

## YOU MUST SPEAK ENGLISH, BUT NOT WITH US: THE CASE OF THE ROMANIAN NATIONAL EXAM

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### Abstract

The paper aims to explore some of the problems of the latest assessment strategy in the Romanian Baccalaureate exam in English as a Foreign Language. It suggests that the current format of examination does not justify the use of level descriptors recently introduced in the assessment methodology, and that it does not focus on communication. As a result of the backwash effect, English teaching and exam training prior to the Baccalaureate often results in the learners becoming decontextualized solo performers rather than good communicators.

**Keywords:** *communication, communicator, education, TEFL, national exam*

Along the years of trying various teaching methods, the outcome reflected more or less the ideas about language and what the learners should know and do about the foreign language. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is funny to look back at other centuries and how educational decision-making impacted upon young generations and in the name of what this was done. In, and then out, came a long trail of priorities that shifted the focus from society's to individual's needs in learning a foreign language, or from the teacher to the student, or from a normative selection of teaching materials, techniques and syllabus to a more relaxed and multidisciplinary approach.

In Romania, the necessity to be a good *communicator* came quite late in the history of curriculum design for teaching foreign languages and in the history of teaching English as a foreign language. In fact, if we look at the decisions taken about the Romanian national exam of highschool graduation – the English paper in the Baccalaureate,<sup>1</sup> the problem of communication is still in the wishful thinking stage. Despite the recent (and rare in the world) idea of equating the national exam in English with the FCE (and above) Cambridge certificate as a formal guarantee of a minimum B1 level for highschool

graduates, as well as recent improvements in the format of the Baccalaureate in English, the national exam still does not meet the prerequisites of good communication. Moreover, the attempt to align the practices in the Romanian state education system with European standards (for example the adoption of level descriptors<sup>2</sup> for foreign languages in the European Framework of Reference) stopped at indicating corresponding levels of English for the minimum standards of attainment in English. This situation has two major effects. In the rare situation where one of many international language certificates designed and organized by a body other than a Romanian institution under the authority of the Ministry of Education can be used as a substitute for a national exam diploma, the two do not guarantee the same level of communicative competence. Second, due to the backwash effect, especially effective in the common core classes as opposed to elective courses, highschool graduates may display good knowledge of English for a certain level (be it B1 or more), but will still lack communicative strategies in the foreign language, even with a good PET or FCE score in place of a Baccalaureate mark.

This is because of a very loose understanding of the young learners' needs regarding communication in both Romanian and English, not necessarily in the process of everyday teaching, since teachers are regarded here strictly in their capacity of executors of educational decisions of higher stakeholders, but in the national curriculum and the related documents issued at ministerial level. Apart from the language system in itself, other factors (context, previous knowledge and schemata, intention and representations of identity etc.) generate and contribute to effective communication the way

teachers of foreign languages see as relevant.<sup>3</sup> This is reflected in a rather limited scope of the national exam: in the Bacalaureate methodology, communication is construed as rehearsed monologue. The implementation of alternative textbooks in late 1990s as part of the national reform in education represented a switch towards new priorities in the teaching of most subjects, foreign languages included. It meant a better organization of teaching choices in terms of aims (including linguistic competence and communication competence), teaching materials (especially since the newly introduced listening section in the syllabus for all levels, and a more refined selection of reading texts, both literary and non-literary) and techniques designed to encourage fluency and some sense of authenticity in communication.

However, the new materials and techniques were not joined by a consistent preoccupation through to the end of the line for authentic communication and appreciation of a foreign language and culture. An innovation in decentralizing schools was to leave a certain number of courses outside the common core curriculum. Thus, for each subject, a number of courses were left for schools and parents to decide (Rom. *Curriculum la Decizia Scolii*, abbrev. CDS). The Bacalaureate however did not take these courses into account when establishing the exam methodology and syllabus.

It is useful to look at the standard model of question paper in the Bacalaureate exam and the marking scheme.<sup>4</sup> Before 2011, the Bacalaureate comprised a compulsory oral test in one of the two foreign languages studied, and a written test in the second. From a methodological point of view this division of tests was flawed conceptually, and in 2011 it was abandoned for a more consistent method of testing just one of the two foreign languages – left for the candidate to decide upon registration.

The new formula is an integrative test (covering the four skills). It consists of three papers – reading and writing, speaking, and listening. The reading section is a fairly simple multiple choice test, just like the listening paper. For writing, the candidates are expected to produce a short piece (letter or email) of 80-100 words and a longer piece (essay) of 180-200

words. The reading and writing test lasts for 120 minutes. For speaking, the candidates are required to give a short motivated answer, a short narration, and a longer monologue about an opinionated position on a given topic.<sup>5</sup> Despite visible improvements in the format, the flaws endanger the validity and reliability of the test. We will look at the format and the mark schemes for each part of the test.<sup>6</sup>

The aspect of the test suggests that one main preoccupation was scorability, so multiple choice questions were an obvious easy way to test. In reading, only scanning and gist reading are tested, not other subskills as well. Based on this, from a total number of fifteen questions (five questions carrying 8 marks each and ten questions carrying 6 points each), the marking scheme results in establishing level A1 for 11-30 marks, A2 for 31-60 marks, B1 for 61-80 marks, and B2 for 81-100 marks.

