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THE ROLE OF GENDER IN ENGLISH SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ROMANIAN AND ITALIAN MILITARY STUDENTS¹

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Abstract

The teaching of English to military students has been set as a major priority in the Italian and Romanian academic curricula ever since these countries became NATO state members. Speaking English fluently is vital for future officers and enlisted personnel who intend to enhance their professional and academic development and pursue a successful military career in the Italian as well as in the Romanian armed forces. Along with other factors such as motivation and cultural background, gender plays an important role in shaping second language acquisition (SLA). This paper aims to provide a theoretical framework concerning the impact of gender on the process of English acquisition. Likewise, it analyses a selection of data collected during a 2022 multilevel survey that engaged forty Italian and Romanian military students aged 18-20. Participants were divided into two equal groups of twenty members based on their gender and invited to answer twenty-five questions in English. The information obtained reveals the similitudes and differences that occur between female and male military students in terms of English learning, attitudes, motivation and social interaction. This study is not meant to support single-sex education, which has been enforced in the Italian and Romanian military schools and academies for so many years, nor to rationalize gender-specific teaching methods. Its goal is to raise academic awareness concerning the way in which gender influences the language learning styles of military students - a special group whose linguistic needs are rarely addressed at a national and international level.

Keywords: second language acquisition; gender; cultural background; military students; motivation.

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1. Introduction

The mastery of the English language plays a crucial role for interoperability at all NATO levels. To be effective when deployed together in operations and exercises, the forces of NATO member states and their partners need to speak a common language, which is obviously English. In the 2015 NATO conference on terminology management, Maj Gen Edvardas Mažeikis, Director of the NATO Standardization Office (NSO), raised public awareness regarding the terrible consequences that the lack of common standards and language may generate: “One hates to think of all the things that could go wrong if NATO nations and partner countries did not understand each other” (Nato, 2015).

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Ever since Italy joined NATO in 1949 as a founding member and Romania followed suit back in 2004, the teaching of English to military students has been set as a major priority in the academic curricula of both countries. Mastery of the English language is an essential condition for military personnel who work for international organisations, participate in peacekeeping operations or various other missions abroad. Speaking this language fluently is vital for future officers, warrant officers and non-commissioned officers who intend to enhance their professional and academic development and pursue a successful military career in the Italian and Romanian armed forces.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the attitudes of male and female military students regarding the learning of English as a second language in Italy and Romania. This is meant to estimate the levels of English exposure and production military students have during classes as well as outside of them and see how the way in which they relate to this language influences their proficiency. In order to collect the necessary data and analyse them in terms of quantity and quality, I developed a multilevel survey. Forty students aged 18-20, who are currently enrolled in military academies in Bucharest and Viterbo, were invited to answer twenty-five multiple-choice questions written in English. For practical reasons, this article provides only a selection of the questions asked during the survey. Likewise, it focuses primarily on the results obtained following the separation of students based on gender: males versus females, although it cannot overlook aspects such as their cultural background and military education.

It is necessary to stress the discrepancy between Italians and Romanians in terms of English proficiency. Although both Italian and Romanian students speak Romance languages and, by logical deduction, should experience more or less similar difficulties when learning a Germanic language such as English, the former seem to struggle more than the latter. In addition, it is important to understand that the participants to this survey are not ordinary students. They are military students, who live in the barracks and are subject to a special form of education, which obliges them to fully comply with given orders and obtain the best possible scores.

The attempt to grant the gender factor a special status in the acquisition of English as a second language requires further clarification. During the last decades, there has emerged extensive literature emphasising the fact that men and women are endowed with different neurological and cognitive systems, which may influence their language aptitude, learning strategies, personality, motivation and long-term attainment. Therefore, my study compares the data collected from both male and female students in the attempt of establishing the possible differences between the two groups. I do not aim to use the acquired information in order to support single-sex education, which has been enforced in the Italian and Romanian military schools and academies for so many years. Furthermore, it is not my goal to rationalize gender-specific teaching methods and gender segregation in classes. In fact, I start my research from the hypotheses that female students are generally more committed to the study of English than their male colleagues and that female military students work harder than their colleagues. I ultimately highlight the idea that even if both male and female military students in Italy and Romania are expected to comply with NATO regulations and improve their knowledge of English, the acquisition of this language relies more on internal motivation rather than on the external obligation exercised over these young people.

2. Second Language Acquisition (SLA): Theoretical overview

The term Second Language Acquisition (SLA) refers to the process by which people learn a new language after previously acquiring their mother tongue (Hummel, 2021, 1). The famous linguist Stephen Krashen makes a clear distinction between “acquisition” and “learning”. In his view, the first term refers to a more or less “unconscious process” and can be used only in the case of toddlers who absorb their mother tongues in a natural way (Krashen, 1982, 10). The second term, however, names a “conscious process” and can be applied to older children and adults who employ various artificial strategies that enable them to assimilate a new language (Krashen, 1982, 10). The detractors of this discriminative theory, Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, reject the idea that acquisition occurs in a

“naturalistic” setting, namely outside the classroom, whereas “learning” takes place only in a “formal” setting, that is inside the classroom (Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, 2003, 162). They claim that “all cognitive development is constructed in and profoundly shaped by sociocultural contexts, whether they be home, community, or school” (Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen, 2003, 162). This means that the adoption of a new language can take place anytime and anywhere, the classroom being only a small part of the sociocultural context of an individual. I embrace Watson-Gegeo and Nielsen’s theory and consider that there can be no distinction made between “acquisition” and “learning”. A subject assimilates a new language both consciously and unconsciously despite his or her age or context.

