

Teaching Romanian culture to foreign learners: an experiment involving students' understanding of visual arts

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Foreign language teaching should aim to raise learners' cultural awareness and improve their communicative skills, not just introduce linguistic structures. The question that arises is how to foster cultural competence in the foreign language classroom. This paper focuses on teaching Romanian to foreign students and presents the results of an experiment conducted with foreign student groups at the University of Bucharest and the "Ovidius" University of Constanța. The aim was to assess students' interest in high culture, more precisely visual arts. The experiment consisted in the presentation of three paintings by famous Romanian artists, after which the students were asked to describe and comment on the images. The framework employed is based on the analysis of appraisal in English language, proposed by Martin and White (2005). The results show that students easily recognized the main messages conveyed by the paintings. Furthermore, they evaluated the pictures based on their background knowledge, expressed detailed opinions and feelings about them, and made associations with their native cultures. These results suggest that foreign learners may be interested in high culture topics as long as they are actively involved in the learning process.

Keywords: *Romanian culture, foreign language teaching, visual arts*

1. Introduction

Currently, the development of intercultural competence is a common objective in foreign language teaching, as language policies emphasize the importance of cultural knowledge in foreign language (FL) course syllabi. In spite of this trend, the exact meaning of cultural knowledge remains rather vague. According to the EU Council, cultural awareness is a key competence for lifelong learning and involves "knowledge of local, national, regional, European, and global cultures" (Council of

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the European Union, 2018). An earlier version of the Common European Framework for Languages provides a more detailed description, stating that one of the main aims of language learning is “to achieve a wider and deeper understanding of the way of life and forms of thought of other peoples and of their cultural heritage” (Council of Europe, Language Policy Unit 2011, np).

In order to achieve this objective, it is crucial to accurately identify the elements that represent the “way of life” and “forms of thought” of other peoples and communities. Over half a century ago, Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) noted the various understandings of ‘culture’ as a broad scientific concept and identified over 160 definitions of the term. This variety poses a challenge to the teaching process, as FL courses are time-limited and require thorough topic selection. Thus, the question arises: how can teachers select and discuss relevant cultural data to foster cultural and linguistic awareness in the foreign language classroom?

In order to build cultural awareness, it is important to understand what sparks students' interest, how they view the new culture, and how they position themselves in relation to both the target culture and their own. Our paper contributes to this debate by presenting the results of a small-scale experiment conducted in a Romanian language course for foreign students. The focus is on visual arts, which are included in the syllabus of university courses on Romanian culture addressed to foreign students in the Preparatory Program. We investigated students' perceptions of selected artworks from the target culture to assess the topic's relevance in a Romanian culture and civilization course. Our goal was to understand the students' perspective and to adapt the course according to their interests and needs in the future.

We agree with the observation that “a lot more is involved in language teaching than a mere exchange of linguistic labels; subjective experience and personal identity are at stake” (Buttjes 1991, 8). When learners do not have the opportunity to voice their views and beliefs, their motivation may decrease, hindering their autonomy as learners. Consequently, we designed our research to avoid the traditional presentation of cultural data in the form of a lecture, which treats students as passive receivers of information. We considered different ways to allow students to participate in the teaching process and decided to use an open-ended questionnaire to assess their understanding of art and their attitudes toward famous Romanian paintings. We adopted the definition of culture advanced by Peoples and Bailey (2012, 24), as encompassing “shared, socially learned knowledge and patterns of behavior” and the view that artworks are expressions of a particular culture. Throughout the paper, we use the term ‘high culture’ in order to refer to the specific cultural products that require a high degree of skill to create and a high level of education to be interpreted. The term is usually linked to the

social hierarchy and viewed traditionally as characteristic for the upper classes, although at present the distinctions between 'high' and 'low' culture tend to become blurred (van den Haak 2018). The findings presented below indicate that expressions of 'high culture' can be interesting to foreign learners and that they engage in complex processes to decode and interpret the messages of artworks.

