

PLURILINGUALISM AND ASSESSMENT. ROMANIAN AS A FOREIGN AND HERITAGE LANGUAGE

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ABSTRACT. *Plurilingualism and Assessment. Romanian as a Foreign and Heritage Language.* The study presents the revision process of two rating grids for the examinations provided through Babeş-Bolyai University – Romanian Cultural Institute Consortium for Testing Romanian as a Foreign Language. It focuses on how plurilingual competence was addressed as part of the revision. The first case presents revisions to the grid for written production, level A1. The revision process was corpus-based and started from the analysis of 352 texts produced in live exams. Reordering the grid criteria prioritised the criterion of efficacy (task fulfilment). In this study we focus on the criterion of accuracy, which operationalised the use of foreign (i.e., from an additional language) words by plurilingual test takers in their written production. This led to the addition of a new descriptor to the assessment instrument. The second case presents the revision process of the rating grid for spoken production, level B1, with a focus on the criterion of accuracy. The grid descriptor operationalising phonological control changed in order to reflect the influence of other languages on pronunciation, rhythm, accent, stress, and intonation. Intelligibility replaced the idealised native speaker as a reference point, in accordance with the new perspective reflected in the phonological control grid of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion*

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Volume (CEFR CV). The study presents how the adaptation of this grid was influenced by the significant number of test takers with Romanian as heritage language. These processes of rating-grid revision are considered a first step into what needs to be a robust effort to adapt language assessment to the plurilingual reality of speakers.

Keywords: *plurilingualism, plurilingual competence, heritage language, assessment, rating grid*

REZUMAT. *Plurilingvism și evaluare. Româna ca limbă străină și ca limbă moștenită.* Studiul prezintă procesul de revizuire a două grile de evaluare pentru examenele organizate de către Consorțiul Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai – Institutul Cultural Român pentru Testarea Românei ca Limbă Străină și se axează asupra modului în care competența plurilingvă a fost inclusă în procesul de revizuire. Primul caz prezintă revizuirea grilei pentru producții scrise, nivelul A1. Procesul de revizuire s-a bazat pe analiza unui corpus de 352 de texte produse ca parte a unor sesiuni de examinare. Una dintre consecințe a fost reordonarea criteriilor incluse în grilă, cu prioritizarea criteriului eficienței (îndeplinirea sarcinii). În acest studiu ne concentrăm asupra criteriului acurateței. Acesta include, în forma sa actuală, un nou descriptor care operaționalizează utilizarea de cuvinte din alte limbi în producțiile scrise ale candidaților. Al doilea caz prezintă procesul de revizuire a grilei de evaluare pentru producțiile orale, nivelul B1, cu accent asupra criteriului acurateței. Descriptorul care operaționalizează controlul fonologic în cadrul grilei a fost schimbat pentru a reflecta influența altor limbi asupra producției candidatului în ceea ce privește pronunția, ritmul, accentul și intonația. Inteligibilitatea a înlocuit modelul unui vorbitor nativ idealizat ca punct de referință, în acord cu noua perspectivă reflectată în grila pentru controlul fonologic din *Cadrul European Comun de Referință pentru Limbi: Învățare, Predare, Evaluare. Volumul Companion*. Studiul prezintă modul în care adaptarea acestei grile a fost influențată de numărul semnificativ de candidați care au româna ca limbă moștenită. Aceste procese de revizuire a grilelor de evaluare sunt considerate un prim pas pentru ceea ce ar trebui să fie un efort amplu de abordare a realității plurilingve a vorbitorilor în procesul de evaluare lingvistică.

Cuvinte-cheie: *plurilingvism, competență plurilingvă, limbă moștenită, evaluare, grilă de evaluare*

1. The plurilingual speaker in a multilingual context

1.1. The social and political context

The phenomenon of intense migration that we see nowadays around the globe (<https://publications.iom.int/books/world-migration-report-2024>) combined with historical minority communities and the geopolitical legacy of

colonisation paints a very diverse multilingual portrait of humanity today². Moreover, current global trends indicate that the mobility of populations is rising³. While the reasons for leaving one's homeland are highly varied, the challenges that migrants and refugees face in the new countries are broadly similar, albeit varying in degree. Language is one of the most important forces impacting the migrants' and refugees' future from an educational, professional and personal point of view (International Organisation for Migration 2024, 91, 180, 184; Little 2016, 1; Rocca, Hamnes Carlsen, Deygers 2018, 7). While the ever-increasing mobility of people across the world generates unprecedented linguistic demands, the urgent solutions differ substantially in effectiveness and accessibility.

Educational organisations and institutions face increasing diversity in the linguistic education of children and adults, with multilingual classes and groups becoming more common. Adults need, as well, to prepare for integrating professionally into new language communities. The result is increasing numbers of pluricultural and plurilingual learners.

