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# Language Attitudes, Language Learning Experiences and Individual Strategies What Does School Offer and What Does It Lack?

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**Abstract.** Language learners' attitudes towards the language and its speakers greatly influence the language learning process and the learning outcomes. Previous research and studies on attitudes and motivation in language learning (Csizér 2007, Dörnyei 2009) show that attitudes and motivation are strongly intertwined. Positive attitude towards the language and its speakers can lead to increased motivation, which then results in better learning achievement and a positive attitude towards learning the language. The aim of the present study was to get a better insight into what regards the language attitudes of students attending Hungarian minority schools in Romania. The interest of the study lies in students' attitudes towards the different languages, the factors/criteria along which they express their language attitudes, students' learning experiences and strategies that they consider efficient and useful in order to acquire a language. Results suggest that students' attitudes are determined by their own experiences of language use, and in this sense we can differentiate between a language for identification – built upon specific emotional, affective, and cognitive factors – and language for communication.

**Keywords:** language attitudes, motivation, language for identification, language for communication, cross-linguistic associations

## 1. Introduction

Research on language attitudes is connected to a larger socio-political, socio-cultural, and socio-economic context where multilinguals' languages are attributed different meanings and values. Language learners' attitudes towards the language (including its status and prestige) and its speakers greatly influence

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the language learning process and the learning outcomes. Caroll (1964) and other researchers (Csizér 2007, Dörnyei 2009) claim that attitude represents one of the most important sets of variables for predicting learner efficiency and achievement.

The aim of the present study is to gain a deeper insight into and to offer a more comprehensive analysis of Hungarian minority students' language attitudes based on their learning experiences. The paper examines Hungarian minority students' attitudes to different languages and their opinion on effective and useful language learning strategies. Data presented in the paper comprises the results of a larger period of data collection concerning language use and linguistic behaviour.

## 2. The relationships between attitude and motivation: brief theoretical framework

Attitude is a set of beliefs and psychological predispositions to act or evaluate behaviour in a certain way (Gardner 1985). Language attitude is also described as a complex notion which can be defined as part of the existential competences, but also as a dynamic structure of learner attitudes.

Motivation is the reason for doing something, the combination of desire and effort in order to attain a goal (Gardner 1985). Dörnyei's (2005) motivational model includes general and situation-specific learning motivations. Instrumental and integrative motivations in language learning are the outcomes of learners' specific linguistic needs and their attitudes towards the language and its culture. This motivational background highly influences learners' attitudes towards language learning and their efficiency in learning the language.

According to Dörnyei's (2005, 2009) "L2 Motivational Self System", language learners' behaviour can be analysed along three components, namely the "ideal L2 self", the "ought-to L2 self", and the "L2 learning experience". In our interpretation of learners' language behaviour and linguistic attitudes, it is necessary to add a fourth component introduced by Richard Clément under the name of linguistic self-confidence (Csizér 2007, Dörnyei 2009). However, in the course of our analyses, the notion of the L2 motivational self system with its components will be treated as the learners' self-reflections, their linguistic self-concept, which is under constant change and re-assessment because the different learning and communication experiences redefine the learner's personality and image of the self (Tódor 2009).

The above mentioned linguistic self-concept of learners can be explained by using the terms and concepts coined by Dörnyei (2005), i.e. the 'ideal' self and the 'ought-to' self. These two make up the linguistic self-concept and are considered by Dörnyei as strongly related. The 'ideal' self represents the (language) learner's wishes and desires that s/he would like to achieve in the near future for his/her

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personal development and well-being. This type of motivational background is highly dependent on the learner's attitudes towards the target language and its native speakers. The 'ought-to' self is connected to instrumental motivation in literature. As Dörnyei (2005) defines it, the 'ought-to' self refers to all the attributes that a person believes s/he needs to or should achieve in order to avoid some negative consequences, so it is rather meeting external needs and expectations than a personal desire. Among the typical instrumental motivations, we can mention better salary, better job, etc. and, in our case, some external learning motivations such as those connected to linguistic prestige – state language, international language, etc.