Behaviourists such as Mitchell and Florence claim that language learning should be regarded as any other type of learning which relies on the formation of habits (Mitchell and Myles, 1998, 23). A habit is the result of a repeated reinforcement of a certain stimulus. In time, it can be so deeply interiorised that it becomes a reflex very difficult to eliminate. In this case, first language (L1) habits may have a substantial influence over second language (L2) performance. For instance, Romanians and Italians may speak English with a strongly distinctive accent. They may even misspell certain English words, simply because their mother tongues are phonetic languages, which means that they have sound-based writing systems. In addition, they may involuntarily transfer certain grammar patters from their mother tongues into English, although they are not correct. For instance, both Romanians and Italians use the verb “to have” in order to express age. Thus, constructions such as “Am 20 de ani.” or “Ho 20 anni.” determine the employment of a wrong translation: “I have 20 years” instead of “I am twenty years old”. Other commonly used phrases are: “ai dreptate” (Romanian) and “hai ragione” (Italian). Both of them are mistakenly translated into English as “you have right” or “you have reason” instead of “you are right”.

Successful second language acquisition is strongly conditioned by students’ motivation and attitudes. The English proverb “When there is a will, there is a way”, perfectly encompasses this situation. It is always a matter of will if Italian and Romanian students overcome difficulties and truly learn English.

3. English SLA in Italy and Romania

Recent surveys show that there is a high discrepancy between these Italian and Romanian learners in terms of English language proficiency and I aim to identify here some of the causes that may generate it. Based on the English Proficiency Index, (EF EPI) from global language training company Education First, Italy occupied back in 2019 the 36th position out of one hundred countries around the world. Italian test takers had their language skills qualified as “moderate”. The company says that people with such skills should be able to have basic conversation, take part in meetings and write short texts on familiar subjects, but cannot necessarily understand TV programs, read complex books, deliver presentations or have sophisticated conversations in social situations (EF Epi 2019). In the same survey, Romania scored the 16th position, proving “high proficiency” skills. This means that test takers were able to “understand written texts on abstract topics with relative ease” and “recognize implied meaning when not explicitly stated” (EF Epi 2019). Likewise, they could “understand a wide range of spoken idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms” and they “followed most spoken input with confidence” (EF Epi 2019).

In 2020, Italy ranked 30th out of one hundred countries. This was a clear improvement, but Italian participants had their language skills still labelled as “moderate proficiency”. The same year, Romania fell to the 17th position out of one hundred countries, but maintained its “high proficiency” label. The 2021 English Proficiency Index shows Italy again on a lower position (EF Epi 2020). It is the 35th out of 112 countries where English is not a national language. The Italian test takers scored “Media Competanza” (moderate language skills), being outranked once again by Romanians, who moved the country to the 15th place (EF Epi 2021). Finally, based on the 2022 English Proficiency Index, Romania has gone back to the 17th position out of 111 countries and regions, whereas Italy has been awarded the 32nd place, preserving its status of a country whose test takers exhibit a “moderate” level of English proficiency. This is definitely not a blameworthy situation. However, considering that Italian and English share the Latin alphabet and a large number of words that originated in Latin as

well as the fact that Italy is constantly visited by millions of native English speakers, it is intriguing that the Italians are not improving their English language skills. At the opposite pole, Romanians seem to excel in learning English, benefiting greatly from their linguistic heritage and defying the fact that Romania is not so intensely frequented by native English speakers as Italy is.

The disparity between the levels of communication skills in English acquired by Italians and Romanians may be fuelled by various causes. To begin with, we should consider the importance of languages in the global context. Approximately 63 million people in the world speak Italian as their first language and an additional 3 million use it as a second language (Eurotrad, 2022). At the opposite pole, Romanian is spoken by approximately 24.3 million native speakers and by four more millions as a second language (Chirileasa, 2019). Given the large number of people who already speak Italian or at least are making an effort to speak it, many Italians do not feel the need to learn English in order to facilitate their communication. By contrast, having a mother tongue which does not enjoy the international success of Italian, numerous Romanians experience the urge of learning not only one, but more foreign languages. It is also important to note that Italy is home to about thirty-four spoken languages and related dialects such as Sicilian, Neapolitan and Sardinian. Consequently, many Italian citizens have to learn Italian as a second language. In this context, the study of English as a third language becomes an extra burden. Romanians, however, despite a limited number of regionalisms and a few variations of accent, enjoy linguistic unity within the borders of their country. Therefore, the majority of them do not have to learn an official state language and are free to focus on international languages such as English.

