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LEVEL OF COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN ROMANIAN LANGUAGE AMONG NON-NATIVE GRADUATE STUDENTS FROM THE REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA: ASPECTS OF MONITORING AND EVALUATION

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The study presents the results of a recent investigation carried out at *Nicolae Testemițanu* State University of Medicine and Pharmacy in Chisinau, Republic of Moldova. It aims to evaluate the self-perceptions of non-native medical students regarding their level of communication in Romanian, both as the official state language and as a tool for professional and civic integration. Communication skills were analyzed in relation to the official provisions of the National Romanian Language and Literature Curriculum, which formed the basis of the training for the graduate students who are now medical students. The analysis also considered the increasing institutional demands placed on them for their subsequent socio-professional integration within the country.

Keywords: *curriculum, Romanian language, communication skills, foreign language graduates, higher medical education.*

NIVELUL COMPETENȚEI DE COMUNICARE ÎN LIMBA ROMÂNĂ A ABSOLVENȚILOR ALOLINGVI DIN R. MOLDOVA: ASPECTE DE MONITORIZARE ȘI EVALUARE

Studiul de față prezintă rezultatele unei investigații realizate recent în cadrul Universității de Stat de Medicină și Farmacie „Nicolae Testemițanu" din Chișinău, Republica Moldova, care a vizat auto-evaluarea percepțiilor studenților medicinești alolingvi față de nivelul de comunicare în limba română, ca limbă oficială a statului, dar și ca instrument de integrare profesională și civică. Competențele de comunicare s-au analizat în raport cu prevederile standard din Curriculumul național de Limba și literatura română, în baza căruia s-au pregătit absolvenții, actuali studenți medicinești, dar și conform cu exigențele instituționale crescânde față de acestea, pentru integrarea ulterioară a vorbitorilor în contextul socioprofesional din țară.

Cuvinte-cheie: *curriculum, limba română, competențe de comunicare, absolvenți alolingvi, învățământ medical superior.*

Introduction and Research Context

According to the educational ideal established by the Education Code, the learning process in the Republic of Moldova aims to "build a resourceful personality, capable of self-development, possessing a system of knowledge and skills, an independent opinion and action, and openness to intercultural dialogue, in the context of both national and universal values" [2].

Competency-based education, which focuses on both students and teachers, introduces several new dimensions. These include "developing skills in learners such as independent problem-solving, forming individual experiences in addressing cognitive or communicative issues, closely monitoring the achievement of intended goals, and giving new meaning to the learning process… [4].

The National Curriculum outlines the fundamental objectives for the Romanian Language and Literature subject in educational institutions that teach in the languages of national minorities. These objectives aim

to develop students' communication skills, promote national and universal values, and optimize linguistic and reading experiences in diverse communication contexts to facilitate socio-professional integration [p. 7]. From a legal and theoretical perspective, this is a clear and achievable goal. However, it is, at present, only partially and superficially reflected in the verbal and social behavior of non-native graduate students. The same document specifies that students' linguistic education in these institutions should be achieved through a wide range of communicative acts - sequences produced by the speaker with specific communicative intentions. This approach provides students with numerous opportunities to use the language in particular communication situations [Ibidem, p. 10]. The integrative concept of the discipline capitalizes on intercultural, intra- and interdisciplinary processes, based on the interconnected 4C elements: content, communication, knowledge, and culture. Therefore, language and literature learning are not ends in themselves but means of acquiring knowledge about culture, customs, national traditions, behavioral norms, and both national and universal cultural values [Ibidem, p. 4].

As being part of the ongoing process of monitoring and updating the National Curriculum (as is commonly done in many countries, approximately every ten years) [Cf. 6], we conducted a small-scale study involving high school graduates and first-year medical students from a specialized university in the Republic of Moldova. The research used a questionnaire with a variety of items. The aim of the study was to assess students' self-evaluation of perceptions as well as their cognitive-behavioral (verbal) abilities. These students were required not only to study all subjects in Romanian (LR) but also to begin practical training and professional integration, using Romanian as the primary tool for communication with the majority of patients. Additionally, they had to apply Romanian in all other areas related to the medical profession, starting with completing medical records and extending to praxiological research, which involves skills necessary for obtaining various professional qualifications.