Language learners/users will naturally have one, if not more, languages (which may include 'dialects') that they may call 'home languages', because they used them during their formative years. Throughout their life they will find themselves using language, in the broadest sense, as well as different languages, in varied contexts with many other users at different levels of competence, and they will acquire new language to bridge communicative gaps that exist between themselves and others. These interactions mean the language user becomes a plurilingual, pluricontextual language learner, and sites the acquisition of language very much within a socio-cognitive understanding (ALTE 2020, 9).

Romanian has progressively become part of the multilingual reality in Europe, especially in the 35 years since the political changes in our country at the end of 1989. As with other communities in Diaspora, the effort of Romanian migrants is generally directed not only to learning the language of the host country but also to preserving their Romanian, whether it is their L1 or heritage language.

² We will adopt in this study the distinction between *multilingualism* and *plurilingualism* as it is presented in *CEFR* and *CEFR CV*: "The CEFR distinguishes between multilingualism (the coexistence of different languages at the social or individual level) and plurilingualism (the dynamic and developing linguistic repertoire of an individual user/learner)" (Council of Europe 2020, 30).

³ See the *Global Trends Report* issued by UNHCR in 2022 (<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-report-2022>) and the *Global Risks Report 2024* (https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_The_Global_Risks_Report_2024.pdf) issued by the World Economic Forum, among other documents.

1.2. Plurilingual competence

Languages are normally described as *products*⁴, in isolation from each other, objectified in grammar books and in dictionaries. In addition, dialects are presented discretely in the effort to define and differentiate variants of the same language. This analytical approach can provide useful tools for language learning and assessment. When used as part of a teaching strategy, one needs to consider the multilingual and plurilingual reality of the language learner and speaker. Eugenio Coseriu clearly distinguishes between the discrete description of dialects and the linguistic competence of a language speaker whose knowledge of various dialects is *integrated* rather than separated (*Figure 1*).

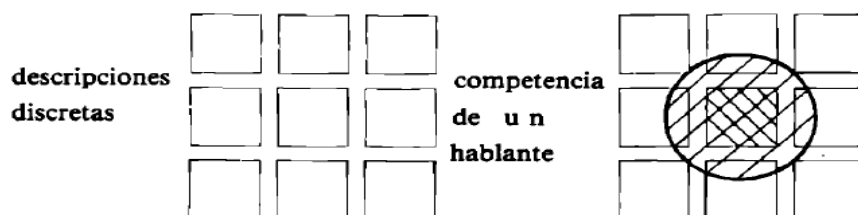


Figure 1. The speaker's integrated knowledge of dialects⁵
(Coseriu 1988/1992, 176)

In the same manner, different languages are often co-present and integrated in the linguistic competence of a speaker⁶. Moreover, according to David Crystal, three quarters of the global population live in a multilingual

⁴ According to the tripartite distinction Eugenio Coseriu makes at the level of language between *energeia* (activity), *dínamis* (competence) and *érgon* (product) (Coseriu 1988/1992, 88).

⁵ On the left of the page (first drawing): discrete descriptions; on the right of the page (second drawing): the competence of a speaker (my translation).

⁶ „En el hablante no hay un estar uno junto a otro, sino más bien un estar uno encima de otro. /.../ La descripción separada de los sistemas de la lengua no puede, además, delimitar lo que los hablantes de otros dialectos saben del dialect descrito. Si el dialect que ocupa el centro en nuestro esquema (here *Figure 1*) es el dialect principal del hablante, puede suponerse en el caso normal que también sabe algunas cosas de los otros dialectos, tal como se indica mediante el sombreado.” [In the speaker there is not a state next to each other, but rather a state on top of each other. /.../ Moreover, the separate description of the language systems cannot delimitate what the speakers of other dialects know about the dialect which is described. If the dialect which occupies the centre in our figure (here *Figure 1*) is the main dialect of the speaker, it can be assumed, in a normal case that he/she also knows some things about the other dialects, as indicated in the shaded area. – my translation] (Coseriu 1988/1992, 176).

world (Crystal in Seed 2020, 5) in which speakers employ their competence in multiple languages and dialects in myriad ways. Consequently, in terms of language use, what we usually encounter is the *plurilingual speaker in a multilingual context*. This reality needs to reflect more in the language learning process, in its teaching and assessment instruments.

CEFR CV defines plurilingual competence (based on CEFR 2001, Section 1.3) as involving the ability to call flexibly upon an interrelated, uneven, plurilingual repertoire to:

switch from one language or dialect (or variety) to another; express oneself in one language (or dialect, or variety) and understand a person speaking another; call upon the knowledge of a number of languages (or dialects, or varieties) to make sense of a text; recognise words from a common international store in a new guise; mediate between individuals with no common language or dialect, or variety), even if possessing only a slight knowledge oneself; bring the whole of one's linguistic equipment into play, experimenting with alternative forms of expression; exploits paralinguistics (mime, gesture, facial expression, etc.). (Council of Europe 2020, 30)⁷.

