THE PROCESS OF SETTING THE TIME FOR A1-B2 RFL EXAMS

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ABSTRACT. *The process of setting the time for A1-B2 RFL exams.* In this paper we approach the issue of setting the time for each of the four RFL exams (A1-B2), administered by the Department of Romanian Language, Culture and Civilisation, from Babeş-Bolyai University, as part of the academic programme specific to the preparatory year, by presenting the stages this process was put through. In order to establish the total time interval for each exam, it was necessary to find a way to determine how much time is needed for each of the test's components. Therefore, starting with an estimated timeframe decided beforehand in the specifications document, we have tried to confirm it or adjust it with the help of the pretesting and the actual examinations. During this process, attention was paid to the three parts of the written exam, *Reading*, *Elements of the communication construction* and *Writing*, excluding from the analysis the *Listening* and the *Speaking* component, which already had a set time for each test. We have doubled our analysis with the help of a qualitative method, the analysis of the feedback questionnaires, and the results obtained can be found in the last section of our paper.

Keywords: setting the time, exam component, pretesting, live examination, test takers.

REZUMAT. *Procesul de stabilire a timpilor pentru examenele RLS, A1-B2.* În acest studiu abordăm problema stabilirii timpului alocat pentru fiecare dintre cele patru examene de limba română ca limbă străină (RLS), A1-B2, administrate la Departamentul de limbă, cultură şi civilizaţie românească, de la Universitatea Babeş-Bolyai, pe parcursul programului academic intitulat *Anul pregătitor de limba română*. Pentru a putea stabili cu exactitate timpul total pentru fiecare examen, o metodă de măsurare şi înregistrare a timpilor pentru fiecare component al testului în parte a fost necesară. Aşadar, s-a început cu un interval de timp stabilit anterior în documentele de specificaţii pentru examene, care a fost, după caz, confirmat, infirmat sau ajustat, în funcţie de rezultatele obţinute la pretestări şi la examene. Pe parcursul acestui proces, o atenţie sporită s-a acordat componentelor: *Citire, Elemente de construcţia comunicării* şi *Scriere*, excluzând din analiză *Ascultarea* şi *Vorbirea*, pentru care există timpi ficşi. În demersul nostru, am încercat să dublăm analiza cantitativă printr-o analiză calitativă, efectuată cu ajutorul chestionarelor de feedback, administrate la finalul examenului.

Cuvinte-cheie: stabilirea timpilor, component, pretestare, examen, candidaţi.

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0. Introduction

Even though we've been constantly interested in offering an objective and well developed exam, at the Department of Romanian Language, Culture and Civilisation from Babeș-Bolyai University with the occasion of the process of auditing of our examinations by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE) we've revised our procedures on test development and administration, situation that benefited greatly our department, including in the case of the allotted time for each component of the exam. The aim of this paper is to present, by the help of both the quantitative (statistical analysis) and the qualitative (ques. analysis) methods, the process that has been conducted in order to decide the time needed by the candidates to take the test of *Romanian as a foreign language (RFL)*, for A1-B2 levels. Thus, we will describe the three stages that this process was put through. In order to refer to them more easily, we will name them *the preliminary phase*, *the pretesting phase*, and *the validation phase*.

1. The Preliminary Phase

Since the academic year of 2010-2011, the RFL examinations we apply have had the same structure, assessing candidates' receptive and productive skills, and also the structural competence. For each level, the 100 points allotted are divided equally between the five components of the exam: *Listening*, *Reading*, *Elements of communication construction (ECC)*, *Writing* and *Speaking*. As said, providing our test takers with the necessary time to solve the exam at each level represents an important part of the process of developing and administering the exams. The first step taken in this direction was the analysis of the other exams, for other foreign languages that have already had a long term tradition in administering tests[2]. After comparing the tests' duration for these examinations at each level, as well as the length of the texts and of the exercises given, an approximated time value for each of the four exams resulted. These values have been confirmed and adjusted with the help of the most experienced teachers of our department. Therefore, for each exam there was set a timeframe that had to be adjusted after every session of examinations depending on the feedback from the test takers and the observations provided by the teachers. The exam's duration, as described above, was: for A1 of 1 hour and 40 minutes; for A2 of 2 hours; for B1, 2 hours and 15 minutes; for B2, 2 hours and 30 minutes. The next step taken in the direction of a more standardized time for the examinations was in the academic year of 2013-2014, where these periods had been analysed again,

