Language Diversity Seen from the Perspective of Preparatory Year Programmes

Raluca-Elena HURDUZEU,
Viorela-Valentina DIMA,
Maria-Antoaneta LORENTZ*

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Introduction

In this paper we aim to shed light on how preparatory year programmes for foreign languages capitalize on the multilingual competences of students. We start with an overview of the need for preparatory programmes in Europe. We then focus on the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens organized by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania: diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, languages used in the teaching process, opportunities for insertion on the education and labour markets.

A note on linguistic diversity and multiculturalism

Given the increased globalized world of the 21st century, people from all over the globe have been moving (more or less) freely to pursue personal and professional goals, to explore opportunities for development and enhanced satisfaction of ever more complex needs. This has resulted in societies becoming ever more multicultural and multilingual, hence in the need for people to develop and capitalize on their multicultural and multilingual competences.

According to the English Oxford Living Dictionaries, multiculturalism is "[t]he presence of several distinct cultural or ethnic groups within a society". To be successfully integrated in such a society, one needs to enhance one's multicultural skills, which range from cognitive to affective and behavioural competences:

> knowledge (for example, knowledge about other cultural groups and their products and practices, and knowledge about the ways in which people of different cultures interact), attitudes (such as curiosity, openness, respect for otherness and empathy),

* Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania (raluca.hurduzeu@rei.ase.ro, viorela.dima@ase.ro, an_ililorentz@yahoo.com).

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skills of interpreting and relating (for example, interpreting a practice from another culture and relating it to practices within one's own culture), skills of discovery (such as the ability to search out and acquire new knowledge about a culture and its practices and products), and critical cultural awareness (that is, the ability to evaluate critically the practices and products of one's own and other cultures) (cf. Council of Europe 2009: 10).

These complex multicultural skills can be developed by one's active involvement in learning languages, with the latter seen as instruments for acquiring complex knowledge of the target culture. When learning and using a language, we become aware not only of its morphological and syntactic structures but also of the realities and abstract representations encoded by it. Hence, the more languages one comes to be proficient in, the more complex one's understanding of the world, as seen through as many lenses as languages mastered and used to glimpse at the world.

Against this background, the European Union has embraced linguistic diversity, perceived as follows: "[t]he harmonious co-existence of many languages in Europe is a powerful symbol of the EU's aspiration to be united in diversity, one of the cornerstones of the European project" (European Commission, not dated). Among the benefits of multilingualism, the European Commission (*idem*) highlights the following:

- Languages "can serve as a bridge to other people and open access to other countries and cultures, promoting mutual understanding".

- "Effective multilingualism policies and initiatives can strengthen the opportunities of citizens. Language skills may also increase individuals' employability, facilitate access to services and rights, and contribute to solidarity through enhanced intercultural dialogue and social cohesion".

Several studies have highlighted the way in which mastery of several languages contributes to people's successful integration in the societies they choose to *work* in (cf. a.o. Cilianu-Lascu & Tremblay 2011, Berthoud et al. 2013, Callahan & Gándara 2014, Chiswick & Miller 2015, World Economic Forum 2018). For research on the need for multilingual workers on the Romanian labour market, see Pătru et al. (2018), Dima, Mohanu et al. (2019), Mohanu et. al (2019).

This paper would like to address the way in which mastery of several languages contributes to people's successful integration in the societies they choose to *study* in. More specifically, we examine the way in which students enrolled in a preparatory year programme for foreign languages may resort to multilingual competences to facilitate learning of a new language which, in turn, facilitates integration in a foreign education and labour market.

Preparatory year programmes – clarification

There are (at least) two types of study programmes known as 'foundation year programmes' or 'preparatory year programmes'. On the one hand, there are preparatory year programmes designed to equip future students with *basic knowledge in a certain field* so that they may pursue a Bachelor's degree programme in the respective field (Alghamdi, 2015, AcademicCourses, 2019a, European

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Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018); on the other hand, there are preparatory year programmes designed to teach aspiring students the *language* of the country where they wish to attend Bachelor's/ Master's/ Doctoral study programmes.

As for the education market for preparatory year programmes at European level, AcademicCourses (2019a,b) provide a list of 226 programmes, out of which 165 programmes of the first kind mentioned above in 16 European countries, and 61 programmes of the second kind mentioned above in 11 European countries. Nonetheless, we believe the market is much more extensive than captured by AcademicCourses (2019a,b) – since, if we take a look at Romania's case, only one preparatory year programme of the second type is mentioned, out of the existing 25 programmes. In what follows, we focus only on the preparatory year programmes of the second type.