2. Literature review: Teaching language or teaching culture?

Communicative language teaching is a widely used method of teaching foreign languages at present. Communicative competence encompasses several types of skills, including grammatical, sociolinguistic or sociocultural, discursive, and strategic competence (Richards et al. 2002, 90–91). However, in language classrooms, communicative competence is often viewed as the ability to produce meaningful utterances using the lexical items, grammatical structures, and pragmatic information acquired, while the role played by the speaker's culture(s) is often overlooked. Not only teachers, but also learners tend to focus on acquiring grammar and vocabulary, paying less attention to the cultural context. For example, a survey of Lithuanian students revealed that most respondents considered grammar and vocabulary to be the most important aspects of learning a foreign language, though they also recognized the importance of sociocultural competence (Dulkšnienė and Mačianskienė 2020, 84–85). According to Liddicoat and Scarino (2013, 12–13), this view stems from the understanding of language as a structural system, "a set of agreed-upon meanings assembled according to a set of rules". This leads to a normative view of grammar and language that encourages students to focus on the correctness of their discourse, thereby silencing individual voices.

When it comes to the development of sociocultural competence of foreign learners, attention is given usually to the appropriateness of their discourse in specific contexts. The definition of sociocultural competence as "knowledge of the relationship between language and its nonlinguistic context" (Richards et al. 2002, 90) emphasizes the pragmatic aspect of foreign language teaching and learning. This approach focuses on foreign speakers' ability to perform speech acts in discourse and recognize and respond appropriately to utterances containing speech acts. While this view is particularly suited for the planning of tasks in the FL courses and students' assessment, the question is whether pragmatic skills are enough to help learners become independent users of the target language, able to adapt to a different cultural context.

The design of learning resources also indicates a tendency to prioritise grammar over cultural content. The observation made by Risager (1991) regarding FL textbooks published after the 1950s, which still consider cultural aspects as “secondary to linguistic content, at least at the elementary level” (Risager 1991, 182) can still hold true in the case of textbooks on Romanian as a foreign language. In some such textbooks (e.g. Brâncuș et al. 2003), cultural information is avoided at the beginner level and is taught at the intermediate and advanced levels, while in other textbooks it is introduced at the end of an unit, after the presentation of grammar and vocabulary (e.g. Dorobăț and Fotea 1999). The placement of cultural content in isolation at the end of a teaching unit may encourage teachers to treat culture as secondary (Byram 1991, 17-18). Additionally, presenting isolated information in FL textbooks can lead to a fragmented view of foreign cultures and promote stereotypes about their peoples (Davcheva and Sercu 2005). The introduction of small ‘cultural units’ or ‘tips’ about the target culture may draw attention to the differences between the native and target cultures. In the long term, such approaches may lead to the construction of “Otherness” and prevent foreign learners from engaging in meaningful communicative exchanges with native speakers.

Another factor that influences the introduction of cultural data in the FL classroom consists in the plurality of views on what constitutes cultural content and what should be taught as relevant to the foreign learners. This is better understood when we take into account how views on culture shifted during the last century. An earlier approach to FL teaching tended to focus on ‘high culture’, presenting “images of recognized cultural attributes of nations” in textbooks (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013, 18). This approach was influenced by the concept of the nation-state as a homogeneous entity, glossing over the presence of minorities or cultural subgroups (Liddicoat and Scarino 2013; Anderson 2006 [1983]). A more recent approach focuses on ‘popular culture’, which is considered more interesting to learners, especially in the early stages of FL acquisition. Therefore, many FL coursebooks present aspects of daily life that belong to popular culture (Davcheva and Sercu 2005). The interest for popular culture can be linked to the recent development of cultural studies. Since “complex societies are now everywhere” (Hannerz 2002, 188), researchers have focused their attention on smaller units of analysis, such as youth cultures or immigrant cultures, instead of national cultures.

Whether it comes to elitist or mass culture, the idea of teaching cultural data poses a problem from the very beginning, simply because it starts from the assumption that ‘culture’ can be taught or learned institutionally. This means that culture is ultimately viewed as a homogeneous set of data that does not change over time. However, all cultures are dynamic and subject to change, though they

evolve at different paces (Spencer-Oatey 2012, 12–13). Consequently, achieving complete knowledge of a different culture remains utopian. Instead, FL courses should provide foreign speakers with the tools to recognize differences and similarities between the target culture and their own, construct meanings, and cope with cultural changes. As Byram (2008, 68) suggests, learners should not aim to achieve the same competencies as native speakers but rather to become “intercultural speakers”, able to mediate between their native culture(s) and others.

Traditionally, cultural aspects in foreign language (FL) teaching are introduced mostly as textual data about the target culture, but this approach may not contribute to learners’ cultural awareness (East 2012). Literature is often mentioned in connection with foreign language (FL) teaching, and materials for various languages usually include literary texts, especially at the intermediate and advanced levels. The preference for a text-based approach is motivated by the necessity to quickly develop students’ receptive skills, which is easier to do with text support.

