CHARACTERISTICS OF ROMANIAN TEXT COMPREHENSION BY SECOND LANGUAGE ENGLISH SPEAKERS (CASE STUDY)

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Abstract: Intercomprehension is a fascinating relatively new field of applied general linguistics that can give us the measure of comprehension between people that are not part of the same family of languages. This paper is a Case Study that tries to prove the rate of reading comprehension of a Romanic family text (i.e. Romanian) for people who learned English as a second language. The study was performed on 48 respondents who do not know Romanian and were asked to read twenty questions in Romanian and answer them if they could understand, or at least mention in English the words or phrases they believed that they could recognize.

Keywords: intercomprehension, ESL, reading comprehension, Romanian.

1. Method of research.

Intercomprehension is "a form of communication in which each person uses his or her own language and understands that of the other." [1] The communication form implies both speaking and writing as it is mentioned in the same text, although understanding a text may be considered text comprehension, the fact that the sentences are written in a foreign language could be integrated in intercomprehension concept. Starting from this concept we developed a case study based on written comprehension. A questionnaire of twenty usual and less usual, simple and more complicated, general and national Romanian questions was designed in order to check the concept of written comprehension by people who do not know Romanian and more to try and depict some characteristics or patterns (if any) of understanding for people who speak English or have learned English as a second language. However, we are going to take into consideration only 10 sentences for this paper otherwise the present work would probably be too long and perhaps boring.

The people involved in the case study were supposed to read the questions written in Romanian and according to what they could understand answer the questions. The instructions given to the respondents involved in the study are:

Read the following questions, underline the words you can understand and write the translation or give short answers in the following languages: English, French, Dutch, Italian, Spanish or German.

The languages were chosen taking into consideration the fact that the research was developed within the borders of the European Union and the possibilities of translating and analyzing the answers of the researcher. At the same time we considered fair to give a choice of three Germanic or Anglo-Saxon languages and three Romanic languages for translation and answers. In this part of our research we are going to find some characteristics of comprehension

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or perhaps lack of intercomprehension between languages that do not have the same traits, and we chose English speaking people and their capability of understanding a Romanic language.

2. Respondent profile.

There were 24 respondents involved in the study who gave their answers or translations into English. We will give some facts about them in order to be capable of finding similarities and differences among them that might help us to reach conclusions. The respondents are natives from four continents speaking from one to several languages, as they mentioned at the beginning of the questionaire. They have various ages and levels of education.

From Europe there are 12 respondents from the following countries:

- one from Albania speaking Albanian, Greek, English and French;
- one from Sweden speaking Swedish, English, German and Dutch;
- one from Spain speaking Spanish, French and English;
- two from Greece speaking Greek, French, English, and Italian (one of them also speaks Spanish);
- one from Netherlands speaking Dutch, English, French and German;
- two from Poland speaking Polish, German, English, French and Russian;
- one from Ukraine speaking Ukrainian, Russian, English and French;
- one from UK speaking English, French, Spanish and Danish;
- one from Belgium speaking Dutch, French, English, Italian, Russian and Chinese;
- one from Bulgaria speaking Bulgarian, English, French, Russian and German.

From Africa there are 6 respondents as follows:

- three from Cameroon speaking English and French;
- two from Ghana speaking English (official language), Ga, Ewe, Dagbani, and Fante (part of Niger-Congo languages);
- one from Kenya speaking English, Swahili (Bantu language), Luo (Nilotic languages).

From American continent there is only one respondent:

- from Ecuador speaking Spanish, English, French.

From Asia there are 5 respondents from the following countries:

- one from Philippines speaking English and the official language (part of the Austronesian family);
- one from Turkey speaking Turkish, English, Czech, Russian;
- two from Myanmar speaking Myanmar, French and English (official language);
- one from India speaking Malayalam (Dravidian family) and English (official language).

We considered that the respondents are speakers of English as second language (except for the person from UK) because most of them indicated English as second language and, the most important fact, they answered in English. However, we can decide for their English knowledge according to the correctness of their answers.

