



***The Career of Students who Use a Different Language  
at Home and at School***  
***Kariera uczniów posługujących się innym językiem  
w domu i w szkole***

**ABSTRACT**

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**RESEARCH OBJECTIVE:** The objective of the research is to understand how the ethnic composition of the family and the choice of the language of the school are related.

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**THE RESEARCH PROBLEMS AND METHODS:** Minorities are often the subject of research, and within, bilingualism, language use arenas and state language education are prominent topics, however, the issue of ethnic minority students studying in majority institutions is relatively unexplored.

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**THE PROCESS OF ARGUMENTATION:** Our research is focused on the ethnic Hungarian minority in Romania, their decisions and their experiences of education in the majority language. The present qualitative research was carried out in a semi-structured interview format in November 2023 with 14 respondents, reached by snowball method.

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**RESEARCH RESULTS:** Our results show that, in addition to proximity to the institution and the increased possibility of doing well in the country, the school experience of parents and older children are factors behind the decision made by parents. Nevertheless, we also find that extended family, even the third generation, has an impact on school choice.

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**CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND APPLICABLE VALUE OF RESEARCH:** The research presents a perspective that focuses on the educational results of respondents most of whom proved to be successful in their respective fields. The results we found confirm hypotheses from the literature regarding the language choices of different nationalities. The research is a part of a larger project which aims at the exploration the research upon the students attending non-native language schools.

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→ **KEYWORDS:** MINORITY, MAJORITY LANGUAGE OF INSTRUCTION, PARTIUM, LANGUAGE POLITICS, QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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## STRESZCZENIE

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**CEL NAUKOWY:** Celem badania jest zrozumienie, w jaki sposób skład etniczny rodziny i wybór języka instytucji są ze sobą powiązane.

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**PROBLEMY I METODY BADAWCZE:** Mniejszości są często przedmiotem badań, a w ich obrębie dwujęzyczność, areny używania języka i państwowa edukacja językowa, jednak kwestia studentów z mniejszości etnicznych studiujących w instytucjach większościowych jest stosunkowo niezbadana.

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**PROCES WYWODU:** Nasze badania koncentrują się na etnicznej mniejszości węgierskiej w Rumunii, jej decyzjach i doświadczeniach związanych z edukacją w języku większości. Niniejsze badanie jakościowe zostało przeprowadzone w formie częściowo ustrukturyzowanego wywiadu w listopadzie 2023 r. z 14 respondentami, do których dotarliśmy metodą kuli śnieżnej.

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**WYNIKI ANALIZY NAUKOWEJ:** Nasze wyniki pokazują, że oprócz bliskości instytucji i zwiększonej możliwości osiągnięcia dobrych wyników w kraju doświadczenie szkolne rodziców i starszych dzieci są czynnikami wpływającymi na decyzje podejmowane przez rodziców. Niemniej jednak stwierdzamy również, że dalsza rodzina, nawet w trzecim pokoleniu, ma wpływ na wybór szkoły.

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**WNIOSKI, REKOMENDACJE I APLIKACYJNE ZNACZENIE WPŁYWU BADAŃ:** Badanie przedstawia perspektywę, która koncentruje się na wynikach edukacyjnych respondentów, z których większość odniosła sukces w swoich dziedzinach. Wyniki, które znaleźliśmy, potwierdzają hipotezy z literatury dotyczące wyborów językowych różnych narodowości. Badanie jest częścią większego projektu, który ma na celu zbadanie uczniów uczęszczających do szkół uczących w nierodzimych językach.

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→ **SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** MNIEJSZOŚĆ, WIĘKSZOŚCIOWY JĘZYK NAUCZANIA, PARTIUM, POLITYKA JĘZYKOWA, BADANIA JAKOŚCIOWE

## Introduction

In minority contexts, the difference between the language of instruction and the language spoken at home poses a challenge in education. Minorities are often studied, and researchers are unanimous in assessing the causes and effects of attending a majority educational institution on one's school and career. The international literature is replete with studies on the educational situation of minority groups, and there is consensus that young people attending non-native institutions are disadvantaged and less successful than their majority peers (Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022; Kyriazi, 2018; Lopez-Agudo et al., 2021). Although we do not have precise data on the number of Hungarians living in Romania who study in state language institutions, we can draw conclusions from the results of the 2011 census.

