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**LOOKING BEYOND STUDENTS' LANGUAGE LEARNING AND  
ATTITUDES TOWARDS THREE LANGUAGES IN CONTACT**

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**Abstract**

This study aims to examine attitudes towards Romanian, Spanish and English in a group of 124 Romanian native speakers from Romania, aged 15-18 years old, that were exposed to Spanish and English as a foreign language in Secondary Education. It is commonly believe that learning a third language is easier than learning a second and thus, the bilingual learners cognitively benefit from their prior language learning. Drawing upon empirical data gathered from a questionnaire with 52 items, this study advances the idea that are no significant differences between the attitudes towards the three languages: Romanian, Spanish and English. On the other hand, our results suggest that students' positive attitudes towards English revealed a stronger trilingual identity of the participants of our study. Furthermore, results have also indicated that there are several significant differences in Romanian and Spanish attitudes between the learners (n = 22) who have studied for several years in Western countries or with parents working there, than their peers who have never been in interaction with other cultures.

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**Keywords:** Attitudes; language learning; Romanian Secondary Education; foreign language.



## 1. Introduction

Many studies have demonstrated the important role of attitudes as a key motivational component in the acquisition of a second or third language. Garrett *et al.* (2003: 3) define attitude as ‘an evaluative orientation to a social object of some sort, but that, being a “disposition”, an attitude is at least potentially an evaluative stance that is sufficiently stable to allow it to be identified and in some sense measured’. They note that some language attitudes are acquired at an early age and are thus likely to be relatively enduring.

In the school setting, especially in multilingual settings, it is important to understand language attitudes and their relationship to language behaviours, where the language attitudes may be negatively affected if their first languages are excluded, or marginalised in the school or implicitly by the teacher (Seligman *et al.*, 1972; Papapavlou & Pavlou, 2007). Gardner (1985) believed that learners cultivating more open and positive attitudes towards an L2/L3, could learn it if they have sufficient motivation.

It is well known that attitudes are learned through observational learning and instrumental learning (Garrett, 2010). Learning happens through language socialisation (Duff, 2010), in which children acquire the communicative competence and all the rules of the new society in order to react to their social world. As Luykx, 2005; Baquedano-López & Kattan, 2007 note, children have access to socially valued linguistic resources shaping language socialisation practices and coconstructing language attitudes.

Understanding the attitudes of learners towards the language and its speakers in the context of secondary education is important in order to exploit the most important attitudinal factors affecting L2/L3 acquisition. However, there is still little data available regarding the attitudes towards three languages in contact such Romanian, Spanish and English within the context of Romanian secondary education. This research presents teenage students’ attitudes towards languages in Romania. In addition, based on the findings of the study, we believe that schools, universities and other institutions could take advantage of these attitudes in secondary education.

## 2. Method and data sample

In this study we have made use of a questionnaire approach to elicit the attitudes of the informants towards the three languages and tried to gain information about the respondents’ age, sex, grade, occupation of their parents, languages studied in secondary education, etc. We sampled 124 Romanian native speakers from a public school in secondary education situated in the northeastern region of Romania, aged 15-18 years old, that were exposed to Spanish and English as a foreign language in Secondary Education, 22 subjects of whom have studied for several years in Western countries or have parents working there.

We used a questionnaire elaborated from the study of Ardeo (2014) which has been implemented with bilingual speakers from the Basque Country. We elaborated a definitive test adapted to the sociolinguistic features of Romania students in secondary schools. The questionnaire contains two blocks; the first one presents information about the students, as we explain above, and the second one contains 52 items gathering information about languages, identity, attitudes and culture. The

questionnaires were completed in Romanian language in the 2015-2016 academic year and the time allowed was 30 minutes.

### 2.1. Statistical analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to describe the sample characteristics as well as to test for group and/or attitudes differences. In order to describe the sample, means, standard deviations, frequencies and graphs were used. To compare groups and/or attitudes in the sample, mean comparison were used. Specifically, t-tests and repeated measures ANOVA were used. When an ANOVA resulted in significant results, post-hoc (Sidak correction) pairwise comparisons were used to test for pair mean differences. All statistical analyses were performed in the SPSS 22 package.