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[2] Mainly Cambridge, IELTS, TOEFL, Goethe and DELE exams.

then compared and adjusted in the same way, based on the feedback and direct observation during the live exams, on the experience of the teachers and on the allotted time for the other languages exams. The new time values for each of the 5 components of the exam can be found in an internal document named *Specifications for Romanian as a foreign language test developers* at our Department.

Despite the fact that these time intervals have been discussed and modified repeatedly, there wasn't at any point an actual statistical analysis on this topic. This is the reason way starting with the academic year of 2014-2015 it has been decided that a more efficient and clear procedure had to be considered.

Consulting the bibliography on this issue we've been able to identify three different ways of achieving this goal:

a. The first direction, described by the specialists from Carnegie University, is the intuitive one in which the language tester has to "think how long it will take students to complete the exam."[3] Except the situation in which our goal is to assess how they perform under stress (which is not our concern), it is recommended that we take the test ourselves and "allow students triple the time it took us – or reduce the length or difficulty of the exam."[4] As described above, this, in fact, is very similar to the procedure that we've embraced at the beginning and from which we've drawn the conclusion that it is not sufficiently accurate, mostly because of the very different categories of test takers involved.

b. The second way of determining the necessary time for the exam is described by Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S. Palmer, in *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests*[5] by reference to a German language exam for an introductory German language course. The authors show that "the time allotted for the example task needs to be adequate for test takers to read and listen to the instructions, think about their responses, and record their responses to the task. This will be determined by pretesting the task on three students, one from each of three ability levels: high, medium and low."[6] Clearly this procedure could be more efficient in our case, but we've continued to search for a more clear example, that requires the implication of more than just three students.

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[3] https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingexams.html

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S. Palmer, *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests,* Oxford University Press, 1996.

[6] Lyle F. Bachman and Adrian S. Palmer, *Language Testing in Practice: Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests,* Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 341.

c. The procedure described in the *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining. For use with the CEFR*[7], produced by ALTE, is the closest to what we've needed because it already implies the other two situations described. Thus, it is shown that "enough time should normally be allowed for an average test taker to complete all the items without rushing. The most important consideration is that the test takers have sufficient opportunity to show their true ability. At first this may need to be estimated by an experienced language tester[8]. After the test is trialled, or used in a live context, the timing might be revised."[9]

As we can easily observe in each of the three descriptions the key idea is pretesting the exam and/or the task with the help of the candidate(s) or of the actual language tester. Even though all three options could give reliable results, we've considered that the procedure described in the *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining* suits better our case, because it already involves the other two, and even more, the first alternative was already tested at our department.

2. The Pretesting Phase

During this stage we've developed a set of procedures for collecting and analysing the time needed to solve the tasks given at each of the three components taken into consideration: *Reading*, *ECC* and *Writing*. The pretesting phase refers to the first stage of pretesting the A1-B2 exams, applied during the academic year of 2014-2015 in order to compare and obtain reliable values for the needed time by the candidates to solve each component.

The pretesting took place about a week before the actual exam in that level, in strict conditions of examination. The three components of the pretesting were given, when possible, on separate days in order to delimit and to give candidates time to rest and consequently get more reliable results. There wasn't set a time limit, each student handed the paper when he or she finished the task.

The teachers were instructed to record the time each student needed for completing the tasks in one section (except for *Listening* and *Speaking*, that already have a set time), in order to monitor the time needed for completing each task and to make necessary adjustments in the time allotted for solving the tasks in the examination. After each session of pretesting during the academic year of

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[7] *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining. For use with the CEFR,* produced by ALTE on behalf of the Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2011.

[8] Which, in fact, represents our first step, the preliminary step.