3. Analysis of answers

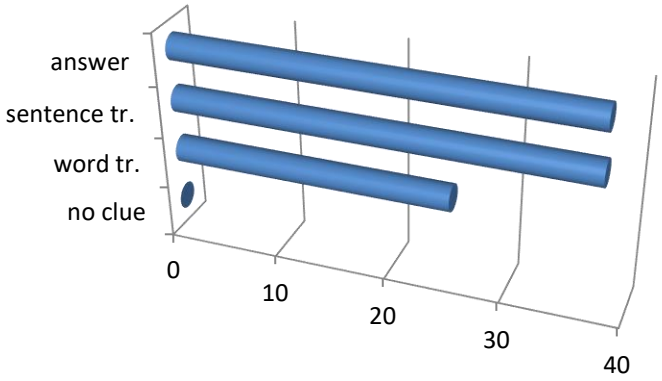
The first question is “Cu ce mijloc de transport vii la şcoală?” (What means of transport do you use to come to school?) and the main meaning that of *means of transport* was understood by all the respondents at different degrees. The word “transport” was underlined as being familiar and translated by 6 respondents. Only one out of six also recognized the word *school*. The sentence was correctly translated by 8 people out of 9, and we can say that the ninth translation was about means of transport, too. Another 9 respondents gave answers containing the means of transport used. If we were to make a chart containing the degree of understanding for the first question this

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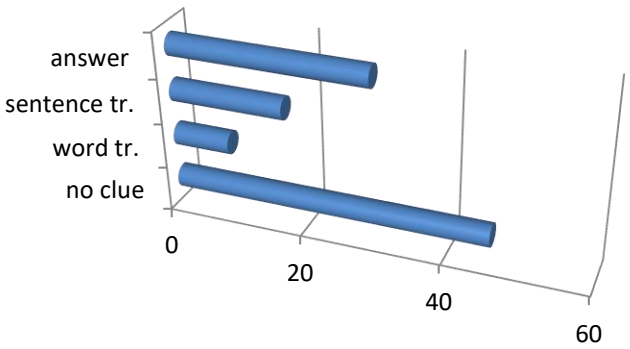
would show that 25% of the respondents understood the main general meaning, 37.5% understood and translated the sentences and 37.5% gave answers according to what they were asked in the written form.

Sentence 1



The second question "Eşti căsătorit(ă), necăsătorit(ă) sau divorţat(ă)?" (Are you married, not married or divorced?) was understood by only 13 people. Five people could not understand anything, while six people although underlined the word "necăsătorit(ă)" as being familiar, translated it as *nationality*, *necessity* or *necessary* according to the form. The word *divorced* was recognized by 2 people, while 4 respondents gave translations related to the meaning. The meaning was understood by 7 persons who gave answers according to their marital status. The chart for the second sentence would show that 45.83% did not get the meaning of the sentence, 8.33% recognized and translated one essential word for the meaning, 16.66% understood the question and translated it (more or less correct) and 29.16% gave the right answer.

Sentence 2



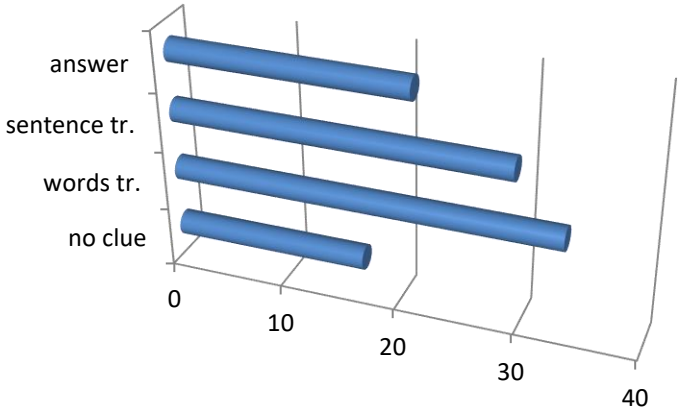
The third question "Care este culoarea ta preferată?" (What is your favourite colour?) was not understood by 4 people, 8 people translated a word or two and the word recognized was "preferată" translated as *prefer*, *preference* or *favourite*. The next group of 7 respondents translated the sentence using the singular or the plural but getting the meaning exactly like the 5 people who answered by using a whole sentence or just colours. The corresponding chart shows that 16.66% of the respondents had no clue about the question, 33.33% understood a word that