As Italian plays a key role in maintaining national integrity, the Italian government and mass media grant extensive power to the dubbing industry. The main broadcaster, RAI, and other commercial channels transmit only a fraction of films, documentaries or news bulletins in English, to the disapproval of the young generations who would rather listen to the original voices (Mykhalevych, 2022). This is not the case in Romania, where the attempt to dub television programmes faced increased opposition (HotNews.ro 2011). Nowadays, due to the internet and cable television, as well as the emergence of Netflix, HBO Go and other similar channels, Italians and Romanians have the alternative of watching non-dubbed movies and listening to the original voices of English native speakers. This may be an opportunity for many of them to improve their English proficiency, yet it requires personal effort and motivation.

The system of education and the attention granted to the English teaching-learning process deeply influences students' attitudes regarding this language. Italy did not make the study of English in primary schools compulsory until 2006. However, precarious planning and financing has made the *maestri* (primary school teachers) assume the role of English trainers, relying on their basic knowledge of the language and methodology. Consequently, numerous generations of Italian students have been deprived of suitable formal exposure to the study of English at a young age (Santipolo, 2016, 177). In Romania, the study of English is compulsory beginning with age six and classes are conducted by specialised teachers. This gives Romanian students a great advantage in comparison to their Italian colleagues (Eurydice, 2019). The COVID-19 Lockdown has affected the teaching process in both countries. According to the UNICEF article "Learning at a Distance Children's remote learning experiences in Italy during the COVID-19 pandemic", Italy was the first country in Europe to implement a nationwide lockdown (Digital, 2021). This dramatic decision deprived students of "65 days of school compared to an average of 27 missed days among high-income countries worldwide" (Digital, 2021). Romania was not exempt from the pandemic and the consequences of the lockdown either. According to Gallina A. Vincelette, "Romanian school-age children lost 110 days of the school year" (qtd. in Zamfir 2021). Considering that even a short break may cause significant loss of learning, there are great concerns that the lockdown accompanied by a deficient online teaching and in some cases the lack of internet connectivity, may generate major educational inequalities over time. Last but not least, the level of English proficiency exhibited by Italians and Romanians is also deeply connected to the labour market. According to the data of a study carried out on a sample of 1,900 subjects by Aba English, Italians are well aware of the value of the English language in the professional field (qtd. in Novello, 2020). Thirty percent of them believe that, by improving their

command of the language, they could get a salary as much as fifty percent higher (qtd. in Novello, 2020). The Italian labour market, nonetheless, is able to accommodate a large number of employees even if they do not speak English. In Romania, however, high unemployment, inflation and low wages make Romanians interested in learning foreign languages such as English, especially in order to apply for a better-paid position abroad (Van Zutphen, 2022).

All the aspects presented above, starting from the importance of the Italian and Romanian languages in a global context and ending with the relevance of English language skills on the labour market, characterise the Italian and the Romanian societies and deeply influence students' attitudes - including military students' attitudes - towards the learning of English.

Despite the given facts, studies quantifying students' motivation in learning English as a second language lack public exposure or are totally absent. In Italy, I can identify Swedish author Helene Nysten's 2009 essay as the only survey, which explores the attitudes towards English among Italian students. Although the author interviewed high school students aged 16-18, I acknowledge her work as one of my sources of inspiration. In Romania, as far as I know, there are no similar studies. Research on military students' motivation in learning English is also extremely limited. Professor Keith Farr from the Swedish National Defence College authored the only paper I was able to find in this respect. Farr (2016) was interested in the motivation of Swedish military staff officers to learn English and relied his claims on a "two phase mixed-methods design, with an interview study and a follow-up questionnaire" (Farr (2016, 391)). The author identifies several factors that motivated his subjects: the prospect of a promotion, the necessity for international communication and implicitly of joining multinational military coalitions and organizations, the experience of taking part in an international exercise as well as the opportunity for organized tuition and professional language feedback. This study, however, does not consider the role of gender in second language acquisition. In this respect, my study attempts to fulfil an existent gap.

4. Gender based Learning Differences

In English, the words *gender* and *sex* have a long and intertwined history that dates back to the late fourteenth century. Etymologically, both terms are modelled on Latin stems. *Sex* comes from *sec-* which means "cut, section, segment or division" (Onions, 2006). This explains its use in reference to the biological differentiation between men and women and eventually intercourse. *Gender* derives from *gener-*, as in *generare* ("to beget"), and is related to *genus* which, depending on the context, can be translated as "race, stock, family, kind, rank, class, order and species" (Onions, 2006). Although initially used to identify a grammatical subclass, 'gender' has expanded its significance to join 'sex' as in "male-or-female sex" and later on to identify the roles fulfilled by males and females (Onions, 2006).

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) provides detailed definitions of *sex* and *gender*:

Sex refers to the biological and physiological characteristics that define humans as female or male. These sets of biological characteristics are not mutually exclusive, as there are individuals who possess both, but these characteristics tend to differentiate humans as females or males.

Gender refers to the social attributes and opportunities associated with being female and male and to the relationships between [them]. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialisation processes. They are context- and time-specific, and changeable. (EIGE, 2019)

In essence, sex is made by nature and gender by society. When exploring the concept of *gender*, one should not overlook that it is part of a "broader sociocultural context" and that it is strongly connected to other identity categories such as class, race, ethnicity, age and (dis)ability. I do not intend to provide further details regarding the overlapping of multiple identity categories, otherwise known as 'intersectionality'. I retain only the impact of 'gender' on students' motivation and attitudes towards

English second language acquisition.