For writing, the questions have the expected form, but again the marking scheme reflects a certain expectation of performance that is inconsistent with the level scale. It is often difficult to test writing because of a certain inherent subjectivity in both responding to a question, and in marking. The test proposes four parameters for the short response (email): content (20 marks), text organization measured in word order and simple connectors (10 marks), grammatical accuracy measured in simple structures (5 marks), and vocabulary measured in elementary lexis (5 marks). For the essay part, the parameters are the same, but measured slightly higher in the sense that variety is appreciated in both grammar and vocabulary, rather than elementary units. However, the marking scheme suggests that it is enough to write the short piece at an “elementary” level to be rewarded with an A2 certificate, and for an “elementary” email plus correct number of words, obvious paragraphs and one personal argument in the whole of the essay the marks given can easily make one the proud holder of a B1 certificate. This is because, as the methodology explicitly instructs, the examiner can only give the marks in sets of 4, 5 or 10 at a time and must not award fractions of a mark.

For listening, there are two pieces (a total of 20 minutes of work including the embedded

pauses and instructions) heard twice, with a total of 10 multiple choice questions (10 marks for each question). The first listening piece lasts for about one minute and a half, and the second three and a half minutes. All questions test listening for specific detail from a non-authentic audio material. Again, in the absence of other subskills tested, it is surprising how easily candidates can be declared a B2 level.

Finally, the speaking section has three parts: a short response, a medium, and a longer one. According to the procedure, all three questions are printed on a slip of paper. The candidate is handed this paper and given 10-15 minutes to prepare his answers. Then he will give his answers orally for a total time of 15 minutes. The marking scheme suggests that the main conditions to be declared a B2 speaker are good pronunciation, elementary vocabulary, a little fluency, some coherence and some grammatical accuracy. Since the Ministry of Education offers models of questions, test formats and marking schemes on a regular basis, there is a high degree of predictability in the candidates' performance and, inevitably, the backwash effect in the 12<sup>th</sup> form English teaching.

It is useless to complain about the lack of separate grammar and vocabulary sections in this test. Methodologically speaking, what is understood by 'adequate vocabulary' and 'various grammar structures' is included in the marking scheme for oral and written production. But this test is neither communicative, nor communicator-oriented. Of course, it is not expected to be communicative in a post-method stage of teaching English as a foreign language. Even if it were, this crime would still be forgiven if the test displayed some ideological tenets of communicative testing such as use of context, authenticity of materials and tasks, and attention to the candidate's behaviour.<sup>7</sup> As it is, the language levels introduced as an improvement to the assessment methodology fail to shift the testing and, implicitly, 'backwash' teaching towards the current goal of training good communicators. By the beginning of the 12<sup>th</sup> form, the students will expect coaching in responding to Baccalaureate questions in the English exam and spending a large amount of time literally rehearsing monologues on given

topics together with their teachers. Poor students will thus be encouraged to aspire to a good result in their certificate following this particular technique, while genuinely good students will suffer from the backwash effect in class and the limits imposed in the methodology of the Baccalaureate (the highest level marked is B2, obtained as described above) in a frustrating realization that, compared to their weaker peers, any extra work is useless, as well as any extra talent, motivation, or a richer vocabulary for that matter.

The level descriptors refer to a lot more than strictly linguistic competences. At all levels, there is a correspondence between the skills measured and the candidate's behaviour as communicator.<sup>8</sup> The Baccalaureate exam (and the training for it) implies a graded meter for the same kind of behaviour. The format of the test, together with the marking scheme, suggests that the same behaviour is expected, but marked differently function of the number and variety of linguistic elements in the candidate's output. It lacks a sense of pragmatics.

In other words, the candidates are not trained, or expected, to use language in contextualized communicative action.<sup>9</sup> This involves a real-life social setting, or a simulated environment of interaction. Admittedly, it is difficult to assess L2 English pragmatics in receptive skills.<sup>10</sup> This, however, does not excuse the absence of other subskills in the reading and listening tests in the current format. As for speaking and writing, contextualized tasks of responding to real-life (or simulated) stimuli involve not just role-play, but genuine interaction. For example, it is at least strange that, for a national exam that grants certificates as high as B2, the candidates are never assessed in an authentic dialogue and examiners do not have a chance to assess the candidate's ability to formulate a question, a request, or express a regret, not to mention the ability to initiate and maintain a conversation.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the marking scheme of the current exam there is no such parameter as choice of strategies, choice of intensifiers, or appropriateness of content and register (in quality and quantity). But such parameters exist in the level descriptors that are now included in the national assessment.<sup>12</sup>

There is an infinite range of solutions to make this exam relevant for communication abilities, even if it certifies English only as high as B2. This by no means suggests that the format should take inspiration from other exams, be they accepted by the Romanian Ministry of Education as equivalent or not. There are many other exam formats worldwide, and it would be a difficult ethical problem to decide the criteria for selecting one or another as model, or whether to do so at all. The solution should begin with establishing communication in EFL as a priority. The backwash effect will not be eradicated from the classroom, but at least it will result in an increased motivation to communicate, in both good and poor learners of English.

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10. *Idem*, p. 201-202. Assessment of "how well they [learners] think someone else has performed pragmatically" works in terms of classroom technique, but in the Baccalaureate exam it is difficult to replicate real-life situations where the interlocutor's pragmatic performance is influenced to a variable degree by social and cultural factors beyond the learner's reach. It would mean that, in order for the learner to be able to make such an assessment, he would have to be familiar with at least a number of patterns from the English-speaking culture and other cultures as well.
11. See any course in TEFL. Jeremy Harmer lists the latest research regarding the components of the communicative competence in all skills (*The Practice of English Language Teaching*, fourth edition).
12. The Common European Framework of Reference, <http://www.eui.eu/Documents/ServicesAdmin/LanguageCentre/CEF.pdf>

### Endnotes

1. <http://www.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c133/>
2. <http://europass.cedefop.europa.eu/en/resources/european-language-levels-cefr>