## 3. Results

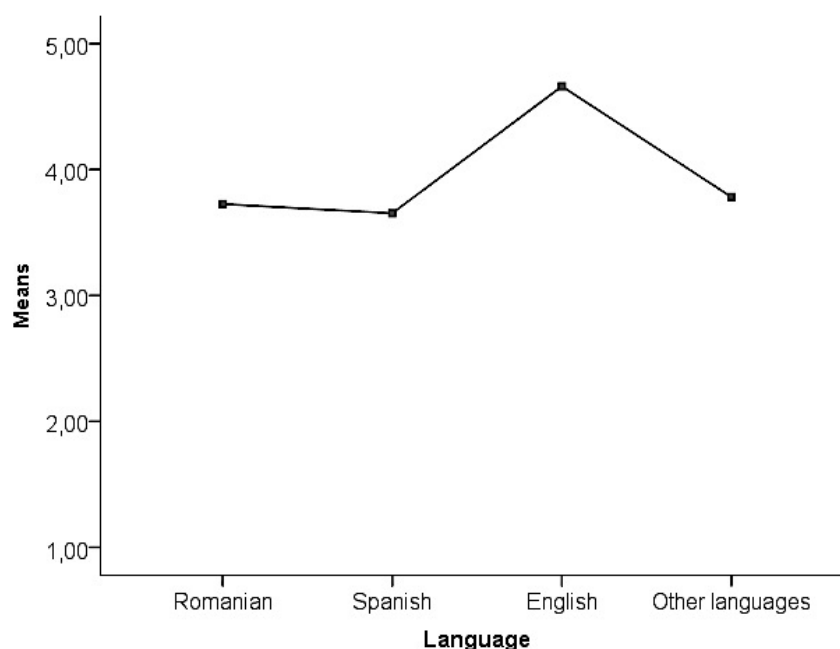
Among the 52 indicators of attitudes towards languages, some of them are parallel (symmetrical), in the sense that they ask for a certain attitude with exactly the same wording but the language changes. As an example, “How much do you like Romanian?” vs. “How much do you like Spanish?”. These indicators allowed us to compare differences in attitudes towards these languages. There were important and statistically significant differences among these indicators. The means and mean comparison for all these “symmetrical” pairs are presented in table 1. In general, the students like Romanians and Romanian, as well as they like programs, films, music and magazines more in Romanian than in Spanish. However, when it comes to indicators of the importance of Romania vs. Spain and their languages, the differences always favor Spain.

**Table 1.** Means and mean comparison for pairs of symmetrical indicators on attitudes towards the countries and their languages.

Pairs tested	Indicators	Mean	t	p
Pair 1	How much do you like Romanians?	4.04		
	How much do you like Spaniards?	3.54	4.56	<.001
Pair 2	How much do you like Romanian?	4.37		
	How much do you like Spanish?	3.74	5.47	<.001
Pair 3	How important a role do you think Romania plays in the world?	2.97		
	How important a role do you think Spain plays in the world?	3.53	-5.67	<.001
Pair 4	How rich and developed do you think Romania is?	2.59		
	How rich and developed do you think Spain is?	3.85	-12.53	<.001
Pair 5	How important do you think Romanian is in the world these days?	2.25		
	How important do you think Spanish is in the world these days?	3.54	-12.25	<.001
Pair 6	How much would you like to travel to Romania?	4.02		
	How much would you like to travel to Spain?	4.58	-5.14	<.001
Pair 7	How much do you think knowing Romanian would help you if you travelled abroad?	1.93		
	How much do you think knowing Spanish would help you if you travelled abroad?	3.50	-17.7	<.001
Pair 8	How important do you think learning Romanian is in order to learn more about the culture of its speakers?	3.81		
	How important do you think learning Spanish is in order to learn more about the culture of its speakers?	3.91	-1.12	.268
Pair 9	How much do you like Romanian TV programmes?	3.79		

	How much do you like Spanish TV programmes?	2.68	8.26	<.001
Pair 10	How much do you like Romanian films?	3.39		
	How much do you like Spanish films?	3.48	-.605	.546
Pair 11	How much do you like Romanian music?	4.14		
	How much do you like Spanish music?	3.71	3.19	.002
Pair 12	How much do you like Romanian magazines?	3.29		
	How much do you like Spanish magazines?	2.62	5.03	<.001
Pair 13	I like reading/speaking/writing in Romanian.	4.36		
	I like reading/speaking/writing in Spanish.	3.45	7.17	<.001
Pair 14	I like being taught in Romanian.	4.13		
	I like being taught in Spanish.	3.38	5.18	<.001
Pair 15	Romanian is a language easy to learn.	3.69		
	Spanish is a language easy to learn.	3.58	.881	.380
Pair 16	I identify myself only with Romanian culture.	3.52		
	I identify myself only with Spanish culture.	2.09	9.20	<.001

Additionally, there were four indicators that asked about “How much do you think knowing Romanian/Spanish/English/other languages would help your future career?”, and we also compared their means with repeated measures ANOVA. ANOVA results found statistically significant differences ( $F(3, 369) = 25.18, p < .001$ .) in the four indicators. A post-hoc (Sidak correction) pairwise comparison found that these differences were due to a statistically different (and higher) mean of English when compared to all other languages. That is, the students consider that Spanish, Romanian and other languages (with the exception of English) may help less than English in their careers. The means are presented in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Means of languages that would help students' future career

Some of the students had Spanish as a foreign language and some were native speakers. We were therefore interested to compare the attitudes about languages of these native Spanish speakers to those

that are only learning Spanish as a second language. In order to do so, several t-tests were calculated. Most of them shown no statistically significant differences, but the t-test that were significant are presented in Table 2. A close look at the means shown that native speakers had higher means for all these indicators, including those referred to Romanian.