Our research is focused on the ethnic Hungarian minority in Romania (Pallay, 2020), their decisions and experiences with education in the majority language. At present, all levels of education, including higher education, can be taught in Hungarian according to

the language preservation model in Romania (Pusztai & Engler, 2014). Nevertheless, the possibility of state language education is also being raised among native speakers of Hungarian in hopes of better labour market prospects, which can lead to assimilation (Papp, 2012). The theoretical basis, facts and data from the literature are presented below. These studies and research look at the language situation of Hungarian minorities and some other minorities at an international level. Afterwards, the research is presented in detail.

## Minority Students' Performance

The emergence of the concept of the nation can be linked to the decline of feudalism and the breakdown of a society based on the privileges of hierarchy, and two types of nations can be distinguished (Pallay, 2020). John Ogbu's (1978) typology of minorities distinguishes between voluntary (immigrant) and involuntary (ethnic) minority communities. Immigrant (voluntary) minorities move to a foreign country of their own free will in the hope of improving their prosperity. Involuntary (ethnic) minorities relocate to a foreign country as a result of external factors or the shifting of borders. A prominent problem is minority failure in education, which is more prevalent in industrialised and urbanised societies but is not necessarily inherent in the minority way of life. The paradox of assimilation, as formulated by Rumbaut (1997), is the phenomenon in which a child of assimilationist parents fails to perform adequately at school and therefore turns against education and social norms.

Although Anglo-Saxon countries are mostly inclusive and open to different cultures, the educational situation of minority students is often a challenge for them. In Anglo-French Canada, in addition to the two official languages, there are also native language schools for larger minorities, including Hungarian. Surveys show that children from non-native English-speaking families do well, but this is not the case for Indigenous families. Cultural differences and teachers' lack of knowledge about the culture make it difficult to work together with families. The situation is similar in Australia, where there is a high rate of truancy among indigenous youth, with roughly 50% of them staying in secondary school. In the United Kingdom, minority students generally perform well, but (Middle) Eastern and black students face more serious problems (Kovács & Pető, 2005).

Lopez-Agudo, González-Betancor and Mercenaro-Guetierrez (2021) investigated the impact of the PISA test language and home language difference on academic achievement among 15-year-old Spanish students in Catalonia, Spain. Their results show that the language of the test influences the students' performance in the sense that if they do not understand the content, they cannot give the correct answer. Researchers in Finland have also studied students from former Yugoslav states and Turkey (Kilpi-Jakonen & Alisaari, 2022). Their study describes how parents with higher education are more inclined to use a second language with their children at home and may abandon their native language in favour of the majority language in the long run. Those students who primarily use their native language score lower on literacy tests.

Native language education can also contribute to increased migration, as a significant proportion of Romanian-born Hungarian language learners complete their higher education in their home country (Hungary) or even in another country. According to the PISA survey, language of instruction is a determinant of minorities' academic performance (Papp Z., 2012). Hungarian students learn the state language as a first language, and this is also the case in Transcarpathia. This challenge accompanies students throughout their school careers, as the teaching of the state language is compulsory in Hungarian education institutions. This is often perceived as a challenge and a failure, as the curriculum does not take into account the fact that most students first encounter the majority language in the first grade. One consequence of this perceived failure is that parents enrol their children in Romanian schools in the hope that this will make it easier for them to overcome school barriers and integrate more easily.

## Bilingualism in the Family

One of the functions of the family is to reflect and filter incoming value and norm systems that influence the life of the family (Szilágyi & Flóra, 1998). The language chosen in the family strengthens the identification with one's national consciousness: since one can really only identify with one, this reinforces the demarcation function of language use. Children growing up in bilingual families can, if there is a balance, also benefit from a dual upbringing: they learn two languages, are more flexible and more receptive. The choice of the language of instruction matters to parents (Keller, 2007), who can also impose their own values, principles and culture in the context of secondary socialisation.