2. Plurilingualism and language learning

The reality of a plurilingual speaker in a multilingual context has been addressed as part of the process of language learning and assessment. According to Gorter and Cenoz (2017, 231) a shift can be observed “away from an emphasis on separating languages to approaches that more closely suit daily practices of multilinguals. This concerns a shift from language isolation policies in language teaching and assessment towards more holistic approaches that consider language-as-resource and promote the use of the whole linguistic repertoire.” Another reality of language learning to which language teachers and assessors need to respond is that the people learning the language are found in an abundance of contexts, not just inside but increasingly outside the classroom. “We know that much language learning takes place informally – listening to music, playing games and watching films, using the internet and communicating electronically, and increasingly in our multilingual cities in the diverse street. How will educators respond to this reality, treating it not as a diversion but as a major source of knowledge and incorporating what learners bring with them from their outside world...?” (King 2018, 33).

⁷ For other terms used as alternatives to plurilingualism, with possible slight differentiations in meaning (e.g. *individual multilingualism*, *individual bilingualism*, *code-switching*, *translanguaging*) see Seed 2020, 7.

A pivot in education policy towards multilingualism and plurilingualism can be noticed in the USA and in Europe. An early approach is found in Ruiz (1984), who, in relation to the educational context of language learning in the USA, distinguishes between the orientations of *language-as-problem*, *language-as-right* and *language-as-resource*. Through a document entitled *Raise the Bar: Pathways to Multilingualism*, the U.S. Department of Education promotes equitable access to English learning, improved access to quality bilingual education, and the development of a diverse, bilingual and multilingual workforce of educators (<https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-initiatives/raise-bar/raise-the-bar-pathways-to-multilingualism>). At the same time, students are directly encouraged to learn new languages and to continue using their mother tongue/ L1/ heritage language through programmes like the *Seal of Biliteracy*. The Seal of Biliteracy is “an award given by a school, district or state in recognition of students who have studied and attained proficiency in two or more languages by high school graduation” (<https://sealofbiliteracy.org/>), a programme which “encourages students to pursue biliteracy, honors the skills our students attain, and can be evidence of skills that are attractive to future employers and college admission offices” (<https://sealofbiliteracy.org/>).

At the same time, concrete language-learning programmes promote plurilingualism in a wealth of multilingual contexts. For example, there are projects through which teachers are helped “to move informedly towards plurilingual education” (Esteve, Fernández, Martín-Peris & Atienza 2015, 1). Such a project was developed in collaboration with schools in Barcelona to help Spanish teachers teaching additional languages “move in a principled way towards plurilingual education” (Esteve, Fernández, Martín-Peris & Atienza 2015, 2). Another project, called TEMPLATE and developed across ten European countries, investigated “the integration of technology and plurilingual-inspired pedagogies in terms of awareness, use and training needs” (Boggio-López and Ruiz-Madrid 2024, 1). An increasing number of studies present concrete teaching practices leveraging plurilingualism (Pearce 2024; Grommes P. and Adelheid Hu (eds.) 2014; Piccardo E., Germain-Rutherford A. and Geoff Lawrence (eds.) 2022; Little D., Leung C. and Piet Van Avermaet (eds.) (2014) and a multitude of possible curriculum scenarios are presented in Coste, Moore and Zarate (2009).

It is interesting to see how the direct teaching method that keeps L1 and L2 apart in teaching and assessment, long considered unquestionable in so many contexts in modern education, is now seen as the “traditional view.” (Gorter and Cenoz 2017, 235) It “has affected many generations of students and teachers,” being “taken for granted as the foundation-stones of language teaching.” (Cook 2001, 404) We prefer to interpret this evolution in Adamson’s terms: It is not just another “fashion” in language-teaching methodology, nor a

new or renewed method “inherently superior to another,” but rather a search for which methods are “more appropriate than others in a particular context” (Adamson 2004, 605).

3. Plurilingual assessment. Two case studies

Is there a multilingual/plurilingual turn in assessment, too? While we see numerous studies investigating multilingualism and plurilingualism in SLA, language policy, teaching practices, and pedagogy, a significant shift in the realm of assessment is not yet evident. Seed (2020, 8) notices that “very little attention has been paid to plurilingualism in the field of assessment.” Cenoz (2023, xi) states that “plurilingual/multilingual assessment has not received enough attention.” Melo-Pfeifer and Ollivier (2023, 2) show that “the assessment of plurilingual learners has drawn little attention in education policies.”

