

## **Mapping the Early Stages of Learner Identity in Romanian Classes: Approaching Translation and Medical Students**

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### **Abstract**

*Language learning and teaching, along with the way they are examined, have changed in recent decades, as interest has shifted from more traditional and general approaches regarding language acquisition and transfer to concepts like the BICS/CALP dichotomy (Cummins 76-79). The new tendencies allow for a more nuanced analysis of the learning process and its results. Building on the idea of a developing student identity proposed by Bernstein in 2000, its evolution and influence on the way a language is pursued (McKeown, Ramadori 24-37), the current research tries to observe the concept of learner identity in the context of Romanian courses within a translation and interpreting university programme. Motivated by the desire to grasp the specific training needs of future translators, the present paper attempts to outline the learners' linguistic profiles and map early language learner identity development, by means of a brief study which looks at students' own perception of difficulties and strengths at different times. The population of the study is constituted of 46 students who were asked to reflect on these aspects by completing surveys between 2019 and 2022. Moreover, it was possible to contrast these results with those from another interesting learner population: foreign students enrolled in Romanian language courses as part of their medicine studies in Romania. The results seem to confirm the existence of a learner identity in both groups and the ramifications of the findings are analysed in both learning contexts, with a focus on the context of translation and interpreting.*

**Keywords:** translation studies, Romanian, language learning, language learner identity, BICS and CALP

### **Introduction**

Language learning and teaching have changed over the last decades, and so has the way they are examined, as research interest has shifted from more traditional and general approaches to the study of second language learning and acquisition (Krashen 1-2) or language transfer, put forth by Sharwood and Kellerman in 1986, and to more nuanced types of analysis of the process and results of language learning, by using concepts like Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), proposed by Cummins in 1979. Building on

the idea of a developing student identity suggested by Bernstein, recent papers also track the evolution of language learner identity (McKeown, Ramadori 24-37), its impact on the language acquisition itself, as well as on decisions made by students regarding the study of a language and the way this is pursued. In the current research, the first of a series of research projects, the concept of learner identity is observed in language learners who study Romanian as a foreign language. within a Translation and Interpreting degree in Spain, as the peculiarities of this context naturally generate reflection among the teaching staff and lead to a series of questions that have motivated this study, which are: *what is the language profile of the students?* and *is there a pedagogic identity of the individuals attending the courses being built over time?* If so, I also allow for the possibility of considering their linguistic profile as an important building block in their learner identity, along with their own assessment of perceived difficulties and strong points, as it is an indicator of their relationship with the language (one of difficulty, accessibility, enjoyment and so on). Lastly, can this data offer grounds for a discussion on their motivation, needs and potential intentions as future professionals with a command of the Romanian language? The findings of the survey conducted in this programme are contrasted with a similar questionnaire, applied in groups of foreign medical students enrolled in Romanian courses as part of their studies at a university in Romania. If we consider translation and interpreting students as a special learner population whose needs differ from those of general learners it was believed that it would be feasible to contrast my initial observations and findings with those of another interesting learner population: foreign students enrolled in Romanian language courses as part of their medicine studies in Romania. Although different in several aspects that we shall comment on in the appropriate sections of the paper, such as in their purpose in learning the language and their linguistic profile, the two populations are similar in that, in general, they come from groups meant to have started studying Romanian at the university level (the exceptions and particularities will be commented on in the upcoming sections) and as beginners. In other words, the pupils in both populations must follow a study plan that starts with a beginner curriculum and the levels assigned are consecutive and progressive. Moreover, it has to be noted that the linguistic diversity in the second population has also motivated its inclusion in the study, as it was perceived as a factor that could lead to striking results.

The paper aims to look into aspects relevant to the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language, but in the context of translation studies, and a focus on the necessities of these learners, which have been insufficiently explored. Also, since the work of translators and interpreters is subjected to a wide range of professional requirements (including numerous functions and

competencies beyond basic standard language skills such as comprehension and expression) and implies a variety of communicative aspects and cognitive processes, I believe that determining the needs of learners who are meant to be future translators becomes a relevant part of the teaching process. Firstly, given this paper's focus on this kind of programme, I would like to restate that the learning requirements of future translators are more complex than those of general language learners (Pym 319-40). Thus, in addition to written and oral communication skills, knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and key cultural information, a set of specific abilities must also be taught, ranging from research capabilities to easily grasping concepts belonging to other areas of knowledge or well-developed social and mediation abilities, in the case of interpreters. These competences are included in the official programme description to which the main group belongs (published by the University of Alicante and which echoes the specifications of ISO standards such as 17100: 2015 on translation services). Future graduates need to acquire digital skills and are defined as “translators, interpreters and multilingual communication professionals”, expected to meet certain social needs and to possess “global knowledge in fields related to translation studies (civilisation, culture, politics, business, etc.)”, who are able to produce quality translations in different registers and fields and to adapt efficiently to a fast-changing environment. This list can be completed with expectations from potential employers and qualities considered valuable on the job market (multi-specialisation, speed, etc). In contrast, the medical students do not need to acquire such subtleties of the language and additional skills, as their purpose in learning the language is purely instrumental. In other words, they only need to know the language as a means to an end, a tool in their academic and professional life, albeit within a specialised context.