In order to get a better grasp of particular cultural traits, written texts may not be enough, as tradition is “something real, to be found outside the minds of individuals, and objectified in the form of a collection of objects, symbols, techniques, values, beliefs, practices, and institutions that the individuals of a culture share” (Rapport and Overing 2000, 94). However, it is difficult to expose foreign learners to the wide array of elements involved by cultural traditions. In FL courses, visual works of art are often overlooked, as their interpretation requires knowledge from various disciplines, such as history of art, history of culture, aesthetics, or semiotics. Still, we should not forget that “people assign their own meanings and values to the texts, messages, and products they receive. Those meanings reflect their cultural backgrounds and experiences” (Kottak 2010, 291). In other words, there is no unique ‘correct’ interpretation of artworks, just as literary texts can be read in multiple ways. Learners should be encouraged to judge and appreciate arts based on their own preferences, beliefs, values, and personal and cultural backgrounds. Alongside visits to galleries, presentations and analyses of artworks can be a form of creative activity (Dulksnienė and Mačianskienė 2020, 74–75), drawing attention to particular traits of the target culture and helping students notice the similarities and differences between the foreign culture and their own. Efland (2002) highlights the importance of artworks for the study of culture, stating the existence of a symmetrical relationship between art and culture: “[...] the work of art becomes meaningful when it is seen in the context of the culture, and the culture becomes understandable as read through its arts” (Efland 2002, 164). Thus, prompting learners to construct interpretations of the artworks may stimulate their curiosity for the target culture, together with their critical thinking and cognitive abilities.

3. Research design and methodology

This study began with the debate over whether FL courses should teach topics belonging to ‘high culture’ or ‘popular culture’. Our main aim was to assess how foreign students relate to and interpret artifacts from Romanian culture to better understand their relevance in the ‘high’ dimension of culture. We decided to focus on visual artworks and investigate how art history could raise cultural awareness in FL classrooms.

3.1. Participants’ background

The study involved four groups of foreign students in the “Preparatory year”, a university program which spans two semesters and is designed for foreign students pursuing a bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral degree at Romanian universities. The preparatory year is an intensive study program that aims to provide students with a solid foundation in the Romanian language that they can later apply to academic or professional settings. Most of the courses taught during the two semesters are practical or seminar-style, focusing on Romanian and specialized languages. The number of theoretical courses offered is considerably lower than the number of practical courses. The most frequently taught theoretical courses regard Romanian culture and contemporary Romanian language. Each course lasts one semester and consists of a maximum of 14 lectures. Lectures are held weekly for two hours, and each course concludes with a written or oral exam.

The survey took place during the second semester of the 2024–2025 academic year, a period when all the students involved in the experiment attended a theoretical course on Romanian culture and civilization. Two groups of the participants were enrolled at the University of Bucharest, and two groups were enrolled at the University of Constanța when the research was conducted. The participants were from various countries: Albania, Armenia, Bulgaria, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Italy, Jordan, Kenya, Morocco, Palestine, Serbia, Syria, Ukraine, and Yemen. Participation in the research was fully optional and the students were informed that their decision whether to participate or not in the study would not affect their grades on the final exams in any way.

The students did not receive prior explicit instruction on Romanian visual arts or the history of Romanian painting. Seven of the students in Bucharest had visited the National Museum of Art two months before the experiment but they did not receive any specific instruction regarding Romanian painters or styles on that occasion.

3.2. Research design

The experiment took the form of a brief test that lasted one hour. Students were asked to look at three images, each of which represented a painting by a famous Romanian artist. The titles of the paintings and the artists' names were not mentioned and the images were shown one after the other. Each student received a form with four questions about each image, and they had to answer the questions in writing. The test was bilingual, with the questions written in Romanian and English. Students were informed that the task was not a language test and that they could answer in Romanian, English, Italian, German, or French. Students could not use mobile phones to complete the task, but teachers were available to assist with language-related questions.

