CONSIDERATIONS ON CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE. THE CASE OF ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (RFL), LEVEL A1

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ABSTRACT. *Considerations on conversational competence. The case of Romanian as a foreign language (RFL), level A1.* The study focuses on several aspects of L2 conversational competence in Romanian, at level A1. A learner corpus formed of spoken productions of students with different linguistic backgrounds is analyzed. Initiating and responding moves are calculated in the case of each student in order to determine what type of discourse each task generates. Communication strategies (message abandonment, approximation, word-coinage, literal translations, appeal for help, use of fillers, etc.) as well as means of giving feedback in conversation (continuers, collaborative completions, assessments, etc.) are also identified and investigated and possible implications in developing and assessing conversational competence in Romanian as a foreign language at level A1 are issued.

Keywords: learner corpus, conversation analysis, communication strategies, initiating moves, responding moves, passive role, active role, feedback in conversation.

REZUMAT. *Observații privind abilitatea conversațională în cazul limbii române ca L2, nivelul A1.* Lucrarea de față prezintă câteva aspecte ale abilității conversaționale în limba română ca L2 la nivelul A1, pe baza analizei unui corpus format din producții orale ale vorbitorilor nonnativi, din medii culturale diferite și cu diverse L1. S-au calculat, în dialog, *replicile de răspuns* (*responding moves*) și *replicile de inițiere* (*initiating moves*) în vederea identificării tipului de dialog rezultat (*echilibrat, simetric, asimetric* etc.). De asemenea, au fost identificate și analizate strategiile comunicative folosite (*abandonarea mesajului, aproximarea, traducerile literale, repetițiile* etc.), precum și mijloacele de oferire a feedbackului în conversație (*completările colaborative, evaluări ale mesajului* etc.). În final, se propun descriptori pentru evaluarea abilității conversaționale pe trei benzi diferite, la nivelul A1.

Cuvinte-cheie: corpus cu producții ale vorbitorilor nonnativi, analiza conversației, strategii comunicative, replici de inițiere, replici de răspuns, rol activ, rol pasiv, feedback în conversație.

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INTRODUCTION

The test of Romanian as a foreign language developed by the Department of Romanian language, culture and civilization (Faculty of Letters, Babeş-Bolyai University) consists of five parts: listening, reading, elements of communication construction, writing and speaking. With respect to marking and grading, it is a well-known fact that the productive skills raise more issues. In spite of the existing metadocuments as test specifications, syllabuses, grading scales and grids and despite the workshops and training sessions organized regularly by the Department, there still are some matters of concern regarding the grading of productive skills. Fairness, reliability and accuracy of test scores are objectives still rather difficult to fully accomplish, mainly in the case of grading speaking performance. Although each performance is graded by two assessors according to especially designed grids[2], the assessors' comments[3] suggest that it is not clear for them what to pay attention to when it comes to the conversation task of the oral component of the examination[4] aside from the linguistic aspects which are quite well defined in the case of three criteria of the grid: *accuracy*, *complexity* and *cohesion and coherence*. Regarding the conversational competence there doesn't seem to be consensus. On the one hand, the descriptors in the grid for the communication efficiency criterion are vague - they only mention two aspects relative to the conversational competence: the ability to carry out a simple conversation and the ability to understand the interlocutor's message or to ask for help otherwise. On the other hand, the comments from the assessors' sheets suggest that they interpret these vague descriptors in different ways: "only one of the two students addresses the questions, the other one's contribution is limited to answering the other's questions" or "students don't relate their turns to the interlocutor's previous line, it's like they are engaged in parallel discourses" or "the student helps the other in case he doesn't understand his contribution to the dialogue or in case he cannot find the proper word" or "the dialogue was too short, but this was due to the dry topic or to the students' cultural background". Therefore it is only natural for one to ask himself what is actually important when awarding points for the conversational task, apart from the linguistic features of the discourse: the ability to address questions, to give feedback in the dialogue or the communication strategies?

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[2] The grids used in grading the spoken performance focus on the following criteria: complexity, accuracy, cohesion and coherence and communication efficiency.

[3] The assessors use a blank grid to justify the points given for each criterion.