Gardner and Lambert (1959) were the first to demonstrate a significant relationship between motivation and positive attitudes towards the language and its speakers. The Attitude Motivation Test Battery (ATMB) developed by Gardner and Lambert (1959) included five constructs – attitudes towards the learning situation, integrativeness, motivation, language anxiety, and instrumentality – and several scales to assess these constructs. If we take a closer look at these scales, we can see that, for example, motivation is measured along motivational intensity, a desire to learn the language and attitude towards learning the language. Measuring motivation by examining language learners' attitudes towards learning the language is a good example to show that attitude and motivation are interconnected.

On the basis of previous research results and studies on attitudes and motivation in language learning, it can be concluded that attitudes and motivation are strongly intertwined. Positive attitude towards the language and its speakers can lead to increased motivation, which then results in better learning achievement and a positive attitude towards learning the language. However, neither attitude nor motivation are stable, they can change over time and are closely related to the actual social, political, and socio-historical context and power relationship (Pavlenko 2005: 31).

Apart from the distinction referring to language learning motivation – instrumental and integrative –, we also need to point out a distinction regarding linguistic needs and language use. While learners might have instrumental (external) or integrative (internal) reasons for learning a language, they can also have different reasons for using the language. House (2002) differentiates between "language for communication" and "language for identification" (terms taken from Hüllen 1992). Multilingual people can choose the language and adjust the language to their needs. Thus, for example, speakers can use their mother tongue to express their cultural identity and use another language only as an instrument to communicate and to understand each other (Dégi 2012). In the light of this theory, the increased demand for English as an international, high-prestige language should not be treated as a threat to multilingual diversity, but it should be considered as a development towards a so-called "multilingualism with English" (Hoffman 2000: 3).

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## 3. The empirical study

The aim of the present study is to gain a better insight into what regards the language attitudes of students attending Hungarian minority schools in Romania. Our research addresses questions related to students' attitudes towards different languages, the factors/criteria along which they express their language attitudes, students' learning experiences and strategies that they consider efficient and useful in order to acquire a language.

The source of data presented and analysed in the present paper is the result of a long data collection period that lasted for three years during our research on language use and linguistic behaviour.[1] For the purpose of our research, Hungarian minority schools were selected from two types of bilingual localities, namely settlements with a small Hungarian minority population and those with a large Hungarian minority population (where Hungarian minority people constitute the majority of the population). Both urban and rural schools were investigated. The subjects of our study were students of primary and secondary schools (5 to 12 graders) attending a Hungarian minority school in one of the following locations: Timişoara (N=70) and Tormac (N=46) from Timiş County, Sândominic (N=69), Miercurea Ciuc (N=46) and Toplița (N=45) from Harghita County, and Ghimeş (N=53) from Bacău County. Thus, a total of 329 primary and secondary school students participated in the research. Almost half of the subjects were boys (47%) and slightly more than half of the subjects were girls (52%). *Table 1* below shows the distribution of the respondents by gender.

**Table 1.** *Distribution of subjects by gender*

| Setting | Boy | Girl | N |
|---|---|---|---|
| Timişoara | 36 | 34 | 70 |
| Tormac | 12 | 34 | 46 |
| Sândominic | 31 | 38 | 69 |
| Miercurea Ciuc | 26 | 20 | 46 |
| Toplița | 27 | 18 | 45 |
| Ghimeş | 24 | 29 | 53 |

The sampling of our respondents was based on the linguistic context the respective schools they attended were set in. Therefore, the schools selected have the following profile:

1 The research projects were financially supported by the Sapientia Foundation – Institute for Scientific Research from Cluj-Napoca. Data come from two larger research projects listed below:
a. Language behaviour and schoolscape. The schoolscape of Hungarian minority schools from Romania – a comparative analysis. IPC: 6/6/2014. Project co-ordinator: Erika Mária Tódor.
b. Language use, language attitudes, and schoolscape. IPC: 12/23/28.04.2015. Project co-ordinator: Erika Mária Tódor, project members: Zsuzsanna Dégi, Réka Bartalis-Vitályos.

