

EFL Writing in Romania: Reflections on Present and Future

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Abstract

Many global contexts remain largely unexplored, and thus unable to inform the shaping of an accurate picture or theory of second language (L2) writing around the world. Romania is such a context. This study investigates the attitudes and perceptions of 52 in-service K-12 English teachers from Romania, and represents an expansion of prior research conducted by the researcher. Using a survey, data were collected about the teachers' attitudes and perceptions about EFL writing in Romania. The findings illustrate the teachers' persistent positive attitudes towards the English language and English-speaking countries/cultures as well as further need for professional development in the area of pedagogy and EFL writing.

Keywords: Teacher training, development, EFL writing, L2 writing, Romania

1. Introduction

The number of studies about second language (L2) writing in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts has been on the rise. This development is well justified, since EFL is more widely spread than English as a Second Language (ESL), and ignoring what happens in the EFL world can leave large gaps in our understanding of L2 writing (something we have known at least since Silva, Leki, & Carson (1997)). Additionally, the needs and processes of efl writers can be quite different from those of esl writers. Chapters in Manchón (2011) illustrate efl situations in which English language learners write-to-learn language or content through English writing more than learning-to-write for the sake of developing writing skills in English. Looking at Eastern and Central Europe, Harbord (2010) notes that writing there tends to be taught primarily as a means to develop linguistic proficiency. It is encouraging, therefore, that the research has been expanding to more global contexts that were previously unexplored.

In an older meta-analysis, Ortega (2009, p. 233-235) had found that about a third of the empirical research articles in major international

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journals such as the *Journal of Second Language Writing* and *TESOL Quarterly* were about EFL writing, but focused almost exclusively on Japan, Hong Kong, and China. Since then, more work about EFL writing in a wider range of countries has been published, including in Cimasko and Reichelt (2011), Manchón (2009, 2012), Ruecker and Crusan (2018), Seloni and Henderson (forthcoming), and You (2010). In the European context, there are large, corpus-based, comparative studies which describe the local writing cultures and EFL writing practices of multiple countries from both Eastern and Western Europe (for example, EUWRIT is described in Chitez, Kruse, & Castelló (2015) – about Romania, Ukraine, Macedonia, Switzerland, Germany, and Spain; and Kruse, Chitez, Bekar, Doroholschi, and Yakhtonova (2018) describe the LIDHUM project, in which reforms of writing were implemented at universities in Switzerland, Romania, Macedonia, and Ukraine).

A subset of the existing research on EFL writing examines writing teacher preparation and other teacher-related factors, such as attitudes and perceptions. The rationale for investigating teacher-related factors is based on the crucial role that teachers play in shaping the teaching-learning process. Such research not only reflects the specific differences among contexts but also suggests reasons for those differences, illustrating that approaches to L2 writing pedagogy cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach. Casanave (2009) argues that an ecological framework to EFL writing is advisable because “this view emphasizes the complex, messy, interrelated and contextually situated (or local) nature of all learning, including language learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2002; Tudor, 2003; Van Lier, 2002, 2004) and writing (Casanave, 1995b).”

Studies that are mindful of the ecological perspective have pinpointed a number of factors that matter in the way that EFL writing is taught and practiced in different countries. For example, some important differences have been found across EFL contexts in the type and amount of teacher preparation and professional development. EFL teachers can be classically trained in language and literature as well as primarily self-taught as pedagogues, clamoring for more professional development (Ene & Mitrea, 2013, – about Romania); they can be trained in multiple rhetorical traditions and not necessarily as teachers of writing (Kruse, Chitez, Bekar, Doroholschi, & Yakhtonova, 2018, – about Switzerland, Romania, Macedonia, and Ukraine; Reichelt, 2005, – about Poland and Reichelt, 2009a, – about Germany); or they have to be deliberately challenged to observe and reflect on pedagogical practices in order to innovate their traditional ways (Lee, 2010). Teachers often face difficult working conditions with huge workloads, large classes, low pay, and few resources (Ene & Hryniuk, 2018 – about

Poland, Mexico, and China; Ene & Mitrea, 2013 – about Romania; Lee, 2010 – about Hong Kong; see also chapters in Manchón, 2009). Sometimes they are disempowered in hierarchical, traditional systems (Casanave, 2009 – about Japan). In many countries, national and standardized assessments exert overwhelming pressure on daily classroom activities (see chapters in Ruecker and Crusan, 2018).