The present paper includes a brief survey-based study, meant as an attempt to outline the learners' linguistic profiles and map the first stages in the development of language identity by looking at their own perception of difficulties and strengths at different times. Therefore, it is my endeavour to try to map the early points in the journey from being an *outsider* (a learner who is navigating on a surface level of the language, in social and familiar interactions within the user's comfort zone) to becoming an *insider*, with the potential of becoming an empowered professional for whom Romanian can be a working tool.

A context for the research conducted is provided in the following section and it includes elements about the university programme to which each group belongs, as well as background information about the target population and secondary group, followed by a literature review, the results and a discussion leading up to the validation of the claim of an early language learner identity and its implications.

## 1. Context

In the case of the students who study Romanian as part of a 4-year Translation and Interpreting programme, the language is taught in 4 hours of weekly classes. The programme includes an *A language* (Spanish or Catalan), a *B* and *C language* (chosen from English, French or German) and finally, a *D language* which can be Romanian, Russian, Arabic, Chinese or Italian) and for which the students are not required to pass a placement test or any other previous level assessment. They go on to take six consecutive subjects (available between their 2nd and 4th year), which are divided in 2 series: *D Language* courses (1-3, obligatory) and *Language and Translation* courses (1-3, optional). They are evaluated by means of written and oral tests consisting of language and translation activities, as well as classwork (oral and written comprehension or expression tasks, as well as translations). The latter courses are more oriented towards translation (from and into Romanian), introducing them to specialised languages and to a variety of registers and textual styles. Finally, at the end of the cycle, students may also do their final project on topics related with translation from or into Romanian, such as a translation analysis. The courses can also be linked to levels established by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (A1- C2) for descriptive purposes, therefore these markers will occasionally be used here for a better understanding of some of the aspects discussed.

In recent years the number of those who tend to choose Romanian has varied between 10 and 20 students per year. Interestingly enough, only a minority of 2 or 3 students per year tend to be Romanians residing in Spain, who have been living abroad from an early age and have never studied the language in a formal and structured setting (although between 2021 and 2022 there have been none). They are what can also be described as false beginners and may contribute to a diversity of initial levels as well as different learning needs.

As follows, some details regarding the local languages in Spain will be provided in order to better account for some of the comments in the methodology and results sections: four co-official local languages are recognised by the Spanish Constitution apart from Spanish itself (Art. 3): Valencian, Catalan, Euskera and Galician. Although identified therein as separate languages, Catalan and Valencian are generally considered dialects or variants of the same language (d'Andrés 67-108) from a linguistic perspective. In fact, the University of Alicante curriculum for Translation and Interpreting includes *Catalan Language* courses and not *Valencian*. Finally, it is important to mention that Valencian is taught in most public and

private schools in the region and, even though policies and study options have varied in the last decades, the vast majority of students in the Valencian Community learn the language throughout the whole of their pre-university education, therefore only a small minority (constituted of exchange students or students from other regions of the country) may occasionally not speak or understand it.

Regarding the second population in this research, the students (belonging 1st and 2nd year groups) were enrolled in Romanian language courses of 2 hours weekly as part of their medical studies in English at the University of Oradea and were brought together for different workshops within a teachers' exchange programme. According to information provided by the host university staff and the students themselves, the classes may welcome very ethnically and linguistically diverse pupils, coming from countries as distant as India, Nigeria or Somalia, but also from Arab-speaking communities belonging to EU countries such as Finland. The students evidently reside in Romania and require the language competence for social and academic interactions as well as to carry out their practical medical training in Romanian hospitals later on in the programme.

## **2. Literature review**

This study employs the concept of student learner identity as defined by Bernstein in 2000, who states that pedagogy is meant to generate “a particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performances and practices” in both teachers and students. Hence, it was necessary to find out how the students feel about the study of Romanian and their own abilities in this attempt, how difficult they perceive the language to be and if and how they self-assess their strong and weak points, in order to better understand how they interact with the language. Other findings which I want to use as a point of reference in my research are those connecting learner identity and investment in language learning with the construction of a positive or negative identity (Teng 43-60). Such connections have been explored in terms of English training programmes by McKeown and Ramadori in 2022, who analysed the development of a language learner identity within a given study programme. They remark that, as pupils experience improvement in their language skills and benefit from interactions with others using the target language, they consequently acquire new perspectives on the language and their progress. This links with learner identity as a sum of multiple components such as one's own perception of oneself, the development of identity through negotiation and reproduction, as well as the classroom environment in which learners interact using the new language (Lobatn 60-76).