When choosing a kindergarten or school, it is important to consider the labour market situation (Papp Z., 2012), i.e. to make a decision that will return the resources invested in the future. However, while market needs changing rapidly, the time spent in school can span 10 to 20 years, which makes it more difficult to calculate the impact of the decision. Papp Z. distinguishes between factors influencing school choice at three levels: macro, meso and micro. The macro level refers to the legal framework, the meso level to the characteristics of the school, and the micro level to the socio-economic situation of the family. Although the choice of non-native education is an individual decision, it also has an impact at the macro level, as the risk of assimilation affects the community at the macro level. At the meso level, the quality of the school is a decisive factor. At the micro level, it can be observed that in more socio-economically developed families, the ability and willingness to make decisions is more pronounced, as social class is also chosen along with the school (Papp Z., 2012).

## Goals, Research Questions, Assumptions

The idea of interviewing people who have experience being taught in Romanian was inspired by the research of the Bálványos Institute (n.d.). The goal of our research is to understand how the ethnic composition of the family and the choice of the language of the institution are related. Not only statistics, but also those with experience in Romanian minority circles and even interviewees report that in Hungarian educational institutions, the performance of Hungarian students in Romanian language and literature is generally poorer than in other subjects. The exploratory research questions aim to assess the experiences of such learners. How did they come to be Hungarian in a Romanian institution? Who made this decision? How did the Hungarian students experience the foreign language environment? How did the students perform in the foreign language? What are the indicators of success? What support did the students receive, what factors contributed to their academic progress? How did their career paths develop?

## Sampling, Topics

Sample size and sample selection in our qualitative research required special consideration. As our research was aimed at a target group that is difficult to identify, it can be described as exploratory research in preparation for subsequent large-scale quantitative research. In this type of study, a sample size of only ten individuals provides an adequate basis for analysis if a purposive, expert sample selection procedure is followed, whereby members of the target population who possess these career characteristics are willing to respond (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Several databases in Romania deal with statistics, and several of these websites provide data on all aspects of education. We have analysed statistical data for the Romanian part of the Partium region, which has been interpreted by education researchers as a single learning region (Kozma & Ceglédi, 2010; Pusztai & Torkos, 2001), i.e. the counties of Bihor, Maramureş, Satu Mare and Sălaj. Data on the Hungarian population by age group and by county are not yet available from the 2022 Census, so we can rely on the 2011 Census. Based on existing incomplete data, we estimate that about one-third of the Hungarian student population attends Romanian-language schools.

## Data Collection and Processing

A list of questions was prepared before the interviews were conducted. The semi-structured interview questions covered demographics, family background, experiences at different levels of education, relationships, with classmates and future plans. The target group included Hungarian learners in Romanian-speaking schools or kindergartens who have completed or are completing higher education, i.e., those who can essentially be

considered successful students. Respondents were selected using the snowball method. The first respondents were selected on the basis of familiarity, and then each respondent was asked to suggest additional potential respondents. The survey was conducted in November 2023. Data was collected through online and in-person interviews, which were audio-recorded and conducted in Hungarian. The interviewer and the respondent understood each other, although there were some individuals who spoke with an accent. Providing answers was voluntary, and respondents were assured of anonymity. In total, we obtained data from 14 respondents. Depending on the amount of time the respondent spent at a Romanian-speaking educational institution, the interviews lasted from about 15 minutes to an hour.

## Characteristics of the Respondents, Family Background

All respondents declared that they were Hungarian, but in terms of the nationality of their parents, their fathers were more likely to come from mixed families: while only one of the mothers was from a mixed family, there were three fathers with a third-generation member from a different minority background. Thus, some grandparents were of Romanian nationality and also influenced the family's language situation. The language spoken in the nuclear family was Hungarian in most cases; in four cases, Romanian grandparents and distant relatives, both consanguineous and nonconsanguineous, were mentioned, with whom there was closer contact and with whom conversation took place in Romanian. One interviewee spoke Romanian with his wife. An interviewee from an entirely Hungarian family also occasionally spoke Romanian with her mother and sister: the mother worked in a Romanian community, and his sister followed her brother to a Romanian school; all tended to spend time in the company of Romanian-speaking friends and acquaintances. They were the only family, completely Hungarian at the nuclear level, in which Romanian was part of daily life. The majority of respondents were primarily members of Hungarian communities, but there was also a sizable number of those who had a mixed group of friends; this was more common among those who graduated from a Romanian high school. Time spent in Romanian kindergarten did not bring lifelong relationships. In terms of parents' occupations, there was a wide variety. There were actors, entrepreneurs, and tram conductors. The respondents can generally be said to have stable financial capital and to have been raised in secure financial conditions.