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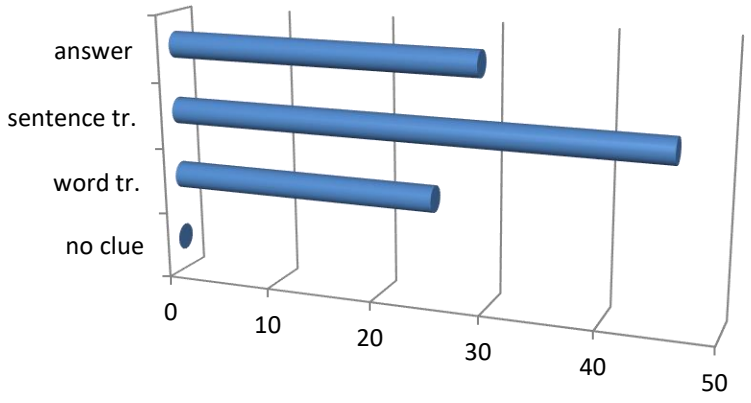
could not give the meaning of the question, 29.16% understood the question and proved that by translation and 28.83% gave answers according to the preferred colour.

Sentence 3



The fourth question is "Preferi să mergi la teatru, la operă, la balet sau la cinematograf?" (Do you prefer going to the theatre, opera, ballet or cinema?). The meaning conveyed to everybody, the only difference was in the percentage of understanding. Most of the nouns were understood by 6 people, 2 of them understood only the word *cinema*. The translation was given by 11 respondents, while 7 people rendered answers. The percentages show that 25% understood the nouns but they also could understand it was a connection between them, 45.83% could translate the interrogative sentence and 29.16% were able to answer the question according to what they prefer.

Sentence 4



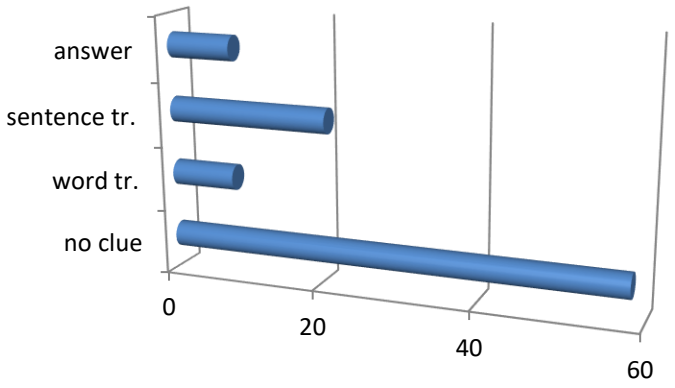
The fifth question "Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare?" (Do you stay in or go for a walk on Sunday?) had no meaning for 14 people who even if they recognized one or two words these did not help them with the message of the sentence. Some words like *go*, *Sunday*, *home* were translated by 2 people, while the translation of the sentence was performed by 5 respondents and

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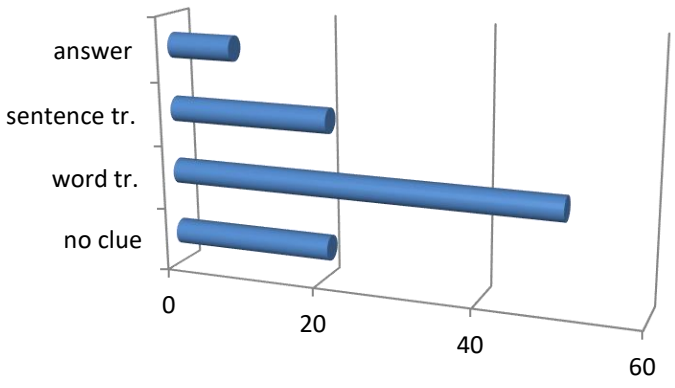
a meaningful answer was given by two persons. Generally speaking the first part of the question was underlined and translated. The chart for the sentence shows that 58.33% did not understand a word, 8.33% understood a little bit, 20.83% found the meaning and 8.33% answered confidently.

Sentence 5



The sixth question is "Bei ceai, cafea sau lapte dimineata?" (Do you drink tea, coffee or milk in the morning?). Things change with this sentence because 5 people did not understand what was it about, 12 people underlined and translated one word *coffee* that was a clue for the whole meaning, other 5 respondents translated the question conveying the meaning to the word *coffee*, too, while 2 persons gave answers stating their preferences. Beside coffee some of those who translated understood the nouns *tea* (2), *milk* (1) and the verb *drink* (3). The percentages are: 20.83% of the respondents could not understand anything, 50% understood vaguely that is about coffee, 20.83% recognized the meaning approximately and 8.33% gave an answer according to the question.