Local and University Curricular Framework

The content of the curricular units - personal environment, educational environment, social environment, and cultural environment - is oriented towards achieving the established level of proficiency in learning Romanian as a non-native language, aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Class X - B2.1, Class XI - B2.2, Class XII - B2.3). In this context, we recognize both the regulation and facilitation of the teaching process, engaging educational actors within the national and European political and socio-cultural contexts. Additionally, higher education serves as a clear step toward achieving an advanced level of Romanian language proficiency for allophone citizens (C1 and C2), at least in terms of comprehension and oral expression.

The main objectives of higher medical education in the Strategic Development Plan of *Nicolae Testemiţanu* State University of Medicine and Pharmacy for the period 2021-2030 (usmf.md/ro) are as follows: „Improving, innovating, and enhancing the quality of the educational process at all levels of study through the maintenance and development of educational provisions, adjusting training from the perspective of competence development, and increasing attractiveness and competitiveness both nationally and within the European context” [8].

Under its development strategy, *Nicolae Testemiţanu* SUMPh is a higher medical education institution that, through professional training, steadily contributes to the acquisition of theoretical knowledge specific to the medical field, the development of professional and transversal competencies, and practical skills. It also focuses on “the formation of fundamental skills for education and self-development throughout life, fostering teamwork and effective communication skills.” The university aims to develop critical listening competences, evidence-based medicine skills, personalized care, and the use of information technologies, while transmitting moral, ethical, and social behavior values necessary for the respective professional activity. At the same time, it promotes the discovery, knowledge, and preservation of national values, as well as those of other people living in our country.

Thus, curricular remodeling for each study program encompasses both content and the pedagogical process itself, with student-centered education and the development of both theoretical and practical skills becoming core principles of the training system [9]. In this context, the main goal of the medical university

curriculum is to emphasize interdisciplinary and interprofessional approaches that integrate fundamental sciences, clinical studies, and public health. This ultimately prepares highly qualified specialists for both national and international medical and pharmaceutical fields. The Romanian Language course (for native allophone students) at *Nicolae Testemițanu* SUMPh aims to foster and continually develop communication competencies in Romanian while gradually introducing students to Romanian medical terminology, an essential precondition in developing professional competencies [4].

Findings on the Self-Assessment of Communication Competence in the Romanian Language

The present study aimed to assess the level of communication competence in the Romanian language among non-native graduate students in the Republic of Moldova. This was accomplished by administering a questionnaire (17 items) to 9 groups of first-year non-native medical students, totaling 98 respondents from the Faculties of Medicine, Dentistry, and Pharmacy at *Nicolae Testemițanu* SUMPh. The respondent sample consisted of 34.7% men and 65.3% women, with the majority of participants (82.7%) aged 19-20 years.

Based on the Curriculum of the Romanian Language course for non-native students and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, the topics were designed to begin at the B2 level. The respondents self-assessed their proficiency in the Romanian language as shown:

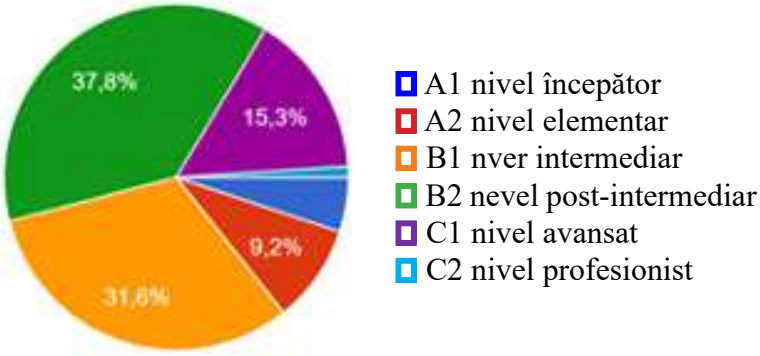


Figure 1. Self-assessment of the Level of Proficiency in the Romanian Language (LR)