The authors of the study selected three images from different artistic trends and historical periods. The main selection criteria were that (a) all paintings be created by famous Romanian artists and (b) each painting should have a different subject. The first painting displayed was *Still Life* (*Natură moartă* in the original Romanian) by Theodor Aman, dating from 1870. The second painting presented to the students was *The Chess Player* (*Jucătorul de șah* in the original) by Corneliu Baba and the third painting was *Girl with Her Dowry* (*Fata cu zestrea ei* in the original Romanian), by Nicolae Grigorescu. Images of the first two paintings were retrieved from the website of the National Museum of Art of Romania (www.mnar.ro), while the third image was found on the Wikipedia website.

Considering the themes of the paintings, we proposed two research hypotheses to be tested: (1) the second painting would be the most accessible to students, as chess is a widely recognized game whereas (2) the first and third paintings would pose challenges for viewers: the former due to the distant historical period, and the latter due to cultural differences. Regarding the painting by Nicolae Grigorescu, we assumed students would need knowledge of 19th-century Romanian rural marriage customs, such as the importance of a girl's dowry for a good marriage.

Students were asked to answer the following four questions about each image: (a) What do you notice in the picture?, (b) What comes to mind when you see this picture?, (c) What can you say about the character represented in the picture? Who do you think he or she is, and what is he or she doing?, and (d) Can you give this painting a title?. For image A, which does not depict a character, question (c) was "What can you say about the space represented in the picture? Who do you think lives here?" Students were told that there were no right or wrong answers, and they were encouraged to use their imagination to interpret the images.

3.3. Methodology

Taking into account the instructions given to the participants and their various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, we expected the answers to be multilingual with the majority of them in English. The methodological framework employed was the one proposed by Martin and White (2005), regarding the category of appraisal in English language. According to this perspective, appraisal is a key resource in the semantics of discourse, besides involvement and negotiation, and it encompasses three major domains: attitude, engagement and graduation. We decided to focus on the category of attitude which involves the expression of affect, judgment, and appreciation. Affect refers to the expression of positive or negative feelings, triggered by the reaction to behaviours, phenomena, texts or processes (Martin and White 2005, 43). Judgments regard other people and their behaviour or character and they are based on a set of shared values. Judgments may refer to social esteem or to social sanction, with the former being more frequent in oral culture, and the latter prevailing in written forms (Martin and White 2005, 52-53). Finally, the term 'appreciation' is used for the evaluation of various things or phenomena and it has two main dimensions: reactions to things and appreciation of composition (Martin and White 2005, 56-57). By applying this framework, we intended to gain a better perspective of the students' reactions to the artworks presented, of their judgments regarding the characters, and to find out whether they express appreciation or not towards the images, and which particular elements captured their attention.

4. Discussion of the results

We received a total of 60 responses, two of which were incomplete. 22 of the answers were written in Romanian, 27 in English, 10 in French, and one in Italian. The students' answers showed that most of them could easily describe the objects in all three paintings. They noticed the use of colors and the placement of objects on the picture plane. They also attempted to interpret the use of perspective and to identify the emotions conveyed by the space or characters in the paintings. In connection with the framework proposed by Martin and White (2005), we noticed that the dimension of affect appeared to be most frequently used by the students in the comments on paintings. The answers about paintings featuring characters also included expressions of judgment, which referred to social esteem and not to sanction. The appreciation of the paintings was more rare and it mostly referred to

the complexity of the painting as a whole and to reactions to the things represented in the painting.

4.1. Comments on the painting *Still life* by Theodor Aman

Currently on display at the National Art Museum of Romania in Bucharest, the painting *Still life* depicts an interior scene with a bouquet of roses on a table alongside other objects, such as letters, notes, a fan, and leather gloves. According to the museum's website, the painting is a declaration of love from the artist to his wife, Ana Aman, a beautiful and elegant woman who loved pink roses. Theodor Aman's works, bearing the influence of three artistic trends, romanticism, academic art, and postimpressionism, are considered to mark the beginnings of modern Romanian painting (Ionescu 2011, 104).

Regarding the painting *Still life*, the elements that the majority of students noticed were the flowers and the cup in the background, for which they used different terms, such as *bol* "bowl", *cupă* "cup" or *pahar* "glass". The bouquet of flowers was the focal point for the participants in the experiment, and the pink color drew their attention from the beginning. As shown in example (1 a), the students correctly identified the flowers as roses and attempted to name and describe the objects next to them. Some participants even noticed the difference between the foreground and background elements (example 1 b).