## Reasons for Choosing a Romanian-Language Institution

Based on the conversations, we can see how the reasons for choice, performance and quality of experiences are related. We identified the categories of *hope for prosperity* and *others* as reasons for choosing an educational institution. Interviewees who made it clear that they enrolled in a Romanian-speaking school in order to live successfully in the country were included in the former category. The second category contains people

who made their choice based on distance, as well as those whose older siblings' and parents' school experience played some role in their choice.

## Performance

The second topic studied is the issue of performance: here we took into account the achievements in Romanian-speaking educational institutions. We divided the respondents into *outstanding* and *non-outstanding* categories: those who achieved outstanding results at one level of education in a Romanian institution and those who did not. In terms of performance, there were just as many outstanding achievers as non-outstanding ones. All respondents who achieved outstanding results had an accepting and open attitude. Another three interviewees with positive experiences did not declare a particularly successful career at school.

## Quality of Experiences

In terms of the quality of experience, we separated those who reacted positively and negatively to their school environment. We classified the interviewees who were open to the state language school, made friends and learned the language easily into the *receptive-open* category. They are the ones who said: In Romania, *knowing Romanian well is an advantage*. The *anxious* category included those who had difficulties in integrating and learning the language. We found that 4 respondents reported anxiety and frustration when speaking Romanian which persists to this day. There is also a correlation between the groups without anxiety and with anxiety: none of the respondents with anxiety reported outstanding results. Taking all this into account, we can conclude that an open-minded attitude is an essential condition for language learning and thus for a successful career.

## Types of Language Dominance of the Educational Career and the Family Background

Our respondents pursued Romanian- and Hungarian-dominant studies, depending on the language in which the person attended school or kindergarten for a long time. All men had Romanian-dominated academic careers. For women, on the other hand, the distribution of the two languages of instruction, is not so clear-cut. Men and their families typically made more informed choices and decisions about their future, including a student who chose the best high school in the area rather than being influenced by his parents. All but one of the men performed exceptionally well at a Romanian-speaking educational institution, and we can also mention competitive performances, doctoral thesis, and outstanding grades.

It is clear that in mixed families, the language of instruction was always Romanian-dominant, while in the case of all-Hungarian parents, the language of instruction was mixed. The latter fact strengthens the assumption that the educational careers of students from mixed families will follow the majority path. Although the majority of the parents were native speakers of Hungarian, we must mention a few grandparents who were present in the respondents' lives as blood relatives or step family members. During data collection, it was revealed that grandparents of Romanian nationality were also considered authoritative in shaping the language spoken at home. This drew our attention to the fact that the third generation of respondents should also be taken into account when investigating the language spoken at home.

In the case of the respondent who completed grades 5–8, her high school education was only available in Romanian, and her parents did not want her to commute to the city every day. Her initial enthusiasm was soon followed by negative experiences, so she describes grades 5–8 as a “dark period” (A.11). She was one of those who had a completely negative experience with education in Romanian. Another respondent stated the following: “I think I would have learned it the same way I learned every other subject very diligently, because that is typical of me. So I cannot say that it brought great benefits” (A.13). The rest of the interviewees spoke favourably about this period: according to their statements, they were not discriminated against, and apart from minor disagreements, they had positive experiences.

Half of the respondents graduated from secondary school in Romanian. The respondent who finished grades 5–8 in Romanian longed to return to a Hungarian-speaking environment, so she decided to commute from grade 9 onward: “I longed to be able to speak my native language and continue my education, so I decided that I wanted to go to a Hungarian school from 9th grade” (A.11). One young man made his own decision about his schooling, and already had concrete plans for his studies, so he chose the most prestigious school in the city.

We were also interested in performance. Seven respondents declared outstanding results: a distinction in an accounting competition, 4th–5th place in a group of fifty, a scholarship, a high admission average on the entrance exam, physics and chemistry Olympiads, scores in physics competitions guaranteeing admission to university, the best qualification in Romanian, a volume of Romanian poetry, and a doctoral thesis. Not all of them attended educational institutions in Romanian since kindergarten, but they performed outstandingly in certain areas.

