

**EDU WORLD 2022****Edu World International Conference Education Facing Contemporary World Issues****ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING.  
ROMANIANS' REPRESENTATIONS OF ENGLISH**

Georgescu Corina-Amelia (a), Ungureanu Cristina (b)\*

\*Corresponding Author

(a) University of Pitesti, Targu din Vale, No.1, Pitesti, Romania, georgescu\_c@yahoo.fr

(b) University of Pitesti, Targu din Vale, No.1, Pitesti, Romania, cristinaungureanu1976@yahoo.com

**Abstract**

This article proposes an analysis of the teaching of English as a foreign language in Romania during the recent years through the analysis of the representations that people of different ages have about this topic. Teaching languages in Romania has a fairly old tradition, but since 90s, this teaching-learning has considerably developed, being helped by a national education policy in the field. What role does English play in the language teaching process in Romania? The main objective of this work is to find out the representations of Romanians related to English. The research methodology takes into account two elements: the theory of representations and a sociolinguistic survey. For the sociolinguistic survey, a questionnaire is distributed to Romanians who have direct and indirect connection to English. The sample considered, includes 100 respondents, belonging to different age categories, mostly from the urban areas and of different socioeconomic levels. The survey data are processed and analyzed through quantitative and qualitative techniques. The results will give us the possibility of designing potential intervention directions in order to optimize the teaching of English in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

It takes little linguistic knowledge to notice that of all the world languages it was English that played the supreme international role and as Crystal (Crystal, 1997, p. 139) suggests “there has never been a language so widely spread or spoken by so many people as English”. And there is no wonder why Britain’s real black gold is not North Sea oil but the English language and as British Council Annual Report 1987-88 signaled, the challenge was for them to exploit it to the full. And that has happened. Romania is among the countries which fully adopted this language, especially after 1989 when there was not only a political change of regime, but also a change in point of East i.e. Communist versus West i.e. Democratic views. This brought a significative switch in point of languages taught in school as Russian which was widely studied before 1989 was mainly replaced by English after this year.

In order to understand all the changes, one need to consider the different views expressed by the different laws of education. Thus, according to the Decree no. 175/1948 for the reformation of the education, one shall be taught Russian starting with the fourth elementary form; through Law no. 11/1968, education in the Socialist Republic of Romania can be accomplished in one modern language of wide circulation. Ten years later, another law (28/1978 / Art. 14) stipulates that in secondary schools as well as in high schools, students shall study two foreign languages, at their choice. At university level, students were also taught the previously studied modern languages in order to improve their knowledge. However, in spite of the law provisions, students in schools and high-schools were not able to genuinely choose the foreign languages they were going to study and one of these languages was Russian while the other was, through the francophone tradition which Romanians kept at that time, French.

After the 1989 Revolution which brought along the fall of the communist regime in Romania, an increased importance was granted to studying foreign languages and the Law of Education no. 84/1995/ Art. 26 stipulated that at the end of the high-school, one of the examinations which the students had to pass was an oral test at one of the foreign languages studied. Nowadays, the National Education Law no. 1/2011, article 68 explicitly states that the national curriculum involves eight key-skills among which foreign language skills.

Historically, as far as English is concerned, it has been taught and used in our country since the early 1800’s. There have been teachers, textbook authors, dictionary authors, translators who have learnt it and taught it to others. In Romania, English has been transmitted via French language since, for centuries, Romanian intellectuals were educated in Paris. The French forced them to learn a foreign language according to their cultural model. Therefore, this is how they began to learn English: its grammar, its culture, the art of translating it into Romanian. Gradually, the connection with the English space became more direct: philologists appeared who studied in England, who travelled to England, who wrote different studies.

The British Council has been working in Romania as early as 1938. Currently there are offices in Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca and Iasi. In 2018, we celebrated 80 years of cultural relations between the United Kingdom and Romania. Romania was in fact one of the first four countries in the world where the British Council set up an overseas office, along with Egypt, Portugal and Poland.