[9] *Manual for Language Test Development and Examining. For use with the CEFR,* produced by ALTE on behalf of the Language Policy Division, Council of Europe, Strasbourg, 2011, p. 22

2014-2015 the correspondence between the allotted time from the *Specifications for Romanian as a foreign language test developers* and the needed time resulted from the analysis of all the recorded time in pretesting were compared. An average of all the values recorded during the pretesting was done for each of the three components taken into consideration in our analysis.

For each component of the RFL exam, the results of these calculations are presented in the table below.[10]

Tabel 1. The comparison between the allotted time in the specifications and the needed time in the pretesting (Pretest.), during the academic year of 2014-2015

	A1		A2		B1		B2	
	Spec.	**Pretest.**	**Spec.**	**Pretest.**	**Spec.**	**Pretest.**	**Spec.**	**Pretest.**
Reading	30 min.	27,6 min.	35 min.	34,44 min.	45 min.	39,36 min.	55 min.	45,35 min.
ECC	30 min.	26,44 min.	35 min.	30,85 min.	45 min.	39,02 min.	45 min.	44,33 min.
Writing	30 min.	27,93 min.	40 min.	37,37 min.	50 min.	50,27 min.	60 min.	65, 66 min.
Supplementary time given for revision and for transcription from the draft copy	10 min.		10 min.		10 min.		10 min.	
Listening (already established)	15 min.		15 min.		20 min.		30 min.	
Total amount of minutes for the writing exam	**115 min**.		**135 min**.		**170 min**.		**200 min**.	
Speaking	**10 min**.		**10 min**.		**15 min**.		**15 min**.	

As the calculations show, the students were able to solve the tasks within the time set in the *Specifications* document, fact that confirmed the values set in the mentioned document. A difference between the two values was seen, but it was too small to determine us to modify the allotted time at that point.

In the case of *Reading* component (B2) we've decided not to modify the values in the *Specifications* document even though the difference between

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[10] The results offered here consist also the *Appendix 1* to *Technical Report on the process of relating the examinations of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL) to the CEFR, at the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilisation, Faculty of Letters, Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania, Volume* I, written by Lecturer Dina Vîlcu.

the allotted time and the needed time in the pretesting was of 10 minutes, due to the fact that the texts the candidates have to read are of an extended length. On the other hand, there is a difference at this level at *Writing* component that can equate the proportions until a new analysis will be done. Needless to say for this case, for example, the next phase, that of validation is necessary.

Using the pretesting into deciding the allotted time for the exam was intended to confirm or to show the need to adjust the time already set in the *Specifications* document for each exam component, without offering a value for the entire test.

Besides the set times there are some exceptions that we've been able to introduce during the same year in the department's regulations. Therefore, "extra time is given in the case of *permanent disabilities (demonstrated with a medical certificate)* for dyslexia – more time is given to the students with this condition for solving the tasks (30 minutes for A1 and A2 exams; one hour for B1 and B2 exams, in case of moderate dyslexia diagnosis; if it is necessary, in case of a more severe diagnosis, the time can be supplemented with at most an hour and a half) or for vision problems – special exam papers are produced, with larger letters (between 16 and 20), according to the student's request; if there are students for whom these arrangements are not sufficient, the exam can be adapted, the tasks being transferred from written to listened form; the writing of the results after dictation can also be arranged;"[11].

The comparison between the allotted time at the beginning (2010-2011) with the results of our statistical analysis (2014-2015) reflects that for each level substantial extra time was added: 15 minutes for A1 and A2, 35 minutes for B1 and 50 minutes for B2. The high amount of time added at B1 and B2 can also be justified by the fact that one of the exercises at *Reading* was replaced by a more complex exercise, with longer texts.
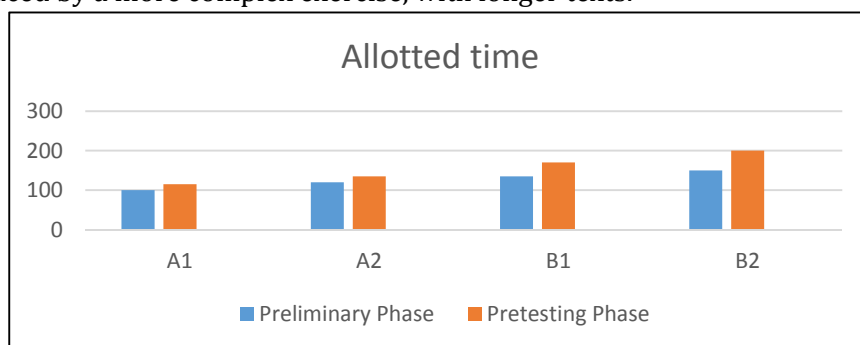