- (1) a. *niște flori triantofile cu culoare galben, roz, roșu și alb, un bol cu un carnet înăuntru cu o eșarfă și un caiet.* (D., Greece)
 'some flowers roses with color yellow, pink, red and white, a bowl with a notebook inside with a scarf and a copybook'
- b. *Văd niște florile roz, dar în spatele lor este un pahar cu câteva subiecte* (J., Serbia)
 'I see some pink flowers, but behind them there is a glass with a few subjects'³

This image triggered most comments addressing the dimension of affect. Even though it represents only an interior scene, and no persons can be seen, the participants recognized easily that the selection of objects and their positioning indicate the presence of a woman and that the painting conveys the painter's

³ The quotes are excerpts from the students' comments and the language errors in the original excerpts are made by the students. We decided to leave them unaltered and to translate them as closely as possible to the original.

affection towards the absent woman. The terms appearing often in the answers were *dragoste* “love”, *iubire* “love”, *dor* “longing”.

- (2) a. *Cred că este specială. Pentru că tabloul există dor și iubire. (...)Trandafirul este un simbol al iubirii.* (R., Finland)
 ‘I think it is special. Because the painting exists longing and love. (...) The rose is a symbol of love.’
- b. *Este un spațiu special pentru aceste obiecte. Este un spațiu unde pot să mă gândesc despre o iubirea. În acest spațiu stă o femeia, pentru că putem să vedem mănuși de damă.* (A., Greece)
 ‘It is a special space for these objects. It is a space where I can think of a love. In this space lives a woman, because we can see woman hand gloves.’

Some comments included the term *frumusețe* “beauty”, referring to the quality of objects represented in the painting. In the following example, the respondent shifts from the appreciation of the flowers depicted to a more general opinion about the world:

- (3) *Acest desen arată adevărata frumusețe a florilor și frumusețea lumii și au niște cărții.* (G., Turkmenistan)
 ‘This drawing shows the true beauty of flowers and the beauty of the world, and they have some books.’

Other students linked the appreciation of beauty to the expression of affect. They interpreted the interior scene as conveying peace and happiness. Some students chose to only list the feelings triggered by the image (example 4.a), while others imagined small narratives about the person who could inhabit the space. In example (4.b), the respondent includes in his answer the appreciation of the general message of the picture and a judgment about a character that is not present. The association of the still life with the grandfather (or grandmother) figure can be based on the objects represented and which belong to a different century.

- (4) a. *Mă gândesc la frumusețe și pace și liniștire.* (A., Bulgaria)
 ‘I think of beauty and peace and calmness’
- b. *Mă gândesc este casa Bunicului. Ea face prăjitura în fiecare zi și ea este foarte bună. Sensul acestei imaginei e foarte cald și confortabil.* (A., Ukraine)
 ‘I think it is Grandfather’s house. She makes the cake every day and she is very good. The meaning of this image is very warm and cozy.’

An unexpected trait that arose from the students' answers was their tendency to interpret the painting through the lens of their personal experiences. Although the evaluative lexis employed is reduced, the positive dimension of affect can be understood from the associations made by the students, either in sequences of actions or in enumerations of nouns. For some participants, the flowers triggered memories of pleasant events such as meetings with friends (example 5.a). One student advanced a particular interpretation (example 5.b), based on the shape of the goblet in the painting, which reminded him of a Venetian gondola. The two examples below fall both into the category of indirect realisations of evaluation, which can be understood by readers sharing a common cultural background (Martin and White 2005, 61-62). The recall of springtime or of the Italian city of Venice is likely to trigger a positive feeling to the readers.

- (5) a. *when I look at this picture I imagine spring with a picnic with my friend at 4 p.m., and watching the sunsets, and listening to music.* (Z., Morocco)
 b. *Mi va al mente la prima volta quando vedo l'immagine la città di venezia, gondola e fiori.* (M., Palestine)
 'What comes to my mind the first time I see the picture (is) the city of venice, gondola and flowers'

For the majority of the respondents, the interior in the picture suggested a feminine presence that was elegant and aristocratic. The terms "aristocratic", "royal" and "princess" appeared often in the answers regarding the person who could live there. In example (6.a), the respondent attempts to outline a detailed portrait of this feminine character. He uses statements that include judgments of social esteem, especially regarding normality (she is elegant) and capacity (she is educated), besides her social status. Other answers (example 6.b) focused on the staged character of the objects displayed and identified the owner as an artist or a person who has a close relationship with the artist.