[4] The oral component of the examination includes three tasks: an interview with the examiner, a monologue about some images on a given topic and a conversation/a role play between the two candidates.

Taking all of the above into account, the research questions were:

- Is the student's performance influenced by the topic of the dialogue or by his cultural background?
- Are there tasks that demand one passive and one active role? If so, should this be considered an issue?
- What kind of communication strategies should we expect the candidates to use and which of them should be highly rated?
- What kind of feedback in conversation should we expect from the candidates and how can that be measured in the process of rating?

In order to try to find answers to these questions, we grounded our research on a small corpus containing the transcripts of 40 A1 conversations on 6 different topics. The students were recorded during the A1 examination and the transcripts were analyzed placing emphasis on several aspects: *the number, the length and the type of moves*, *the means of giving feedback in conversation* and *the communication strategies*.

DATA COLLECTION

As mentioned above, the study focuses on a learner corpus formed of spoken productions of 80 students with different first languages (L1): 27 – Arabic, 12 – Arabic and French, 14 –Romance languages, 5 – German, 5 – Slavic languages, 6 – Albanian, 6 – Chinese, Turkish, Indonesian, etc. The students were recorded during the A1 examination of Romanian as a foreign language in three different sessions (2014, 2015, 2016) while performing 40 conversations on the 6 possible A1 topics: *planning a day off together* (7 conversations), *organizing a party for a friend* (6 conversations), *planning a holiday together* (6 conversations), *at the grocery store* (7 conversations), *at the restaurant* (7 conversations), *buying an apartment/a house* (7 conversations).

ANALYSIS

In the study, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used. In the first phase, in order to find out whether the discourses were *symmetrical* (both candidates contribute equally to the dialogue) or *uneven* (one candidate contributes more to the dialogue) and whether the candidates had a more *passive* (mostly responding) or a more *active role* (mostly initiating), different types of moves were identified and counted in the case of each student. Also, the length of each move was considered.

Each utterance in a conversation can be regarded as a *move* (Martin 1992) or, more specifically, a move represents the basic semantic unit in interaction that selects for speech function (Eggins and Slade 1997). There are

two types of moves: *initiating moves* and *responding moves.* Halliday and Mathiessen (2004) identify four basic initiating moves that correspond to the four primary speech functions: *command*, *statement*, *offer*, *and question.* All four types were taken into account in the study. Responding moves too can be divided into *expected responses* (which tend to close the exchange) and *discretionary responses* (which tend to open out the exchange)[5]. Martin (1992) and Eggins and Slade (1997) talk about two types of discretionary moves: *tracking moves* (which check or clarify the content of the previous moves) and *challenging moves* (which challenge the speaker's initiating move). Below, we summarize the aspects we considered when analyzing each student's contribution:

- Initiating moves (statement, question, offer, command)
    o long (number)
    o short (number)[6]
- Responding moves
    o Expected responses
        - long (number)
        - short (number)
    o Discretionary responses
        - long (number)
        - short (number)

The mean of moves and the mean of long moves were calculated in the case of each task and results were compared in order to establish whether there are more productive tasks or not. Moreover, in this stage we inspected the content of the conversations trying to determine whether there are some features that were determined by the candidates' cultural background and whether these features make any difference when judging the quality of the performances.

Another type of information that was gathered from the collected data regarded feedback in conversation. Gardner (1994) lists seven means of giving feedback in conversation: using *continuers* (mark the speaker's right to continue), *acknowledgements* (mark agreement with the speaker or signal understanding of the previous turn), *assessments* (signal appreciation of what has been said), *news markers* (mark the speaker's turn as new), *questions* (marks interest by asking for further details or for repairing misunderstandings), *collaborative completions* (finishing or repeating the other's turn), *non-verbal vocalizations* (laughter, sighs, etc.). From Gardner's list, in our study, we kept the following categories:

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[5] It is said that casual conversations are expected to have more discretionary responses, as they are aimed at maintaining social relationships, while transactional interactions tend to have more expected responses, since they aim at completion and closure (Thornbury and Slade 2006).