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a. educational institutions characterized as dominantly Romanian social and linguistic environment (with Hungarian sections with a small number of students) or their larger social and linguistic environment is dominantly Romanian – the institution itself is a Hungarian-minority school but the community is dominantly Romanian (Tormac, Timişoara).

b. educational institutions characterized by a social and linguistic environment bilingual in Hungarian and Romanian, but the institution is set in a dominantly Romanian social and linguistic environment (Ghimeş and Topliţa).

c. educational institutions characterized by a dominantly Hungarian social and linguistic environment, and their larger social and linguistic environment is also dominantly Hungarian, in which the Hungarian minority population of the community constitutes the local majority (Sândominic, Miercurea Ciuc).

The research aimed at investigating the linguistic landscape of the institutions listed above and exploring students' attitudes; therefore, a triangulation of research methods was used to collect data (Sántha 2015, Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault 2015). Based on this type of integrated research methods, design data was collected using both quantitative research methods (questionnaires) and qualitative methods (interviews, focus-group discussions, and taking photos) bearing in mind the fact that students' age difference has an influence on the way researchers can approach them and get a deeper insight into their opinions and attitudes. Data presented in the present study were collected with questionnaires (3 closed-ended and 3 open-ended questions) and focus-group discussion with students.

# 4. Results

## 4.1. The game of duality: language for identification and language for communication

The most frequently used language plays a crucial role in defining one's linguistic self, and it is followed by languages that one encounters directly or indirectly (linguistic and social context, institutional learning, self-study, etc.). In the questionnaire, students were asked to name what they thought was the most beautiful language and bring up arguments to support their choice. Obviously, there are a large number of reasons why one can opt for such a relative and complex notion like beautiful language. In the course of analysing students' answers, we were interested in their reactions and arguments as well as in the types of the key concepts that they used. In other words, we were curious about the set of criteria they used to define the most beautiful language.

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**Table 2.** *Which is the most beautiful language?*

| The most beautiful language | Arguments | Answer types |
|---|---|---|
| ***Hungarian*** | "because it is my mother tongue"[2] | Central, the most frequently mentioned reason. |
| | "because it is the most beautiful language"<br>"it is the most difficult"<br>"because it is special"<br>"it contains nice words and expressions"<br>"it was easy for us to learn"<br>"because I like it; because it is beautiful"<br>"I am proud of it"<br>"it sounds nice"<br>" it has a rich vocabulary"<br>"it contains nice expressions and Hungarian people are intelligent"<br>"…because I don't speak any other language"<br>"it is nice, well-balanced, easy to understand"<br>"it is tough and logical"<br>"it is sophisticated"<br>"unique, melodious, complex"<br>"maybe it is the most difficult language in the world" | Listing adjectives, affective nature of answers.<br>It highlights the role of language in shaping one's identity.<br>It is worth mentioning that this affective dimension generated the most colourful and varied answers about the language. |
| | "because I am Hungarian and so are my parents"<br>"I was born Hungarian and respect this language"<br>"because I inherited it…"<br>"because it is old and it is full of archaic/folkloric expressions" | Identity-bearing capacity.<br>It highlights the role of language in shaping one's identity. |
| | "because through it I can understand people and my friends"<br>"because I like reading in this language"<br>"because I can express myself better"<br>"because it is the best way to tell what you want; because there are a lot of words at our disposal, to make ourselves understood"<br>"because you can express one thing in many ways"<br>"it has polysemic words and we can talk more fluently using many words" | Language of communication, it helps to establish relationships.<br>The language has a communicative-functional role. |

2 Statements and expressions between quotation marks are the respondents' answers.

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The majority of the students (73%) considered Hungarian to be the most beautiful language and defined its beauty according to the following criteria: a. *because it is my mother tongue,* b. a multitude of arguments for their choice by using a *list of adjectives*. In this list of adjectives describing the language, mainly emotional ties are formulated, but we can also find references to different language myths (for example, "the most difficult and special language"). The third set of arguments contains comments and reactions which reflect the language's role in *shaping one's self*, its *identity-bearing capacity*; so, using the language allows for a more sophisticated and complex self-expression. At the same time, the communicative-functional role of the language is also a factor to determine its beauty and make oneself understood.

Many of the respondents (27%) qualified languages other than Hungarian as beautiful. A summary of their answers is provided in the table below.