- (6) a. *A royal woman's bedroom who loves nature and colourful flowers. She seems well-read, likes books. Judging by the placement of the letters, they don't seem like official letters but maybe a letter from a friend or lover. I picture the woman to be very beautiful and elegant* (C.M., Kenya)
 b. *The space feels like it belongs to someone with a romantic and artistic soul, perhaps an artist.* (K., Albania)

Regarding the appreciation of the painting, we observed that most participants recognized that the painting belongs to a different historical and artistic period.

Some of them identified the period as the 19th century (example 7.a). Furthermore, some students tried to identify the artistic school. Even when the answers were incorrect, as in example (7.b), the terms used show that the students are familiar with the names of art movements, at least in part. The student who provided the response below does not know the specific characteristics of realist or neoclassical art, but correctly identifies the original painting by Theodor Aman as oil on canvas.

- (7) a. *The first thought is that it is a picture which reflects the atmosphere of the aesthetic of XVIII – XIX centuries.* (Y., Ukraine)
 b. *It looks like an oil painting emulating the style of a realism or neoclassicism done on a canvas template.* (M., Canada)

Other participants used artistic terminology in their answers. They recognized that paintings of inanimate objects are called still lives and that depictions of flowers are a common subject of such paintings.

- (8) *Dans l'image on voit (...) une peinture de nature morte, représentant des fleurs, un livre et d'autre objets decoratifs* (I., Morocco)
 'In the image we see (...) a painting of still life, representing flowers, a book and other decorative objects'

The comments about the first painting show that the students were not uninterested despite the time difference. The theme of the painting was more important than its date or the art movement to which it belongs. The still life prompted the most detailed descriptions from the respondents, who also noticed the differences between the foreground and background. Furthermore, most of the students' interpretations were similar to the explanations on the museum's website, despite their lack of familiarity with the artwork and its historical and cultural background.

4.2. Comments on the painting *The chess player* by Corneliu Baba

Created in 1948, the artwork was presented at the Art Salon in Bucharest for the painter's debut. The painting depicts part of the artist's studio, featuring a middle-aged man crouching over a chess table, likely analyzing a move. The National Art Museum of Romania's website provides a brief description of the painting, drawing attention to the particular angle from which the image is seen. The painter, who is watching the player, is also his chess partner.

Corneliu Baba's artwork is the most recent of the three paintings in the study, dating from less than a century ago. Furthermore, this painting did not seem to require specific cultural information for interpretation since the character and setting could be placed in any modern Western society. Consequently, we assumed that the students' answers would show a high degree of similarity. However, this hypothesis was contradicted when the comments on the second painting revealed diverse interpretations, leading to three main strands of analysis. As we expected, most students recognized easily the character as a chess player and seemed familiar with chess as a strategy game, yet the affects mentioned in the comments were both positive and negative.

One interpretation focused on the character's loneliness and sadness, which lead to a general evaluation of the painting in terms of a negative affect and to the judgment of the character in terms of social esteem:

- (9) *Bărbatul acest este singuratic. Sensul imaginii e foarte trist.* (A., Ukraine)
'This man is lonely. The meaning of the image is very sad.'

Respondents viewed the character as losing the chess game and transferred this failure to a more general level, as being symptomatic for the character's failure in life. In the answers, the terms *singuratic* "lonely" and *singurătate* "loneliness" appeared frequently, emphasizing the general negative feeling conveyed by the image, as the students did not recognize that the chess player must have a partner who is not seen by the viewer. Some students used the painting as a starting point to develop a brief narrative about the man's past life. In example (10), the respondent lists the aspects of the man's portrait that drew her attention: his eyes and general posture, as well as his inner state, which she can only imagine.

- (10) *Mă gândesc la singurătatea în combinație cu sărăcia, la omul cu lipsă de viață în ochii lui, în statură lui și chiar în sinea lui. mă gândesc la un bărbat care a pierdut toată speranța pe care bănuiesc că avea în trecut.* (I., Ukraine)
'I think about loneliness combined with poverty, of the man with absence of life in his eyes, in his posture and even inside him. I think of a man who has lost all the hope I supposed he had in the past.'

The dimension of judgment of social esteem was often visible in the comments regarding the man represented in the picture. The most striking characteristics identified by the students regarded his age, his clothes, the posture, and the facial expression. The judgments were made in terms of absence of normality and absence of capacity, as the person was viewed as being poor and unable to win the game.