[6] Moves (initiating/responding) which consisted of one word (*Da./Nu./Acasă. – Yes./No./Home.*, etc.) or of repetitions of previous words were regarded as short ones.

- continuers/acknowledgements,[7]
- assessments,[8]
- news markers,[9]
- collaborative completions[10].

This part of the analysis was performed in order to draw some conclusions with respect to the ways in which candidates relate their contribution to the dialogue to the interlocutor's turn.

The last phase of the analysis was meant to reveal to what extent students "help" themselves and each other in conversation. In order to inspect this aspect, we considered the *communication strategies* which aim to make up for deficiencies in the speakers' linguistic systems or to facilitate communication[11]. There have been many attempts to classify communication strategies[12], but we worked with Dὂrnyei's typology (1995) (apud. Thornbury and Slade 2005):

- Avoidance/reduction strategies (message abandonment and topic avoidance)
- Achievement/compensatory strategies
  - circumlocution (describing/exemplifying/paraphrasing)
  - approximation (using an alternative term with the closest meaning)
  - use of all-purpose words (using a general lexical item instead of specific words)
  - word-coinage (creating a non-existing L2 word based on a supposed rule)

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[7] We calculated them in the same category as they were usually expressed the same way: *aha, îhî, îhâm, da, bine.*

[8] E.g.: *Perfect!, Ce interesant!, Ce idee bună! – Perfect!, How interesting!, Good idea!*

[9] E.g.: *Aaa? Serios? – Seriously?*

[10] We left the questions out only because we took them into acoount when analyzing initiating moves. Also, non-verbal vocalizations were neglected as we were interested ony in the verbal means of giving feedback in conversation.

[11] Tarone (1981) differentiates between *communication strategies* and *production strategies,* the former being used by L2 learners for compensating lack of knowledge and the latter being common in the case of native speakers who "use their linguistic system efficiently and clearly with a minimum of effort" (p. 419). In a like manner, Bygate (1987) sees production strategies as means of facilitating (simplifying structure, ellipsis, formulaic expressions, fillers, etc.) and of compensating (rephrase, false starts, repetitions, rephrasing) (p. 15). We believe that there is a high degree of overlap between communication and production strategies and as it is rather difficult to determine what motivates strategy use, we put them together in our study under the umbrella of communication strategies.

[12] For example, Tarone (1981) divided communication strategies into *avoidance* strategies (giving up a topic), *achievement* strategies (approximation, circumlocution, word-coinage), *conscious transfer* (literal translation), *appeals for assistance*, and *mime*. Bialystock (1990) separated *knowledge-based strategies* (used for adjusting the message by manipulating the knowledge of a concept) from *control-based strategies* (used for keeping the original content of a message and shaping the means of expression by going outside L2).

- o literal translation (translating literally a word or a structure from L1 or from another foreign language to the target language)
- o foreignising (using an L1 word by adjusting it to L2 rules)
- o use of non-linguistic means (mime, gestures, facial expressions, sound imitations)
- o code switching (using an L1 word with L1 pronunciation)
- o appeal for help (directly or indirectly)
- Stalling/time gaining strategies
    - o fillers/hesitation devices
    - o repetitions

We examined the strategies used and we discussed them in relation to the candidates' L1 in order to determine to which extent students rely on strategies, which strategies are most frequent at level A1 and if the results are influenced by the candidates' linguistic/cultural backgrounds.