As regards preparatory year programmes for foreign languages, the curricula are designed so that such programmes facilitate participants' learning of the target language, as well as development of a large array of competences. Among them, we mention academic skills, communication skills, personal relations and personal development skills, employability etc. (apud Alghamdi 2015: 118).

In Europe and Asia, preparatory year programmes for foreign languages aim to facilitate participants' learning of the target language, both in its general use and in its use for specific purposes (sometimes, the curricula also contain specialized courses). Table 1 below comprises a few examples of such preparatory year programmes:

Table 1. Preparatory year programmes for foreign languages in Europe and Asia

country	program	organized by
Austria	Preparatory year programmes for German and English	University of Applied Sciences Technikum Wien, Intensive preparation course for international students (Fachhochschule Technikum Wien not dated)
The Czech Republic	Intensive course in the Czech language	Charles University, (AcademicCourses 2019d.)
Flanders, Belgium	Preparatory year programme (2 semesters) in Dutch (general and special purposes)	UC Leuven-Limburg and partners (Vansteenhuyse not dated)
France	Preparatory year programme in French	IESA School of Arts and Culture, (IESA not dated)
Germany	Preparatory programme of 2 – 4 semesters in German	'Studienkolleg' (Studienkolleg not dated)

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Table 1. Preparatory year programmes for foreign languages in Europe and Asia		
country	**program**	**organized by**
	(general and special purposes)	
Italy	Preparatory year programme in Italian and Arts	Accademia Riaci, (AcademicCourses 2019g)
Romania	Preparatory year programme in Romanian (general and special purposes)	25 universities authorized by the Ministry of National Education (MinEdu 2017, apud Militaru et. al 2018)
Russia	Preparatory year programme in Russian	several universities, (AcademicCourses 2019c)
Spain	Preparatory year programme in Spanish	UCAM Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia (AcademicCourses 2019e)
Turkey	Preparatory year programme in English "for students needing to reach the language level for faculty"	Yaşar University, (EURASHE not dated)
United Kingdom	Preparatory year programme in English and specialized courses	University of Nottingham, (University of Nottingham not dated), and other universities (AcademicCourses 2019f)

In Romania, the list of 25 universities authorized by the Ministry of National Education to organize a preparatory year of Romanian language for foreign citizens comprises both public and private higher education institutions (MinEdu, 2017, apud Militaru et. al, 2018). The preparatory year programmes in Romanian as a foreign language are evaluated in a similar fashion to Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral study programmes: they can be established only after a rigorous authorization process, and they are thoroughly evaluated every 5 years according to national accreditation and reaccreditation standards, elaborated by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – ARACIS (cf. ARACIS, 2017). The national standards refer to issues such as: the curricula (comprising obligatory and elective disciplines of general Romanian and Romanian for special purposes, culture and civilisation etc.), the number of students that can be enrolled in a higher education institution, the specialised and transversal competences students are expected to obtain, learning resources, graduates' insertion in the education market,

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the professional competences of academics who teach in the programme, internal quality assurance procedures etc.

The Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens organized by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania

The programme, henceforth referred to as APLR ASE, was authorized in 2014 and accredited in 2017. In the period 2014–2019, APLR ASE enrolled more than 320 students from more than 30 countries across the globe, most of them from non-European countries: Albania, Algeria, Azerbaijan, Brazil, Bulgaria, China, Congo, Egypt, France, Georgia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Lebanon, Mexico, Morocco, Nigeria, North Macedonia, Palestine, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, United States of America, Vietnam, Yemen and Zimbabwe. Figure 1 below captures the geographic distribution of the countries of origin of APLR ASE students:



Figure 1. Countries of origin for APLR ASE students enrolled in 2014–2019
(map designed with www.mapcustomizer.com)

Since participating students come from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds, several languages are used in the teaching process, so as to facilitate understanding of Romanian linguistic, cultural and professional realities. Among these languages, we mention Romanian and English mainly, but also French, Italian, Arabic, Spanish, and Russian. By resorting to this rather wide range of languages to communicate during the Romanian language and culture classes comprised in APLR ASE's curriculum, students (and academics) develop not only their language skills, but also their intercultural competences (see also Șerban, R.N., 2018: p. 48, Dima, Hurduzeu & Fedot, 2019). For research on the specificities of teaching Romanian as a foreign language, see also Rusiewicz-Woźny & Struzińska (2002), Chiriac, Vîntu & Trebeș (2017), Toma (2017), and Stanciu-Capotă & Șerban, M. (2018). For research on the ways in which the preparatory year programmes of Romanian language contribute to the social and cultural (not only linguistic) integration of participants in the Romanian society, see Dafinoiu (2016), as wel as Dima, Hurduzeu & Fedot (2019).