Figure 1. – Comparison between the allotted time in the preliminary phase and in the pretesting phase

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[11] *Regulation of exam administration. Romanian as a foreign language,* internal document.

Even though the allotted time set in the *Specifications* document has been confirmed by the pretesting phase, we consider that a new analysis of the recorded values in the academic years 2015-2016 and 2016-2017 is needed in order to validate the values decided in the pretesting phase.

3. The Validation Phase

At this stage we aim to validate the time allotted in the pretesting phase, during the academic year 2014-2015. So, following the same steps as described above (recording the time for each student and analysing the results), we examined the information gathered both at pretesting and at the actual exams in the academic years 2015-2016, and 2016-2017. A very important aspect to take into consideration is the fact that after a component is pretested, analysed and modified according to the results, the following year it becomes part of the exam. Therefore, the same subject was submitted for pretesting, one year and the following year, for validation, situation that could provide relevant information for our analysis:

During the academic years of 2015-2016, and 2016-2017 the time needed to solve the tasks during the pretesting was again recorded. Thus, for the first year, we've been able to analyse for this paper the information at all the four sessions of pretesting, and for the second year only at A1, and A2. The results are registered in the table below:

Table 2. The results for the needed time in the academic years of 2015-2016, and 2016-2017, Pretesting

	A1		A2		B1	B2
	2015-2016	2016-2017	2015-2016	2016-2017	2015-2016	2015-2016
Reading	*19.6 min.*	*19.92 min.*	*25.88 min.*	*27.19 min.*	*35.48 min.*	*46.8 min.*
ECC	28.9 min.	*23.6 min.*	*27.1 min.*	31.04 min.	41.1 min.	41.2 min.
Writing	33.64 min.	28.09 min.	*32.99 min.*	39.45 min.	45.75 min.	57.04 min.
Specifications	30 min. 30 min. 30 min.		35 min. 35 min. 40 min.		45 min. 45 min. 50 min.	55 min. 45 min. 60 min.

We can easily observe that there isn't any case in which the values set in the *Specifications* to be exceeded. So, after analysing the results, and taking

into consideration the fact that there are many other factors[12] involved in the process, we consider that there should be three time intervals relevant for our procedures, and for our further actions. Thus:

1. if there is a difference of *less than 5 minutes* between the value in the specifications and the one in our analysis, the value could be validated without further analysis because it is common to be a slight difference from a session to the other and from a person to another.

2. if the difference is *between 5 and 10 minutes* we consider that this section and the time allotted should be further recorded, and another analysis should be done in the following year.

3. if the difference is of *more than 10 minutes*, a modification of the allotted time should be taken into consideration, if there isn't a very clear reason why this difference appeared.

Thus, observing the values in *Table 2* we are able to validate the time values set in the specifications and checked before in the pretesting phase in almost all the cases for *ECC* and *Writing*. It only exists a situation, in the case of the time needed for A2, in 2015-2016, that the value obtained is in an interval of 5-10 minutes, but during the following year the values have increased and moved in the next section, that with a difference of less than 5 minutes. This is the reason why we do not believe that it is a concerning situation, and that a modification of the time set in specifications document should be modified in the case of *ECC* and *Writing*.