The type of assessment based on CEFR scales is generally monolingually inclined, according to Beacco et al.: “learners are supposed to demonstrate, in one language at a time, their competence according to a given level within the CEFR scales. These standards are predominant, when in reality the interaction among plurilingual speakers is more complex” (Beacco et al. 2016, 69). In contrast with plurilingual teaching, the significantly less-advanced implementation of plurilingual assessment can be explained by the many obstacles such assessment might face in the real world of interlinguistic and intercultural education. In an assessment paper, should the input, rubrics, or both be offered in bilingual or plurilingual form? How can we implement plurilingual assessment in a multilingual classroom or exam in which the test-takers have diverse L1s unfamiliar to the assessors? In a routine assessment of one language, to what extent will the assessor accept the integration of elements from one or more other languages in the test takers’ responses? How should assessment instruments (e.g. scales, grids, checklists) be built in order to accommodate plurilingual responses? How should results of plurilingual assessment be reported to stakeholders? Easy and straightforward answers are not to be expected to such complex questions. However, the fact that they are expressed represents a step forward into addressing the new complex reality of language assessment in an increasingly plurilingual world.

In our language-testing organization (Babeş-Bolyai University-Romanian Cultural Institute Consortium for Testing Romanian as a Foreign Language) we are acutely aware that we need to accommodate plurilingual speakers and examinees. We confront the difficulty of finding solutions for all the questions above, that are but a small portion of burgeoning needs.

We will present two cases in which we tried to adapt our assessment process to the plurilingual reality of our candidates. Both employ changes to the assessment grid grounded in corpus-based analysis. The first is for A1 written responses. The second is for B1 spoken responses.

In the discussion to follow, ‘foreign words’ refers to words from one or more languages distinct from the language being tested, in this case, Romanian.

3.1. The rating grid for written responses. Level A1

3.1.1. The revision process

The first case study involves revision of the assessment instrument for written responses at level A1. It took place between 2016 and 2017, when the extant grid had been employed for fifteen consecutive assessment sessions. The main group of test-takers were students in the preparatory Romanian-language year⁸ at Babeş-Bolyai University. The raters were faculty teaching in that programme⁹. Feedback on the efficacy of the grid was collected from thirteen teachers. They found the instrument useful but in need of improvement. Specifically, some descriptors like *syntactic structures*, *lexical means* were found to be potentially confusing, and adverbs *sometimes*, *frequently* or *often* in descriptors like “They *sometimes* make orthography and punctuation mistakes.” were pointed out as insufficiently clear. The teachers also found that it was sometimes difficult to differentiate between bands because some descriptors were largely similar, even identical, from one band to the next. Teachers also encountered overlapping criteria, for example sentence length and complexity being categorized under ‘accuracy’ instead of ‘complexity.’

The initial design of the assessment grid had been based on the literature in the field and the experience of experts. In contrast, the revision was grounded in the analysis of a corpus of written responses to live exams. The corpus included 352 responses (16,190 words) from 126 examinees who had given express permission to use their anonymized product for research. The examinations had been administered in the Department of Romanian Language,

⁸ The preparatory year is a programme in which the students learn Romanian for the whole academic year and then they normally continue their studies in Romania. Some of them will study in Romanian, others might follow programmes in French or in English. All the examinations in the programme need to be passed for the student to receive the graduation certificate.

⁹ In order to reduce subjectivity and possible bias in rating, the procedure we applied was that of having students in one group assessed by teachers who taught a different group. This procedure was only applied for the end-of-course formal evaluation. During the semester, the teachers did formative assessment and gave adequate feedback to their own students, contributing to the continuous improvement of the teaching process and to the students’ steady progress.

Culture and Civilization, to students in the university's preparatory year of Romanian language learning. The tasks were of two types: written interaction (e-mail) and written production (description). For a balanced representation of the test-taking population, responses were selected¹⁰ according to criteria related to cut-off points, and to test takers' L1 and gender¹¹.

The criteria included in the original grid were maintained, as was the number of points allocated to each criterion in the overall component score. A significant change was made to the order in which the criteria were placed in the grid. The original order was:

COMPLEXITY	ACCURACY	TEXT ORGANIZATION	EFFICACY* (how well they can fulfil the task)
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The criteria were reordered as:

EFFICACY	COMPLEXITY	TEXT ORGANIZATION	ACCURACY
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Even if all the criteria continued to be weighted equally, the assessors were instructed that efficacy became the primary criterion according to which a written response would be judged. This decision was taken in order to avoid assessors' forming an initial opinion about the quality of the written production based on how 'red' the exam paper was, e.g., how many grammatical mistakes the test taker had made. Assessors were asked to shift their judgment towards efficacy. To that end, during the workshops for testing the new grid and for familiarisation with the instrument, the teachers were instructed to start by asking *whether* the task was fulfilled. This was to be determined according to the subpoints in the rubrics. Subsequently, by use of the other criteria, they were to decide *how well* the task was fulfilled.

While this revision process produced changes in the descriptors across the whole grid, in this study we will focus on *accuracy*, the criterion under which the assessment of the plurilingual aspect of the written responses was operationalised. In the original grid, the following key concepts were operationalised: grammar, vocabulary, orthography, and punctuation. The analysis of the test takers' responses led to orthography being subsumed to

¹⁰ According to McEnery and Hardy (2012, 2) "the corpus data we select to explore a research question must be well matched to the research question."

