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**PERCEPTIONS / ATTITUDES WHEN CHOOSING WHICH
FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO STUDY: A CASE-STUDY**

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Abstract

Studying foreign languages is a “must” nowadays as we live in a globalized world. The Romanian education system has always included in the curricula two foreign languages. For a long time, one of these languages was French as a consequence of the traditional XIXth century relations between France and Romania. Beginning with the 1960’s, the political situation imposed the study of Russian until 1989, at the Romanian Revolution when the communist regime fell. According to European statistics, a clear majority of pupils learn English in the vast majority of EU Member States, while slightly less than one quarter (23.2 % and 22.1 %) study French or Spanish, while almost one fifth were studying German (18.9 %). Our article is based on a questionnaire analyzing students’ /people’s perceptions and motivation when choosing what foreign language to study; do they choose to study a language because it is useful, it is beautiful, it is fashionable? The expected results include two issues: the languages which are chosen and the motivation for which one would choose them those and not other ones. The questionnaire includes information about the reasons making students choose to learn a certain language, but also about the reasons making parents choose that their children should study one language or another. According to the results, we aim at establishing a hierarchy among the languages preferred, but also among the motivations taken into account for studying these languages which might be indicative of people’s perceptions and attitudes towards foreign languages.

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Keywords: Languages, motivation, study, perception, attitude, teachers.



1. Introduction

Studying foreign languages is a “must” nowadays as we live in a globalized world. Romania has always had a tradition in studying foreign languages whichever the political regime might have been. However, there has always been a language which has been given priority to in comparison with the others. The causes may be historical, cultural and/or psychological or a combination of these. Lately, globalization has brought many changes in point of studying languages and Romania’s situation is not different from other countries’ one under this aspect. However, our article aims at finding how/why students study a language or another in school. Is it a matter of like/dislike choice, of trend, of necessity, of obligation coming from the family? Or, maybe a mixture of all the above mentioned factors?

Romania has had a long tradition in teaching/learning foreign languages, dating back to the period of the Second World War. Eversince, the Romanian education system has included in the curricula of the primary and secondary schools as well as in those of the high-schools, the study of two foreign languages. For a long time, one of these languages was French as a consequence of the traditional XIXth century relations between France and Romania. Beginning with the 1960s, the political situation imposed the study of Russian until 1989, at the Romanian Revolution, when the communist regime fell. In this paper, we aim at analyzing the nowadays situation as lately there have been significant changes. The question is: How do we choose the foreign languages we want to study?

2. Problem Statement

According to some European statistics, within primary education, a clear majority of pupils learn English in most of EU Member States. Indeed, learning English is mandatory in several countries within secondary education institutions, and “a number of EU Member States have close to 100 % of pupils learning this language already in primary education” (Eurostat – Statistics explained, 2017), while at the secondary level, “almost all (95.8 %) EU-28 students were studying English as a foreign language in 2015, compared with slightly less than one quarter (23.2 % and 22.1 %) studying French or Spanish, while almost one fifth were studying German (18.9 %).” (Foreign language learning statistics, 2017) Except for statistics, there are a number of studies trying to explain students’ motivation in choosing to study one language or another. For a better understanding of the situation, we shall present the evolution of learning languages in Romania since 1928.

According to Article 18 of the Law no. 28/1928 for Secondary Education (Law of Education, 1928), if a child wanted to enrol in a high-school, he/she was supposed to pass an examination made up of tests of Romanian, Romanians’ History, Romania’s Geography, Mathematics and French. According to Article 21, Chapter III of the same law, the baccalaureate examination included subjects such as: Romanian Language and Literature, Romanians’ History, Romania’s Geography, Civic Education, French Language and Literature, Natural Sciences to which the Ministry added 2 extra subjects every year. Article 29 of Chapter V mentions the literary and scientific subjects which are taught during high-school, among which Romanian, Latin, French and Greek; French is compulsory and a second language (German or English) may be chosen according to the high-school’s option.