**Table 3.** *Which is the most beautiful language?*

| **The most beautiful language** | **Arguments** |
|---|---|
| Romanian | "because it is useful", "because I can express myself better" |
| English | "because it is used by many people" |
| French | "because its pronunciation is pleasant", "because I like how words are pronounced" |
| German | "because it contains only a few swear words" |
| Chinese | "because the letters are cool" |
| Italian | "because it is beautiful, melodious, it has an interesting pronunciation, it is exceptional, it is used by many" |

Analysing respondents' answers as to why they chose a specific language as the most beautiful one, it can be seen that apart from the most frequently mentioned reason – mother tongue – used in the case of Hungarian, the external aspects, characteristics of a language form a category along which a language is defined as beautiful, for example, pronunciation, the way it sounds, letters, melody, or its usefulness.

The data presented above show that in the case of the mother tongue (Hungarian) our research subjects' attitudes are mainly expressed by using affective language and are based upon their linguistic and communicative experiences, while in the case of other languages subjects' opinions about the language are based upon the language's external features. Thus, the mother tongue serves the purpose of expressing self-identity, heritage, and confident self-expression; it is the language of identification. However, the ability to make oneself understood and understand others as well as the external linguistic features of languages

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also play an important role in deciding which language is "beautiful". In this respect, we can differentiate between *internal* and *external* categories, where internal means attitudes derived from linguistic experience and their affective, cognitive, and experiential dimensions, whereas external means attitudes based on impressions, aesthetic elements, and receptive language skills.

A similar duality is observed by Sára Magyari (2015), who examined what the school population of Timiş and Oradea counties thought of the mother tongue. Her research results show a duality in the way minority school children perceive their mother tongue. On the one hand, there is a sort of external discourse, which prescribes how one should speak about the mother tongue (for example, "sweet mother tongue", "it must be protected", "it is our responsibility to preserve it," etc.), while, on the other hand, there is an underlying/internal discourse, which contains the real/true attitudes (Magyari 2015: 42).

According to the interviewees' answers, it can be said that Hungarian language is the language for identification and self-expression, English is the language which opens up possibilities, and Romanian is the language of instrumentality.

It can be observed that children coming from mixed marriages obviously present a dual affective attitude when it comes to choosing the most beautiful language. This might be the explanation for the fact that even if they have chosen a school with Hungarian as the language of instruction they still feel that they can express themselves better in another language.

It is worth mentioning that students' answers present two types of underlying attitudes: there is a more powerful presence of ethnolinguistic identity-driven attitudes, according to which the mother tongue is the most beautiful language "because we were born Hungarians"; on the other hand, there are the cultural relativism-based attitudes in statements like "there is no such thing as the most beautiful language", "all languages are beautiful", "everybody considers their own language beautiful", "everyone's own mother tongue is the most beautiful, and thus for me Hungarian is the most expressive language". Knowledge about students' underlying attitudes towards languages is of utmost importance in the education of linguistic behaviour as a major determining factor of linguistic behaviour is exactly the way how we think about languages.

Another major factor that influences language attitude is the functionality of the language, since such language evaluations reveal the motivational background of the "ought-to self" (Dörnyei 2005). In what follows, the paper sets forth this aspect and examines students' choice of the most useful language and the arguments that support their choice. In the context of Hungarian minority communities in Romania, this question has an even greater relevance since the above mentioned duality can be further extended – by analysing this issue, we can obtain a picture about students' attitudes towards learning and speaking the state language and foreign languages.

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**Table 4.** *Which is the most useful language?*

| The most useful language | Arguments |
|---|---|
| English (56%) | *world language,* "you can communicate with anyone", "the most spoken language in the developed countries", "the most widely spoken language", "English language knowledge is necessary for almost all job applications", "we can use it everywhere in the world because it is spoken in almost all countries" |
| Romanian (31%) | "We live/are in Romania." "It is used in many places in Romania." |
| Hungarian (9%) | |
| German (8%) | |
| Chinese (1%) | |

Considering students' definition of their "ought-to selves", it can be seen that language prestige is defined by the instrumentality of the respective language. Again, students' responses reveal duality in their attitudes: English and Romanian are considered to be the most useful languages. The high prestige of English is attributed to the fact that it is a world language and one can be successful with it even on the labour market. The necessity to acquire Romanian comes from the desire to integrate into the immediate language environment. These are natural communicative needs. The results are in line with other motivational studies carried out in Transylvania (Dégi 2012), namely that English is considered by students as a language of success, which is also used for international communication – it is the language of "international multilingualism", while Romanian is a language of "local/national multilingualism" (Dégi 2012: 661).

