

## WHY DO ROMANIANS SPEAK FOREIGN LANGUAGES SO WELL?

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***Abstract:** According to a Eurobarometer survey on attitudes to multi-language, nearly half of Romanians say they can converse in another language. English is the foreign language that Romanians speak most, followed by French, German and Spanish. In recent years Romanians have progressed in language learning, especially young people, although teachers recognize that the Romanian education system has to make some changes. Beyond the statistics and polls, it is obvious that in recent years the language learning has become important for many Romanians.*

***Key words:** foreign language, mother tongue, school curriculum, level of English*

### **The use of foreign languages by Romanians**

According to a Eurobarometer, less than half of Romanians say they can have a conversation in another language. English is the foreign language that Romanians speak most, followed by French, German and Spanish. Over 70 percent of Romanians believe that every European should know at least one foreign language and 60 percent believe that English should be the best option. Thus, Carmen Valica, a Radio Romania Actualități correspondent, mentions that according to the Eurobarometer survey on attitudes to multi-language, nearly half of Romanians say they can converse in another language, English being the most commonly used. However, only 20 per cent of Romanians use a foreign language on holiday, compared to the European average of 50 per cent.

Androulla Vassiliou, Education Commissioner in the European Committee, explains that although more Europeans believe that speaking a foreign language is important, aspirations are not translated into reality. Vassiliou continues:

“98 per cent of respondents say it would be good for their children’s future that they know a foreign language. 88 per cent believe speaking another language than their mother tongue is useful and 84 per cent say that all Europeans should speak a foreign language. Over 70 per cent of Europeans believe that we should know even two foreign languages besides our mother tongue and we believe it, too. Results are therefore encouraging. But when it comes to facts, it is clear that we are working. Only 54 per cent of Europeans say they can converse in at least one foreign language and only one quarter of them speak two languages besides their mother tongue”. (available at: [http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the\\_use\\_of\\_foreign\\_languages\\_by\\_romanians\\_under\\_eu\\_average-42176](http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the_use_of_foreign_languages_by_romanians_under_eu_average-42176))

Nonetheless, for Romania the results in this area are below the European average. 48 per cent of Romanians say they can converse in another language, 22 per cent say they can do this in two foreign languages. English is the foreign language that most Romanians speak – 31 per cent, followed by French – 17 per cent, German and Spanish – 3 per cent. The study indicates that 8 per cent of Romanian citizens surveyed indicated Hungarian language as their mother tongue.

Nearly 60 per cent of Romanians believe that English is the most useful language and about 70 per cent consider that it would be most useful for their children. Eurobarometer also shows that Romanians mostly use a foreign language to watch movies or TV programs and listen to radio, since 68 per cent of Romanians, compared to only 44 per cent of Europeans, prefer subtitled films.

If Eurobarometer results rank us below the European average regarding the use of language, those involved in education believe that reality is different. Editor Constanța Comănici says that in recent years Romanians have progressed in language learning, especially young people, although teachers recognize that the Romanian education system has to make some changes. Beyond the statistics and polls, it is obvious that in recent years the language learning has become important for many Romanians. Even if in school the time for teaching foreign languages is limited, situation that exists in the European Union, the age at which children begin to study a foreign language has dropped to four or even three years. There are kindergartens with exclusive program in foreign languages, most in demand being English, then German or Spanish recently.

Moreover, in secondary school, students study one or two foreign languages at school and increase the number of hours. Often, the study of a

foreign language is coupled with private lessons or attending courses organized by paid various companies.

### **Top 5 foreign languages taught in Romania**

All schools in Romania have foreign language programs. Students must study at least one language to an advanced level and a second one at a more basic level. In other cases there are more than two foreign languages available to study and the student can choose from several. Many schools also offer bilingual courses.

During the communist period, the main language taught was Russian and German was the second most common. Nowadays things have changed and the school curriculum is very different.

According to the results of 2008's "Key Data on Teaching Languages at Schools in Europe" published by The Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA), the top language taught in Romania nowadays is English. Some fortunate children start to learn it in kindergarten but usually public schools have a language program which starts in second grade. The explanation is simple: as we can see on the World Language Map, English is very popular all around the world and nowadays it is necessary to have at least a basic command of the language. Furthermore, according to the cited study, the second most popular language is French and the third is German. Italian and Spanish are the next most commonly taught languages.

There is a wide variety of options available and many kids choose a specialized public school or high school because they want to study a certain language and they then continue to learn it throughout the curriculum. In the areas highly populated with minority groups, languages like Hungarian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Slovak, Czech or Croatian are taught too. They do not necessarily classify as foreign languages in these circumstances, as they are available as a result of the structure of society.

Nevertheless, it seems to be the case that all changes in society lead to changes in the learning process. If you were to ask a young Romanian man something in English you would definitely get an answer. This is less likely to happen amongst the older generation of Romanians, as English was not as much of an integral part of the curriculum when they were in formal education.

### **Youth is the hope**

Magdalena Bădicescu teaches English at Jose Marti School in Bucharest and is also part of the evaluation committees at English exams.

She says that young people's interest to study foreign languages has increased in recent years. Bădicescu explains:

“Children and adolescents are very open to foreign languages. Relevant are the results from Cambridge, also from EFTA examinations and TEOFL are exceptional in the world. Romanian students have very good results”. (available at: [http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the\\_use\\_of\\_foreign\\_languages\\_by\\_romanians\\_under\\_eu\\_average-42176](http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the_use_of_foreign_languages_by_romanians_under_eu_average-42176))

Since 2004 Daniela Pavoni is the leader representative of foreign language schools in Romania. Specifically, the company organizes courses and summer camps in foreign schools, colleges and universities where they advise young people to study in another country. To this, professor Magdalena Bădicescu explains:

“All the children they send abroad, i.e. over 600 each summer, have an extraordinarily good level of English, and when compared to other nations participating in educational programs it seems that other children of the same age have a much lower level of English. There were cases when groups were being formed only by Romanians since their level of English was so high that they could not have been combined with other foreign students”. (available at: [http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the\\_use\\_of\\_foreign\\_languages\\_by\\_romanians\\_under\\_eu\\_average-42176](http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the_use_of_foreign_languages_by_romanians_under_eu_average-42176))

Nonetheless, professor Bădicescu considers that certain aspects of the Romanian educational system could suffer some changes. She explains that in order to be more productive, foreign language classes should be taught to smaller groups of students and not to the entire class. Of course this is a practice in some Romanian schools and it is advisable to be adopted by every school with the purpose of increasing a positive result regarding foreign language learning.

All in all, even if surveys show that Romanians compared to other European citizens do not use foreign languages so often, facts show that there has been done a step forward in increasing people's interest in foreign languages.

## Webography

[http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the\\_use\\_of\\_foreign\\_languages\\_by\\_romanians\\_under\\_eu\\_average-42176](http://www.romania-actualitati.ro/the_use_of_foreign_languages_by_romanians_under_eu_average-42176)  
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**Oana-Roxana IVAN** is a PhD student in Philology from the University of the West in Timișoara (Romania). Her thesis centres on the topic of Don Quixote and Tristram Shandy as modern archetypes of failed masculinity. She has an MA on American Studies and a BA on English and Spanish Language and Literature in the University of the West, and a BA on International Relationships and European Studies in the “Babes-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca (Romania). She is a qualified teacher of English and Spanish as foreign languages and has been teaching languages for five years in the state and private educational system. Her field of interest has allowed her to participate in many national and international conferences during the last years.