On the other hand, the needed time for solving the *Reading* component seems to be very different, and some results could show concerns:

a. In the case of A1 exam, the time set in the *Specifications* (and confirmed in the Pretesting Phase) is with more than 10 minutes longer than the one resulted in our analysis, for both years taken in account. **In this case, a reduction of the time allotted or another validation of this value is needed to be taken into consideration.[13]**

b. For A2 exam another significant difference can be seen, but it is of less than 10 minutes, which cannot be considered a concerning situation, as we have decided before.

c. As in the case of A2, at B1 the difference is of approximately 8 minutes.

d. In the case of **B2, *Reading***, at this point we had to validate the time value set in the *Specifications* because, as shown in the Pretesting Phase, there

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[12] Here, the reading speed could be taken into consideration as well as the fact that maybe the students could be less motivated than in the live examinations. Also, we believe that another type of analysis should accompany this one, an analysis of the results of the pretesting, because sometimes more minutes do not mean higher points.

[13] A comparison with the values recorded during the live examinations could be helpful.

was a difference of 10 minutes between the interval in specifications and the one in pretesting. At this stage a slight increase of the needed time by the students to solve the task can be seen, compared to the one in Pretesting Phase. This is the reason why **we recommend not to modify the value yet, but to keep it under observation for another stage**.

Therefore, in all the mentioned cases, it is easily to realise that the significant differences appear in the case of *Reading*, probably because of a different reading speed or a different language level of the students.

Relevant results for our analysis, but also for the issues that appeared at *Reading*, can be obtained by analysing the time needed by the candidates to solve the same subject, but in conditions of live examinations. Thus, the task pretested during 2014-2015 was submitted to live examinations in the year 2015-2016, and the results are presented in *Table 3*.

Table 3. The comparison between the average time intervals needed at the pretesting, and at the exam for the same tasks

2015-2016 Exams	A1	A2	B1	B2
The average time needed to solve the written exam	87 min.	107 min.	136 min.	173 min.
The results from *Pretesting Phase*	106 min.	127 min.	158 min.	195.34 min.

We can easily observe that there is a difference of twenty minutes between the results in the Pretesting Phase and the ones after the analysis of the exams, even though we are discussing about the same tasks, but solved by different test takers in slightly different conditions[14]. But we do not have to forget that this time is the average time and there are many students that are very slow and others that maybe did not completely reach the language level tested. For all these categories the extra time is needed. In all the other cases, the majority of the candidates have enough time to solve the exam within the timeframe given.

After analysing all the time values we observed that:
- in the case of A1 there were more students that finished the exam before the average time of 87 minutes. So, from the total of 96 students that took the exam only 26 needed more time than the average.
- In the case of the other three exams, there were more students that needed the time above the average.

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[14] Despite the fact that we've tried to assure the same situation as in the live examinations, the pressure of the exam, that most of the times determines the student to focus more, cannot be there.
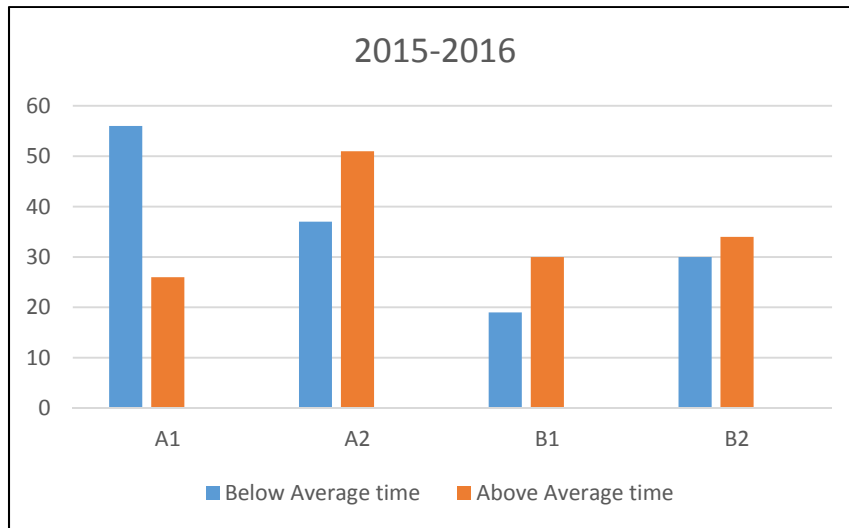
Figure 2. – The proportion of the students that completed the written exam within the average time or above it

This findings confirm the ones obtained before at *Reading* component, for A1. They show us that it might be the case to reduce with 5 or 10 minutes the time allotted for this exam, taking into consideration the fact that there were two times more students to finish the exam within the average interval than above it. Another argument on this modification could be given by the qualitative analysis in the next section of our study.