¹¹ More information on the production from the point of view of test takers' L1 and gender and on the application of the criterion related to cut off can be found in Vilcu, Arieșan & Vasîu, 2017.

grammar as part of a common descriptor¹². Moreover, grammar and vocabulary errors are now considered together due to the fact that many vocabulary mistakes were in words which also presented grammatical mistakes. Following analysis, a new descriptor proved necessary for operationalising the component of language transfer¹³.

3.1.2. Findings on language transfer

Table 1 includes examples from the written responses analysed in the process of grid revision that illustrate how foreign words, i.e., words from languages other than Romanian, were integrated in responses in the target language. The foreign words are italicized. Sentences were transcribed exactly as written by examinees. The middle column lists the L1 of the examinee and the right column translates the response into English. All names appearing in the sentences were replaced with the letter X.

Table 1. Samples from written responses containing words from other languages

Romanian	L1 of the author of the text	Translation in English
Lui X îi place juca <i>video game</i> .	Arabic	X likes to play video games.
Facultate este foarte bine și <i>pieceful</i> .	Hindi	The faculty is very good and peaceful.
Eu merg la restaurnt cu X și mănănc <i>soup</i> de pui.	Arabic	I go to the restaurant with X and I eat chicken soup.
El este <i>employe</i> de banca.	Arabic	He is a bank employee.
În cameră, pe masă este un fotbal și <i>basket</i> .	Chinese	In the room, on the table there is a football and a basket.
Îmi place camera de dormi pentru ca este foarte <i>comfortable</i> .	Arabic	I like the bedroom because it is very comfortable.
<i>Nel timpul</i> liber el joacă fotbal cu prieteni.	Albanian	In his free time, he plays football with his friends.
Școala meu <i>starteaza</i> în luni, dupa doua zile.	Armenian	My school starts on Monday, in two days.

¹² The number of mistakes related to word order, orthography and omitted words was very small. They were added to those concerning morphology and were all operationalized under the descriptor related to grammar (Vîlcu, Arieșan & Vasiu 2017, 115).

¹³ The notion of *language transfer* will cover in this study the application of linguistic features from one language to another (e.g. at the level of morphological features in L2 applied to words from L1 or another language) and also the use of lexical units from L1 in the texts written in L2. We chose to use this term rather than *code switching* because the knowledge of the languages which were combined was deeply disbalanced at the time in the language learning process when the texts we analysed were produced. The cases we found in the written production were of isolated words used to fill the gap when the corresponding words in the target language were not known rather than flexibly alternating between the languages.

Even if at level A1 transfer of isolated words is to be expected, we consider that the use of these words in written (rather than spoken) production is relevant and justifies the introduction of a new descriptor to operationalise it. First of all, we will consider the language from which the transfer was made. Most of the students contributing responses to this corpus have L1 languages that are very different from Romanian and other Romance languages, languages that students could rightfully predict that teachers and assessors would not know. Arabic is the L1 most represented in test takers. Other languages, like Greek, Turkmen, Hindi, Chinese, Japanese, etc., are well-represented. Many also spoke a widely-used language (mainly English and French). When they included foreign words in their written texts, those words were, in most cases, not from their L1, but from one of the more widely-used languages they spoke. In almost all cases this was English. This choice probably had two motivations. Students knew: 1) The chance was very slim that the assessor understood a word in their L1; 2) The chance was considerable that a written English or French word was very similar, even identical to the one in the target language (in this case, Romanian). This gave them a chance to make their message understood, even if it was not produced entirely in the target language.

An exception using a non-English word came from a student with Albanian as L1. This student used the Italian preposition *nel* instead of the Romanian *în* [in]. This choice seems to confirm the rationale for word transfer expressed above. The student supposed that the corresponding preposition in Albanian [në] would not be understandable to the Romanian teacher. However, instead of choosing the English word, they chose the Italian *nel*, which might be, in their understanding, closer to Romanian, given the numerous similarities in vocabulary they might have noticed between Italian and Romanian since starting to learn Romanian. It is interesting to notice that the word *time* is written in Italian, but with the Romanian definite article [*tempul*].

Adapting a word from a different language to the morphological system of the target language is a strategy that was applied by other students, as well. The last example in our table, the one coming from a student with Armenian as L1, shows the English verb *start* conjugated according to the Romanian verb paradigm that uses the suffix *-ez*.

The choices displayed in *Table 1* prove that this was part of a communicative strategy and a conscientious and stepwise process: first, the student decided to use a foreign word; second, the student selected the source language, being aware that the assessors would not know their L1 and that using a foreign word might increase the chances of making themselves understood. This shows a mature learner, well aware of the choices they have for overcoming obstacles when writing.