RESULTS

Productiveness of tasks

By analyzing the number, the length and the type of moves in each conversation, we found some interesting results. Apparently (Fig. 1) all task types seem to be productive. However, there are three task types which appear a little more productive than the others: dialogue at the restaurant (a mean of 39.28 moves and of 19.71 long moves), organizing a party (a mean of 33 moves and of 16.66 long moves), at the grocery shop (a mean of 30 moves and of 15.85 long moves). In our opinion this is due to the fact that all three task types focus on a very familiar subject: *food and drink*. Moreover, two of them (the restaurant and the grocery shop conversations) imply simple transactions to which candidates are exposed every day in real life situations. Nevertheless, the difference between the values calculated for these task types and the average (30.45 – moves; 16.41 – long moves) is minor and allows us to state that all task types are equally productive. Thus, the task choice does not influence the length of the performance. Another interesting fact we found out while investigating task impact on performance was that even if in theory transactions aim at closure and therefore discretionary responses are rare in this kind of interactions, in our corpus, most of the discretionary responses (30 out of 45) were identified in the conversations produced for the transactional tasks. However, this had no repercussion on the discourse length neither.
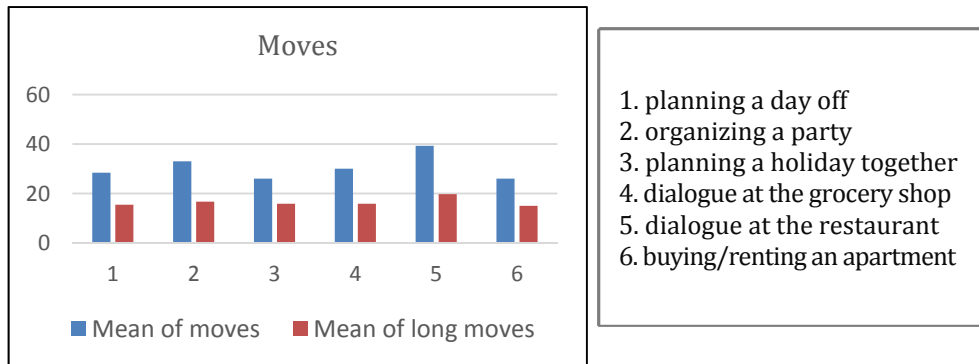
Fig. 1. – Mean of moves and long moves per task type

Role impact on performance

The analysis showed that 32 out of 40 conversations implied equal contributions from both participants, on the whole. Most of the discourses were symmetrical (in terms of number and length of moves). Thus, the role assigned to the candidate does not influence the length of his performance. However, the study of move types revealed that in 26 out of 40 dialogues one of the two participants was mostly initiating, in 2 cases one candidate was mostly responding and in 12 cases candidates were both initiating and responding (Fig. 2).
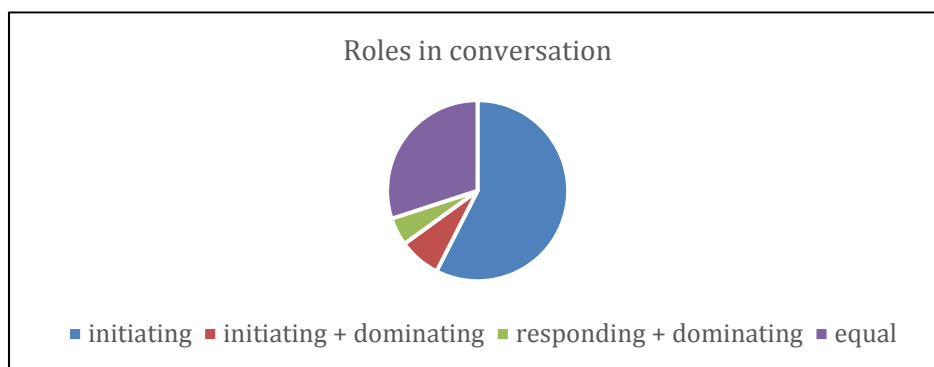

Fig. 2. – Types of conversational behavior

There are three task types in which the roles tend to elect one type of "behavior": mostly initiating or mostly responding. In 6 of the 7 dialogues we

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analyzed for the grocery store task, the candidates who were assigned the customer's role produced significantly more initiating moves than their interlocutors. With respect to the restaurant task, in 5 of the 7 dialogues, the waiter had a more active role by producing most of the initiating moves. In 6 of the 7 dialogues about buying/renting an apartment, those who were assigned the client role created considerably more initiating statements and questions than their partners. It seems that the transactional tasks (as opposed to the ones which mainly have a social, interpersonal function) tend to assign one definite active role (the waiter, the customer, the client) and one definite passive role (the client, the shop assistant, the owner). However, this does not mean that the candidates' contributions are uneven. In fact, there were only symmetrical discourses (length and number of moves) in the case of the grocery store task, there were two dominating discourses in the case of the restaurant conversation task out of which only one belonged to a more initiating participant, and, in the case of the buying/renting an apartment task, only one discourse was dominating (length and number of moves). This proves that even though some tasks require one candidate to produce more initiating moves than the other, they do not elect unsymmetrical discourses, so they shouldn't be excluded from the examination item bank and the assessment of the candidate's conversational competence should not be affected by the role assigned.