Sentence 6



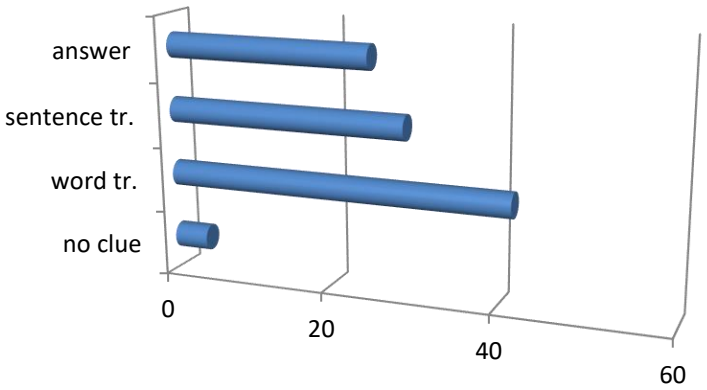
The seventh question is "Te uiţi la reclame la televizor?" (Do you watch advertisements/ commercials on TV?). Only one person did not understand anything that means 4.14%. a number of 10 people understood the word *television* and one of those also understood the word *advertisement*, meaning 41.66%. Other 7 people translating the sentence realized that it was something about the advertisements on TV and they represent 29.16%. The last group is represented by those who gave an answer and they are 25% of all the respondents. The word

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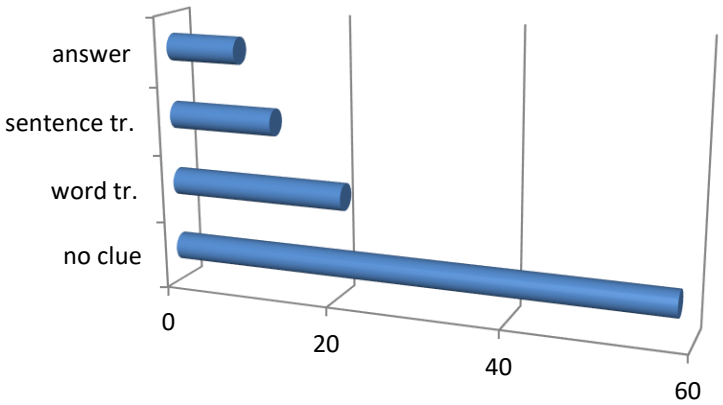
recognized by almost everybody in the interrogative sentence was *television*, and the chart is as follows.

Sentence 7



The eight question is "Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?" (Where do you go on holiday in the mountains or at the seaside?). The sentence seemed to be more difficult as long as 14 people had no clue about the meaning, which in percentage is 58.33, only 5 people recognized only one word *sea***that is not a keyword**, forming 20.83% from the total of respondents, so that we can say that about 80% of the people did not know the meaning of the sentence and, perhaps, in speaking they could not answer in English or any other language. Five people got the right meaning, three of them translating the sentence that means 12.5% and other 2 giving an acceptable answer that means 8.33%. The word recognized by many respondents was the noun *sea*, and the chart shows as follows.

Sentence 8



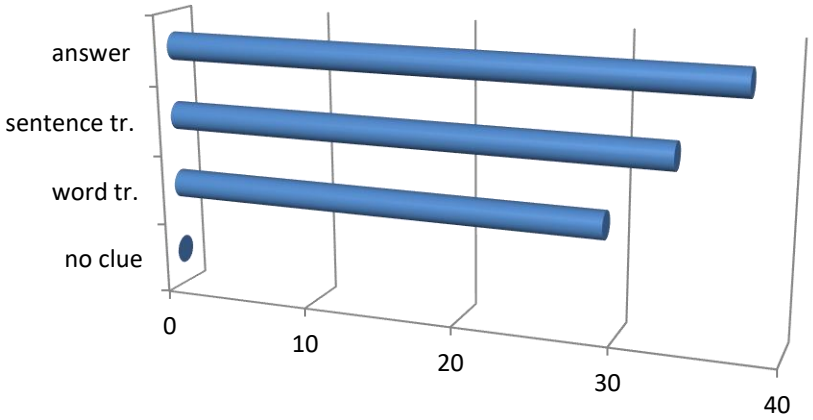
The ninth question is "Care este hobby-ul tău?" (What is your hobby?). The key word of the sentence is *hobby*, the noun that gives the meaning of the sentence and it is obvious that everybody knows this word as long as there were only 7 people who just recognized it. A group of 8 respondents translated the sentence while 9 people answered according to their interests. That means that the chart corresponding to the sentence shows the following figures: people who

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recognized a word 29.16%, people translating the sentence 33.33% and people rendering an answer 37.5%.