4. The qualitative analysis with the help of the feedback questionnaires

In order to reveal useful results, besides the quantitative method of analysis we've considered a qualitative method, as well, the questionnaire. The form administered to the test takers is meant to give us feedback regarding the exam, at the end of the examination. In this document there is a question regarding the time allotted for the exam. The candidates are asked to choose *yes* or *no* depending on the answer they provided to the question: *Was the allotted time sufficient for you*? We've started to administer this questionnaire in the year 2015-2016. Therefore, we've calculated the number of candidates that stated they didn't have enough time. They are registered in the table below:

Table 4. The number of respondents to the feedback questionnaire

2015-2016	Respondents	Candidates that answered *No*	2016-2017	Respondents	Candidates that answered *No*
A1	122	7 (5, 73 %)		84	22 (26,19)
A2	90	20 (22,22 %)		77	12 (15,58%)
B1	Data was not collected	-			
B2	106	16 (15,09 %)			

Even though this stage was meant just to double the statistical analysis, the results obtained determined us to take a step further and to consider the analysis of the exam papers as well. We can easily observe the percentages obtained, that in a first step could be considered concerning. After analysing the actual paper exams we've come to the conclusion that there is a substantial difference between the candidates that stated they didn't have enough time and the ones that actually didn't have the needed time[15]. Due to this situation, we have expected that if the test takers said they lacked the time, we should find unfinished paper exams or tests in which we can easily see they have been finished abruptly. But this was not the case. Even more, we have been able to observe that none of the students that scored high at the exams for all the components (more than 15 points out of 20) does not have at least one of the components unfinished. Except this case, we've been able to identify several situations that could justify the answers at the questionnaires:

a. There were candidates that completed the subjects but didn't finish transferring their texts from the draft to the exam paper, mainly because their writings were more extensive than it was expected at that level (at *Writing* component the students are asked to write two texts on a given topic, with specified number of words[16].).

b. Some candidates didn't finish the writing part. Here we've been able to identify only one case in which the lack of time could be considered. It is the case of a paper exam from the A2 session, in 2015-2016. We've come to this conclusion because the candidate scored high at all the other components and even more, for the one text he/she wrote got the maximum score. Except this case, we have been able to observe that it is usually the case of the students that didn't score high at all the components (less than 10 points) to not complete the tasks given. So, it could be possible that they didn't have the necessary language level

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[15] This situation probably appears because of the fact that this questionnaire is given exactly after the exam and because of the pressure of the exam they might "feel" they didn't have enough time.

[16] The number of words the students are expected to write at each level are known, and they are specified in the document, entitled *Detailed Specifications for the Stakeholders*, which is available on our department's website (www.romaniandepartment.com).

(vocabulary, grammar, etc.) to solve the task, instead of putting the blame on the lack of time. Among this papers some weren't even on the subject, even if they were asked to write about their activities during a day or to write a short letter to somebody, they wrote a description about themselves, which is usually taught during the first week of A1 classes.

c. There was a third category of test takers, the ones that didn't write anything at the last part, the *Writing* part, and scored very low at all the other components. We've identified two candidates in this situation (one at A2, 2015-2016, and one at B2 2015-2016). They haven't got more than 30 points for all the components, so probably here it is again the case of low language level not lack of time.

d. We couldn't identify even one paper that has not been completed at the other two components (*Reading* and/or *ECC*).

Further we will present the number of exam papers we've been able to identify as unfinished (for different reasons), and that could be included in one of the three cases described above (a-c).