It is essential to highlight that the field of language and gender studies is still under construction despite the forty-year research that has been done in this direction. As Karen Feery underlines, it is difficult to identify the moment when “language and gender [combined] into an independent area of research” or “a single key research question that resulted in its establishment as a viable area of study” (Feery 2008:32). It is clear, however, that this field has had a difficult evolution, marked by many changes and controversies, and that it continues to be “dynamic and ever-growing” (Feery 2008, 32).

Over time, numerous studies have strengthened the idea that boys excel in areas such as mathematics and physics, while girls have an innate penchant for foreign languages (Rogers, 2006, 135). This belief was dismantled by Canadian researcher Daniel Voyer, who argues that: “females have the advantage on school grades regardless of the material” (Voyer and Voyer 2014, 1174). The factors that contribute to their success can be numerous, but the different learning styles are worth mentioning. Often, girls are more interested in understanding the materials, whereas boys are more focused on performance (Voyer and Voyer 2014, 1174). This may explain the different scores they get. According to the authors, the mastery of the subject matter generates better marks than performance emphasis and this may explain why males score lower grades in comparison to females” (Voyer and Voyer 2014, 1192).

A 2008 study conducted by Northwestern University researchers established that boys’ and girls’ brains were active in different areas during English language acquisition and that girls’ brains did more processing and connecting than the boys’ brains did (Burman, Bitan and Booth, 2008, 1350). Moreover, girls showed greater activation in the brain areas associated with abstract thinking and speech production, whereas boys had their auditory and visual areas better stimulated. This made authors conclude that males relied heavily on their senses while females had a more holistic approach to language learning (Burman, Bitan and Booth, 2008, 1350). Further developing this study, authors Arabski and Wojtaszek claim that males learn better a second language if they have their senses simulated (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 55). In this sense, the authors recommend watching videos, listening to music, reading texts and using extensive visual support (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 256). They also claim that male students perform better in oral examinations than their female colleagues (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 99). At the opposite pole, females’ brains are more suited for speech production, grammar exercises, and tasks that involve abstract thinking such as fill-in-the-blank or verb conjugations (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 99). Given that most exams usually evaluate students’ language skills in terms of speaking, writing and grammar, it is understandable why girls get much better results than boys. The study performed by Van der Silk, van Hout, and Schepens in 2015 on adult subjects shows that, unlike female brains, which preserve their ability of connecting abstract notions and apply them in speaking and writing, male brains lose these superior abilities as the time passes (Van der Silk, van Hout, and Schepens, 2015, 20). One year later, Babble researchers outlined that, unlike women, men make more pragmatic choices when it comes to learning a language (Babel, 2016). For instance, they would learn a language that provides them certain job benefits. Nonetheless, there are plenty of women who want to learn a language in order to improve their careers. Naturally, cultural interests, travelling, mental fitness may also motivate learners in various proportions to learn a second language. Learners may even engage in learning a new language due to certain stereotypes. Professor Ulrich Ammon suggests in this sense that men would learn German as it is associated “with technology, industry and business”, while women would rather choose French or Italian as they are the languages of “fashion and culinary excellence” (qtd. in Noack 2021). Nonetheless, research certifying these claims is insufficient.

Regarding students’ opinions towards the teachers, a study indicates that female students are often more critical than their male colleagues (Jeanette Ludwig, 1983, 69). Other studies, such as the one conducted by Stein and Bailey back in 1973, indicate that, in contrast to male students, females have a stronger desire to please (for example the teacher) rather than to achieve good results for themselves (Stein and Bailey, 1973, 360). When analysing students’ life satisfaction scale, Huebner concludes that unlike males, females are less confident when it comes to language production (Huebner, 1995,

321). However, most of the results from research on gender and language acquisition are vague and can never be generalised or placed on a pedestal.

Research on the possible connection between ‘gender’ and the process of second language acquisition in a specific educational environment such as the military one represents a novelty. Today, major organisations such as the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the Euro-Atlantic Partnership Council (EAPC) make sustained efforts not only to support the study of English as the main language of communication, but also to integrate the gender perspective into “all policies and programmes in all areas and at all levels”. According to Admiral Bauer, “mainstreaming gender is a priority not only in capabilities, resources and technology but also in terms of personnel, training, education and baseline requirements”. Based on the admiral’s statement, it becomes relevant to explore the possible ways in which gender may influence the education of military students and, in particular, their second language acquisition.

Exploring women’s motivation for joining the military, Mariann Mankowski, Kristian M Mattocks and Leslie E. Tower indicate that their reasons are not different from those of their male colleagues. Women enlist – the authors say - for the *opportunity* it promises and the *calling* they feel to serve their country” (Mankowski et al, 2015, 8). However, women’s integration into an environment which was, until recently, entirely reserved for men is not easy and requires much more determination and work. Correlating the information that girls generally perform better than boys in school and that after enrolling in a military educational institution women work even harder than men in order to prove their right to be there, I expect the female participants in my survey to be more motivated and better organized during classes, especially English classes.