Numerous English words leaked into Romanian throughout the 20th century, but the spread, or imposition, of English in Romania was never greater than after the fall of the Communist system, when not only the lexicon but also the morphology, the syntax and the phonology started to be affected.

In the study EF English Proficiency Index 2016, Romania ranks the 20th out of 72 countries assessed at a global level concerning the English language skills that the inhabitants have and the way they succeed in using social and professional relations.

## 2. Problem Statement

English has acquired an important place among the foreign languages studied in Romania, especially after 1989 when it started to replace Russian which had largely been taught before 1989 given the political background.

Since 2000, English ranks first in the hierarchy of school pupils' options and one possible explanation might be "the acceleration of the integration phenomenon in the general trend of Romania economic globalization" (Chirovici, 2010, p. 98). In 2004, Romania joined NATO and since 2007, it has been a member of the European Union. In 2014, English was the most taught language in Romania, at a high-school level with a percentage of 99.3%, according to the European network Eurydice (2017). ([http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/73ac5ebd-473e-11e7-aea8-01aa75ed71a1.0009.01/DOC\\_1](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/73ac5ebd-473e-11e7-aea8-01aa75ed71a1.0009.01/DOC_1)).

The latest numbers published by the Romanian National Statistics Institute (2020-2021) ([https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/asr\\_2021\\_serii\\_de\\_timp-ro.pdf](https://insse.ro/cms/sites/default/files/field/publicatii/asr_2021_serii_de_timp-ro.pdf)) show that English is studied in Romania as a first language by a number of 87.84% of the students while as a second language, it is studied by a percentage of only 12.49% of the total number of students. The percentage has mainly been the same since 2017, as shown by the data presented by the Romanian National Statistics Institute and included in Table 1:

**Table 1.** English taught as a foreign language in Romania

	<i>First foreign language</i>				<i>Second foreign language</i>			
	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021	2017/ 2018	2018/ 2019	2019/ 2020	2020/ 2021
<i>Total</i>	245012 6	241858 7	238809 1	236771 8	142498 3	141205 7	140349 9	140502 4
<i>English</i>	208765 4	209428 0	208972 5	207989 7	226603	196922	183697	175618
<i>Primary education</i>	938509	922365	895159	868742	20559	22858	18760	17770
<i>English</i>	808972	804188	786265	766092	8133	6437	5372	4462
<i>Lower secondary education</i>	720032	712451	708615	702700	685506	676015	670487	665216
<i>English</i>	603113	612754	617828	614389	115670	97780	90495	86013
<i>Upper secondary education</i>	637607	629743	618201	620525	630166	622945	612564	614394
<i>English</i>	547301	547860	544911	549652	87583	78290	70907	67983

In Romania, English is taught in school at all the education levels: at the nursery school (as an optional subject), in the primary and secondary schools, in high-schools as well as at the university. English as the first foreign language is officially taught since the preparatory class (the first class at the

primary school) attended by students of 6-7 years old; the study of a second language is compulsory since the 5th grade. Pupils may choose among more foreign languages such as English, French, Spanish, Italian, Russian and more rarely Greek, Japanese, Portuguese, Turkish, Yiddish or Chinese, but the most commonly studied languages are English and French. In the high-school, pupils continue to study both of the languages no matter if they study in a scientific or humanistic programme; Romanian students also have the possibility to study in bilingual language programmes which allow them to improve the skills as they may work in smaller groups of 10 to 15 persons. The number of classes which are weekly taught varies according to the education level: at the primary school, pupils have 1 up to 2 English classes weekly, while at the secondary school, they have 2 classes a week either if English is studied as a first or as a second language. Some schools provide the pupils with the possibility to study up to two more class of English as an optional subject. At the high-school, the number of English classes a week may vary according to the field of study, but, for the bilingual language programmes, there are 5 compulsory classes a week and up to 2 optional English classes. At the end of the high-school, the Romanian baccalaureate involves an examination which assesses the foreign language skills. Consequently, students receive qualifications from A1 to B2 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

If the number of students studying English today has come to exceed that of primary school students studying French, showing a shift in the balance of forces between the two languages in the Romanian education, the slower evolution process must be explained by the fact that French still prevails in rural teaching, because most of language teachers know this language. English remains the most studied foreign language in schools and universities in Romania. Romanian statistics try to follow the upward trend in Europe (Condruz-Băcescu, 2013, p. 22).