On the other hand, Jim Cummins' language skill model, which distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Linguistic Proficiency (CALP), offers a great metaphor for the whole that is the process of learning a language: an iceberg whose visible tip is represented by BICS, whereas the less visible and more substantial part is composed by CALP. At first sight, this could apply to the student populations in question in the following ways:

Skill s	Examples for the translation and interpreting students (group A)	Examples for the medical students (group B)
BICS	Social vocabulary, familiar contexts, general language, linguistic skills needed in everyday and social interactions.	Social vocabulary, familiar contexts and general language.
CALP	Specialised vocabulary (e.g: medical, legal, etc.), analysis, translation and interpreting tasks, academic language.	Specialised medical and scientific vocabulary, academic and scientific language.

In the case of the translation and interpreting students, the first 3 language courses are meant to ensure the acquisition of BICS and the maximum level to be expected would be A2-B1, whereas the following 3 semesters, which are devoted to language and translation contents, represent the first steps towards CALP and require an upper intermediate level or, whenever possible, an advanced level (B2-C1). Interestingly enough, given that communication using BICS is context-embedded, and undemanding from a cognitive point of view, it is considered that an average learner would need from 6 months to 2 years to master it. On the other hand, CALP skills imply becoming proficient in academic language or language specific to various content areas and are thought to be achieved in at least five years. Ironically, given the structure of the translation studies programme in question, students are expected to develop CALP in just six semesters (with only 4 hours of class on a weekly basis). This, of course, constitutes an additional challenge for both students and instructors, as it could be considered feasible only with additional effort and work from learners and seems to be based on the (ambitious) premise that university students possess a certain "basic" knowledge and understanding of some specialised concepts from fields such as science, law, institutions and so on.

### 3. Methodology

The brief survey-based study consisted of two parts, corresponding to the different populations to which surveys were administered. Group A, the main population and focus of the study, was composed of 46 translation and interpreting students residing in Spain (in their 2nd, 3rd or 4th year at the University of Alicante) and completed anonymous questionnaires between 2019 and 2022 during their class hours, by means of an online form written in Spanish. Group B, a population of 29 foreign medical students in Romania (belonging to the 1st and 2nd year, University of Oradea), filled in the anonymous paper questionnaires in English during a short series of workshops organised within a teachers' exchange programme (again during class hours). This latter group was used as a support or triangulation group within the context of a broader research regarding the teaching of Romanian as a foreign language in translation training programmes. Due to the difference in their field of study and the purpose with which they study Romanian, the importance given to the findings from this group is lower. This is also owed to the limited time available to administer the survey. The students enrolled in the *Medical Studies in English* programme were only available for a two-hour session (per group) in which the questionnaires were handed out and collected. As previously explained, they reside in Romania in order to attend university there and carry out their practical medical training in public health institutions in this country. Therefore, while their training and background is different, the common element of the two populations is the need to acquire social, academic and professional dimensions of language proficiency. Nevertheless, Group B is taught Romanian with different goals in mind, as already explained in the Introduction.

Both surveys included questions meant to elicit information about their mother tongue(s), other languages spoken and a more detailed set of open-ended questions referring to the study of the Romanian language (how difficult they perceive Romanian to be before and while studying it, as well as their strengths and weaknesses). The question referring to the mother tongues spoken was included in the questionnaire for group A in order to confirm what was evident by means of classroom observation and the location of the university: that most students are native speakers of Valencian/Catalan, as well as Spanish. This is relevant as both languages bear notable similarities with Romanian in syntax, morphology, basic vocabulary, phonetics and spelling (Beltran 25-73 and Sala 5.3-4: 7-11) and, from my own experience as a teacher, this is likely to improve the results of the learning process. In group B, it was meant as a way to identify the different native languages spoken by the population.

Students were given the possibility of writing their own answer

instead of selecting it from a list, which often led to diverse answers. This was both convenient for some of the inquiries and conducive to ambiguities in others, therefore these implications will be duly commented on in the discussion section. One of the interrogations formulated in which I believe it was particularly beneficial to do so was the one referring to their mother tongue, especially for the Spanish residents, as students were allowed to fill in their answer using either *Valencian* or *Catalan*, as the imposition of one designation was susceptible to a certain degree of political or linguistic debate.