Cultural background impact on content

It is worth mentioning here that we identified very few cases when the cultural background seemed to have some kind of influence on the content of the dialogue:
- negotiating at the grocery store (L1 = Arabic)
- responding to the restaurant conversation task with a friendly dialogue on the street while ordering fast-food (shaorma) (L1 = Moroccan Arabic)
- understanding the relationship between the waiter and the client as a more intimate/relaxed one (L1 = Arabic): at some point, the client asks the waiter to recommend the cheapest thing he can serve, as he – the client – is very poor and he does not have money to spend.

These aspects did make the conversations funnier, but they did not affect the dialogues in any other way. Thus, the assessment of the performances should not be more problematic because of some superficial cultural influences.

Feedback in conversation

The study proved that the most common way of giving feedback in conversation at this level (besides asking for further details) is the use of

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continuers and acknowledgements like *Bine., Da., Aha, Înțeleg., Îhâm, Foarte bine.* (*Good., Yes., I see., Very well.*), or of repetitions of the interlocutor's words. There were 153 continuers/acknowledgements identified in the discourses of 48 students (out of 80). Each of the 48 used such continuers in their discourse with a frequency that ranged from 1 to 12 continuers per discourse. Assessments like *Daaa!, Ce idee bună!, Ce interesant!, Ooo!, 20 de lei?!* (*Yesss! Such a good idea!, How interesting!, 20 lei?!*) and so on were identified in the case of 24 out of 80 students (between 1 and 5 such assessments per production).

There were only 5 students who produced collaborative moves and only three who used news markers in their dialogues. Only 20 students (out of 80) used 5 or more feedback moves and half of them were Europeans, 6 were Asian and 4 were Africans and Middle East Arabs. We strongly believe that feedback in conversation is culturally bound and we consider that means of giving feedback in a conversation in Romanian should be one focal point when practising conversations in class.

Communication strategies

There is a mean of 4.4 communication strategies per student and one of 2.67 different communication strategy type per student. There are 30 students who use more than 5 strategies in their performance and all of them speak a Romance language either as L1 or as a foreign language. The chart below summarizes the distribution of communication strategies and of students who use them in the learner corpus we analyzed (Fig. 3 and Fig. 4).
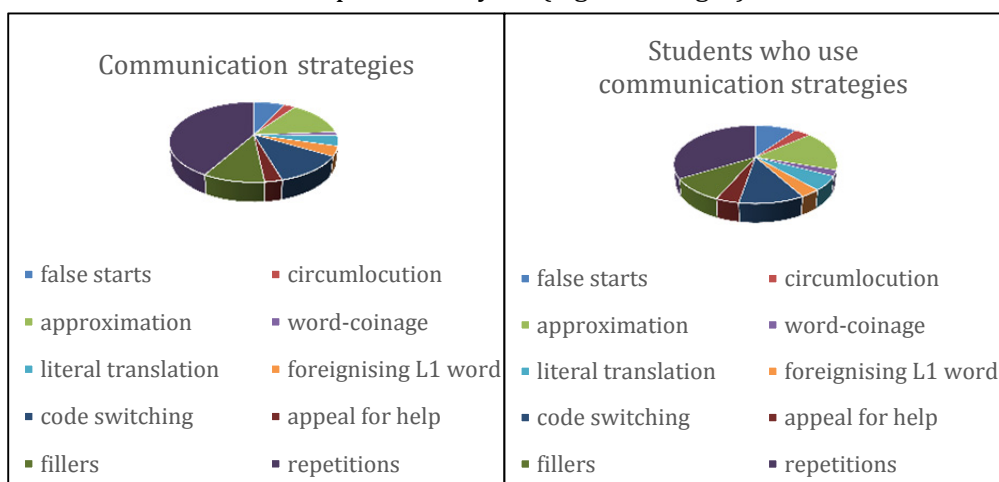