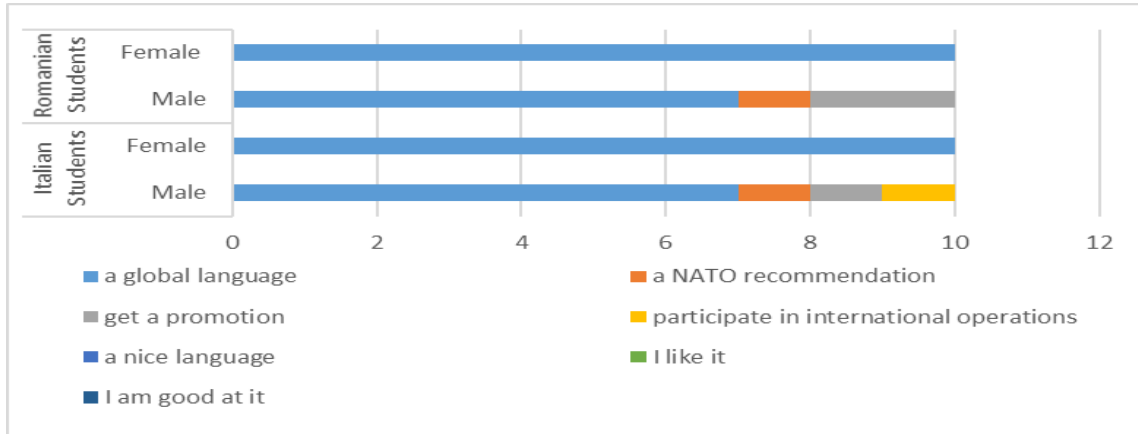
5. Selected Results of the Student Survey

5.1. Why is it important to learn English?

Although all military students, regardless of their gender or cultural background, agree that they should learn English, their decision may be motivated by various reasons. When asked to explain why it is important to learn this language, students are offered several options to choose from. These options are meant to evaluate their answer in terms of extrinsic motivation (the first four) and intrinsic motivation (the last three). All twenty female students, Italian as well as Romanian, consider that it is important to learn English because it is a global language. A large number of male students also confess to learning English for its global dominance. However, six of them are more pragmatic when it comes to identifying the reasons that motivate them to learn English.

This way, the military environment appears to influence male students more than females. Three Italian male students state that they learn English as it is a NATO requirement, in order to get a promotion or to participate in international operations. Similarly, three Romanian male students want to study English in order to comply with NATO regulations or simply because it helps them obtain a promotion. In the interview that followed this survey, two Italian male students said that they would equally learn Croatian if it were a job condition.

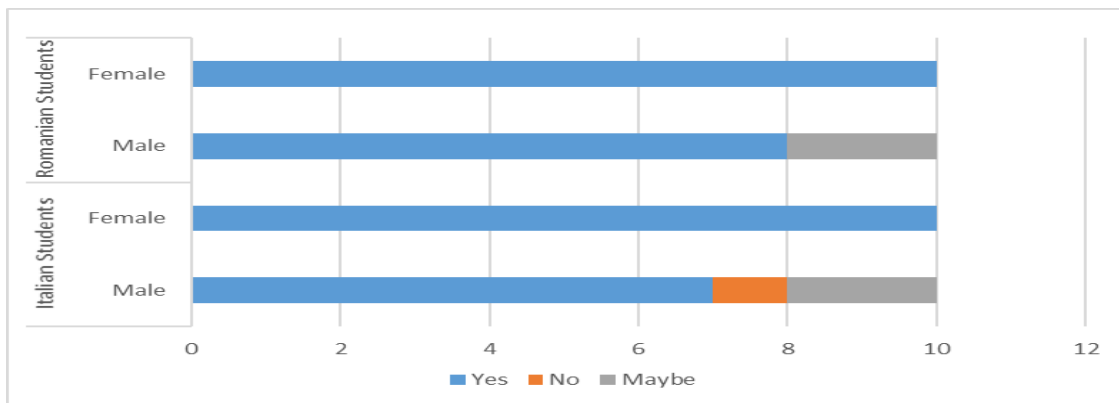
None of the students involved in the survey expresses intrinsic motivation when it comes to learning English. None of them learns this language for its linguistic beauty, out of pleasure, or simply because they can master it well. Their choices can be seen instead as extrinsic motivation. Their need for an immediate gain can be understood as the result of the contemporary society they are living in and of the particular social conditions they are facing.