Sentence 9

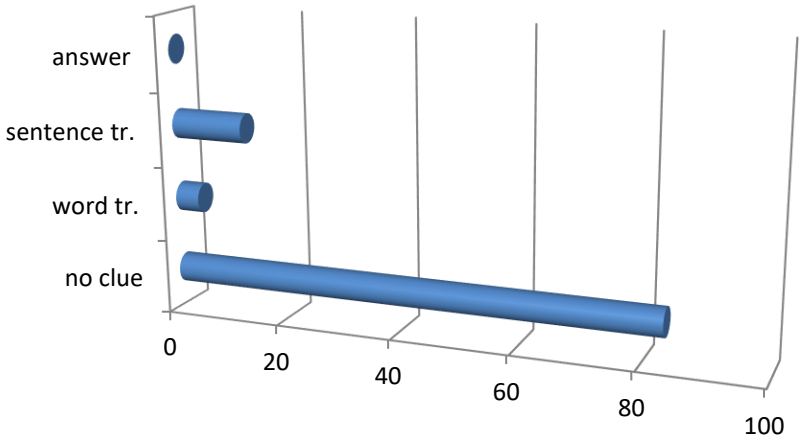


The tenth sentence is "Ce crezi că e mai uşor să înveţi într-o limbă străină, să scrii sau să vorbeşti?" (What do you think is easier to do in a foreign language, to write or to speak?). The last sentence in this series was not understood by most of the people taking part in the case study that is 17 people. One word was thought to be recognized by 4 respondents, each giving a translation for a different word as follows: "uşor" (easy) was translated as *use*, "înveţi" (learn) was translated as *invest*, "vorbeşti" was correctly translated *talk*, and "sau" was identified as the English *or*. Other 3 people tried to translate the sentence and this is what they performed:

1. Do you believe may use…….
2. Do you think you and me an introduction …….., so written so understood?
3. Do you believe that the biggest invention is the wheel, the writing or the fire?

The corresponding chart shows that 83.33% of the respondents had no clue about the meaning of the sentence, 4.16% understood an important word, and 12.5% understood the first part of the sentence (asking for opinion) and something from the second part, although the exact meaning could not be revealed.

sentence 10



4. Characteristics

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In order to depict the characteristics of reading comprehension of people speaking English as a second language, a comparison between the data and charts is necessary as well as the analysis of the key words for the sentences where the whole meaning is based on them. A sentence like the first one is mainly based on two words and they are *transport* and *school*. Transport is a noun or verb that can be found with the same form in almost all European languages, that is the reason why it was recognized and half of the meaning of the sentence conveyed to the reader. The other word "şcoală" does not look exactly like the English version *school*, but in Albanese is *shkollë*, in Turkish *okul*, *ekol*, in Spanish *escuela*, in Dutch *school*, in Polish*szkoła*, so that it could be guessed. The sentence is short and as the first sentence of the inquiry it was paid more attention to in comparison to the second one that was no understood at such high rate.

The second sentence has the meaning based on three nouns "căsătorit(ă)", "necăsătorit(ă)", "divorţat(ă)". The word that can be understood be English speaking people is *divorced* that resemble to the Romanian one. However, people speaking Spanish may understand the first two words starting from the Spanish *casado*. The percentage of people who understood the meaning of the second sentence is very high, about 45%, considering the lack of similar words, except for *divorced*.