Then the students were asked *How difficult did you perceive Romanian to be before/after studying it?* This question was slightly modified for group B and formulated in reference to the students' arrival to the country because, according to information provided by the host university staff, their arrival to the country coincides with the beginning of the classes (as it is dependent on a special visa). In addition, the students belonging to this group actually live in Romania and are exposed to the language both socially and academically, therefore it was felt that it would be more practical to rephrase the question.

Lastly, the subjects of the survey were asked about their strengths and weaknesses and suggested to either identify language skills (reading, writing, etc.) or language components (grammar, vocabulary, etc.) to that effect.

## **4. Results**

In this section I shall summarise the results of the survey in each of the two populations: group A, composed of translation and interpreting students in Spain, and group B, formed by foreign medical students in Romania.

### **4.1. Mother tongues spoken**

For group A, the question referring to the students' mother tongue was open so that the students could answer using either the names *Valencian* or *Catalan*, as explained in the methodology section. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this study, both separate and cumulative figures for Catalan and Valencian are provided, in order to offer more precise information. The responses show that, as a first mother tongue, Spanish is named by a compelling majority, followed by Catalan or Valencian. However, when asked about their second mother tongue, Catalan and Valencian stand out, followed by Spanish. The cumulative results show Spanish, Catalan and Valencian as the main languages spoken with 57% and 29.1%, respectively, as can be seen in Table 2 and Figure 1.

SURVEY 2019- 2022					
46 respondents					
1st mother tongue		2nd mother tongue		mother tongue (1st or 2nd)	
SP	32	SP	13	SP	45
*CAT+VAL	7	*CAT+VAL	16	*CAT+VAL	23
CAT	4	CAT	4	CAT	8
VAL	3	VAL	12	VAL	15
RO	6	RO	2	RO	8
GAL	1	GE	1	GAL	1
		EN	1	GE	1
		0	13	EN	1

Table 2: Mother tongues in group A

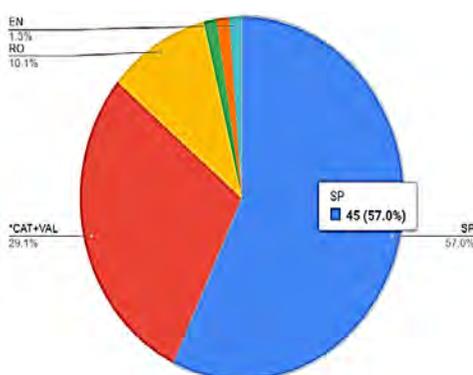


Figure 1: Mother tongues in group A: overall results

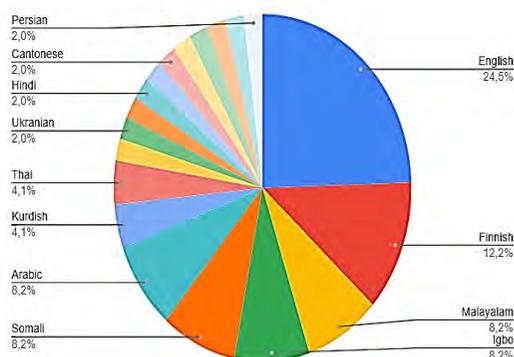


Figure 2: Mother tongues in group B: overall results

In group B, the responses obtained show a far more diverse linguistic landscape: the most common first mother tongue is English (5 speakers), followed by Malayalam and Igbo (4), Somali and Arabic (3). Other languages are also present: Kurdish and Thai (2), and Yoruba, Ukrainian, Hungarian, Hindi, French and Finnish (1). As a second mother tongue, English was the most spoken once again (7 speakers), closely followed by Finnish (5), but Cantonese, Irish, Pashto, Urdu, Somali, Persian, Arabic and Russian (each represented by one speaker) were also present. The graph in Figure 2 offers a visual representation of the total results in percentages (first and second mother tongue).

#### 4.2. Other languages spoken

The inquiry regarding other languages spoken in group A revealed that most respondents spoke English (42.9%) and more than half French (25.7%), while the other well-represented languages were Catalan/Valencian (total result: 14.3%) and German (13.3%). Portuguese (1.9%), Italian and

Russian (0.8% each) are also mentioned. Subsequently, the same question was asked in group B, and it was found that the medical students in Romania spoke English (33.3%), German (20.8%), Turkish, French, Finnish, Swedish (8.3% each), and Russian, Spanish and Hindi (8.3% each).