Given the high percentages, one might wonder what has caused this trend. Is it because of teachers, students, because of the education system, of media or of parents?

The teaching methods in Romania follow the same patterns for all the foreign languages taught and there are modern handbooks for all the languages and levels of study. The communicative approach dominates and it focuses on teaching the main skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) and on stressing the social use of the language. The Romanian curriculum (2017) for teaching English as a modern language aims at developing the key skills: linguistic interaction, reading, writing, speaking and expressing cultural and linguistic identity. Thus, it includes all the skill types presented in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

### **3. Research Questions**

What role does English play in the language teaching process in Romania?

The notion of social representation is claimed by several directions of research (social psychology, anthropology, history, philosophy, and sociology (Neculau, 1997, p. 125). For instance, for Jodelet (1991, p. 44), a social representation is “a form of knowledge, socially developed and shared, having a practical aim and contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social whole”. Representations then

appear to be decisive in the management of social relations, both from the point of view of behaviour and communication. They therefore appear as a construction whose object is symbolized and interpreted, which establishes, according to Jodelet's phrase, "versions of reality".

The traditional definitions among social psychologists (Bonardi & Roussiau, 1999) insist on three interdependent aspects which characterize representations: their elaboration in and through communication, the (re)construction of reality and the mastery of the environment through its organization: Analyzing a social representation means trying to understand and explain the nature of the social ties that unite individuals, the social practices they develop, as well as the intra- and intergroup relationships.

Representations in linguistics have been introduced for at least two reasons: on the one hand, they use discursive-cognitive models necessary to take into account interpretation and attribution of meaning and on the other hand, "the representations that speakers have of language are invoked to understand their linguistic behaviours, either when producing [...] or receiving [...], in a frame strongly inspired by psychology" (Mondada, 1998, p. 128).

In the field of language acquisition, representations are an element of structuring the process of language acquisition. Representations concerning the mother tongue, the language to be learnt and their differences are related to certain learning strategies for learners. Thus, Castellotti and Moore (2002) mention that research about representations converges around two observations: traces (especially discursive) of a state of representation can be observed, but also traces of its evolution in context. Representations are malleable, so they can change; on the other hand, representations have strong links to the learning process, strengthening it or slowing it down.

From this point of view, the study of representations is a major challenge for teachers, both to better understand certain phenomena related to language learning and to implement appropriate teaching actions. In this context, our work focuses on the state of representations among Romanians and how they relate to the process of learning English as it is taking place in Romania now. Representations are important and as the literature suggests the representations of languages, their norms, their characteristics, their status in relation to other languages, greatly influence the procedures and strategies of those who learn and use them.

A large number of works on language representations and learning show the essential role of the images / perceptions that language learners have of their speakers and the countries in which they are spoken (Candelier & Hermann-Brenneke, 1993; Muller, 1998; Matthey, 1997; Zarate, 1993).

These images, very strongly stereotyped, have a certain power that either helps or inhibits learning. They originate and are perpetuated in society through various channels (media, literature, tourist leaflets, guides for the use of certain professions etc.). It should not be overlooked that the elaboration of representations takes place in complex interactions involving several different actors and parameters.

Porcher (1997) also develops the idea that the experience of an individual plays an essential role in the decoupage that everyone can make of the world around them and the meaning that stems from it. Two major notions then emerge. The first concerns the individual in a defined social setting passing from social interactions and social behaviour to what constitutes him / her as a person. The second focuses more specifically on cultural choices of the individual. It is through these cultural choices, partly

influenced by family practices, that the individual will primarily construct his way of perceiving the world and how he perceives himself in it. This notion is all the more important when speaking of representations of a language given the link between language and culture. These two main axes of the representations of language in the individual emphasize the fact that the imposition of the foreign language without prior explanation has a negative effect on the motivation and desire to learn that language. In order for the learning of this language to allow the construction of positive representations in the individual, it is important to understand and make it clear that language is one of the vectors of culture that allows a better understanding of the foreign person.