In 1948, a new Law of Education was published (Decree no. 175, 1948). According to it, Russian becomes a compulsory language, being studied beginning with the IVth form. The Law published under

Ceausescu’s rule, Law no. 11/1968, did not mention which languages shall be studied, keeping the provisions of the previous law. However, Article 14 of the 1978 Law of Education ((Law of Education, 1978) refers to the compulsory study of two foreign languages both in the secondary school and it high-school and it adds that the two foreign languages taught up to the baccalaureate are studied at university, too.

Article 26 of Law no. 84/1995 includes a provision according to which one of the two foreign languages studied along the school years becomes a compulsory examination at the baccalaureate. Article 68 of the latest Law of Education (Law of Education, 2011) presents the national curriculum for primary and secondary education as including skills of communication in foreign languages. Article 77 of the same law emphasizes the obligation of students to pass an examination in a foreign language to demonstrate their skills.

Summarizing the information presented diachronically, we may conclude that between 1928 and 1948, French was the most studied language in Romania, being compulsory and having the status of first modern language studied, students’ skills in French being assessed by a test at the end of the high-school at the Baccalaureate. During the next period of time starting with 1948 up to 1989, the education involved the obligatory study of Russian, Romania being under the influence of the Soviet Republic of Russia. After 1989, when the Romanian Revolution took place, things have completely changed: according to the latest European statistics, “Many of the eastern and northern European Member States that joined the EU in 2004 or 2007 were characterised by the fact that learning Russian was compulsory in the past. This situation has changed rapidly and in most of these countries there has been a marked increase in the proportion of pupils learning English — by 2015 this share often exceeded 50 % of all pupils. In Estonia, Lithuania, the Czech Republic, Bulgaria, Slovakia, Romania and Latvia it was between 69 % and 86 % in 2015, rising to more than 90 % in Poland and Croatia (as noted above)” (Foreign Language Learning Statistics, 2017).

Nowadays, the official European statistics clearly show that English has become the “leader language” in Romania being studied by more than 80% of the students enrolled in primary and secondary education institutions. As far as French is concerned, “apart from Luxembourg, the next highest shares of primary school children learning French as a foreign language in 2015 were recorded in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania (15-16 %). (Foreign Language Learning Statistics, 2017). According to the Romanian Statistical Yearbook – 2015 (Andrei, 2016), during the 2014/2015 school year, in Romania, out of a number of 2 550 386 students enrolled to study the first language, a number of 2 063 165 (80.89%) studied English, while out of a number of 1 524 945 enrolled to study the second language, a number of 1 039 064 (67.07%) studied French, these being the first two languages studied by number of students (Table 01).

Table 01. Number of students enrolled by first/second language in Romania – 2014/2015

TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION BY THE FIRST LANGUAGE STUDIED 2 550 386						
English	French	German	Russian	Spanish	Italian	Others (Greek, Japanese, Portuguese, Turkish, Norwegian, Chinese)
2 063 165	432 486	45 664	277	5 336	2 511	
TOTAL NUMBER OF STUDENTS ENROLLED IN PRE-UNIVERSITY EDUCATION BY THE SECOND LANGUAGE STUDIED 1 524 945						
English	French	German	Russian	Spanish	Italian	Others (Greek, Japanese, Portuguese, Turkish, Norwegian, Chinese)
328 001	1 039 064	140 398	2 371	7 170	7 647	

According to the European documents, in Romania, a first modern language is learnt at ISCED level 1 (which is primary education), by 57.6% of the students while only 0.7% study two foreign languages at this level (International Standard Classification of Education, . As far as the ISCED level 2 is concerned (lower secondary education), a vast majority of 95.4% study two foreign languages unlike only 4.3% who study one foreign language. At the ISCED level 3, that is upper secondary education, 98.4% study two foreign languages and 1.6% only one foreign language. The table 2 (Eurostat, 2018) below presents contrastively the situation in Romania versus the European Union in 2012:

Table 02. Percentage of people studying languages in Romania vs. EU by ISCED levels