Teacher attitudes towards the target language and/or associated cultures can interact with the many practical factors listed above, and – in turn – they can influence what a teacher is able or willing to do in the classroom. In recent work about teachers from Poland, Mexico, and China, Ene & Hryniuk (2018) reported teachers' reservations about their students' true need to master English, and particularly writing in English. In prior work conducted in Poland, Reichelt (2005) had found that Polish teachers and students had a very positive attitude towards EFL and did not see English as a threat to their individual or cultural identity. In Turkey, Clachar (2000) noted that four of the seven teachers included in the study felt that Western, process-oriented writing methodologies were not appropriate for Turkish students because they were at odds with students' expectations for authoritative, traditional instruction. Arıkan (2011), in a much larger study of 412 prospective teachers from Turkey, found that the teachers had positive attitudes about the target language but not about the target culture, and this was interpreted as an aspect that could diminish the teachers' ability to promote cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, Gürsoy (2013), in a survey of 200 Turkish teachers, found mildly positive attitudes towards English, and female teachers having more positive attitudes than males. In the Basque country in Spain, Ipiña and Sagasta (2017), reported that prospective teachers in their longitudinal study did not feel that English was a threat to their identity. The examples here illustrate that teacher attitudes vary greatly and in somewhat unexpected ways, depending on the linguistic and cultural distance between the teachers' first language and culture and English, political relationships, but also teacher experience and research methods employed by different researchers.

In research which is specifically about Romania – a less researched EFL context – Ene and Mitrea (2013) used data from surveys, written reflections, a focus group and four teacher interviews to examine what 41 K-12 EFL writing teachers in Romania believed about L2 writing theory and pedagogy, as well as how they formed and applied their knowledge base. The study found that the participants were primarily self-taught in the area of EFL writing pedagogy, and were heavily influenced in their practices by the textbooks used, the national curriculum, standardized assessments, and heavy teaching workloads. Process-based writing that incorporated multiple drafts, peer review,

and self-assessment was rare compared to focus on grammar and vocabulary, but many functional and even some creative genres were taught (as also noted by Chitez et al., 2015 and Kruse et al., 2018). Focus on functional genres increased in the grades that preceded national assessments. For the most part, the teachers from the 2013 study did not think that they were greatly affected by globalization, although they acknowledged the increased access to authentic English-language materials. The teachers were critical of national policy changes without explicitly connecting them to global changes.

The purpose of this study is to expand the knowledge base about EFL writing in Romania and capture developments since Ene and Mitrea (2013), particularly as related to teacher attitudes and perceptions that can influence the teaching of English writing. By filling in this knowledge gap, the article aims to contribute to the better understanding of EFL writing and teacher preparation around the world.

2. Research Questions

The research questions that guide this inquiry are:

- What are Romanian K-12 English teachers' attitudes and perceptions towards the English language and English-speaking cultures?
- How have attitudes evolved since the earlier 2013 study by Ene & Mitrea?

The article will discuss the implications of teachers' attitudes for the teaching of EFL writing.

3. Study Design

3.1. Context

Romania, a European Union member since 2007, has a population of around 21 million, with around 3 million students in K-12. English is the main foreign language taught to students from preK-12; students participate in national assessments for English at the end of their 4th grade year and at the end of high school. High-performing students who aim to study abroad take the TOEFL, IELTS, and other certificates.

Traditionally, language teachers are graduates of language and literature studies (for example, English teachers graduate with degrees in English Language and Literature). During their studies, teachers receive training on linguistics, literature, and pedagogy. In recent years, courses on academic or research writing have been introduced, especially for MA students.

Data for this study were collected via an online survey distributed to K-12 teachers of English in a variety of areas of Romania in all of its three main geographic regions. While the 2013 study was conducted in a single location and tapped into the teacher population from only Sibiu county, the current study reached teachers from other counties as well.

3.2. Participants

Fifty-two K-12 teachers of English, all female, participated in this research. All but six of the teachers received their Bachelor's degree between 1980-2017. The other six participants were pursuing degrees at the time of the study; one was in the process of receiving a BA, four their MAs, and one a PhD. The institutions from which the teachers had graduated included all of the major Romanian universities from Bucharest, Cluj, Iași, Sibiu, Timișoara, Craiova, and Ploiești; half of the participants had graduated from the Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. The teachers were all between the ages of 24 and 60, with 23 (44%) of them in their thirties. Thirteen (25%) of the participants had been teaching for 11-15 years and another 13 (25%) for 16-20 years. Eleven (21%) had taught for 6-10 years, 10 (19%) for more than 20 years, and the remaining 5 (9%) for less than 5 years.