This can be contrasted with a similar situation in Seed & Holland (2020), in a study that shows how plurilingualism was considered when revising the Cambridge exams, with the learner's plurilingual competence seen as "a linguistic repair strategy in Cambridge exam papers, rather than seeing evidence of this as an error" (Seed & Holland 2020, 22). The example comes from the A2 level exam for children (A2 Flyers) where test takers needed to write a short story based on three related pictures. One response employed a word in L1 (Chinese): "One day, Sam and Mary play basketball. They are very happy. Suddenly, basketball in the ocean. One haitun help they catch the basketball" (Seed & Holland 2020, 23). "Haitun" is the transliteration of the Chinese word for 'dolphin'. Even though it is not an English word, it helps make the message complete. In accordance with the assessment criteria that prioritized comprehensibility over accuracy in spelling and grammar, the test taker was not penalized for using the transliteration of the Chinese word, as it was considered a repair strategy rather than a mistake.

In comparison with the child who used the Chinese word in Seed and Holland (2020), the university students in the Romanian written-language exam could make a more calculated choice of words. In making the message understandable and conveying the ideas that they wanted to represent, they chose the source language carefully. The students did not limit their use of foreign words to replacing a missing noun or verb for a concrete word or action. In two cases, the students used adjectives (peaceful, comfortable) in order to transmit their feelings and attitude, not merely to name an object or action required for the text.

3.1.3. The new descriptor operationalising language transfer

Our analysis showed that even some of the best responses at level A1 included foreign words, which inspired us to create a new descriptor in all bands of the assessment grid, including the highest one. This means that a test taker whose written production contains foreign words (in a limited proportion) can still obtain the maximum number of points. As stated before, the main criterion to be considered by the assessor is that of efficacy. If the test takers manage to fulfil the task and make their message understood, accuracy will only significantly degrade the overall score for written production in two cases: The mistakes lead to misunderstanding of the text or if their number is considerable in the fundamental elements for that level.

The fact that we analysed written responses, not oral is relevant to our second point: drawing on plurilingual ability is a compensating strategy. Unlike the oral exam, the written exam gave the students time to elaborate. In this

context, the use of foreign words can be considered the result of strategy and proves that the test takers employ their plurilingual competence and creativity to send their message successfully. We see this as a manifestation of a compensating strategy. Compensating is defined in CEFR CV as “a strategy for maintaining communication when one cannot think of the appropriate expression” (Council of Europe 2020, 69). The key concepts operationalized in the scale include the following: accompanying gestures to support language; deliberately using a “wrong” word/sign and qualifying it; defining the missing concept and paraphrase (circumlocution), and the extent to which such paraphrasing is evident (Council of Europe 2020, 69). The grid’s compensating descriptor for A1 relates exclusively to spoken production (“Can use gestures to support simple words/signs in expressing a need.”). This descriptor could be mirrored with one for written production, at least in local contexts of language learning and assessment, like ours: Can use a word in a different language than the target language of the text to bridge a gap in constructing in written production. This descriptor can be fed also from the CEFR CV scale *Building on plurilingual repertoire*. The descriptor for level A1 is formulated in the following terms: “Can use a very limited repertoire in *different languages* to conduct a very basic, concrete, everyday transaction with a collaborative interlocutor.” (Council of Europe 2020, 128)

The change that we made in the descriptors appreciates and values the test takers’ plurilingual repertoire instead of penalizing its use. With the old grid, the use of any foreign word was often simply tabulated as a mistake. Moreover, we acknowledge the use of a plurilingual repertoire as a strength shown by test takers of all levels. However, as demonstrated in Swain and Lapkin (2013, 110) the use of L1 as part of L2 learning diminishes as the learner progresses towards advanced levels. Two important findings are revealed by Swain and Lapkin: as L2 proficiency increases, L1 may be used for a wider variety of functions and there is less and less need to use the L1 as a cognitive tool; the L2 can stand alone (Swain and Lapkin 2013, 110). We see this, as well, as relevant to assessment and the changing modes in which L1 or another language are used as part of the written or oral responses in live exams.

The descriptors are mainly formulated in positive terms in the new grid, including the use of foreign words, redirecting the assessor towards appreciating the test taker’s ability to fulfil the task instead of hunting for language mistakes.

Table 2 below compares the descriptors in the highest band for criterion accuracy, with the new descriptor in italics.

Table 2. The descriptors in the highest band for the criterion of accuracy of written responses in the old and the new grid. Level A1

Old grid	New grid
They produce simple sentences and make mistakes which generally do not lead to misunderstanding.	The grammar and vocabulary mistakes affect less than one fourth of the words in the text and do not lead to misunderstanding.
They use elements of vocabulary specific to the level, with small inadvertences.	<i>Transfers from other languages are possible (about 2 occurrences in the text).</i>
They sometimes make mistakes of orthography and punctuation.	They generally use the punctuation correctly (3-4 mistakes possible in the text).

3.2. The rating grid for spoken responses. Level B1

In the midst of massive migration from Romania to the Occident, we see increasing numbers of second-generation migrants using Romanian in a multiplicity of contexts. They make use of Romanian for educational and professional purposes in their (or their parents') country of origin, as well as in their country of residence (Vîlcu 2023). In these conditions, the BBU-RCI Consortium for Testing Romanian as a Foreign Language is keen to help Romanian migrants and their descendants preserve their language¹⁴ by providing them with certificates of linguistic competence in Romanian. This is intended to demonstrate the concrete, lucrative benefits of mastering their heritage language.