Trying to sum up students' attitudes towards languages, it can be said that while expressing their linguistic self students differentiate between a language for identification, which in this case is Hungarian, and a language of effective communication, that is English, Romanian, and Hungarian.

### 4.2. Language learning techniques: the students' perspective

After having explored students' attitudes towards languages, we tried to get insights into their opinions regarding language learning. Examining students' perspectives on language learning, on the one hand, offers information about those factors which students consider to be efficient in learning a language; on the other hand, students' answers can give an overall picture about students' language learning experiences in school, their advantages and disadvantages.

Our respondents were asked to give their opinions about the way someone can learn Romanian and foreign languages efficiently. The review of the students'

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answers reveals that – regardless of the status of different languages – acquiring both productive and receptive language skills seems to be important and the most effective strategy is direct language use. The most frequently mentioned strategy to learn Romanian, the state language, is *situated learning and active engagement*, as the examples below illustrate:

"you practise the language in your environment"
"…practice makes perfect"
"from friends"
"if you observe the language and use it frequently"
"if you observe how others communicate"
"if you make Romanian friends"
"if you move to a Romanian region"
"you need to live in a Romanian community".

In the case of foreign languages, students stress the importance of the target-language-speaking countries and connections/friendships with native speakers: "go to that country where the language you want to learn is spoken".

The *second* language learning context is the school and respondents mention some institutional language learning techniques:

"learning and practising vocabulary"
"if you pay attention to what is going on in the lessons and you learn"
"if you pay attention to what is going on in the lessons"
"you need to learn the vocabulary and grammar"
"through Romanian tales"
"through reading Romanian books"
"through having extra lessons"
"if you read"
"if you pay attention to what is going on in the lesson and you do some extra exercises".

As far as students' answers related to institutionalized language learning are concerned, it needs to be emphasized that self-discipline is frequently mentioned – acquiring knowledge is achieved by paying attention and being consistent. However, some individual learning techniques also appear like "learn the most important words and their connectors". Moreover, there are opinions underlining the importance of self-study: "you need to learn on your own (learning independently)". According to some students, learning a language has to be started at a young age – you need to start learning and reading "because later you can expand your vocabulary by reading".

Another learning technique is again related to non-formal contexts. Learning strategies presented here are the most varied. On the one hand, these strategies involve *creating an artificial language environment*; on the other hand, they can entail some *concrete language learning tools*: watching movies, cartoons, listening

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to music, playing games, watching movies with subtitles, watching TV, using computers, playing videogames, doing/watching lessons on the Internet, setting your phone language to Romanian, using Google Translate, using dictionaries.

The results presented above regarding students' opinions on effective language learning are in close connection with Enikő Biró's (2015) research results concerning the language learning strategies of foreign workers. Biró's respondents, reflecting on their learning strategies, strongly emphasize the lack and shortcomings of formal education. Their repertoire of language learning strategies is much poorer compared to the students' list of strategies, probably because foreign workers lead a different life-style.

Students' answers on effective language learning strategies can thus be grouped around the above mentioned three ideas: a) direct language use through situated learning and active engagement, b) school, institutionalized language learning, and c) creating an artificial language environment. Students' answers bear an important message for school/institutional education. Students obviously prefer active, experiential learning opportunities, and this should be taken into account when planning institutional language teaching.

### 4.3. Cross-linguistic awareness

Apart from exploring students' attitudes to the different languages and their opinions regarding the most effective language learning strategies, we were also interested in their cross-linguistic awareness as they are multilingual language learners. Therefore, students were asked if any of their previously acquired language(s) help(s) them in learning another language.