Twenty-four (46%) of the teachers taught grades 9-12 and 10 (19%) taught grades 5-8; the remaining participants taught several different grade groupings in the K-12 range. The teachers' schools were from the following areas: 27 (51%) from Sibiu, 8 (15%) from Iași and 3 (5%) from rural areas near Iași, 6 (11%) from Craiova and 4 (7%) from the area, 2 (3%) from Brașov, 1 from Galați, 1 Timișoara, 1 Bucharest, and 1 from Mureș. On average, 36 (69.2%) of the teachers had between 20-30 students/pupils in each group/class; 5 (9%) had 30 or more students and 8 (15.4%) had between 10-20 students in each group or class. Thirty-eight (73%) of the teachers spent between 20 hours a week or less teaching. The remaining 14 (26%) teachers spent more than 20 hours teaching each week.

3.3. Methods

A fifty-two-question survey was distributed to the participants. The first 16 questions were designed to collect demographic information. The remaining 36 questions pertained to English writing and reading practices and beliefs within the teachers' classrooms, the teacher's comfort with teaching, beliefs about English teaching practices, and English teaching and professional development in Romania. The survey consisted of a mixture of open-ended, Lykert-type scale and yes/no questions. The responses were quantified when appropriate; open-

ended answers were analysed qualitatively, by identifying themes and ordering them from the most to the least frequent. Some open-ended answers consisted of several sub-parts that were related to more than one theme. Due to the space limitations of this venue, only the section of the survey that focused on teacher attitudes will be analysed and discussed particularly relative to the Ene & Mitrea (2013) study.

4. Results/Findings

Q: What is your attitude (emotion, feelings) about the English language?

Fifty-one (98%) of the respondents indicated that they had a positive attitude about the English language, while only one respondent indicated a negative attitude. Thirty-one (59%) participants provided a comment as to why. Seventeen (54%) of these 31 responses connected a positive attitude for the English language with a positive attitude for the respondent's job or a desire for students' best learning outcome: "I love what I do and the English language is the tool that helps me do it," and "Because I totally love it, I love teaching it, and I believe that it is really helpful for my students' future." Seven (22%) of the respondents provided an answer that was a simple statement of positivity, such as, "I have always loved this subject." Four (12%) cited the usefulness of English for their positive attitude for the language; one of these answers explained, "I strongly believe that English is a language that allows lots of liberty in thinking and expressing yourself." Two (6%) respondents cited their reason for having a positive attitude toward English as being the global status of English, calling the language "universal" and saying "it is international and no longer belongs to a specific nation."

TABLE 1: Teacher attitudes for English

Reason for attitude	Theme frequency
Positivity toward job/desire for students' best learning outcome	54% (17)
General positivity	22% (7)
Usefulness	12% (4)
Global status of English	6% (2)

Q: What is your attitude (emotion, feelings) about English-speaking countries/cultures?

The teachers' positive attitude applied to not only the English language but also English-speaking countries. Fifty (96%) of the 52 participants answered that they had a positive attitude about English-speaking countries; 2 answered that they had a neutral attitude. Twenty-eight (54%) of the 52 respondents provided a written answer expressing their reasoning, and 1 answer fit in two of the below categories; 5 (17%) of the answers were unclear or irrelevant and were not used in the analysis.

Of the 28, 7 (25%) of the answers were related to a positive view of the culture of English-speaking countries, though it was not clear which English-speaking countries and cultures the respondents were referring to specifically: "Great culture"; "I like their culture and mentality"; "I appreciate their culture and mentality." Six (21%) of the answers expressed a general mood of positivity, such as, "They are interesting" and "Somehow I feel a connection." Five (17%) respondents connected their positive attitude toward English speaking countries with a positive attitude toward the English language. Four (14%) of the answers made a connection to the writing classroom in some way. Three responses showed that the respondents felt that English-speaking countries contribute positively to their teaching. One teacher said, "[English-speaking countries] provide authentic materials for the English class" while another teacher wrote, in contrast, "They should invest more in facilitating access to materials/courses etc." Two (7%) answers are worth noting because of the connections they drew between appreciating English-speaking countries/cultures and the higher values of diversity and global understanding. One comment said, "We can learn if we communicate with the other communities as well" and the other said, "I love diversity."

