

ROMANIAN LANGUAGE IN PREPARING AND EVALUATING STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Assessing students' skills in the Romanian language graduation exams has become a topic of discussion for a large part of the population. Students, parents, and assessors hear about this topic during the simulations of these exams, during regular or special sessions. Most of the time the difficulty of the exam is not given by the complex assessment of the previously taught contents, but by the ambiguous tasks of the subjects in the exams.

We therefore, intend on the one hand, to make a pragmatic analysis of the topics proposed for the national exams and on the other hand, to compare them with the exercises in the alternative textbooks, which should be effective tools in preparing students for the graduation exams.

The aim of this study is to identify at least some of the system's errors and to suggest a series of solutions that will help teachers to better prepare their students for the graduation exams (both 8th and 12th graders).

Keywords:

Graduation, language skills, assessment, interrogations, pragmatics.

1. Key Points

Romanian language is tested almost every year when 8th graders and 12th graders have to take the so-called national exams. Mistakes, not only in the tasks of the exam subjects, but also in the assessment grids have often been identified, which questions the linguistic (sometimes logical) language skills of those who develop these examination subjects on behalf of the Ministry of Education.

Some representatives of the teaching staff both in the pre-university and university education systems draw attention to the importance that experts proposing such tasks should give to the subject-making process.

Mrs. Rodica Zafiu, a professor at the University of Bucharest, reacted to this problem some time ago, as a lot of people do nowadays. Mrs. Zafiu is a distinguished linguistic researcher with skills in analyzing political and public discourse, rhetoric and argumentation and she is famous both in the pre-university and university education systems.

We extract both for analysis and as a theoretical support in our subsequent demonstrations, a paragraph from an article by Mrs. Rodica Zafiu, published in the famous section she signs - *Inappropriate words*, in the cultural supplement of the “Dilema Veche”:

*"The comprehension of the text (part of the reading-comprehension exam is developed by good authors who write tests for the foreign languages exams) has special techniques and criteria that cannot be formally and externally imitated: the questions must aim precise details, thus assessing the degree of connection and integration of information, being based on attention and deduction"*¹. (Note that we are the authors of the bold part of the text).

This passage points very well to the issue of assessment tests in national exams. They must consist of questions that are well and carefully formulated. However, if we try to search information using the tools available for the needed sites, we find out that the subjects in the graduation examinations for the secondary school and high school students in previous years, as well as the subjects from the simulation exam in the current year... no longer contain questions, but syntactic structures in the form of statements, with a predicative verb in the imperative, which always start with verbs of action / command.

We are of the opinion that if these tasks had an interrogative structure, they would be much clearer, much easier to be understood by the students who are evaluated, and obviously there would be a significant increase in the percentage of promoting these exams. Moreover, if the authors of the

¹ Rodica Zafiu, 2014, „Improvisations”, in *Dilema Veche*, no. 542, 3rd-9th July 2014, p. 4.
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alternative textbooks took this thing into account, they would lead to a better preparation of the students in order to get a positive result, including those who are expected to fail the graduation exams.

2. Romanian Language and Literature exams and public opinion

When "material mistakes", as the authors of the subjects like to call them, appear in the examination subjects, representatives of parents' associations or members of student associations express their opinion through various media. Some of them are revolted and blame the teachers, even though the teachers are the ones who prepare the students for exams, not the ones who propose the exam subjects.

Although mass-media and social media show a lot of people's opinions about how many graduate students fail to get a baccalaureate diploma, nothing is said about checking the cracks in the education system. No one is questioning the educational ideal, the curricula and their contents, the number of classes needed to accomplish the course, the number of students in the often overcrowded classes, the textbooks which are not updated according to criteria that will turn them into efficient working tools and, above all, no one talks about the relationship between the tasks in the exam subjects and the tasks the students are used to when in class.

Many commentators, becoming "specialists" overnight, talk about how many funny mistakes have been discovered in the students' exam papers, others talk about how difficult or accessible the subjects were. Usually, at least two camps are outlined. Some are at students' side, others blame the teachers, but in the end, they all agree that the education system is to blame.

The vast majority of those who analyse the phenomenon consider that the baccalaureate exam, like any other graduation exam, should reflect the students' level of knowledge and many are those who look into the topic from a perspective or another, especially when these exams are due.