Factor – 2012	RO	EU
Pupils at ISCED level 1 learning 1 foreign language	57.6	77.3
Pupils at ISCED level 1 learning 2 or more foreign languages	0.7	4.7
Percentage of pupils at ISCED level 2 learning 1 foreign language	4.3	34.4
Percentage of pupils at ISCED level 2 learning 2 or more foreign languages	95.4	64.8
Percentage of pupils at ISCED level 3 (GEN) learning 1 foreign language	1.6	36.6
Percentage of pupils at ISCED level 3 (GEN) learning 2 or more foreign languages	98.4	50.6

The European statistics also envisage the situation by languages and by levels in 2012; no matter which level one may consider, English remains the “leader language” (with 44.8%, 98.7%, 99.9%) followed by French (with 12.7%, 85.7%, 85.0%) as it is shown in the table 3 below.

Table 03. Percentage of people studying a certain language in Romania vs. EU / ISCED levels

Factor – 2012	RO	EU
Pupils learning English at ISCED level 1 - as % of the total pupils at this level	44.8	77.3
Pupils learning English at ISCED level 2 - as % of the total pupils at this level	98.7	96.7
Pupils learning English at ISCED level 3 (GEN) - as % of the total pupils at this level	99.9	94.5
Pupils learning French at ISCED level 1- as % of the total pupils at this level	12.7	12.5
Pupils learning French at ISCED level 2 - as % of the total pupils at this level	85.7	34.1
Pupils learning French at ISCED level 3 (GEN) - as % of the total pupils at this level	85.0	23.6
Pupils learning German at ISCED level 1 as % of the total pupils at this level	1.3	4.5
Pupils learning German at ISCED level 2 - as % of the total pupils at this lev	9.8	22.1
Pupils learning German at ISCED level 3 (GEN) - as % of the total pupils at this level	12.0	20.9
Pupils learning Spanish at ISCED level 2 (GEN) - as % of the total pupils at this level	0.5	12.2
Pupils learning Spanish at ISCED level 3 - as % of the total pupils at this level	2.2	19.8
Pupils learning Russian at ISCED level 2 - as % of the total pupils at this level	0.4	2.6
Pupils learning Russian at ISCED level 3 (GEN) - as % of the total pupils at this level	0.3	2.7

3. Research Questions

Analysing the situation in Romania over the XXth century up to now, one may notice important changes in the choice of languages to be studied as well as in their hierarchy: if at the beginning of the century, French was the language the most widely taught, in the 1950s, it was replaced by Russian and later on, by English. In this paper, we aim at analysing the nowadays situation as lately there have been significant changes. The question arousing might be *How do we choose the foreign languages we want to study?* The answer is related to the social circumstances on one hand and to the learners’ perceptions and attitudes on the other hand. Our analysis focuses on the latter aspect. That is why we consider useful to define these concepts. We use “perception” in line with Slavin (2012) with reference to the mental

subjective interpretation of sensory stimuli, a process influenced by factors such as past experience, knowledge, or motivation. Thus, the subjective perception of processes leads to attitudes which, in their turn, may cause certain types of behaviours as it has been shown in social psychology literature (Goodnow, 1992; Jarvis, 2009; Ormrod, 2011). According to Eagly and Chaiken (1998), “attitude” refers to “a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor” (p. 269). Unfortunately, as other researchers have already noticed, “the relationships among perceptions of the usefulness and importance of foreign languages in society, individuals’ attitudes to foreign language learning and lessons, and actual behavior (e.g., choosing to study foreign languages) are largely neglected in research to date.” (Taylor & Marsden, 2014, p. 903)

Some studies show that the way in which a foreign language is perceived is related to students’ subjective choices (for instance, French was associated to “love”, German with “war”) (Williams, Burden, & Lanvers, 2002). Other researchers (Graham, 2004) explain that students’ motivation was a very important factor causing motivation and persistence in language learning. According to Burge et al. (2013), the enjoyment of a language brings along higher degrees of achievements.