TABLE 2: Teacher attitudes for English-speaking countries/cultures

Reason for attitude	Theme frequency
Appreciation of target culture	25% (7)
General positivity	21% (6)
Positivity toward English language	17% (5)
Writing classroom connections	14% (4)

Q: How does the way you feel about English and English-speaking countries affect what or how you teach in your English class?

Forty-nine (94%) of the 52 respondents said that their attitude for English and English-speaking countries helped what or how they teach in their English classes, while 3 (5.8%) said their attitude did not affect their teaching at all. Eleven (21%) of the teachers indicated in their open-ended answers the belief that their own enthusiasm and

confidence about the English language and associated cultures was bound to have a positive effect on their students' desire to learn English. One (2%) shared the opinion that teachers have a responsibility to cultivate appreciation for other languages and cultures. The remaining 40 (77%) teachers did not provide additional answers.

Q: If you could change something about how English is taught in Romania, what would it be and why?

Forty-four (84%) out of the 52 teachers responded to this question. However, some respondents provided multiple examples of aspects of English teaching they would like to change. Of the 44 respondents, 9 (20%) teachers said there was a need for more and/or longer English classes. Eight (18%) said they would change the materials and technology available to them, including the textbook. Teachers wanted materials and technology that are more attractive to students and more funding for teaching materials. One teacher pointed out that investing in technology would give students access to a wider variety of materials. Another teacher said she would "introduce a lot of genuine British or even American English materials instead of the ones made by Romanians, which are pretty old and outdated." Seven (15%) teachers said they would change the teaching approach, with some stating they would like a more "communicative approach" rather than "the exam-oriented approach." Six (13%) said they would change the national curriculum or syllabus. Six (13%) also said they would have smaller class sizes. Five (11%) of the teachers said they wanted to make their classes and materials more relevant to their students, including more of a focus on "real life" situations. Four (9%) answers had to do with a desire for more freedom, be it in choosing materials or choosing classroom content. Three (6%) wanted more interaction in their classrooms, with other English language learners or with native English speakers. Three (6%) said they would not change anything, two (4%) answers were irrelevant, and one answer pertained to providing teachers with professional development to motivate them.

TABLE 3: Teacher desires for change of English teaching in Romania

<i>What the teacher would change</i>	<i>Theme frequency</i>
More/Longer classes	20% (9)
Materials and technology	18% (8)
Teaching approach	15% (7)
National curriculum/syllabus	13% (6)
Smaller class sizes	13% (6)
Relevance of materials	11% (5)

Freedom in teaching	9% (4)
More interaction	6% (3)
Nothing	6% (3)
Irrelevant answer	4% (2)
Professional development for teachers	2% (1)

Q: If you could change something about how WRITING in English is taught in Romania, what would it be and why?

Of the 40 (76%) respondents for this question, 8 (20%) said they would change the writing textbooks or materials used in class. Eight (20%) also said they would change assignment requirements, meaning the types of assignments required of students and/or the number of assignments required. Six (15%) said they wanted classes, assignments, or materials to be more relevant to their students. Another six (15%) teachers said they would change nothing. Four (10%) of the teachers said they wanted more writing classes, class time, or practice time. Three (7%) said they wanted to teach more practical lessons or require more practical assignments of their students. Finally, one (2%) teacher wanted to implement professional development for teachers.

TABLE 4: Teacher desires for change of English writing teaching in Romania

What the teacher would change	Theme frequency
Textbooks/materials	20% (8)
Assignment requirements	20% (8)
Relevance of classes, assignments, or materials	15% (6)
Nothing	15% (6)
More or longer classes	10% (4)
Practicality of lessons/assignments	7% (3)
Professional development	2% (1)

5. Discussion

The attitudes of the 52 K-12 English teachers from Romania towards the English language and English-speaking countries and cultures was overwhelmingly positive. The reasons behind these positive attitudes varied from simply liking the language and culture(s) to seeing the utility of English as a global language of international communication. The combination of aesthetic, integrative and practical, instrumental reasons for having positive attitudes is rather unique. Other efl studies have found that teachers' strong instrumental (rather than integrative) motivation towards English as a means of international communication

can nurture positive attitudes towards the target language and culture(s) (Gürsoy, 2013). However, the participants in this study also displayed interest in and openness towards the target language and culture(s).