The second case we present relates to the administration of examinations of Romanian as a foreign language, at multiple locations in Europe and the United States of America. Initially, from 2019 through 2021, BBU-RCI Consortium administered the examinations only at the Faculty of Letters in Cluj-Napoca. In the second part of 2021 we started administering them in multiple centres of examination (Bucharest and Madrid), later followed by Paris, Prague, Venice and several locations in the USA. Successful test takers obtain a certificate in their chosen level of proficiency. After we started providing these certificates, we realised that many candidates had Romanian as heritage language. More exactly, 84% of the candidates we have examined so far at the headquarters of the Romanian Cultural Institute in Madrid proved to be speakers of Romanian as a heritage language, in a wide range of mastery. In the USA the percentage of test takers with Romanian as a heritage language was 100%.

¹⁴ "Plurilingualism can in fact be considered from various perspectives: as a sociological or historical fact, as a personal characteristic or ambition, as an educational philosophy or approach, or – fundamentally – as the sociopolitical aim of preserving linguistic diversity. All these perspectives are increasingly common in Europe" (Council of Europe 2020, 31).

The exams evaluate proficiency in Romanian as a foreign language; the spoken component limits the use of another language by the test taker; and the issued certificate is for Romanian only (www.roexam.com).

These test sessions allowed us to assemble and analyse a corpus of spoken production. We were interested in understanding the modes in which test-taker performance could be influenced by having Romanian as a heritage language, and to ascertain its impact on assessment instruments and procedures. Our corpus consisted of 130 spoken responses (65 – spoken interaction, both with the examiner and with another candidate and 65 - spoken production) of candidates who registered to take the examinations at the levels B1, B2, C1 and C2.

The assessment grids for spoken and written production and interaction for levels B1 – C1 were revised between 2022 and 2023. Significant changes were implemented, including the organisation of the grids. As in the case of the grid for written production and interaction for level A1, discussed under 3.1, the order of the criteria was changed to prioritise task fulfilment. The original order was:

COMPLEXITY	ACCURACY	FLUENCY & COHERENCE	EFFICACY* (how well they can fulfil the task)
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The criteria were reordered as:

EFFICACY	COMPLEXITY	FLUENCY & COHERENCE	ACCURACY
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Our experience assessing numerous candidates with Romanian as a heritage language informed the revision of the assessment grid for spoken production and interaction for levels B1, B2 and C1.

This paper will discuss the new assessment grid for level B1 and the updating of the criterion of accuracy to reflect the influence of another language in the spoken discourse of the candidate.

The analysis of the corpus revealed specific, predominant elements in the discourse of the Romanian heritage candidates. We present two categories of elements, one that did not impact on the revision and one that did.

3.2.1. Elements that did not drive changes in the assessment instruments

For second-generation or later Diaspora candidates, their heritage language is often restricted to the familial environment or social circles dominated by fellow Diaspora members. Even in the case of first-generation

migrants, the heritage language might be limited to relatives and friends in their country of origin, while their main means of professional, social and sometimes educational communication develops at least in part in the language of the host country. In these conditions, it is not surprising that the active, daily vocabulary in the heritage language will be limited to a quotidian context, whereas the discussions related to profession or themes like services, access to education and health, media, culture, lifestyle, environment, etc. will be carried out largely in the language of the host country. In the oral evaluation, this becomes evident when test-takers proceed from the first section, interacting with the examiner, to the latter two sections where they interact with another test taker and create their oral responses. The interaction with the examiner is built around questions related to the candidate's personal experience (their education, hobbies, lifestyle, day-to-day activities, opinion on local matters, etc.). Consequently, the candidates discuss very familiar things. The discourse is usually fluent and little time is spent searching for words. Pauses are natural and hesitations can be overcome without help. However, when a topic of discussion beyond the narrow range of chat with family and friends occurs, changes can be noticed in the search for elements of vocabulary needed to build the discourse. At the same time, overuse of simple and repetitive linkers might be observed. Register is another aspect influenced by the context in which the candidate uses the tested language. The register they most frequently access with family and friends is the familiar one and it might be difficult to adapt to the type of interlocutor, type of discourse, or a task in which they more commonly use the language of their host country.

Although we observed these trends, they did not produce changes to the assessment instruments for oral production and interaction at this time. The instruments and procedures assessing vocabulary complexity, coherence, and register remained as designed, reflecting the discourse of speakers who learn the language without any previous connections.

3.2.2. Elements that drove changes in the assessment instruments

The corpus analysis revealed that many candidates had good or very good Romanian fluency, with good discourse management, and strategies for overcoming pauses and maintaining the momentum of dialogue and interaction. Although they had a clearly perceptible accent when speaking about education or their profession, their unusual stress patterns or accent did not usually degrade intelligibility.

