

## INTRODUCTION

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The Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation of the Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, expresses appreciation and gratitude to the editorial board of *Studia Philologia* journal, part of *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai* series, for hosting an ensemble of studies related to the processes of teaching and assessment of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) in our institution. This issue is especially dedicated to the process of auditing of our examinations by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), a process which concluded with a positive outcome. In present, we are developing the legal procedures for becoming full members of ALTE, as a result of successfully passing the auditing process of our examinations.

The suite of examinations submitted to the ALTE audit by the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation, Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, is composed of four level examinations (*Examen la limba română. Nivel A1; Examen la limba română. Nivel A2; Examen la limba română. Nivel B1; Examen la limba română. Nivel B2*). These examinations constitute the axis around which the whole educational process concerning the academic programme of preparatory year organised at Babeş-Bolyai University develops.

The examinations are considered high stakes from several reasons: 1) they condition the continuation of studies in the academic programme of the students in the preparatory year, with only one chance for a makeup examination for every level; 2) once all these examinations are passed, a graduation certificate is issued by the University; this certificate can be used by the student who obtained it to enrol in any university in our country and begin his/her studies in Romanian; 3) the examination in level B2 is particularly important, because it can also be taken by persons who have not studied with our Department, but have already linguistic skills in Romanian. Passing this examination will grant the issuing of a certificate which will allow the candidates (as far as skills in Romanian language are concerned) to enrol in any university in Romania. The four examinations are commissioned by the Ministry of Education, which approves the academic programme in its entirety. For the time being, the main categories of population taking the examinations are 1) the students

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enrolled in Babeş-Bolyai University, in the preparatory year (for all four examinations) and 2) the persons who need a linguistic competence certificate in Romanian in order to be able to start studies in our country (for B2 examination). We currently administer each of our examinations to a number of about 120-140 students per year. The characteristics of our test takers are constant from one session of examination to the next. They are similar in their: level of education, age, interests for learning Romanian, and varying, at the same time, in educational and cultural backgrounds and in L1.

Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) has been taught and assessed in Babeş-Bolyai University, through the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation, for more than forty years. While the courses taught here have always been highly valued and appreciated, the assessment has rather been seen in its dimension of a necessary, final stage of the didactic process. Being only in a small measure standardised or monitored, the assessment process accomplished, for many years, the normal role of providing the marks for the transcripts of records and varied largely from one year to the next, even from one group of students to the next, within the same academic year, the examinations being designed, administered and marked by in a diversity of registers and visions. This started to change approximately ten years ago, when the team at the Department grew with new members. However, the idea of aligning our examinations to the *Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)* and to the ALTE standards appeared years before, in 2001 – 2002, when our Department, together with the Alpha Centre of Modern Languages, started to represent Babeş-Bolyai University as affiliate institution of ALTE. Another important event which took place in the same period was the publication of the *Threshold Level for Romanian language* (Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2001) by a team of teachers and researchers from our Department. Since then, members of our Department have constantly participated in ALTE meetings and have set as an objective the transformation of this status in that of full member of ALTE.

The RFL examinations we apply have a common structure, assessing candidates' receptive and productive skills (listening, reading, speaking and writing), as well as their structural competence. For each level, the examinations have basically the same structure, including five components: *Listening, Reading, Elements of communication construction, Writing and Speaking*. The number of items, as well as the types of tasks vary, however, from one level to the next. The total number of points a test taker can obtain in the examination is 100, 20 points for each of the five components. Cut off score is calculated for each component separately and also for the whole examination. Then it is corroborated with the national system of education in Romania, which states that an examination can be promoted with mark five (the maximum mark being ten).

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The RFL examinations submitted to the ALTE audit have been developed, in their structure and content, by members of the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation, who are experienced RFL teachers and assessors. They gained their external experience especially through participation in the ALTE bi-annual meetings and ALTE conferences, as well as in other scientific events organised by prestigious associations (Eaquals, CercleS, different universities and educational institutions). Expert judgment is involved in the whole process of test development. Experts internal and external to our institution were kindly asked to participate in a process of item validation, working with us on line and also in various workshops, before the items and tasks were introduced into the item bank.