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The curriculum of the APLR ASE programme contains: classes of Romanian for general and specialized purposes: phonetics, vocabulary, grammar, oral and written communication; introductory classes on Romanian culture and civilization; as well as classes of Romanian for special purposes – i.e. for social sciences (economics – finance, management, marketing), biological and biomedical sciences (anatomy, biology, chemistry), or engineering sciences (transport and constructions, management and information technology). The programme develops a variety of skills, such as:

- receptive and productive *language skills*, i.e. listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, writing (A1 to B1, according to CEFR 2001);
- *intercultural and mediation skills* between learners' own cultures and the Romanian culture, as well as across learners' own cultures by resorting to Romanian;
- *transversal competences* such as rigorous and efficient management of professional tasks, networking and teamwork abilities, increased awareness of continuing education methods and opportunities.

For the continuing improvement of the programme, the organizing faculty (i.e. the Faculty of International Business and Economics from the Bucharest University of Economic Studies) monitors the graduates' opportunities for insertion in Romania's higher education market, as well as the country's labour market. We briefly present data on the 2015–2018 series of APLR ASE alumni.

As regards APLR ASE graduates' insertion in the Romanian *education* market, we noticed that the 2015–2018 APLR ASE graduates were successfully admitted in Bachelor's, Master's, Doctoral and postgraduate programmes organized by 15 Romanian universities in 5 cities and towns: Bucharest, Cluj-Napoca, Constanța, Iași, Oradea, as rendered in Figure 2 below. The specialisations that 2015–2018 APLR ASE graduates were able to pursue upon completing the APLR ASE programme were in the fields of:

- *social sciences* – economics and its sub-domains: accounting, economic cybernetics, finance, international business and economics, management;
- *biological and biomedical sciences*: human and veterinary medicine, pharmacy;
- *engineering sciences*: constructions, engineering, mechanics;
- other areas: architecture, interior design, English language and literature, physical education and sports.

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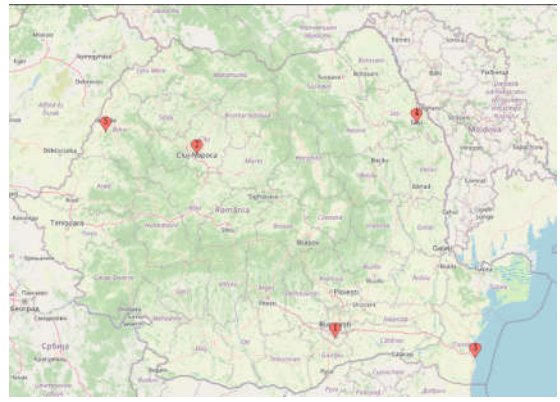


Figure 2. Cities where APLR ASE graduates of 2015–2018 enrolled in Romanian higher education study programs (map designed with www.mapcustomizer.com)

As regards APLR ASE graduates' insertion on the Romanian *labour* market, we noticed that the 2015–2018 APLR ASE graduates had the opportunity to work both during the higher education programmes they enrolled in after completing the APLR ASE programme, and after graduating from the respective higher education programmes. On the one hand, during higher education studies, APLR ASE graduates participated in professional placements and internships offered by small and medium-sized enterprises and multinationals in fields such as: insurance, banking, consultancy, the distribution sector, or hospitals and pharmacies. On the other hand, upon completing higher education studies, APLR ASE graduates found jobs in: call centres, petty trade, department stores, gyms, e-commerce, or the health system; moreover, some APLR ASE graduates work as language teachers (of Arabic, Spanish, English), or freelancers (photographer, graphic and web designers).