Source: Catană, 2022

5.2. If English were not a NATO condition, would you still learn it?

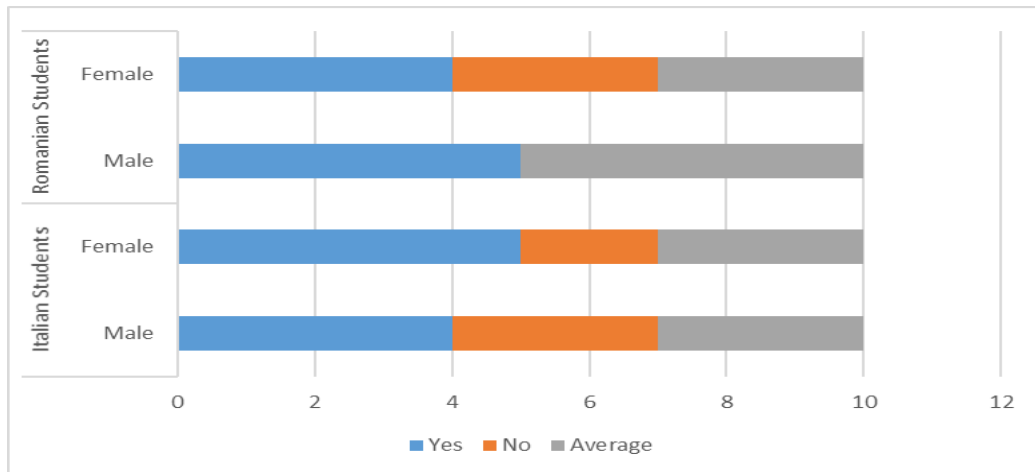
In order to test the influence of the military environment over the students' motivation to learn English, I asked them to imagine that this language were not a NATO condition anymore. As in the first case, all Italian and Romanian female students chose to learn English despite NATO requirements. Most males would also continue to learn it, yet some of them – three Italians and two Romanians – were totally reluctant to do so.



Source: Catană, 2022

5.3. Do you have a good level of English?

Asked to appreciate their level of English, an equal share of 45% of the Italian and Romanian students consider that they have a good level of English. 20% of the Italian students, however, are dissatisfied with their level of English. By comparison, only three female students (15% of the Romanian group) are unhappy with their knowledge. They preserve this opinion even if they passed an English admission exam, which certifies their intermediate level. None of the Romanian male students declared they had a bad level of English. This shows that Romanian females are more critical than Romanian male colleagues and their Italian counterparts. At a closer look, Romanian female students appear to be as critical as Italian male students when it comes to their level of English. In addition, 40% of Romanians regard their knowledge of English as being average, whereas only 25% of Italians share this opinion. Final calculations prove that Romanians are much happier with their English knowledge than Italians. The data collected is available in the charts below.

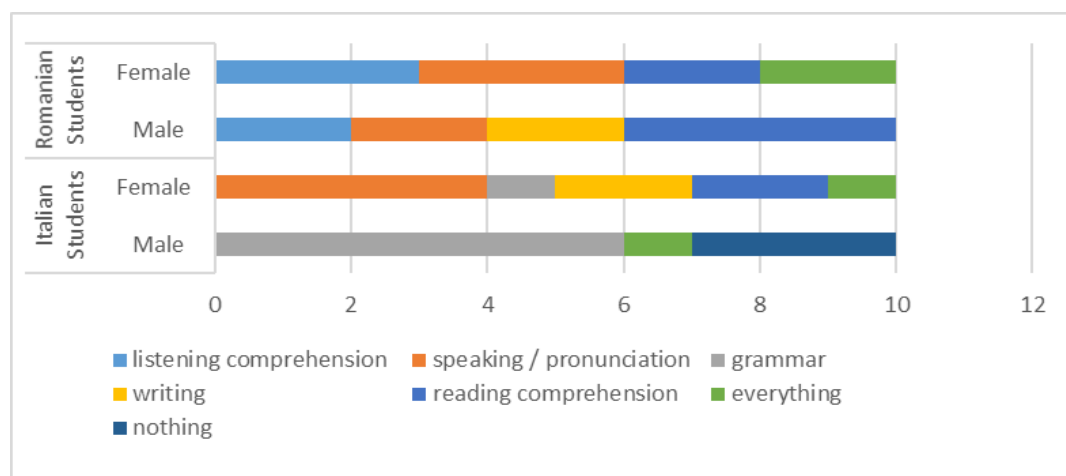


Source: Catană, 2022

5.4. In your opinion, what is the easiest activity when learning English?

Based on the data collected during this survey, most Italian students identify English “grammar” as the easiest task during their seminars. By comparison, their Romanian colleagues chose “reading” as a facile activity. Gender differences are visible, though not decisive. The largest number of Italian males favour “grammar” practice, while the largest part of females consider “speaking” to be the easiest part. The majority of Romanian males think that “reading” is the most accessible task, whereas their colleagues seem to oscillate between “speaking” and “listening comprehension”.