The implementation of language teaching in the classroom is then another element that will or may not promote a real contact between the student and the foreign language to be learnt. Indeed, as Porcher explains, the fact that teachers tend to highlight their own culture influences the content choices they will offer students. Concerning the experience of the school teacher himself, one must therefore keep in mind that this factor plays an important role in the construction of his own representations of the foreign language that he has to teach. For instance, a study conducted in Romania, (Ungureanu & Georgescu, 2016) reveals interesting facts regarding the representations that high school students have towards the French language and where steps are proposed for the improvement of the educational system.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The main objective of this work is to find out the representations of Romanians related to English. The results will give us the possibility of designing potential intervention directions in order to optimize the teaching of English in the future.

#### **5. Research Methods**

Our study focuses on teaching/learning English in Romania as well as on the place that English holds, as a foreign language, among other foreign languages. Our inquiry takes into account the theory of representations and a sociolinguistic survey. For the sociolinguistic survey, a questionnaire is distributed to Romanians who have direct and indirect connection to English. The sample considered, includes 100 respondents, belonging to different age categories, mostly from the urban areas and of different socioeconomic levels. The survey data are processed and analysed through quantitative and qualitative techniques. Representations are essential as a lot of factors such as the quality of learning, the learner's self-confidence depend on them when it comes to using English in a specific political, social and cultural context (Beacco, 2000).

The first part of the survey includes basic sociolinguistic data of the respondents and includes questions on age, sex, field of study, social environment, parent-child relation as well as the knowledge/skills and the use of English in a professional environment. It also includes yes/no and open questions. The respondents graduated different study programmes and have different social and professional backgrounds.

In order to statistically analyse the data, we used the SPSS for Windows, version 15, taking into account both the descriptive statistical analysis (for the socio-demographic characteristics, the socio-

affective relations, the respondents' opinions and attitudes) and the inferential statistical analysis (in order to show the correlations between the required data and the attitudes to English).

We use a dichotomic code for questions from 5 to 12 in order to express the positive appreciation (1 point) versus the negative or the assertive-neutral appreciation to English (0 point). We calculated a total score which might indicate a respondent's general attitude to English.

## 6. Findings

Some studies (e.g. Muller, 1998) find a strong correlation between the image a learner has forged of a country and the representations he or she constructs about his or her own language learning. Thus, a negative image of Germany (an example commonly observed in France or French-speaking Switzerland) would correspond to the vision of a difficult and unsatisfactory learning of German, a conception sometimes relayed by the teachers themselves. Muller (1998), for example, explores representations of the German language for French-speaking students, in their links to their representations of Germany, themselves in relation to those made about German-speaking Switzerland and its inhabitants. As far as we are concerned, our sociolinguistic survey will try to establish a relationship between the representations that Romanians have about English and the learning of this language.

### 6.1. Descriptive statistical analysis

In terms of socio-demographic characteristics (see Table 2 below), we noticed a heterogeneity of respondents included in the sample. Regarding age, this ranged from 16 to 56 years; the majority of interviewees were in between 19 and 25 years old and in between 36-45 years old. Participants were both female (79) and male (21). They attended classes in different sections: English bilingual Mathematics-Computer Science (20 participants); Social Sciences (22 participants); Bilingual Philology (26 participants); Mathematics-Computer Science (11 participants); Natural Sciences (21 participants). From the point of view of the home environment, the majority (84%) came from urban areas. As far as the socio-economic point of view is concerned, it must be said that no respondent came from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds; 14% of the subjects had an average level, 82 % had a good level and 4 % have a very good standard of living.