#### **4.3. Perceived difficulty of Romanian before and after attending classes**

These questions, although rather general or imprecise, were easy to answer from a learner's perspective (and can be understood in the context of their study programme and/or other languages spoken) and allowed me to infer whether there is a sense of deficiency or proficiency on the part of the student. When the 46 translation students in Spain were asked how difficult they had perceived Romanian to be before enrolling, I could notice there was barely a difference between those who stated they perceived it as *easy* (18 students) and/or *of medium difficulty* (19 students), whereas 7 members of the group perceived it as *difficult*. In addition to these representative categories, one student described it as borderline *easy/(of)medium difficulty* and finally another respondent, who was a native speaker, did not know how to describe how difficult it could be. To sum up, only 15.21% of the population perceived Romanian as *difficult* before taking classes, whereas the most significant percentages (41.3 and 39.13%, respectively) are divided between *medium/difficult*. Regarding their perception at the moment when the survey was taken, that is, after attending classes for a minimum of one semester, it can be noticed that some perceptions had changed. It is actually obvious that the number of students that assigned the language *a medium level of difficulty* had increased to 22, whereas the same number of students (18) continued to claim it was an *easy* language. At the same time, there were also students who opted for mixed answers: 2 students wrote *medium/difficult* and one student perceived its difficulty as *easy/medium*. The most striking change is that regarding the number of people who deemed it as *difficult*, which had significantly decreased (to only 3), as can be observed in Figures 3 and 4, which show the number of respondents for each option.

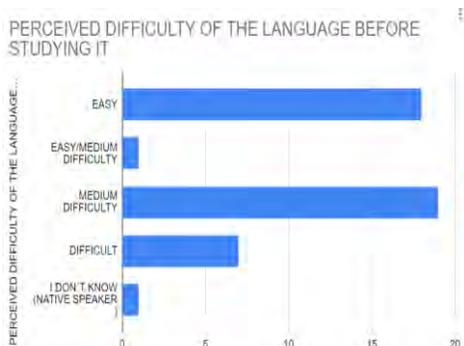


Figure 3: Perceived difficulty of the language before studying it (group A)

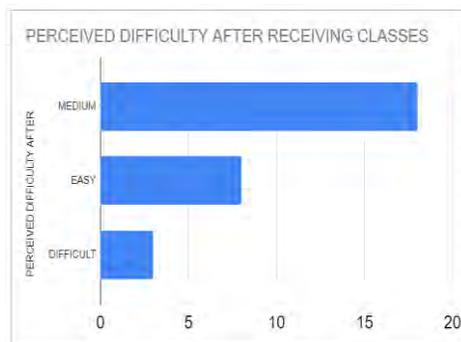


Figure 4: Perceived difficulty of the language after attending classes (group A)

When asked about their perception of the language difficulty before arriving in the country and starting the classes, a significant number of students in group B replied that it would be a language of *medium difficulty* (16 out of 29 students), 10 perceived it as *easy*, while 3 members of the class viewed it as *difficult* (Figure 4). In the same figure we can see that, after attending classes, there was an increase in the *medium difficulty* category (from 16 to 18 students), owed to the migration of two respondents who had initially stated it was *easy* (from 10 to 8), whereas the number of students who stated it was *difficult* remained constant (3).

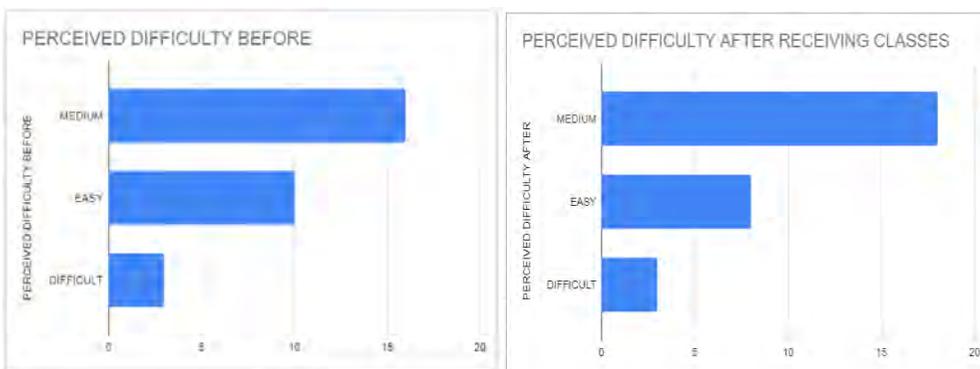


Figure 5: Perception of difficulty before and after receiving classes (group B)

#### 4.5. Strengths and weaknesses

Regarding their strengths and weaknesses when learning Romanian, the students in group A provided responses which indicate that *reading* is the strongest ability for most students (56.5%), followed by *listening* (15.2%) and a combination of the two (8.7%). As for the rest of the respondents, the percentages corresponding to speaking and writing (equaled by those who

stated they did not know and those who considered all skills equal) were far lower: 4.3% each. Finally, 2.3% considered *reading* and *writing* to both be strong skills. On the other hand, *speaking* and *writing* were viewed as weaknesses by 67.5%, and 25%, respectively. At the same time, *listening* was listed as a weakness by 13%, while *speaking* and *grammar* combined amounted to 2.17% and, finally, 4.35% perceived no obvious weakness. A detailed view of these results is offered in Figure 6.