**Table 2.** Means and mean comparison of students in which Spanish is a foreign language against those in which Spanish is their second language in the indicators in which statistically significant differences were found.

Indicators	Group	Mean	t	p
How much do you think knowing Spanish would help your future career?	Spanish as a foreign language	3.50		
	Spanish native speaker	3.93	-1.99	.049
How much do you like Spanish films?	Spanish as a foreign language	3.29		
	Spanish native speaker	3.83	-2.22	.025
I like being taught in Spanish.	Spanish as a foreign language	3.22		
	Spanish native speaker	3.69	-2.21	.046
I identify myself only with these two cultures: Romanian and Spanish.	Spanish as a foreign language	2.20		
	Spanish native speaker	2.90	-2.81	.006
I use Spanish to think through Romanian.	Spanish as a foreign language	2.09		
	Spanish native speaker	2.62	-2.07	.040
How much do you like Romanian music?	Spanish as a foreign language	3.95		
	Spanish native speaker	4.51	-2.71	.008
How much do you like Romanian magazines?	Spanish as a foreign language	3.07		
	Spanish native speaker	3.69	-2.63	.010

The differences among those students which parents worked or still work outside Romania and those who don't were also explored. Table 3 shows the statistically significant differences among the means of this two groups as well as mean estimates. There were a total of ten indicators in which both groups significantly differed. The pattern of differences was clear, the students whose parents work or worked outside Romania always scored higher in the indicators in which there were differences.

**Table 3.** Means and mean comparison of students with their parents having worked or working in a foreign country vs. students with their parents in Romania in the indicators in which statistically significant differences were found.

Indicators	Group	Mean	t	p
How much do you like Spanish?	Parents in Romania	3.61		
	Parents work or worked out	4.31	-2.75	.007
How much do you think knowing Spanish would help your future career?	Parents in Romania	3.55		
	Parents work or worked out	4.09	-2.22	.032
How much would you like to travel to Spain?	Parents in Romania	4.50		
	Parents work or worked out	4.90	-2.72	.009
How rich and developed do you think Spain is?	Parents in Romania	3.77		
	Parents work or worked out	4.23	-2.46	.016
How much do you think knowing Spanish would help you if you travelled abroad?	Parents in Romania	3.42		
	Parents work or worked out	3.91	-2.28	.024
How much do you like Spanish music?	Parents in Romania	3.55		
	Parents work or worked out	4.45	-4.68	<.001
How much would you like to meet people from Spain and other Spanish-speaking countries?	Parents in Romania	3.86		
	Parents work or worked out	4.31	-2.22	.031
I like reading/speaking/writing in Spanish.	Parents in Romania	3.30		
	Parents work or worked out	4.13	-3.39	.002
I like being taught in Spanish.	Parents in Romania	3.26		

	Parents work or worked out	3.95	-2.68	.011
	Parents in Romania	1.99		
Culturally speaking, I feel closer to Spain.	Parents work or worked out	3.18	-3.85	.001

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

We can draw the main conclusions based on our findings. Firstly the most important of the findings from the study is that the data provide strong empirical research in language attitude towards three languages in Romania context. As we explained above, the students like Romanians and Romanian, as well as they like programs, films, music and magazines more in Romanian than in Spanish because they have access to all this information in Romanian in Romania context and only in formal education they are in contact with Spanish culture. We have also noticed that Romanian teenage students mostly use Romanian programs for fun and entertainment and that are not fully informed about the maximum potential of the Spanish culture, such as how the positive use of these programs can enhance a better study of language Spanish.

Secondly, the results of this study indicate that Romanian teenage students are open to demonstrate positive attitudes regarding the benefits effects of learning English, the most important *lingua franca* in the globalised world, a language of communication between people. The results have demonstrated that teenage students are aware of the fact that the use of English language is associated with positive attitudes as well, and also revealed their clear understanding of the advantages of learning English. In line with the findings of Ardeo (2014), our results suggest that students' positive attitudes towards English revealed a stronger trilingual identity of the participants of our study.

Finally, another important finding is the differences among those students which parents worked or still work outside Romania and those who don't. Our participants who lived in other countries, especially in Spain and whose families had settled down in Spain or elsewhere show more positive attitudes towards Spain culture and language than the other ones. It is important to note that the presence of a certain language in the family context, such Spanish or Italian, for these students influences language attitudes towards those languages. They are motivated by their parents to learn new languages as Gardner (1985) highlight.

To conclude, this study has introduced an analysis of languages attitudes of Romanian students; hence, it reflects only their opinions on the matter. If our purpose would be that of finding out what the effects of language attitudes are on people in general, then a similar research project but employing users from different spheres of activity should be carried out.

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