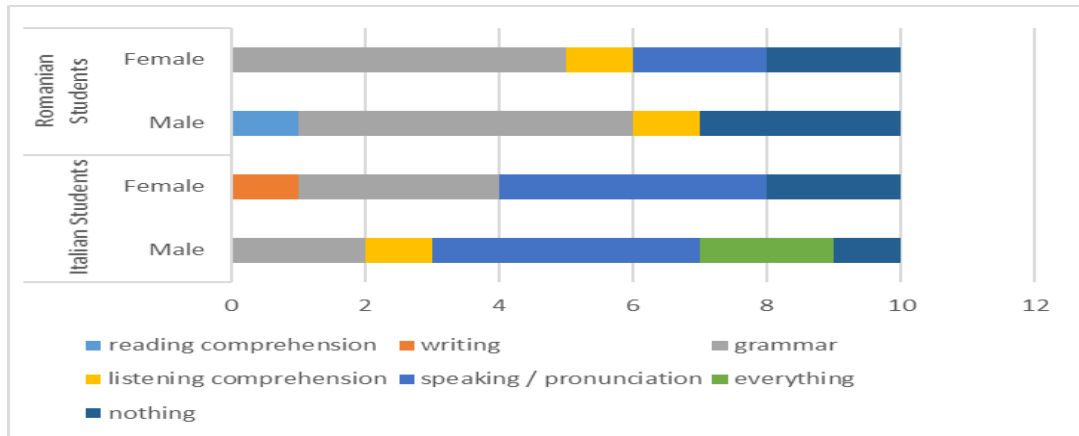
The answers provided by Romanian males confirm Arabski and Wojtaszek’ 2011 study showing that males learn if they have their senses simulated and favour activities such as watching videos, listening to music and reading texts when they are engaged in the process of learning a new language (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 55). The choice made by Italian males is quite surprising, yet it can be explained by the lower level of English grammar that is taught during their classes. Females, according to the same authors, have a more holistic approach to learning a language and their brains are more suited for speech production, grammar exercises, and tasks that involve abstract thinking (Arabski and Wojtaszek, 2011, 55). Their theory may offer a plausible explanation of the fact that the female participants in this survey oscillate between “speaking” and “listening comprehension”.



Source: Catană, 2022

5.6. *In your opinion, what is the most difficult activity when learning English?*

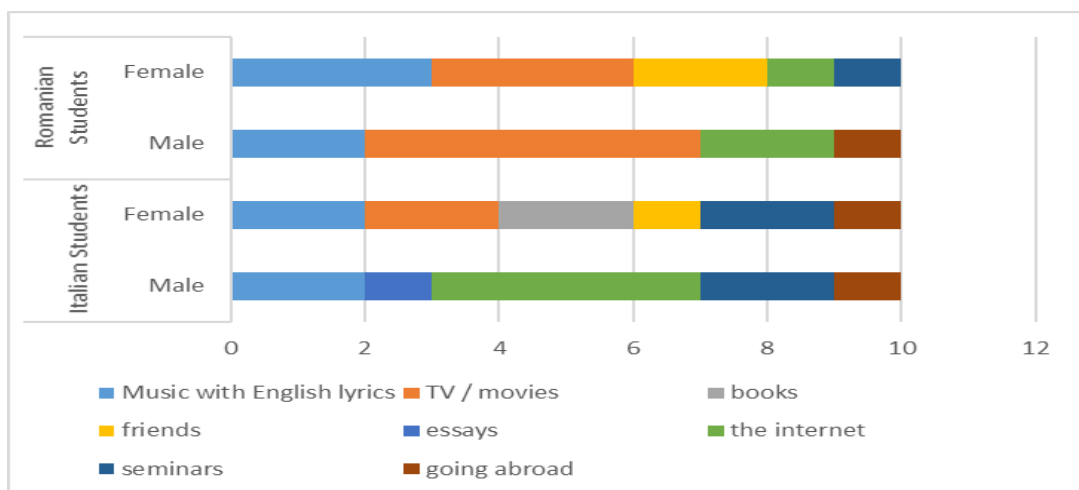
Based on the answers provided to this question, I acknowledge that 50% of the total number of interviewees regard “practicing grammar” as being the most difficult tasks during English classes. The shares may favour males in the case of Italian students, as fewer of them find it hard to practice “grammar” compared to their female colleagues.



Source: Catană, 2022

5.7. *What helps you improve your level of English?*

In this case, the answers provided by students are quite diverse. Most Romanians selected “watching movies” as one of the ways to maintain their English level. By contrast, only three Italian males chose this option. This situation can be explained by the fact that, unlike the Italian television, the Romanian one does not dub movies, offering its audience the possibility to hear the original voices of actors, who are usually native English speakers. It is also interesting to note that an equal number of Romanians and Italians consider that listening to music that has English lyrics is beneficial to their language proficiency.