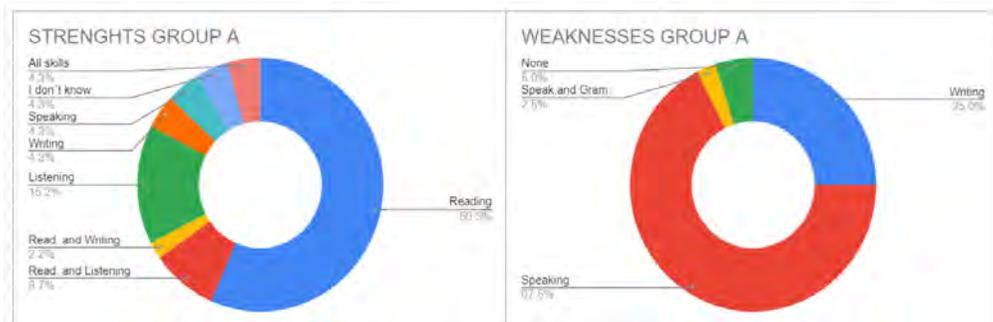


Figure 6: Strengths and weaknesses (group A)

When the same inquiry was made among the second population (Group B), *reading* and *listening* were at the top of the strength lists for many (48.28% and 20.69%, respectively), followed by *speaking*, the *speaking-listening* combination and *writing* (each with a 6.9%), while a minority provided other answers (none, *reading and listening*, *reading* combined with *speaking* and *listening*, each corresponding to 3.45%). For the same group, the most difficult aspect is *writing*, considered as such by 31.03% of the students, followed by *speaking and listening* (13.79%), and 10.34% voting for either *speaking* or combination of speaking and other skills (*writing and speaking*; *writing, speaking and listening* together). *Listening* on its own corresponded to 6.90% of the class, whereas other combinations of skills each represented 3.45% (*reading and speaking*; *reading, writing and listening*; all four basic skills together; *speaking and writing*; *writing and listening*).

## 5. Discussion

The first aspect I wanted to outline by means of the surveys carried out was the linguistic profile of the learners. In the main group (group A), it was necessary to confirm to what degree I was dealing with native speakers of Spanish and Valencian, or even bilingual (in Spanish and the regional language). The prevalence of Spanish as a first mother tongue and Valencian as a second mother tongue demonstrates that both languages may be used in the classroom, either for explanations or translation tasks. Given the

previously mentioned similarities between Romance languages in general, and Valencian and Romanian in particular, I can broadly infer that this may contribute to students' learning in a positive way. For instance, it may facilitate their comprehension of written texts and general sentence structure or enable the quick identification of new lexical items similar to their own language (all valuable skills for future translators). This is also reflected by the students' answers regarding their strengths and weaknesses (commented on further in this section). Thus, this can be a factor contributing to both the development of BICS (for instance, when studying basic vocabulary, such as members of the family or parts of the body) and CALP (for example, understanding medical or legal vocabulary quite easily). All of the aforementioned skills are necessary in translation and aid the cognitive processes involved, especially taking into account the diversity of registers and fields they are expected to be exposed to (particularly in the last 3 semesters), as explained in the context section. From the point of view of foreign languages spoken by the members of this population, I wish to highlight the presence of Romance languages once again, as more than half spoke French, and some students (the non-native speakers) referred to Valencian (studied at school as explained in the context section). Other languages spoken included Portuguese and Italian, which, by the same standard, may contribute to better learning results in their Romanian courses in this specific context. Based on my teaching experience, this is usually the case.

In group B, an initial observation is the presence of a significant linguistic variety: apart from English, the most present native languages are non-European (Malayalam, Igbo, Somali and Arabic). A few assumptions that derive from this reality are: the lack of obvious similarities between their mother tongues and the studied language, as well as the fact that the common language which may be used in class can only be English. This is confirmed by the results regarding the foreign languages, as English and German had higher numbers of speakers, while a smaller number spoke Turkish, French, Finnish, Swedish, Russian, Spanish or Hindi. Therefore, finding lexical (and other) similarities between Romanian and these native and foreign languages will be less likely and using such observations as common denominators in classroom explanations will generally not be possible, which makes English the only feasible classroom language.