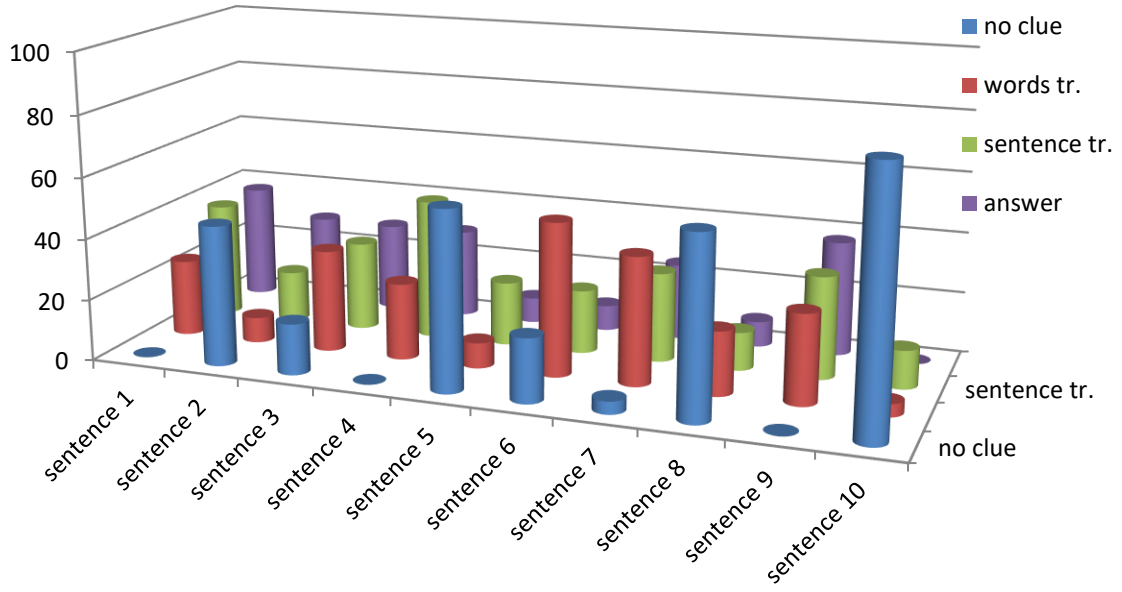
For the third sentence about 60% of the people got the meaning that was given by two words "culoare" and "preferata". If we are to reduce the sentence to these two words we might get some adequate answers. The noun *color* is easily recognizable by almost all Europeans because in Swedish is *kulör*, in French *couleur*, in Bulgarian *колорит*, in Dutch *kleur*, in Filipino *kolor*,in Polish *kolor*, in Spanish *color*, and in Swedish *kulör*. The other word was translated as *prefer*, *preference* or *favourite*, as we mentioned before.

The fourth sentence had the most translations of all 45.83% and the meaning was understood by about 90% if we take into consideration those who recognized the essential nouns, those who translated the sentence and those who rendered answers. The meaning was also given by a series of nouns "teatru", "operă", "balet", "cinema(tograf)" that are recognizable as form and meaning in all European languages. In Filipino the word is also *teatro*, and in Turkish *tiyatro*. We can conclude that all these words are internationally used so that the percentage is a justified one although the sentence is quite long.

The fifth sentence is somehow the opposite of the previous because only 30% of the respondents understood the message. In the sentence "Duminica stai acasă sau mergi la plimbare?" there was nothing to be similar as form with English words. The people who understood it were from Greece, Poland, Ecuador and Belgium and they also spoke French, Italian or Spanish, and another important aspect was that they were educated people (faculty graduates).

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The sixth sentence has as the key word *coffee*, and other two nouns *tea* and *milk*. The international word *coffee* was recognized by 50% of the respondents, the greatest number in the inquiry, and we can say that the vague meaning was got by roughly 80%, although the sentence seemed to be quite long.

The seventh sentence was understood by 95% of the respondents. It is a simple and short question with one recognizable word as being known worldwide: television, and "reclame" (advertisements/ commercials) that was also translated and identified by 13 respondents meaning about 55% of the total number. The word is in Turkish *reklâmcılık*, in Ukrainian and Bulgarian *реклама*, in Swedish *reklam*, in Polish *reklama*, in Albanian *reklamat* so that it could have been identified making connections with the first language.

The eight sentence "Unde mergi în concediu, la munte sau la mare?" could not convey a meaning to the respondents so that about 85% did not have a clue about it. The key word is, perhaps, "concediu" (holiday), which is very different as form from the English word.

The next sentence, the ninth one, is short and has the English word *hobby* as key word, so that the meaning was understood by all the participants.

The last sentence was the great failure of the questionnaire because it was long, complicated with many Romanian diacritics difficult to be read. The figures show the highest percentage of people who could not understand the meaning.

5. Conclusions

It is very difficult to depict the characteristics of intercomprehension out of reading comprehension for a sample of people who speak English as a second language because many of them, as we showed in the previous chapter are influenced by their mother tongue, or by other languages they know, when they need to understand the meaning of a sentence. However, we can depict some conclusions.

1. The sentences that had one or more key words that could be recognized were easier to be translated and/or answered.

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2. It is not very important the length of the sentence if it includes many international or English originated words.
3. Although in every day conversation understanding the verbs is important for a holistic understanding, it is not the same for the sample of questions whose meaning was guessed according to the nouns and not to the verbs.

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