There is a large number of studies concerning multilingual language learning and how languages interact in one's mind (Herdina & Jessner 2002, Bono 2011, Cook 2016). These studies emphasize the fact that language learning is not a linear process and languages are not kept in separate boxes in the speaker's mind. Therefore, researchers argue for a dynamic view of language acquisition according to which multilingual language learning involves the influence of one or more language systems "on the development of not only the second language but also the development of the overall multilingual system" (Herdina & Jessner 2002: 28). Similarly to this dynamic systems theory (DST) model developed by Herdina and Jessner (2002), multicompetence also emphasizes the dynamic interplay and interrelationship between languages in a multilingual person's mind (Cook 2016).

This interplay of languages in a speaker's linguistic repertoire and prior language knowledge is said to have a facilitative effect on further language acquisition, so learners can benefit from these cross-linguistic associations (Jessner 2008, Bono 2011, Jessner, Megens & Graus 2016). Bono (2011: 26) argues that the "possibility to establish crosslinguistic associations based on the similarities and differences

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of known languages is a powerful tool that can be turned to the learner's advantage *if certain conditions are met*" (highlight in the original). Research results in the field point out that the conditions mentioned by Bono (2011) are connected to metalinguistic awareness – in other words, cross-linguistic associations need to be complemented by metalinguistic awareness in order for them to have a facilitative effect on language learning. Metalinguistic awareness is defined as the ability to analyse and control, to help learners to focus on structural similarities and differences between languages (Herdina & Jessner 2002, Bono 2011).

Therefore, metalinguistic awareness is of utmost importance, especially in institutionalized language learning, where there is a greater focus on form and classroom discussions involve a lot of metalanguage.

Consequently, our questions also focused on the metalinguistic awareness of our students' respondents. We wanted to find out whether their prior knowledge of languages facilitated language acquisition and in what ways. Schools and, more generally, formal language education could provide plenty of opportunities to develop students' metalinguistic and cross-linguistic awareness. Bono's study (2011) concludes that learners are mostly unaware of the cross-linguistic phenomena they produce, and it is the task of foreign language teachers to raise students' metalinguistic awareness by reflecting upon similarities and differences between the languages and by helping students "to exploit the shared resources in their linguistic repertoire" (Bono 2011: 49).

Probably the above mentioned unawareness led the majority of students (54%) to answer that neither Hungarian nor Romanian can help them acquire English or other languages. 28% of the respondents claimed that their Romanian language skills help them in many cases. These latter respondents point out mostly lexical similarities, stating that there are "similar words", "similar words of Latin origin appear", etc. Only a minority of students (12%) said that Hungarian also helped them learn another foreign language because they "translate into Hungarian" and there "are words which are explained in Hungarian". These answers suggest, though not explicitly, that in the course of acquiring English (as a third language) the Hungarian mother tongue can be used as a tool to understand texts and vocabulary, while Romanian plays a role in recalling and learning new vocabulary.

## 5. Conclusion

Our opinions about different languages influence not only our attitudes to these languages but also our language learning strategies, and thus our entire language behaviour. The results suggest that students' general positive attitude towards languages promote cross-linguistic associations and integrative, dynamic multilingual thinking.

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At the same time, students' answers reveal that even if the aim of institutional education is to develop communicative competences in several languages in line with the European Union's key competences, everyday school language teaching is dominated by a monolingual perspective and language teaching approach (thinking in one language). Our findings regarding the majority of students claiming that their previously acquired languages are not facilitative in their language learning and that only 28% point out the lexical similarities between Romanian and English are in line with Bono's (2011) findings and might prove that cross-linguistic associations are individual initiatives and mainly unconscious. Therefore, as Bono (2011) also argues, there is a need for language teachers to help students to bridge the gap between languages and to help them exploit their previous language knowledge.

Considering students' answers regarding the most beautiful and most useful languages, it can be stated that their attitudes are determined by their own experiences of language use and, in this sense, we can differentiate between language for identification – the mother tongue built upon specific emotional, affective, and cognitive rationale fulfils this function (including communicative roles) – and language for communication, which, in the case of our respondents, is predominantly English and Romanian.

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