Twelve people positively evaluated their experience in a Romanian educational institution. A few mentioned that it was necessary to know the language of the country, but they also liked to practice and read in Hungarian, and overall they were happy that they know both languages well, with the exception of Hungarian spelling. For a respondent from Berlin, being a member of a minority is associated with positive, homely feelings: “I have never lived in Hungary, but it would be strange for me if everyone around me spoke Hungarian; this is how I grew up, when I was a child, I didn't necessarily understand it on the bus, or I could ignore what they were talking about. And now it's the same.



They speak German around me, but I don't necessarily pay attention to it" (A.2). This reveals a habit of early linguistic alienation. There is also an example where a person who completed her education in Romanian actually felt that both languages and cultures belong to her: "It's like having two personalities. So I cry even when Romania wins a soccer game, but also when the Hungarians do. If they play against each other, I support the Hungarians." (A.9). Most of them are grateful that they were able to establish a good foundation for their command of the Romanian language, thus enabling them to fare better in the world of work: "I'm grateful that I went to Romanian kindergarten, because that's really why I can say yes, that's why I can speak Romanian" (A.3). Even at a young age, it becomes apparent that those who attended kindergarten in Romanian are less likely to struggle in Romanian classes in primary school. In the case of one respondent, whose half-Romanian father insisted on the child's education in Romanian, his Hungarian mother took him to a Hungarian class on Fridays: "And so, looking back, my mother made such attempts, as she once said, to keep the Hungarian sentiment alive in me" (A.12). Despite the fact that he could have got into any university based on his scores, this person chose Hungary because he "always had the urge to speak Hungarian" (A.12). The same person changed his Romanian-spelled surname into Hungarian spelling. Two of these individuals regret having been in a Romanian language environment and clearly describe the time they spent there as painful.

## Conclusions

Although this is not a representative survey, we can say that despite the difficulties, excellent results can be achieved in Romanian language class. Several Olympiads, scholarships and top rankings were mentioned in the reports, even for students coming from purely Hungarian families. In the case of students who achieved success, internal motivation and diligence helped them overcome language difficulties in most cases.

The fact of the parents' mixed marriage did not prove to be conclusive with regard to the respondent's stay abroad. Two of the three respondents from mixed families live abroad (if we trace the mixed marriage back to the third generation, where the relationship with the grandparents is still intense), one in France and the other in Germany. Consequently, the Romanian language did not result in long-term plans in the country.

It is remarkable that the decision was mostly insisted on by the parent from the Romanian family, and met little resistance from the other side. Most respondents reported language difficulties and frustration at least at the beginning of their school careers, but several referred to childlike openness when overcoming difficulties. Such challenges arise regardless of whether the Romanian language training began in kindergarten or in higher grades. A successful academic life was characteristic not only of those who followed the majority path from kindergarten to university; strong motivation and a sense of purpose also helped. It also happened that parents came from rural areas, where they spoke the language less well, and felt that it would be important for their child's

progress in the city to thoroughly master the language of the state, even at the expense of the native language, as it turned out. Most of the respondents worked or still work in a Romanian-speaking environment. Lack of knowledge of Hungarian spelling was mentioned as a disadvantage, but those who also completed studies in Hungarian or regularly spend time in Hungarian circles and educate themselves can overcome this obstacle. During interviews with respondents, there were a few occasions when a respondent spoke Romanian, mostly in cases where they were looking for words from an institutional context. Mention was made of *serbare* (ceremony), *mențiune* (praise), the Romanian name for training courses (economic), and an interviewee who lives mainly in a foreign environment asked in English what he simply hadn't thought of (student, sentence). Respondents who had completed several levels of education in Romanian spoke with an audible accent.

## Limitations

This is a non-representative study; it is also important that the interviewees come from similar social backgrounds and have similar financial situation. It should be mentioned that when interpreting the interviews, the self-verification used to reduce cognitive dissonance must be taken into account. For the majority, there is a possibility that an earlier decision will be evaluated positively afterwards. Due to the structured nature of the questions, the interviews provided objective rather than descriptive data, which will be further analysed. Our assessment of success is also a limitation, as we had an interviewee who only attended kindergarten in Romanian, where there are not as many opportunities for success as, for example, in high school. While conducting this pilot study, we identified the aforementioned limitations and will correct the errors that will arise in the future.

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