Table 5. The number of candidates that stated the allotted time was sufficient and the actual number of them that didn't complete the exam

2015-2016	Stated they didn't have enough time to complete the exam paper	Actually didn't complete the exam paper	2016-2017	Stated they didn't have enough time to complete the exam paper	Actually didn't complete the exam paper
A1	7	6		22	11
A2	20	6		12	4
B2	16	7			

A comparison between the values included in the table can be found in the charts below (*Figure 3*).

The findings shown in *Figure 3* sustain the ones obtained in the Validation Phase regarding the A1 exam (especially the *Reading* component). There were only 7 candidates that stated the allotted time was insufficient, by comparison with the other exams where the number was larger, situation that might reveal us the fact that we cannot talk about not enough time at this exam, maybe the contrary. Thus, we can conclude that with the exception of A1 exam, in 2015-2016, for all the other exams there more candidates that stated that the allotted time was insufficient for them to complete the paper exams than the actual test takers that have not finished. In almost all the cases taken into consideration there is a difference of 10 answers between the two vales considered. A clear reason for this situation cannot be found by just analysing the questionnaires and

the exam papers. This is why we believe that a more complex feedback form could be given after the exams, in which the candidates should explain why they chose the *No* answer. If possible, an on-line questionnaire could be even better, so that the results could be collected easier.
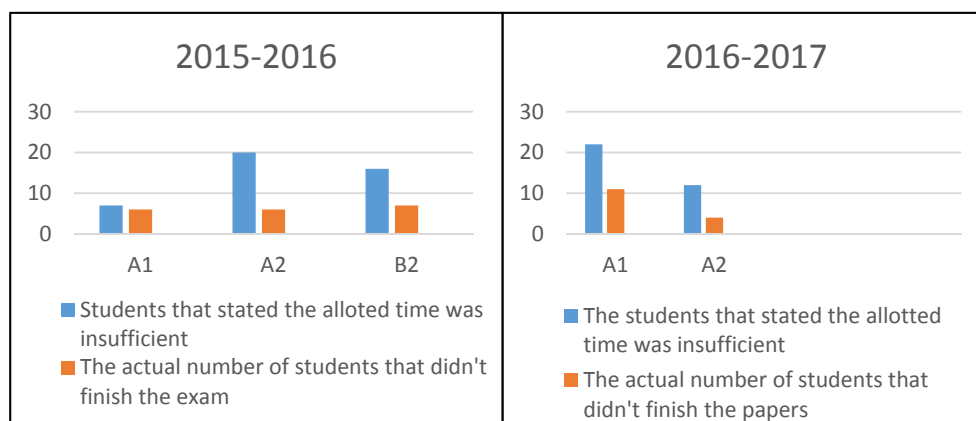

Figure 3. – The comparison between the number of candidates that stated they lacked the time to complete the exam and the actual unfinished papers

5. Conclusions

After analysing all the time vales and the exam papers for the three academic years taken into consideration (2014-2015, 2015-2016, and 2016-2017), we've reached to a sum of conclusions:

a. In most of the cases, the set time in the *Specifications* could be validated, except the time needed at *Reading* component. In this case, but not only, a more complex analysis is required. We aim to continue our study with a correlative analysis of the results at pretesting, exams and the needed time for each candidate to complete the task, and to obtain a certain grade. We are confident to get relevant results from this type of examination.

b. There could be taken into consideration the reduction of the allotted time for A1 exam with five or ten minutes, based on the findings both in the pretesting phase and in the validation phase.

c. A confirmation of the allotted time in the exams is certainly needed especially when our candidates are coming from such different places, have different ages and a different level of studies. This is the reason why we want, and we should continue this type of analysis periodically.

d. A box for observations should be added to our feedback form so that the students could explain why they stated the allotted time was not sufficient. Depending on their answers, and coordinating them with the other types of analysis, in the future we could modify, if needed, the set time for each exam component.

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Cambridge exams: http://www.cambridgeenglish.org/exams/.

Carnegie University, Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence, *Whys and hows of assessment*: https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/assessment/assesslearning/creatingexams.html

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