4. Purpose of the Study

In a context in which in Romania there is a great dynamics in the languages taught at school, it is important to understand the factors causing students’ choosing to study a language or another especially for reasons of social significance such as career prospects or regional needs, but also for reasons related to the allocation of the foreign language teaching staff by languages and/or by areas.

5. Research Methods

Our article is based on a questionnaire which aims at analysing students’ /people’s perceptions and motivations when choosing what foreign language to study; do they choose to study a language because it is useful, it is beautiful, it is a “must”, it is fashionable? Which other reasons might they or their parents have? What languages are preferred and why?

In the study participated a number of 100 persons of different ages, with different levels of education; the study was not designed to include university students in foreign languages or people having graduated in this field; the reason for excluding them was that this kind of persons generally have a positive attitude towards languages, no matter which language is taken into account.

Data collection was intended to capture students’ and parents’ attitudes towards language teaching/learning as well as the way in which a certain language is chosen to be studied. Thus, a questionnaire in three parts was designed: (i) the first part included the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, (ii) the second part aimed at presenting the relationships in the family and the way the attitude that parents have towards learning foreign languages in a family; (iii) the third part was meant to acknowledge respondents’ opinions and attitudes towards languages.

6. Findings

The first part of the questionnaire aims at presenting the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents. In point of age, the sample was heterogeneous, their age varying between 17 and 60, with an

average of 38.5; most of the respondents are between 20 and 30 years old (60%). The majority (67%) is made of women unlike the men representing only 33%. As far as their being or not a part of the education system, the sample included 32% graduates, while the rest were enrolled, under a form or another, in an education institution, being either in a high-school (32%), or in a university (undergraduates –26% or master students-10%). As far as the field of the studies is concerned, there was a rather balanced distribution with 52% people activating in the humanistic areas and 48% in the scientific areas. In point of the languages studied at school, they mentioned English (86%), French (88%), Russian (18%), German (8%), Italian (2%) and Spanish (4%). According to the social environment, most of the respondents came from rural areas (62%), while only 38% of them came from city areas. In the sample we took into account for the survey, there were not people belonging to less well-to-do social categories; 36% had a very good socio-economic level, while 50% appreciated their socio-economic level as being good and only 14% considered it average.

The second part of the questionnaire aimed at presenting the relationships in the family and the way the attitude that parents have towards learning foreign languages in a family influence their children's choices. As far as the relations with the parents are concerned, they were considered as very good or good by most of the respondents (98%). An almost similar percentage of those who area parents and are among the respondents (96%) think that the foreign languages are important for their children's future. Out of them, 30% studied English as a first language, 42% - French and 28% studied Russian, unlike 28% who studied English as a second language, 48% who studied French, 16% equally distributed between those having studied German and Russian. The last question of this part of the questionnaire aimed at showing which languages should be studied. 100% appreciated that English should be studied as a first language, while the opinions regarding the second language were different: in favour of French were 80%, 18% were for German and only 2% thought Italian would be a good choice.

The third part of the questionnaire was meant to acknowledge the respondents' opinions and attitudes towards languages. The first question asked the respondents to write down the combination of languages that they considered appropriate to provide the best future opportunities; the answers showed that the most appropriate language combination was English-German (40%), closely followed by English-French (36.18%); English-Chinese (6%) had a significant percentage as compared to other combinations which were mentioned (for instance, French-German, English-Spanish, English-Italian).

The second question was related to the reasons for which the study of the first foreign language is important; 20% considered that it should be studied because it may help people with their studies, while 60% thought that it provided better career opportunities; 16% saw it as a means to improve relationships (by travels, holiday etc) while for only 4%, it was important for emigration reasons. The same question was asked for the second language. The answers were rather different: 10% appreciated that it is important as it may offer better study prospects, while 38% saw it as being beneficial for the career; 28% of the respondents considered that it may help them socially (relations, holidays, travels etc) and 24% thought of it in connection with emigration.