Another aspect I looked into was the general perceived level of difficulty of the Romanian language before and after attending classes. This question allowed me to see that the students in Spain showed a high initial predisposition for considering it mostly *easy* or of *medium difficulty*, which I believe is owed to their previous knowledge of Spanish and/or Valencian, while less than a sixth of the students considered it *difficult*. This, in turn, contributes to their motivation to study this language (especially when

comparing it with other choices such as Arabic or Chinese). As it was expected (by the teaching staff), this positive perception of the language was even more visible after attending classes for a minimum of one semester, as the number of learners who had seen it as *difficult* was significantly lower. The evident low occurrence of the answer *difficult* is indicative of an optimistic attitude during the learning process among students and a sense of progress. I believe this development can be linked with higher self-confidence in the learning process and a willingness to continue studying the language (which becomes an optional subject after the third semester). The existence of borderline answers is explained by the fact that the question was open-ended and that the use of a limited list of only 3 options (*low difficulty*, *medium difficulty*, *high difficulty*) would have probably produced more striking results.

In terms of initial expectations in group B, it can be observed that, in comparison with Group A, a larger part of the group (more than half of the students) considered Romanian to be a language of *medium difficulty* and that this proportion rose after attending classes (to two fifths). Similarly, there were less students who stated it seemed *easy* (one third) than in the translation group and this number became lower. In my teaching experience, this may imply a decrease in motivation, therefore the utility of identifying this evolution, is that it can be taken into account when planning activities for such a group.

As for the inquiry regarding the students' perception of their own strengths and weaknesses, for group A mostly it revealed *reading* as the strongest ability (considered as such by more than half of the population), followed by *listening* (one sixth). This could be largely attributed to the similarities between their native languages and Romanian, not only in terms of alphabet and vocabulary, but also in sentence structure and other grammatical aspects, which seem to make comprehension tasks (especially reading) more accessible to them. The gap between the two comprehension skills could be explained, in my opinion as a Romanian teacher, by the added difficulty of having to understand certain new and different sounds (compared to their mother tongues). Correspondingly, *speaking* is defined as a weakness by more than half of the students, followed by *writing* (one quarter). As a teacher, I attribute this rather negative perception of their oral and written expression capacity to certain grammatical intricacies of Romanian (such an additional noun gender for nouns, compared to only two in Spanish/Valencian) or declinations (a complete novelty for many), which need to be taught in only 4 hours a week. In terms of oral expression, the pronunciation of sounds that do not exist in their own language may also contribute to a certain sensation of deficiency.

The results obtained in group B showed a similar view of strengths: comprehension skills were also at the top of the list, however in different proportions: less than half opted for *reading* (less than in group A) and one fifth chose *listening* (more than in group A). For this group, the most difficult aspect is *writing* (considered as such by one third of the students), followed by *speaking and listening* combined. Thus, there is a wider variety of answers obtained when inquiring about difficulties in this group. In fact, the collection of responses to both questions referring to strengths and weaknesses displayed a certain predisposition for grouping skills together (for instance difficulties were described by multiple skill combinations, involving speaking and other skills), which may be indicative of a general impression of difficulty, which may be explained by the fact that, at the time the survey was carried out, the students were either in their first or third semester of Romanian, therefore, had not reached a consolidated intermediate level and lacked a global understanding on how the new language worked (that is general perspective on the new language, as well as their own progress). Moreover, the fact that a significant number of the group members spoke non-European and even non-Indo-European languages may require a higher effort of adjusting to the new language system (as they lack the advantage of the Romance language speakers, who quickly grasped the sentence structure of the new language and easily detected grammar and vocabulary similarities with their own).

On the other hand, it must be admitted that some of the results could be influenced by the fact that the two groups belong to different disciplines and their goals when studying the language, as well as their learning priorities are quite diverse. Additionally their approach to the language ( a mere communication tool for academic and professional purposes for some and a craft for others) may enhance or diminish their ability to self-assess their level or progress objectively. In addition, we can suppose the medical students will require less time to achieve their goals in comparison to the translation groups.

Finally, I would like to put the results obtained in group A into perspective by adding some extra information (albeit anecdotal) about some of the notable achievements of Spanish students from the programme. On the one hand, the students in the programme are typically encouraged to take official language tests belonging to international testing systems and, although not many students feel motivated to enrol (usually due to the costs involved), this is an example of higher levels which can be attained (even in six semesters), such as upper intermediate (B2) and advanced (C1). Additionally, in recent years, final papers on translation projects from/into Romanian have included topics as diverse as literary and medical texts and audiovisual translation and have amounted to 1-2 papers a year (written

mostly by non-native speakers), which among other implications, may validate these students' confidence and motivation regarding the Romanian language and hint to their intention of continuing to include Romanian in their academic and professional future endeavours. These are typically papers written in Spanish or Valencian, and most of them include a translation from/into Romanian done by the student and a commentary on the process. Unfortunately, for group B no such information is available at this time and no additional follow-up was possible.