In sum, this section has described language diversity at work in APLR ASE's preparatory year programme for Romanian as a foreign language. We have shown that the diverse linguistic and cultural background of participants coming from more than 30 countries across the globe leads to the use of several languages during instruction, which facilitates understanding not only of Romanian linguistic, cultural and professional realities, but also of those of participants' countries of origin. This, in turn, helps APLR ASE students better integrate in the Romanian education and labour markets, where not only mastery of (general and specialized) Romanian is required, but also mastery of other languages, as well as of intercultural and transversal competences (cf. Pătru et al., 2018, Dima, Mohanu et al., 2019, Mohanu et. al, 2019).

Conclusions

This article has addressed the way in which preparatory year programmes for foreign languages may capitalize upon the multilingual competences of participating students. Firstly, we briefly touched upon the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Secondly, we pointed to the existence of several types of

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preparatory or foundation year programmes in Europe – and pointed to the fact that they may be used to provide training in languages and/or basic knowledge in a certain field that may be chosen for further education. Thirdly, we focused on the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens organized by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania, a programme which we referred to as APLR ASE. We described the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of participants, the languages used in the teaching process, the opportunities for graduates' insertion in the Romanian education and labour markets. To conclude, we would like to express our firm belief that preparatory year programmes may contribute to the formation and development of multilingual individuals, equipped with: (foreign) language skills, a variety of intercultural skills, and a set of attitudes that contribute to their inclusion on the education and labour markets of the destination countries, as well as to their active participation in society.

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Abstract

In this paper, we aimed to shed light on how preparatory year programmes for foreign languages capitalize on the multilingual competences of participating students. More specifically, we examined the way in which students enrolled in a preparatory year programme for foreign languages may resort to multilingual competences to facilitate learning of a new language which, in turn, facilitates integration in a foreign education and labour market.

Firstly, we briefly touched upon the benefits of multilingualism and multiculturalism. Within the background of the increased globalized world of the 21st century, multicultural and multilingual skills represent a pathway to successful integration of people from all over the globe who have been moving (more or less) freely to pursue their personal and professional goals, to explore opportunities for their development and enhanced satisfaction of ever more complex needs. These skills can be developed by one's active involvement in learning languages, with the latter seen as instruments for acquiring complex knowledge of the target culture. When learning and using a language, we become aware not only of its morphological and syntactic structures but also of the realities and abstract representations encoded by it. Hence, the more languages one comes to be proficient in, the more complex one's understanding of the world, as seen through as many lenses as languages mastered and used to glimpse at the world. Against this background, the European Union has embraced linguistic diversity as "[o]ne of the cornerstones of the European project." Several studies have highlighted the way in which mastery of several languages contributes to people's successful integration in the societies they choose to *study* and *work* in.

Secondly, we pointed to the existence of several types of preparatory or foundation year programmes in Europe – and pointed to the fact that they may be used to provide training in languages and/or basic knowledge in a certain field that may be chosen for further education. There are (at least) two types of study programmes known as 'foundation year programmes' or 'preparatory year programmes'. On the one hand, there are preparatory year programmes designed to equip future students with *basic knowledge in a certain field* so that they may pursue a Bachelor's degree programme in the respective field); on the other hand, there are preparatory year programmes designed to teach aspiring students the *language* of the country where they wish to attend Bachelor's/ Master's/ Doctoral study programmes. In our paper, we focused only on the preparatory year programmes of the second type and provided a few examples of such preparatory year programmes.

Thirdly, we focused on the Preparatory Year of Romanian Language for Foreign Citizens organized by the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), Romania, a programme which we referred to as APLR ASE. This programme was authorized in 2014 and accredited in 2017. In the period 2014–2019, APLR ASE enrolled more than 320 students from more than 30 countries across the globe. We described the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of participants, the languages used in the teaching process, the opportunities for graduates' insertion in the Romanian education and labour markets. We illustrated how these diverse backgrounds, which require the use of several languages during instruction, facilitate understanding not only of Romanian linguistic, cultural, and professional realities, but also of those of participants' countries of origin. This, in turn, helps APLR ASE students better integrate in the Romanian education and labour markets, where not only mastery of (general and specialized) Romanian is required, but also mastery of other languages, as well as of intercultural and transversal competences (cf. Pătru et al., 2018, Dima, Mohanu et al., 2019, Mohanu et. al, 2019).

As a conclusion, we expressed our firm belief that preparatory year programmes may contribute to the formation and development of multilingual individuals, equipped with: (foreign) language skills, a variety of intercultural skills, and a set of attitudes that are conducive to their inclusion on the education and labour markets of the destination countries, as well as to their active participation in society.

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