The examinations are based on the communicative language model developed by Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S. Palmer and are linked to the CEFR. The process of relating our examinations to the CEFR has been developed by following the main steps in the Manual published, in this sense, by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe (2009). We developed activities of familiarisation with the CEFR whenever we organised training and standardisation workshops, both for the new assessors or item writers, and for the more experienced members of our team or collaborators. We designed clear specifications for our examinations and created all items and tasks following them rigorously. We organised activities of standardisation for the assessment of spoken and written productions of the test takers and we designed new instruments (assessment grids for spoken and written productions) which we now use in every session of evaluation. Starting with the academic year 2013-2014, we organise sessions of standard setting, using the results from pre-testing and from examinations.

We began to use psychometric analysis in the academic year 2013-2014, in order to have a new confirmation or to perform the necessary revision of the items in our item bank. The results obtained by our students in every pre-testing session are used for estimating the coefficient of difficulty and the discrimination index for every item. Reliability and validity of the components proposed in pre-testing sessions are also calculated for *Listening, Reading and Elements of communication construction*. The results are used in order to do the necessary revision of items and only after that the items and tasks are included in live examinations, in the following academic year.

For the time being, the RFL examinations we created are administered locally, at the headquarters of the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation (The Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca), which allows us to control all the aspects related to registration of test takers, conditions of examination, fairness and handling of test papers, allowing us to work with our candidates' exam papers in perfect conditions of security. This

aspect also allows us to manipulate the content of our examinations, the candidates' exam papers and the results obtained by the test takers in conditions of total confidentiality. It was during the academic year 2014-2015 when we started to ensure support for candidates with special needs, allowing people with dyslexia or with hearing problems to take the examination in conditions favourable for them and compliant, at the same time, with the regulations specific to exam administration. We are also prepared to handle other types of special needs our candidates might have. These aspects, as well as all the procedures of examination administration, are specified in a new, specially designed document, called *Regulation of exam administration. Romanian as a foreign language*.

A crucial domain in which our activity and performances improved significantly is the one of marking and rating. For the first three components in our examination: *Listening, Reading* and *Elements of communication construction*, we designed clear mark schemes and implemented the system of marking each exam paper by two assessors. For the productive skills we also adopted the system of double assessment. Writing is assessed by two raters, while the assessment of the spoken productions is done by commissions of three persons: an examiner and two assessors. It goes without saying that the assessors are not the teachers of the students who they examine. The commissions are always formed so as the teachers from one group to not be able to assess their own students. This way, the objectivity of the rating and marking is ensured, a quality which is strengthened by the fact that rating of productive skills is conducted according to clear and stable instruments of assessment.

The raters who work as members or collaborators of our Department are trained with us and regular sessions of standardisation are organised for all the assessors, more or less experienced. Marking and rating are monitored, intra- and inter-rater consistency are calculated and measures of close supervision or removing of some raters from the team are taken, provided this is necessary.

We are constantly preoccupied with improving our communication with stakeholders and we have developed various means of transmitting information and for being connected with all the categories of public interested in our examinations. While a few years ago the only functional means of communication with potential candidates for our examinations was direct contact (persons came to the Department or sometimes called and asked for information), we later started to make available information about examinations through electronic means, first of all through the site of the Department. We also created leaflets, brochures and other documents in which we present all the important data concerning our examinations. More than that, we diversified very much the information we make available to our stakeholders. While some time ago the only type of information related to the examination the public had access to was the

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administrative one and the one concerning the use of results in official documents, now the stakeholders are offered a large variety of data on the examinations: a detailed form of the specifications; documents describing the procedure of construction, administration and marking of examinations; distribution of the points for each component; samples of complete examinations for all the levels; samples of assessed live examination of written and spoken productions, etc.

The RFL examinations designed and administered by the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation have gone through a thorough process of revision and the members of the Department are confident that these examinations are adequate and reliable instruments for verifying and certifying the test takers' competence and skills in Romanian language. Our intention is to develop them further, to improve them and to maintain and increase their reliability and validity, as well as their impact. We hope to be able to offer them to various categories of public, besides the ones who already use them and to transform them into a largely appreciated, trustworthy and popular instrument of assessing Romanian as a foreign language.

The preparations for the ALTE audit constituted for us the opportunity for a crucial revision of our examinations. We were right in our expectation of having our examinations confirmed, in some aspects, from the point of view of their quality and reliability and also in that of receiving the best of advice for getting them to an even higher level of adequacy and popularity.