Fig. 3. – Distribution of communication strategies

Fig. 4. – Distribution of students who use communication strategies

Repetition seems to be the most frequent strategy students at level A1 use (40% of the communication strategies used, 87.5% of the students who use them). Candidates repeat *their own words* in order to buy time or to gain fluency or their partners' words with different functions and purposes. In the latter case, they use repetitions:

- as fillers, in order to buy time,
- to signal the fact that they didn't understand what has been said (appeal for help),
- to ask for confirmation of understanding (they want to make sure that they understood the message correctly),
- as continuers/acknowledgements (they certify they understood the message and give the interlocutor the right to continue),
- as news markers,
- as assessments.

Approximation is the second most prefered strategy (13.81% of the communication strategies used and 43% of the students who use them): *seara* for *noaptea* (*evening* instead of *night*), *bine* for *bun* (*well* instead of *good*), *după* for *după aceea/apoi/mai târziu* (*after* instead of *later*), *a închide* for *a termina* (*to close* instead of *to finish*), *a prefera* for *a recomanda* (*to prefer* instead of *to recommend*), *pentru?* for *de ce?* (*for?* instead of *why?*), etc. Approximation is sometimes used strategically (= intentionally, to compensate for a gap in one's linguistic system) and it is, in this case, usually followed by circumlocution. In other situations, approximation is used as a consequence of some automatized mistakes: *după/după aceea, bine/bun*.

28.75% of the students selected **code switching** as a strategy in 42 cases. Interestingly, only 5 students switched to L1, 12 appealed to a foreign language for help whereas 2 students switched to both L1 and a foreign language. Here are some examples of code switching: *este zi* (Spanish *este* for the Romanian *această*), *am nevoie de un altra cosa* (Italian *altra cosa* for the Romanian *altceva*), *just o cameră* (English *just* for the Romanian *doar*), etc.

Another rather used category of communication strategies is the one that includes **fillers** (9.66% of the communication strategies used and 25% of the students who used them). When analyzing this aspect we did not consider vocalizations like *ăăă, îîî, mmm*, and so on. Fixed phrases like *nu ştiu* (*I don't know*) or *cred că* (*I think*) used repeatedly and sequence-fillers like *Ce mai faci?/Bine, mulţumesc. Şi tu?* (*How are you?/Fine, thanks. How about you?*) used inappropriately (= when they are not necessary) were calculated here.

25% of the students start one, two or three sentences they finally abandon in their productions. Usually, these **false starts** are followed by

circumlocutions (*Sunt… ăăă… scur-… ăăă… nu am bani* (*I am… ăăă… sho-… ăăă… I don't have any money.*) and they represent 6.9% of the total number of communication strategies.

Literal translations like *o idee mult bună* (Italian: *molto buona*), *este mai timp* (Spanish: *mas tiempo*), *nu problemă* (English: *no problem*) constitute 4.14% of the total number of communication strategies. Only 15% of the students appeal to literal translation and usually they do not use L1, but another foreign language they know.

We also found 14 situations (3.86%) of **foreignising an L1 word** in the case of 7 students (8.75%): *diferente* (English *different* + *e* for the Romanian *diferite*), *producte* (English *product* + *e* for the Romanian *produse*), *altraceva* (Italian *altra* + *ceva* for the Romanian *altceva*).

Only 8 students (10%) **appealed for help** not because help was not needed, but because in most cases, students don't even realize they misunderstood the question and do not consider asking for help – they just continue the dialogue however they think it's appropriate until the partner realizes by himself that he needs to rephrase the question/statement in order to help his interlocutor. However, we identified three ways in which students expressed their need of help:

- using sounds with raising intonation: *ăăă↑, ooo↑, îîî↑, aaa↑*,
- code-switching: *Repeat! Say again!*,
- repeating some of the interlocutor's words.

With respect to **circumlocutions** (2.48% of the communication strategies used and 10% of the students who use them), we identified two main situations when students use them:

- out of necessity:
  - to compensate for a lexical gap
  - to make the message clear for the interlocutor (offering help in understanding)
- as fillers (most of them) – *Ce mâncați? Ce faceți de mâncare?* (*What will you eat? What will you cook?*).