The next two questions aimed at measuring the usefulness of the first language studied as well as of the second language studied at school. The respondents were asked to mark the usefulness by a number between one (the least) and ten (the most). For the first language, the average was 9.60, while for the second language, the average was 7.72.

Two questions tried to show the perception that the students/former students had on the teachers who taught them the first, respectively the second language. For the first language, 90% appreciated their teachers as “interesting”, 4% saw them as “annoying”, 2% perceived them as “indifferent” and 4% could not appreciate how they were. The teachers having taught the second language were perceived as “interesting” by 70%, “annoying” by 2%, “indifferent” by 8%, “boring” by 10%; 6% could not appreciate how their teachers had been.

The question “Would emigration be a possibility that I could take into account?” brought about 64% affirmative answers and 36% negative answers. Out of those answering affirmatively, 96% consider that if they should emigrate, reaching an appropriate level of language might facilitate their social integration.

The last question showed that 70% of the respondents considered that multilingualism is seen as compulsory, 26% as facultative and only 4% appreciated that it does not matter for the Romanian society.

7. Conclusion

The survey implied 100 persons mostly women (67%), with an age average of 38.5. In point of their being or not a part of the education system, the sample included 32% graduates, while the rest were still studying. As far as the studied language was concerned, the respondents mentioned English, French, Russian, German, Italian and Spanish. While for the social environment, most of them came from rural areas while only 38% of them came from city areas. 36% of the people inquired agreed they had a very good socio-economic level, while 50% appreciated their socio-economic level as being good and only 14% considered it average. Most of the respondents had good relationships with their parents, characteristic which could imply that parents may have an important influence upon children’s choosing to study a certain language, especially when a high percentage of the respondents who were already parents at the time when the questionnaire was applied, admitted to consider languages very important for their children’s future. In spite of the fact that only 30% of them studied English as a first language respectively 28% having studied it as a second language, they think that this should be their children/their first language; this opinion exists in spite of the fact that most of them studied French either as a first or as a second language (42% +48%). It is important to note that although the total percentage of those having studied English is lower, they think that this is the language which should be studied as a first language. As far as the second languages which should be learnt as a second language, a very high percentage of people (80%), almost equal to the percentage of the people having studied it (90%), consider French the best option. French is followed by German as a preference for the second language which should be studied. As far as the combination of language providing the best opportunities for future, at the moment of the survey, most of the respondents appreciated that either English-German (40%), or English-French (36.18%) are the most appropriate ones.

The study also aimed at finding out the respondents’ reasons for studying the first language chosen, that is English; most of them mentioned “better career opportunities” as a reason for studying the first language, while for the second language, be it French or German, should be studied both for “better career opportunities” and for its social importance, that is because it helps at a social level; the reasons for studying the second language are almost equally distributed between career, social and emigration reasons. One may easily notice that career opportunities are strongly related to learning English while the second language is studied not only for career reasons, but also for other types of reasons. In point of usefulness, the

respondents assessed the first language, that is English, as being particularly important unlike the second which is less important. The perception upon the first, respectively the second language is clearly related to the respondents' perception upon their language teachers. The survey also shows that Romanians consider multilingualism very important in nowadays society.

According to the results, we can establish a hierarchy among the languages preferred, placing English on the first place in point of usefulness related to career prospects. The second place is shared between French and German, with an increasing trend for German as it is generally thought that this second language may bring along better social opportunities, career options or simply it may help in case of emigration. Our survey only aimed at showing the state of art on this topic; however, one should ask oneself if learning only English as a first language is the only solution especially if one considers that English learning is very much helped by broadcasting English and American movies, listening to songs with lyrics in English, watching cartoons in English and so on. Shouldn't one also consider to start studying another language which is less heard in order to reach the same proficiency level as in English? Another question that we might raise is related to the fact that if in Romania, there are a lot of people having a very good level of English, what happens to the market needs? Don't we also need proficient people in French or German? Could they still reach proficiency under these conditions? We consider these questions should be given an answer so as younger people could have better career opportunities in Romania.

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