**Table 2.** Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents

Age	Average = 36				
Gender	Masculine 21 %			Feminine 79 %	
Educational field	English bilingual Mathematics-Computer science (20%);	Social Sciences (22%);	Bilingual Philology (26%);	Mathematics-Computer Science (11%)	Nature Sciences (21%).
Home environment	urban 84 %			rural 126 %	
Socio-economic level of the family	Very good 4 %	Good 82 %	Average 14 %	Below the average level 0 %	

The next four questions in the questionnaire focused on the families of the respondents. As for the socio-affective relationship with the parents, it was rated as good (14%) or very good (82%) in the majority of cases. When it comes to family members' speaking English, we find out that 20% of the parents use it very rarely in the professional field while 55% of them do not use it at all; 20% use it sometimes and 1% of the speakers do not know. The table no. 3 presented below summarizes the aspects mentioned above.

**Table 3.** Socio-emotional relationships in the family and the way parents related to English

Socio-emotional relationships in the family	Relation with father (N valid = 99)				Relation with mother			
	Very good	Good	Bad	Very bad	Very good	Good	Bad	Very bad
	78 %	20 %	1 %	1 %	82 %	14 %	1 %	1 %
The way parents relate to English	Family members know English		Parents use English in the professional field (N valid = 99)					
	no	yes	no	yes	sometimes	I don't know		
	53 %	47 %	55 %	20 %	20 %	1 %		

When students were asked to assess their own knowledge of English, the responses were: very good (11 respondents); good (81 respondents); weak (8 respondents); for "very weak" we did not have any data.

The majority of respondents included in the sample started learning English at the age of 11 or 12 (one respondent at the age of 5, one at 6, the latest at 30, the average age being 13.05), the initiative for them to take English classes usually belonging to the school (in 70% of cases); in 15% of the cases, it was the family who took the initiative, while in 15% of the cases the initiative belonged to the person himself / herself. On average, students allocate 7.36 hours per week for learning English (on average, 4 hours in school and 3.36 hours in private lessons); students have two English classes a week at school and between 0 and 4 hours of private lessons.

The following questions in the questionnaire focused on students' opinions and attitudes towards English.

To question No. 5, which asks to estimate the difficulty of English, the majority of respondents answered that they found it "relatively easy" (50%) and "easy" (12%); in other words, their ratings are positive. Some interviewees gave a neuter answer ("like any other foreign language" - 26%) or simply "difficult" (12%).

To question no. 6, which deals with the musicality of English, most respondents (74%) made positive assessments, answering "musical" (64%) or "very musical" (10%). 13% of them gave a neutral answer: "like any other foreign language" and other 13% found "no musicality" in direct connection with English.

For question no. 7, which requires assessment of English teachers, most respondents made positive assessments, answering "interesting" (73%); 14% of the respondents chose the "I can't appreciate" variant, and 13% rated English teachers in negative terms ("boring / unbearable / indifferent



people”). This shows that English teachers are considered popular people, with good formal and informal relationships with their students.

Question 8 (open question) is about the thoughts and images that occur their minds when they hear people speak English. A range of homogenous responses were obtained; they were positive - indicating appreciation of the English language (100%), a language helping them in all kinds of situations, being indispensable in many fields such as tourism, business, foreign employment etc. Here are some examples: it is a useful language, it sounds great, it is easy and unique, a language of international circulation, etc. The total percentage of positive responses shows that Romanians have a fairly close relationship with English culture and civilization and are seriously connected when it comes to business etc.

Question 9 invites respondents to provide an element of comparison for English. The majority of the responses obtained were also either neutral (finding similarities of English with other languages, 62%) or positive - indicating appreciation of English (38%).

As for the comparisons made, they were very different: English was compared with German, with a store where we find words for everything, with French, with Spanish (in some respects), with Chinese in terms of the number of speakers, with a violin, with the passport (useful when travelling), with a Beethoven symphony, with a wooden box, with something we depend on, with nothing, it’s just a foreign language etc. Others consider that all languages have their own specific interest and approach for those interested in speaking it and that English is a language appreciated by many people that helps them in all kinds of situations or they simply have no language skills to compare it with another language.