- (11) *Well, he is poor, because of the way he is dressed. Maybe he is playing chess for money to pay for his food. He is definitely not a good chess player because his formation is really sad to look at. He is losing.* (S., Bulgaria)

A second interpretation emerging from the answers focused on playing chess as a sport or hobby. The answers showed an interest in the competitive dimension of chess tournaments, which sometimes tended to background the aesthetic value of the painting. In the example below, the respondent provides an elaborate description of chess competitions by listing elements not present in the original painting. Although Corneliu Baba's painting features only one character, the respondent makes various associations, from a famous chess player to auxiliary staff and players.

- (12) *Competition, chess tutorial books, Robert Fischer, the famous chess player. Art. strategy. Planning. Patience and long-thought actions, back pain due to long hours in the chairs. The volunteers who organize such events. Lonely, cold, long nights where people spend time doing any thing to kill the time s.a.m.d.* (O., Yemen)

A third interpretation focused on the chess game as a metaphor for life. In this case, the participants used imperative verbs to address a hypothetical reader and offer advice.

- (13) *L'argent ne fait pas le bonheur, fair ce que tu aimes pour être heureux et fair ce qui tu aimes pour oublier le probleme.* (Y., Morocco)
'Money doesn't buy happiness, do what you love in order to be happy and do what you love to forget your problems.'

Students who adopted this direction of analysis judged the character positively, evaluating him as a good chess player who is engaged in the game and focused on his next move. According to the methodological framework, the man in the painting is described as having capacity and tenacity, leading to a positive judgment in terms of social esteem.

- (14) a. *A man who is thinking about his next move in the game of chess.* (A.A., Turkmenistan)
b. *I think he plays chess casually but still passionate about it. He seems really focused.* (B., Turkmenistan)

The comments varied even when referring to the appreciation of the painting. Some students appreciated the painting in terms of its complexity and noticed even the position of the pieces on the chess board, interpreting their placement as an indicator of the character's chances of winning or losing:

- (15) a. *Această imagine foarte interesantă pentru mine pentru că are foarte multe mic detalii. În această imagine descris o persoană care joacă șah. Noi putem să vedem că el pierde la șah pentru că elefant negru în loc G5 (...) rege alb în loc H6.* (Y.H., Bulgaria)

'This image very interesting for me because it has very many little details. In this image described a person who plays chess. We can see that he loses the game because black elephant in place G5 (...) white king in place H6'

One study participant associated the painting with another famous artwork, Cézanne's *Les Joueurs de cartes* "The card players". Her response indicates her familiarity with Post-Impressionism and European art history, as well as her ability to recognize the artist's use of colors and geometric shapes.

- (16) *The first thing that came to my mind was the movement of post-impressionist. Cezanne made a painting using pretty much the same colors and geometry to give a certain meaning to the picture. The card players.* (S., Morocco)

Other students found Corneliu Baba's painting to be the least interesting of the three images presented because of the differences in artistic style. A group of respondents negatively evaluated the picture, considering it as lacking in complexity and being unable to express any emotion.

- (17) *It's a very simple picture without many details, not really giving any emotion or something to think about.* (B., Bulgaria)

Among the three paintings presented in the experiment, *The chess player* triggered most expressions of negative affects, judgments of the character, and negative general appreciations. This result may be linked to the general design of the experiment, as *The chess player* was shown to the students immediately after Aman's *Still life*. The differences in styles, topics chosen and visual elements may have lead to a more negative evaluation of the second painting and its subject.

4.3. Comments on the painting *Girl with her dowry* by Nicolae Grigorescu

The last painting chosen is signed by the most important Romanian painter, Nicolae Grigorescu. Titled *Girl with Her Dowry* (*Fata cu zestrea ei* in the original Romanian), it depicts a young peasant girl inside a traditional Romanian village house. She is sitting on a bed surrounded by items common in rural households: a laundry basket, a jug, embroidered towels, a spindle, and a distaff. The presence of these items, as well as a decorated dowry box, suggests that the girl is beautiful, hardworking, and ready for marriage. The painting reflects Grigorescu's interest in depicting themes related to Romanian folk life and popular culture. Consequently, we assumed that this painting would pose challenges to the foreign students and that their interpretations would vary.