We decided to reflect this in our spoken-production grid for multiple reasons. First, we realised that the presence of a non-native accent has a high incidence in candidates with Romanian as heritage language. It could be

identified to varying degree in more than 60% of corpus responses. It consequently becomes highly relevant in speaking assessment, and the raters needed both instruction and tools in order to judge it effectively. Addressing this with the Romanian-heritage candidates also helped us in assessing non-Romanian-heritage candidates with a significant accent.

We were concerned with the pronunciation standard raters customarily apply, sometimes unwittingly: “the idealized native speaker” (Council of Europe 2020, 131). By revising the assessment grid, and organising workshops to familiarise raters with its new form, we were able to question this standard and promote intelligibility as the primary criterion.

This brings us to the third motivation for changing our grid: aligning our assessment instrument with the new scale for phonological control in CEFR CV. It is explained in the Companion Volume that their initial phonology scale had been “the least successful of those calibrated in the original research behind the descriptors published in 2001” (Council of Europe 2020, 133). The key factor in the changes made in the CEFR CV was to prioritise intelligibility over the standard of the idealised native speaker:

In language teaching, the phonological control of an idealised native speaker has traditionally been seen as the target, with accent being seen as a marker of poor phonological control. The focus on accent and on accuracy instead of on intelligibility has been detrimental to the development of the teaching of pronunciation. Idealised models that ignore the retention of accent lack consideration for context, sociolinguistic aspects and learners’ needs. (Council of Europe 2020, 133).

The scale for phonological control in the CEFR CV is subdivided in three categories: overall phonological control, sound articulation and prosodic features. The following descriptors apply to level B1:

- Overall phonological control: Pronunciation is generally intelligible; intonation and stress at both utterance and word levels do not prevent understanding of the message. Accent is usually influenced by the other language(s) they speak.
- Sound articulation: Is generally intelligible throughout, despite regular mispronunciation of individual sounds and words they are less familiar with.
- Prosodic features: Can convey their message in an intelligible way in spite of a strong influence on stress, intonation and/or rhythm from the other language(s) they speak. (Council of Europe 2020, 134).

In light of our analytical findings with the corpus of responses of candidates with Romanian as heritage language, and of the evolution of the CEFR CV, we decided to create a new descriptor in the assessment grid for level B1, which was under revision at the time of this process. The key concepts operationalised in this descriptor were also applied at levels B2 and C1, which are beyond the scope of this paper. *Table 3*, below, compares the descriptors in the highest band for the criterion of accuracy, with the additional descriptor marked in italics.

Table 3. The descriptors in the highest band for the criterion of accuracy of spoken responses in the old and the new grid. Level B1

Old grid	New grid
They create mostly correct sentences and do not make mistakes which could affect the transmission of the message. They can correct part of the mistakes without help. They use the elements of vocabulary specific to the level adequately. They pronounce, in general, correctly and have an adequate intonation.	They use the grammar structures and elements of vocabulary specific to the level adequately. The grammar and lexical mistakes are reduced in number and do not affect the transmission of the message and the speaker can self-correct often without help. The pronunciation is in general correct and the intonation is adequate. <i>The rhythm and the accent can be influenced by other languages, but intelligibility will not be affected.</i>

4. Conclusions

We acknowledge that plurilingualism continues to be a challenge for specialists in language policy, language teaching and most of all in assessment. However, as teachers and testers we need to let our work be informed by the real-world speakers and language learners who rarely compartmentalise their linguistic competence or isolate their languages, and rather tailor their plurilingual repertoire to the communication situations they encounter.

Addressing plurilingualism in the field of assessment is a real challenge, especially in certification testing. The need for this kind of assessment will continue. At the same time, the influence of other languages in the examination in the main language cannot be dismissed as errors and penalised. Solutions need to be found that attune the process of assessment to the reality of the plurilingual speaker. The adaptation of assessment instruments and procedures and the training of the raters in this spirit are key to this process.

We presented in this study how, in testing progress in a language, we adapted assessment instruments and practices to accommodate the influence of one or more additional languages on written and spoken test responses. The changes were informed by the literature in the field, new evolutions in reference documents (mainly CEFR CV), and most of all, by analysis of the corpus of responses. The criterion of accuracy was retooled, making intelligibility the key concept. The assessment grids were remade to operationalise the use of words from other languages (for written production on level A1), and the influence of other languages on pronunciation, rhythm and accent (for spoken production on level B1).

We consider these changes to be the first steps in refining our assessment process, instruments and procedures. This is but the beginning: Adaptation needs to continue. Working with candidates with Romanian as a heritage language opened a new door in our understanding of the interrelationship between languages and brought our assessment process closer to the reality of the plurilingual speaker. Social, political and cultural evolution around the world shows us that plurilingual speakers in a multilingual context will only become more common in future, and our goal is to keep up with them.

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