Despite the diversity of associations made, we can notice a few common elements: musicality seems to be an interesting association made by respondents, whether it is the evocation of musical instruments, or simply types of music; all the mentions made refer to the auditory and visual senses and their majority to art. We can talk about what Freud (2007: 89) calls “free association”. It consists in saying everything that goes through the head, without carrying out moral censorship, when certain thoughts seem inappropriate. This rule aims to make people aware of the representations that have been repressed so far.

Question no. 10 aims to assess the usefulness of English from a social point of view (friends, holidays, travelling, etc.). The students’ answers were: very useful (80%); useful (20%). No respondent ticked the options “like any other foreign language”; or “useless”. The dominance of positive assessments is to be observed.

Question no. 11 requires interviewees to evaluate the usefulness of English from a professional point of view. The two obtained categories of answers were mostly positive: very helpful (65%); useful (35%). These last two questions show that Romanians are aware that English could serve them both socially and professionally.

The last question (No. 12) requires answers about their overall perception of English people. The answers received are varied: have the advantage of being native, they are ignorant, intelligent, resourceful, sociable people, with whom you could openly discuss any topic, ordinary people living on this planet, rather open, educated and civilized people, lucky because they speak native English, rather comfortable and little interested in learning a foreign language, uneducated and ignorant, different from a

linguistic point of view, relaxed, individualist, open-minded and calm, dreamy, little interested in learning a foreign language, rather ordinary sociable, with nothing in particular, skillful, rather inventive, etc.

Most answers were positive (57%); there were also negative (29%) or neutral (14%) assessments. This perception was influenced either by direct contacts with the English people or by indirect contacts.

## 7. Conclusions

Our study reveals that the elaboration of representations takes place in complex interactions that involve several actors and different parameters. The sociolinguistic survey was conducted on Romanian respondents with an average age of 36, of whom 79% are women; most of whom live in urban areas, and have good socioeconomic levels and a good socio-affective relationship with parents. It reveals interesting facts about the representations of English among Romanians: for instance, they find it easy to learn which fact seems to have a positive impact on their general attitude towards English not taking it as a burden. Even if the members of their families did not use too much this language in their professional field, in most of the cases the respondents were encouraged to use it due to their connections to the business world.

The answers to questions from 5 to 12 were recorded in a dichotomous way to express positive appreciation (marked with 1 point) versus negative or constative-neutral appreciation compared to English (marked with 0 point). Thus, a total score was calculated which indicates the general attitude of respondents in relation to English. This score ranged from 1 to 8 points, with an average of 3.93 (standard deviation 1.5). Most respondents (60.4%) scored six or seven points.

Taking into account the results obtained by the treatment of the variables (age, environment of origin, socio-economic level of the family) taken into account, we came to the conclusion that there are no real obstacles to learning English. We believe that the central issue is related to the question of learner motivation. We refer mainly to intrinsic motivation, which involves performing an activity for the pleasure or satisfaction provided, but also to extrinsic motivation, centered on the intention to obtain a consequence that is outside the scope of the respective activity. The level of intrinsic motivation among learners depends almost exclusively on English teachers while the level of extrinsic motivation could increase thanks to the language policies promoted by the state, policies focused on the usefulness of this language. Therefore, the suggestions we make are for two directions: on the one hand, the improvement of teachers' teaching skills, and on the other hand, the improvement of language policies.

English is generally perceived by most of the Romanians as a relatively easy to learn and musical language; this perception may correlate itself with their opinion of the teachers, but the percentage of students having a positive assessment of their teachers of English (lower than expected) may lead to the conclusion that the positive representation Romanians have of English is not the direct consequence of the way they study it at school, but especially of the fact that all the respondents consider it indispensable in many fields, useful from a social and professional point of view. Despite the extremely good perception on the language, it is not influenced by the English people as the enquiry does not show a direct relation between the people and the language when it comes to the Romanians' perception on it.

To strengthen / improve the place of English in Romania, the Ministry of National Education could modify the methodology of the baccalaureate exam to give the possibility at least to pupils in bilingual classes to take a test in the second language studied, increase the number of English classes per week in primary and secondary school and high school, increase the number of foreign language classes in non-philological faculties (which would, in most cases, be English).

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