The answers contradicted again our research hypothesis, as the comments about this painting indicated a high degree of similarity. The interpretation given by almost all the respondents was in terms of positive affect, judgment and appreciation of the painting. Students recognized the traditional representation of women as being hard-working, able to manage the rural household:

- (18) a. *She seems to be a young woman from a rural setting, possibly a peasant or someone taking a break after her work.* (Z., Morocco)
 b. *Este o fată care nu este încă căsătorit. Ea este gospodina și face curățenii casei.* (A., Greece)
 'It's a girl who is not yet married. She is housewife and cleans the house.'

The appraisal of this painting involved most references to positive affects, and positive judgments of social esteem. The female character was described in terms of physical traits as young, beautiful but also in terms of moral traits, such as hard-working, happy, "feminine yet strong" or determined. She was viewed by some respondents as representative for the Romanian culture:

- (19) *I feel a deep cultural heritage that this room carries when I see the picture and a room full of history and warmth. The girl carries the quiet strength of the Romanian people with their rich traditions and motifs.* (K., Albania)

While the majority of the students interpreted the image as depicting Romanian cultural heritage, some respondents made associations with other cultures. In example (20.a), the respondent interprets the character as belonging to a different ethnic and cultural background, probably due to the perceived similarities between the target culture and her native one. Another participant, however, in spite of

recognizing the reference to Romanian traditions, interpreted the message of the painting through an association with his own cultural background:

- (20) a. *It is a girl who has done the whole housework of her house. She is very relaxed after she has done the cleaning and very happy about it. I think it might be a Tatar girl. (A., Turkmenistan)*
- b. *Je me sens fier. Je me rappelle que j'ai vu comme cette photos dans la realite et dans mon pays le maroc et cela ramène de souvenirs. (Y., Morocco)*
 'I feel proud. I remember when I saw photos like this in real life and in my country Morocco and this brings back memories'

As shown in example (20.b.), numerous comments focused on the positive affect that the painting triggers to the viewer. Besides adjectives such as the French *fier* "proud" or the English "happy", other terms used in the comments were "peace", "relaxation", "harmony", "pride", "nostalgia", and "sweetness". The general appreciation of the painting was positive, in terms of its impact and quality. The respondents who showed more familiarity with art history attempted to evaluate the visual elements in the painting. They noticed the role played by light in the picture and the female figure as the central element:

- (21) a. *A woman in more traditional clothing relaxing on the couch or bed. The background is very dark and helps draw the eye to the woman. Maybe she was cleaning and now is taking a break. (M., Canada)*
- b. *This is a representation of the hard working women. The colours used are pretty dark except for the woman's clothes, the white gives her the spotlight of the picture. (S., Morocco)*

The answers above show that the painting that illustrates Romanian cultural heritage and traditions managed to arise the students' interest. Some answers indicated how the respondents view the Romanian culture, while others reflected associations with the learners' personal experiences and cultures. Unexpectedly, the comments revealed that the respondents are able to draw comparisons between different cultures and to identify similarities and differences.

5. Conclusions

As previously mentioned, the corpus analysis indicates that both research hypotheses have been contradicted. The first and third paintings, which we

considered more difficult to understand, proved more accessible to foreign learners, who correctly identified their general messages. In contrast, the second painting received a variety of interpretations. This can be attributed to the different artistic styles employed by the painters. The painting *The Chess Player* shows a modern style closer to Impressionism, which the respondents did not recognize. Even without prior instruction in art history or Romanian painting, participants could recognize the general messages conveyed by the artworks and their interpretations were similar to those published on the museum's website for the first two paintings. Similarly, most participants could identify the cultural context of the third painting. Furthermore, the students engaged in complex interpretive processes, analyzing the elements in the paintings and attempting to decode their meanings. Many respondents mentioned the use of light and colors, as well as the positioning of elements within the composition, as characteristics of the artworks. These findings suggest that students may be interested in more detailed courses on the analysis of visual arts in the future.

The experiment did not aim to evaluate students' knowledge of art history or their ability to identify artists and art movements. Rather, the goal was to determine whether topics about Romanian 'high culture', particularly Romanian art, would interest foreign language learners. The findings show that students may be willing to explore artworks from the target culture and that, in doing so, they contribute with their own perspectives, personal experiences, beliefs, and preferences to the discussion. While their interpretations may not constitute a 'correct' analysis of artworks, the participants seem to position themselves as "intercultural speakers" (Byram 2008) who can mediate between cultures, recognize Romanian cultural traits, and make comparisons with their own culture. Thus, the research shows that high culture can be a valuable topic in FL courses as long as students are actively involved in the process of discovery, analysis, and construction of meaning.

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