3. What do specialists in psychopedagogy say about evaluation?

It is true that there are few people who believe that this test should be a test for the Romanian education system as well, and among them even fewer see this examination as an internal mechanism of the system, meant to improve it, as this is the experts' approach to evaluation. Thus, one of the roles

of evaluation is self-regulation, as we see in the paper "Pedagogy and Elements of School Psychology", coordinated by Elena Joita:

"The role or the regulatory function is very important for the entire teaching activity, leading to the adjustment of the evaluation itself - therefore becoming the pedagogic function that can be attributed to the evaluation itself."²

When will we see public debates in the media pointing out the relevance of evaluations in the national exams and their concordance with didactic approaches during a school cycle? These public debates could outline a national educational strategy, agreed by all political actors.

So far, it seems that decision-makers in the hierarchical line of education have been more interested in making the human resources more efficient and have introduced extra classes for "remedial education", as we can also find in a statement by the current Minister of Education, taken over by news agencies:

"For several years now, the percentage of those who do not get 5 in the 8th grade national examination has increased alarmingly. (...) We cannot ignore these results. I have therefore considered ways of improving these results so that the students would not take the consequences of this lack of preparation for the rest of their life. Assessments from the Ministry of Education show that this gap begins in the third grade. What can we do? Let's try to introduce "remedial education" so that the students who cannot keep up with the school curriculum receive help and catch up with the others."³ (our emphasis)

As far as we can see, the only problem identified by the Minister of Education is "not keeping up", as the lady responsible for identifying and solving problems in the education system states; as for the question "What

² Elena Joita, Vasile Ilie, Mihaela Vlad, Ecaterina Frăsineanu, 2003, *Pedagogy and Elements of School Psychology*, Bucharest: Arves Publishing House, p. 264.

³ Social Department – Mediafax, *Andronescu introduces „remedial sessions” for the students with poor grades. The extra classes might start....*, Bucharest, 14th Dec 2018, retrieved from: <https://www.mediafax.ro/social/andronescu-anunta-cursuri-remediale-pentru-elevii-cu-rezultate-slabe-la-scoala-de-cand-ar-putea-incepe-orele-suplimentare-17786270>

should be done?" the proposed solution is "to introduce remedial sessions", that is extra classes for students.

We can therefore wonder: "Do we have to find the solution to" what should be done? "or would it be better to find out what went wrong in the whole process". It is because this has been going on for a long time. Of course, another question arises: why doesn't the system adjust itself?

We might have unrealistic expectations regarding the goals of education. Maybe we are too far away from the theories of pedagogy and didactics.

More than ten years ago, Florin Frumos stated that in the contemporary Romanian pedagogy the issue concerning the goals of education is disputed by two complementary subjects - didactics and curriculum theory, as we can see in the following statement:

"The problem of education goals is today dealt with in pedagogy from a double perspective: didactics and curriculum theory [...] In what concerns the goals, we find ourselves in the normative, anticipative, desirable dimension of education."⁴

Going back to the issue of national exams, we can question the fact that there is too much to learn in point of content and that some students cannot keep up with it only by attending the classes allocated to the exam subject. Should therefore extra classes be introduced? If so, this means that there are students who do not stand a chance of passing the exams from the beginning of the school year. But if the number of those who do not promote is alarmingly high, aren't we the ones who set unrealistic goals for our students? I mean, is this issue related only to the curriculum theory?

Pedagogy and curriculum theory specialists draw attention to the fact that those who choose the content for different school curricula must constantly investigate whether they help achieve the educational goal and whether they are needed in everyday life. Such a discourse is also found in Constantin Cucos's paper, "Pedagogy":

"Those who are responsible for setting educational curricula need to constantly investigate the effectiveness of the content,

⁴ Florin Frumos, 2008, „The Goals of Education”, in Constantin Cucoş (coord.), *Psychpedagogy for the Definitiv and Didactic Exams*, Revised Second Edition, Iaşi: Polirom, pp. 163-164.

what their value in accessing new informational elements is, what the share of educational values-purpose is and what the share of educational values - means is, that is, the value of the content that needs to be learnt in order to be used in a reality that is constantly changing".⁵

Starting from the statements of the psychopedagogic or philology specialists mentioned above, and referring to the exam subjects proposed both for exam simulations and the exams themselves, we can anticipate some conclusions.