As anticipated, the least common strategy is **word-coinage** (1.38% of the communication strategies used and 6.25% of the students who use them): *noi nu <u>arăm</u> mult timp* (instead of *noi nu <u>avem</u> mult timp* – the verb *a avea* does not get the *–em* termination to the root, but the *–ăm* termination to an incomplete form of the third person singular *are*), *plictisoară* (instead of *plictisitoare* – the verb *a se plictisi* + the feminin suffix *–oară*). The candidates do not use this strategy a lot due to the fact that at this level, their lexis and the grammatical structures they know are too limited to serve as starting points for generalizations.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The dialogue tasks for the A1 exam are equally productive. We consider they should be kept as such in the item bank.

2. The transactional tasks might pick out definite roles (more initiating/more responding), but they have no impact on the discourse length. The fact that one candidate has more initiating moves than the other should not affect grading in this kind of tasks, at this level.

3. We consider that it would be a good idea for the teacher to draw attention on the function of discretionary responses when practicing conversations in class.

4. Feedback in conversation is culturally bound. Europeans tend to use more feedback giving devices. We consider that some techniques for giving basic feedback at this level could be discussed and practiced in class and elementary assessment fixed phrases and some basic continuers/acknowledgements should be valued when grading dialogues at this level.

5. Communication strategies are absolutely natural at this level and, in fact, communication would not be possible without them at level A1. In the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*, the descriptors regarding oral interaction at A1 ("Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided *the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.*"[13] and "I can interact in a simple way provided *the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I'm trying to say.* I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics."[14]) focus on the necessity of **rephrasing**, **repeating** and **offering help** for a dialogue to actually take place at this level. If the interlocutor is a native speaker (e.g. the examiner), rephrasing, repeating and offering help raise no special problems. However, when the interlocutor is another speaker of Romanian as a foreign language at level A1 (as in the case of the last part of the oral examination – the conversation/the role play), communication strategies are essential for rephrasing, repeating and offering help. We consider it is desirable for teachers to try to teach their students how to use more strategies like approximation, circumlocution, appeal for help, which relate to the target language. Otherwise, students will still rely on strategies in conversations, but they will mostly rely on those connected to their L1 or to another foreign language (literal translations, code-switching, foreignising L1 word, appeal for help in L1 or in another foreign language).

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[13] *Table 1. Common Reference Levels: global scale* (p. 24).
[14] *Table 2. Common Reference Levels: self-assessment grids* (p. 26)

6. Taking all these aspects into account, below we suggest some descriptors for conversational competence for three stages at level A1:

CONVERSATIONAL COMPETENCE (level A1)	
	Can interact in a very simple way on familiar and concrete topics. Can **initiate** and **respond** and generally uses **long moves** in order to do that. Can **ask for help** when needed by using **fixed phrases** or **repetition** of the interlocutor's words. Can **help** his partner when needed using **communicative strategies** which mostly rely on the **target language** (circumlocution, approximation). Can use **basic fixed phrases** and words in order to give **feedback** in conversation (**continuers/acknowledgements** and **assessments**).
	Can interact in a very simple way on familiar and concrete topics. Can **initiate** and **respond** and generally uses **short moves** in order to do that. Can **ask for help** when needed by using **code-switching** or **repetition** of the interlocutor's words. Tries to **help** his partner when needed using **communicative strategies** which mostly rely on **L1** or on another **foreign language** (code-switching, literal translation, foreignising L1 words). Can use **words** and **sounds** in order to give **feedback** in conversation (mostly **continuers/acknowledgements**).
	Can interact in a very simple way on familiar and concrete topics. Can **initiate** and **respond** but **only** uses **short moves** in order to do that. Can **sometimes ask for help** when needed by using **sounds** or **non-verbal means**. **Rarely** succeeds in **helping** his partner and only by using **communicative strategies** which only rely on **L1** or on another **foreign language** (code-switching, literal translation, foreignising L1 words). **Does** generally **not** provide **feedback** in conversation.

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