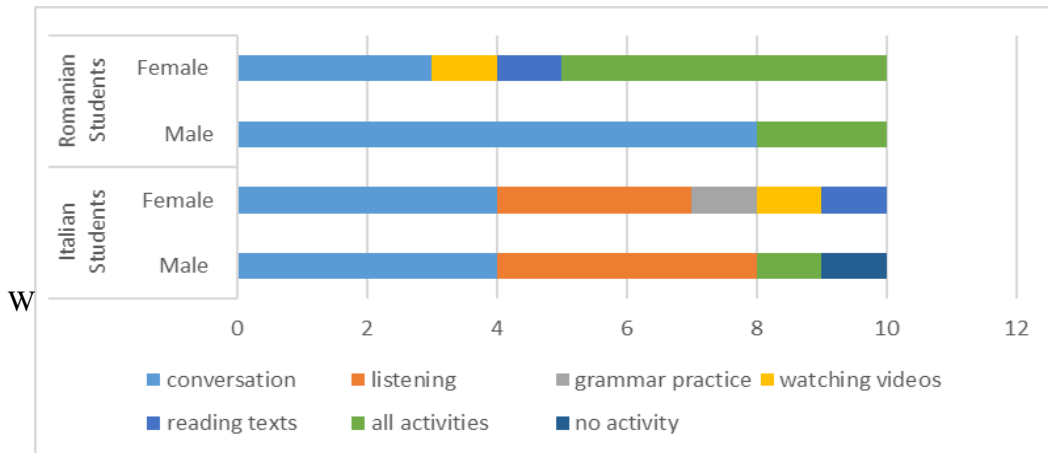


Source: Catană, 2022

5.8. *During the English seminar, which activity is the most useful?*

A great number of students, in particular Romanian males, identify “conversation” as being the most useful seminar activity when it comes to improving their communication skills. Italians, mostly males, are also particularly interested in “listening” activities, which can help them practice their

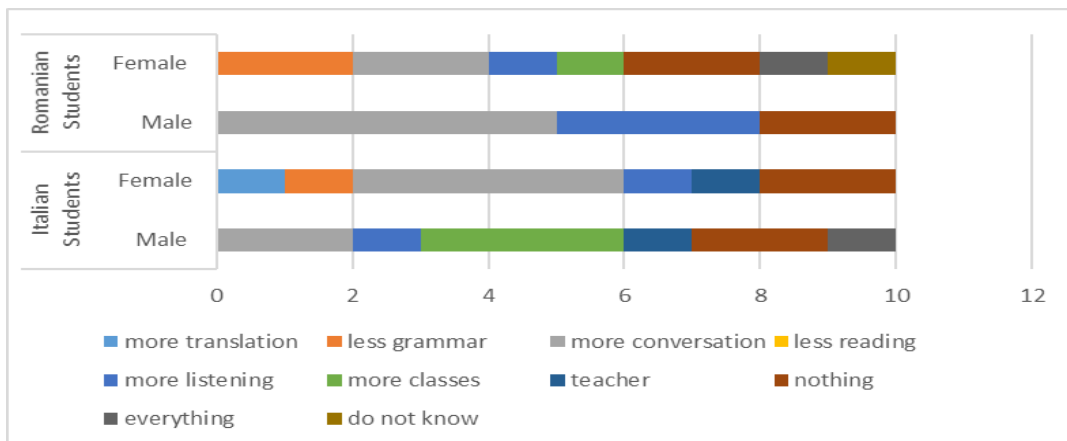
comprehension of an oral discourse in English. 50% of the Romanian female students conclude that all the activities conducted during the English seminar play an important part, unlike their Italian counterparts who are especially interested in “conversation”.



Source: Catană, 2022

5.9. What would you improve regarding the English seminar?

Asked to identify an element that, in their opinion, needs improvement, numerous Italian and Romanian students of both genders chose “conversation”. Combining this answer with the one provided to the previous question, it becomes obvious that English seminars in the military school from Viterbo as well as those in the Bucharest academy do not enjoy too many activities that require them to speak in English. The NATO Stanag 6001 assesses, among other skills, the oral performance of the candidates. Likewise, all these military students will one day be required to speak English in public, during various international activities, missions abroad or tours of duty. Therefore, it is imperative to plan and put into practice more activities that would captivate them enough to make them talk more. At a closer look, the number of activities that girls would like to improve is higher than that of the selections made by boys. This indicates, just like Jeanette Ludwig observed in her 1983 study, that female students are often more critical than their male colleagues when it comes to the organisation of the English seminar (Jeanette Ludwig, 1983, 69). Nonetheless, there are two students in each of the four groups of interviews who do not feel the need to change anything and who are satisfied with the way in which seminar activities are conducted. They represent 20% of the total number of participants in this project. This indicates that the other 80% of students want to change at least something in order to make the English seminar better.



Source: Catană, 2022

6. Conclusion

By combining a multidisciplinary theoretical framework and a multiple-choice questionnaire, this study has attempted to shed light on an area that has been frequently neglected despite its importance. It is a breakthrough in both Italy and Romania, as it identifies the attitudes students (especially military students aged 18-20) have towards English and their particular needs in terms of practice.

Taking into account the impact of gender on the second language acquisition process, this study has identified several similarities as well as differences between the examined subjects. All of them acknowledge the importance of learning English and all of them are motivated by extrinsic reasons when choosing to learn it. Male students, however, are more influenced by the military environment and the idea that learning English is helpful for their professional development. At the same time, their female colleagues are more focused on the global importance of this language and the overall long-term benefits that it brings them. Based on the students' answers, it results that the occasions when they practice English the most, outside their military institutions of education, are when meeting tourists or travelling abroad. Obviously, this becomes a warning sign for teachers to compensate for the students' lack of English practice, by designing more interactive seminars. Although Italians are less satisfied with their level of English than Romanians, both groups require more conversation exercises as well as visual and audio stimulation.

In conclusion, this original study proves to be an important basis for designing and conducting both useful and entertaining English language seminars as well as a starting point for further scientific research in the fields of didactics and pedagogy.

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