Therefore, we can take into account three situations, none of which are desirable, because any of them would lead to the predictable failure of most of the students facing the graduation exam.

Firstly, the experts who design the school curricula do not consider the skills and the content that are to be assessed and, when students get evaluated, most of them fail the exams.

This first option is possible in an education system in a continuous process of change, and in the Romanian education system we often hear people talking about its reformation.

The second situation aims the specialists who facilitate learners acquiring skills and content, "textbook authors" or simply teachers who neither report correctly to the school curricula, nor report properly to the evaluation topics at the end of the school cycle and do not use the most appropriate methods to develop the students' skills that are necessary to pass the exams. Therefore, most of the graduates fail the exams.

We cannot say much about the teachers' classroom activity because we cannot make an accurate analysis of their didactic approaches. We could not use the quantitative research methods as the workload would often exceed the physical capacity of a person, and the analysis of a target group established according to various criteria would lead to generalizations that would be far from the reality of the Romanian education system.

However, the products of textbook authors are available to all of us and can be analyzed from the point of view of fidelity to school curricula and by reference to the subjects in the national exams. Obviously, even in this case, research will not be exhaustive, but it will focus on the most commonly used textbooks.

⁵ Constantin Cucoş, 2006, *Pedagogy*, Revised Second Edition, Iaşi: Polirom, p. 206.

The third situation is the one in which we assume that the experts who propose final exam subjects neither take into account the skills and the contents in the school curricula, nor consider the tools with which the facilitators operate - the alternative school textbooks.

We believe that students should find items similar to those in the national exams in all the alternative textbooks that they use throughout the school cycle as learning tools, as they should not only get familiar with the types of tasks required in the exams, but also to understand their approach and, obviously, their role.

4. A pragmatic analysis of the graduation exams subjects

We all agree that in order for an exam subject to be properly approached by a high school student, it should first be thoroughly understood. In the subject of "Language and Literature", "text comprehension" is one of the main goals.

For a good understanding of the demonstrations to be made below, some clarifications should be made. "Text comprehension" is covered in the curricula for the high school cycle by two general competence- one being common to the 9th and 10th grades, the other being common to the 11th and 12th grades. Each of the two general competencies have a specific competence for each year of study, as shown in the table⁶ below.

General Competence		General Competence	
A correct and proper use of Romanian language in receiving and producing messages in different communication situations		Texts comprehension and interpretation	
Specific competence		Specific competence	
9th grade	To appropriately use the linguistic acquisitions in receiving various texts	11th grade	To use reading strategies in order to understand the texts which are being studied
10th grade	To appropriately understand the meaning (s) of a message sent through different types of oral or written texts	12th grade	To adapt reading strategies to the specifics of the literary texts in the curriculum, with the aim of a personal understanding and interpretation

⁶ The information in the table is taken from the school curricula in effect for high school classes.

We mentioned above an article where Mrs. Rodica Zafiu explains her view of a suitable item for assessing 'text comprehension'. In the author's view, it should be written in the form of an interrogative statement requesting accurate information ("questions must be directed to precise details," the author said in her article, suggestively entitled "Improvisations"⁷).

Starting with 2014, when Mrs. Rodica Zafiu's article was published, and until the 2019 national exams (National Assessment and Baccalaureate Exam), not only 'text comprehension', but all competence found in school curricula and discipline examination programs Romanian Language and Literature are evaluated by means of items formulated with a punctuation specific to assertions but using an imperative; they are false-imperative though, because it resembles the interrogative statements, while requesting information from the student.

Taking a closer look at the items aiming towards "text comprehension skills," we find that these are found within Subject I, A both in the topics proposed as a model for the baccalaureate exam in the current school year, and in the topics proposed for the preliminary preparation of this exam organized in March 2019.

Part A in Subject I consists of five items that are solved on the basis of understanding the message from a support text.

Let us take a look at the task of the "model subject"⁸ for the Baccalaureate Exam in the exam sessions to be held in 2019 and which should be a benchmark for individual or classroom training:

- (1) Indicate the meaning of the sequence "we cannot overlook".
- (2) Mention the name of a building subject to the restoration process, by reference to the given text.
- (3) Explain the author's attitude when he returns to Vienna, as is apparent from the first paragraph of the text; motivate your answer using a significant sequence.
- (4) Explain why the play "Tristan and Isolde" makes the author feel confused.