Furthermore, the absence of specific negative attitudes is overall similar to the findings in the Ene & Mitrea (2013) study, in which the participating teachers also affirmed the usefulness of the English language and some positive effects of globalization in terms of easier access to a wider variety of authentic language and teaching materials. In the 2013 study, a couple of participants had expressed concerns about the globalization of Western writing conventions due to the spread of English, as well as about the increased incidence of plagiarism facilitated by the internet. In the present study, no one expressed such concerns or reservations. On the contrary, the teachers wanted more access to technology, native speakers, and authentic materials. Thus, there is no overall change in the general attitude of the teachers over time. In addition, because the current study included more areas of Romania than Ene & Mitrea (2013), we can now see that the positive attitude shared in 2013 by the English teachers from Sibiu county is, in fact, more widely-spread.

Almost all of the participating teachers also reported that their own positive attitude towards the English language and English-speaking countries or cultures helped them in the classroom by giving them confidence and joy, and by making it possible to transmit those feelings to their students. This connection between positive attitudes and motivation (Gardner & Lambert, 1972) is often the very reason why attitudes are explored in research. Sercu, Garcia and Prieto (2005, p. 489) have also posited that teachers' "perceptions will, undoubtedly permeate their lessons, determining the way the foreign culture/s is/are presented and dealt with." This study presents evidence that teachers themselves appreciate the motivating power of a positive attitude for themselves as professionals as well as for their students. The current study is limited to establishing what the Romanian teachers' attitudes were. The translation of those attitudes into practice will be explored in the future using other sections of the survey used for this study.

As far as the teachers' wishes for how the teaching of English in general and of English writing in particular could improve in Romania, the strongest theme that emerged had to do with wanting more authentic teaching materials and more relevant materials that the students could identify with. Both of these relate to the comments about wanting more freedom from the national curriculum and designated textbooks. Other updates that were requested had to do with the use of more communicative and technology-supported ways

of teaching, as well as simply having more time to teach instead of rushing to keep up with the curriculum. These findings, too, are similar to the prior study as well as to the findings of Ene & Hryniuk (2018) about Poland and China (and somewhat less about Mexico). In essence, what the Romanian teachers expressed in both studies is that a modernization of the teaching of English and efl writing is needed, including in the sense that more professional development for teachers is necessary.

A contextual factor that is usually mentioned as a stressful, limiting factor of efl contexts is about working conditions, specifically workload and class size (Ene & Mitrea, 2013; Ene & Hryniuk, 2018; Lee, 2010; Reichelt, 2005, 2009b). Interestingly, no explicit comments were made in the present study about the teaching loads of teachers in Romania, although it is notably high and was pointed out in the 2013 study as an obstacle for teacher preparation and the use of process-oriented writing. A small subgroup among the participants – only 13% of them, precisely – expressed the wish to have smaller classes, although 78% of them had more than 20 students per class. Further investigations can determine if this population simply accepts the fact that class size is unlikely to change, or there are other reasons for this result.

6. Conclusions and implications

As noted above, the attitudes of Romanian teachers seem to have stayed overall positive over the past six years. The positive outcome of this may be that a generally positive attitude may make it easier for the teachers to teach and help their students achieve their learning goals, as motivation theory predicts. English's global status served as a source of instrumental motivation. Uniquely, the Romanian efl teachers also displayed integrative motivation in the form of openness to the target language and culture. As in the past, the teachers were more critical of the internal, national conditions surrounding the teaching of English rather than any potentially threatening aspects of the spread of English in the world. This suggests that such teachers would be able to model and cultivate a positive attitude towards intercultural communication and understanding. While critical theorists (Canagarajah, 1999; Pennycook, 1999) advocate for questioning the globalization of English and its conventions, efl teachers often get caught in the immediacy of just teaching (Ene & Mitrea, 2013; Manchón, 2011).

The findings and conclusions presented here are based on a single section of the survey given to the 52 participating teachers. Future analyses of the complete survey – which cannot be done in the confines of this venue – may illuminate further connections between the attitudes of the teachers and their reported classroom practices.

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