## **Conclusions**

This brief study provides a better look at the first stages of the learning process in the case of Romanian as a foreign language in two didactically challenging projects: translation studies in Spain (as a main focus of the present paper) and medical studies for foreign students in Romania. The students belonging to the latter programme have been viewed as a support group in our analysis. The results offer some insight into the starting points for each type of population and programme, in terms of linguistic profiles and student expectations, which may constitute relevant information for professors when choosing teaching methods and for institutions when analysing the didactical aspects of each programme.

This research, which is meant as a part of a wider endeavour, has allowed me to confirm that students in both groups have indeed reflected on their perception of themselves as evolving language learners and exhibited changes in their relationship with the new language, supporting the premise of an existing student identity that is dynamic (Teng 43-60). This learner identity, here analysed in its early stages, appears to be influenced by the students' linguistic profile (mother tongues and foreign languages spoken) and is defined by the degree of difficulty attributed to the new language both before and after taking classes (which implies a sense of proficiency or deficiency on the part of the learner while studying the language), as well as one's own assessment of strengths and weaknesses. In my opinion, these elements too can be useful for teachers in both types of programmes and may be used to adjust course contents, methodology and teaching strategies, as well as their own expectations regarding the learning results.

Regarding the group of translation students from Spain, it seems that both their initial expectations and their later evaluation of the degree of difficulty of the new language were correlated with their mother tongues (Spanish and Valencian), not only by inducing a sense of familiarity and a certain degree of emotional attachment to the new language (confirmed by my own teaching experience), but aiding in language acquisition, both in terms of BICS and CALP, and contributing to positive motivation and the

decision to continue studying the language. Given that this group is formed by students who are training to be translators, it can be argued that their specific language profiles provide them with additional learning and translation tools and, therefore, key pieces in their identity as evolving language learners and future multilingual professionals. Additionally, the availability of two languages to teach in and two working languages when translating from/into Romanian leads to more opportunities for pedagogic innovation, on the one hand, and learning, on the other (especially given the high expectations projected on translators, as explained in the introduction). From a language instructor's point of view, the most significant constraint of such a programme is the reduced number of teaching hours on a weekly basis.

As for the second scenario, involving foreign medical students in Romanian, due to the diversity of language profiles and the apparent lack of similarities with those languages, based on my teaching experience, I would say that both students and teachers are required to put in more effort in the learning and instruction process, respectively, and with an even more reduced number of weekly class hours compared to the first group.

The responses regarding strengths and weaknesses inform us on the students' relationship with the language and view of their own progress. In both groups written and oral expression tend to be perceived as weaknesses (although the proportions should not be ignored), perhaps also due to the limited number of class hours per week. However, from my own experience in the field of language learning, I would say this situation is not conducive to positive motivation, therefore, a recommendation when teaching such groups would be to increase the number of communication-based activities and, as a general strategy, to foster pupils' self-confidence and motivation when possible, according to their levels and the resources available. As a reflection on the translation and interpreting students, who must meet varied and high demands, the goal is to help students become not only efficient in communication situations and specific tasks, but also confident (even brave when taking on projects) and versatile. Therefore, class dynamics that create a sense of proficiency instead of deficiency are to be desired.

As previously stated, the present paper is meant to constitute an initial diagnosis in the context of translation training programmes and further research is needed into translation students' learning necessities and learner identity (later stages) in order to identify optimal ways of teaching for the most recurrent scenarios and enable a better assessment of the curriculum or any other potential improvements to the teaching process in this situation. The main limitations of study are the number of respondents (which was subjected to objective factors such as the number of enrolled students), the survey extension and perhaps the design of some of the questions. Moreover, given that during the pandemic the number of enrolled students slightly

decreased and classes were taught online for a certain period of time it may be assumed that this has also had an effect on some of the results. Regarding the teaching of Romanian to foreign medical students, beyond the secondary role given to this group in the present study and constraints such as the size of the student population available or the impossibility of follow-up, studies on larger populations would allow for a more detailed analysis of learner identity evolution in this area. At the same time, there may be a connection between some of the results and the different backgrounds of the two groups (fields of study, learning goals and priorities and consequently their approach to the language may increase or decrease students' ability to self-assess objectively, as well as the time required to achieve their goals in comparison to the translation and interpreting groups. Additional exploration could extend these findings and help pinpoint some of these elements, as well as broaden the existing perspectives on these student categories, their needs and challenges.

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