⁷ Rodica Zafiu, 2014, „Improvizații”, Dilema Veche, no. 542, 3-9 July 2014, p. 4.

⁸ The sample subject for the written exam in the Romanian Language and Literature course can be consulted on the Baccalaureate Exam Exam website at http://subiecte.edu.ro/2019/bacalaureat/modelledesubiecte/probescrise/Bac_2019_E_Limba_si_litteratura_romana_modele.zip

(5) Explain, in 30-50 words, a feature of the Viennese, which is shown in the support text.

The issues raised by these items are multiple. First of all, we note that they are not formulated in interrogative statements. Then, on a more careful reading, we discover some semantic and even logical issues that we will try to analyze below.

It should be mentioned that the Ministry of Education proposes subjects for the preliminary preparation⁹ of the Baccalaureate Exam in 2019, according to the structure of the model presented at the beginning of the current school year as we can see below:

- (6) Indicate the meaning of the sequence "to acquire his teachings".
- (7) Starting from the support text name the place the character comes from to follow high school in Bucharest.
- (8) Name a feature of an authentic mathematician; motivate your answer using a relevant sequence in the text.
- (9) Explain why Professor Banciu meant more to the author than to his colleagues.
- (10) Explain, in 30-50 words, the transformation that students in the first semester of the 5th grade go through, referring to the support text.

The similarity of the two groups of items is given by the action or command verbs: indicate, specify, explain. The wording of the requirement using the imperative but requesting information has become almost traditional in the teaching process, both in the speech of some teachers and in the discourse used in textbooks.

In our opinion, tasks (1) and (6) would be much clearer and simpler if they had an interrogatory structure such as:

⁹ The sample subject for the preliminary preparation written exam in the Romanian Language and Literature course can be consulted on the Baccalaureate Exam website at http://subiecte.edu.ro/2019/simulare/simulare_bac_XII/E_a_XII_limba_romana_2019_simulare_varianta_si_barem.zip

- (1a) What is the meaning / meaning of the sequence "we cannot overlook"?
- (6a) What is the meaning / meaning of the sequence "to acquire his teachings"?

We believe that statements (1a) and (6a) are more natural and more appropriate to the didactic discourse, especially the one aimed at the evaluation, not the formation of new competence, or the teaching of new content, didactic approaches that involve action and within which instructions can be given in order to get the student to act.

In the *Grammar of the Romanian Language*, in the chapter called *Types of statements according to the purpose of the communication*, by Andra Vasilescu and Ileana Vântu, we find that these types of imperative structure involve some aspects which, in our view, should not be used in an item at a national evaluation exam. Here is what the above-mentioned authors said:

*"By using imperative structures in order to ask a question, the speaker assumes a discursive position superior to the interlocutor, exerting a pressure on the answer"*¹⁰.

The wording of the two tasks - (1) and (6), also raises issues of a semantic nature. According to the *Dictionary of the Romanian Language*¹¹, the second meaning of the definition is totally inappropriate to the context, and the first meaning is also quite difficult to accept in the wording of those tasks. Here's the definition:

INDICÁ, indic, vb. I. Trans. 1. To show someone or something; to make known, to signal. 2. Recommend, prescribe (treatments, medications, etc.). - From fr. indiquer, lat. indicare.

It would have been possible to have a semantic equalization of the verb "to indicate" with the phrase "to make known", if the authors of the dictionary had not specified that the meaning of "to make known" is "to signal".

¹⁰ Valeria Gutu Romalo, coord., 2005, *Grammar of Romanian Language* (GALR), vol. 2, Bucharest: Editura Academiei Române, p. 44.

¹¹ Ion Coteanu, Luiza Seche, Mircea Seche, coord., 1996, *Explanatory Dictionary of Romanian Language*, (DEX), 2nd Edition, Bucharest: Editura Univers Enciclopedic, s.v. *indica*.

If we tried to replace the verb explain with the verb "to indicate" (something), the latter would have been used improperly because, by looking at the same dictionary, we find the author clearly states that the meaning equalized with the verb "to indicate" also shows the execution of a gesture (possibly by hand or finger only) on the part of the person showing / indicating, as we see in the dictionary definition¹², and this is obviously impossible in the case of a written exam. Here's the DEX definition:

ARĂTÁ, *arăt*, vb. I. 2. Trans. *Indicate (by a gesture) the person or work on which attention is drawn. ♦ Phr. To show (someone) the door = to show (someone) out of a place. To point to someone, it is said of someone whom the world despises for his deeds. ♦ Indicate a measure, a direction, etc. ♦ To indicate the time, minutes and seconds.*

Similar problems are identified in the other imperative verbs in the complete set of five requirements. Thus, the verb "to mention"¹³ would have a meaning in the series of the following verbs: to signal, to remember, or to the series, to mention to note, coming from fr. *mentionner*. It is obvious that a replacement with these semantic equivalents in the context used is quite difficult to accept. And if we looked at a dictionary of synonyms¹⁴, we would discover other interesting equivalents of the verb "to mention", such as the similarity of this verb with the verb to indicate:

MENTIONÁ vb. I. v. *mention*. 2. *record, specify, specify*. 3. v. *indicate*

The primary meaning - remember, indicated by this dictionary cannot replace it in the context of mentioning, because it is unacceptable to believe that the assessor can ask the candidate to remind him "the name of a building undergoing the restoration process" nor "the name of place of which the author comes to Bucharest ". We can exclude the second meaning as inappropriate in the context because the authors provide a context that clarifies the correct meaning of the synonyms, and the third meaning - to

¹² *Ibidem*, s.v. *arăta*.

¹³ *Ibidem*, s.v. *menționa*.

¹⁴ Mircea Seche, Luiza Seche, 2002, *Dictionary of Synonyms*, Bucharest: Editura Litera Internațional, s.v. *menționá*.

indicate, would mean to return to the previous debate, in which the word is equivalent to the verb to point (by using your hand/finger).

Now let us see how simple it would be if statements (2) and (7) were converted into interrogative structures? Not only it would clarify the issue, but it would be very natural, appropriate to the didactic discourse that the evaluation implies. This is how the two statements would look like:

(2a) *What is the name of one of the buildings undergoing the restoration process, mentioned in the text?*

(7a) *What is the name of the place the character comes from to follow high school in Bucharest, mentioned in the text?*

I did not accidentally bold the final part of each statement. These are unnecessary and add to the requirement, because before the requirements there is a clarification on the five items: "Write the answer to each of the following requirements on the exam sheet."

We find interesting the use of the structure "explain the reason" in statements (4) and (9). If we put together the definitions of the two words, we make a surprising discovery:

EXPLICÁ, explíc, vb. I. Trans. Making it easier to understand; to clarify.

MOTIVUL n. I. Reason, cause of action; the impulse that pushes action or causes action; mobile.

If we replace in sentences (4) and (9) the structure "explain the reason" with, let us say, "clarify / make the cause easier to understand"

(4a) Explain / Make it easier to understand why the play "Tristan and Isolde" makes the author feel confused.

(9a) Explain / Makes it easier to understand why Professor Banciu meant more to the author than to his colleagues.

We are convinced that the authors of the two items wanted the students to understand something else, especially since the suggested answer given in the correction table is:

(4 - suggested answer) The author is puzzled by the interventions at the end of "Tristan and Isolde"¹⁵.

(9 - suggested answer) The author followed a career in mathematics / the mathematics professor was his role model¹⁶;

If we converted the structure "explain the reason" into "what is the reason", the statements (4) and (9) would be much clearer and simpler. This way the answers could easily be deduced, as Mrs. Rodica Zafiu suggested - "the questions must be aimed at precise details, [...] be based on attention and deduction."¹⁷

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¹⁵ National Baccalaureate Exam 2019, Part E. a) Romanian Language and Literature, Assessment and Note Bars Model. http://subiecte.edu.ro/2019/bacalaureat/modeledesubiecte/probescrise/Bac_2019_E_a_Limba_si_literatura_romana_modele.zip

¹⁶ National Baccalaureate Exam 2019, Part E. a) Romanian Language and Literature, Class XII, Assessment and Memo Bars, Simulation. http://subiecte.edu.ro/2019/simulare/simulare_bac_XII/E_a_XII_limba_romana_2019_simulare_varianta_si_barem.zip

¹⁷ Rodica Zafiu, *art. cit.*

Website:

For the sample subject for the preliminary preparation written exam in the Romanian Language and Literature course can be consulted on the Baccalaureate Exam website at
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