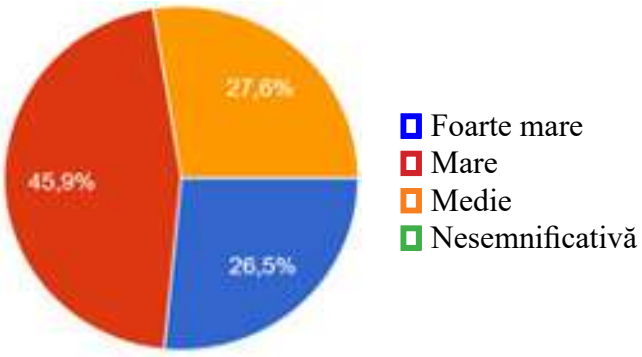


Figure 2. Contribution of SUMPh to the Development of Communication Competence in the Romanian Language

From the diagram above, it can be observed that 15.3% of respondents possess a C1 level of proficiency in Romanian, 7.8% self-assessed their proficiency at the B2 level, 31.6% rated themselves at the B1 level, and 9.2% at the A2 level. Thus, the level of preparation among the graduate students and their adherence to the official curricular requirements is intermediate, as 17% of them exceed the levels outlined above. This situation would not be concerning if these students were not considered „the best of the best." On the other hand, it is important to take into account the expectations regarding the professional competencies they are expected to acquire, which should be applied, including through the use of the Romanian language.

Among the integrated skills of communication competence in the Romanian language, the highest-rated skill, with over 90% of respondents, is reading comprehension, followed by listening comprehension. Next is verbal communication, rated at 80.6%, while writing skills received the lowest score, with 75.5% among the surveyed students. This situation is significant, as it highlights the current needs acknowledged by the students, which are essential for designing and implementing teaching methods in university classrooms, as well as for practical activities in hospital settings.

Despite the great efforts made by the *Nicolae Testemițanu* SUMPh management to create favorable conditions for studying Romanian, only 26.5% of respondents consider the university's efforts to be "very *high*," while 46.9% rate them as "*high*," as illustrated in the diagram below. We believe this provides a useful signal for the institution's management and teaching teams, as students are increasingly aware of their

own level of proficiency in the Romanian language, as well as the professional needs that can conflict with their personal and civic needs.

In response to the question, “Which of the factors listed below helped you most in advancing your knowledge of the Romanian language?”, respondents identified the primary role of school, followed by the university, friends, and family. Based on our own teaching experience and direct interactions with students, we can confirm that, in many ways, the official requirements set by state policy and the official curriculum support their importance, even though many students come from mixed families where, at home, on the street, or with their friends, they speak Russian.

Regarding the use of Romanian in their professional careers and the understanding of its crucial importance, the situation, according to medical students, is as follows: very high – 42.9%; high – 40.8%; medium – 15.3%; and very low – insignificant. However, over the course of their studies, in longitudinal research, attitudes do change. However, the initial outlook is not so optimistic, which is why the combined efforts of all participants are so significant.

The observations mentioned above are confirmed by the percentage derived from the responses to the question, „How interested and motivated are you to possess a cultured, literary expression in the Romanian language?” As a result, 51.1% of respondents selected „very high,” and 40.8% chose „high,” indicating that Romanian is becoming increasingly manageable as a professional tool and a means of cultural and civilizational expression for the majority of the population. This trend is influenced both by the ongoing influence of the Russian language and, more recently, by English over the past two decades. As stated, “The cultivation of language will always be necessary or relevant as long as we have something to cultivate – our everyday language” [5, p. 5].

In this „unfavorable or even friendly” context, viewed from both a pragmatic and sociolinguistic perspective, 51% of respondents consider the effort to master Romanian at university to be „very high” while 41.8% rate it as „medium”. Furthermore, 52% of respondents rated the conditions for professional development through the Romanian language at the university as „very high,” and 36.7% rated them as „high” as shown in the diagram below.

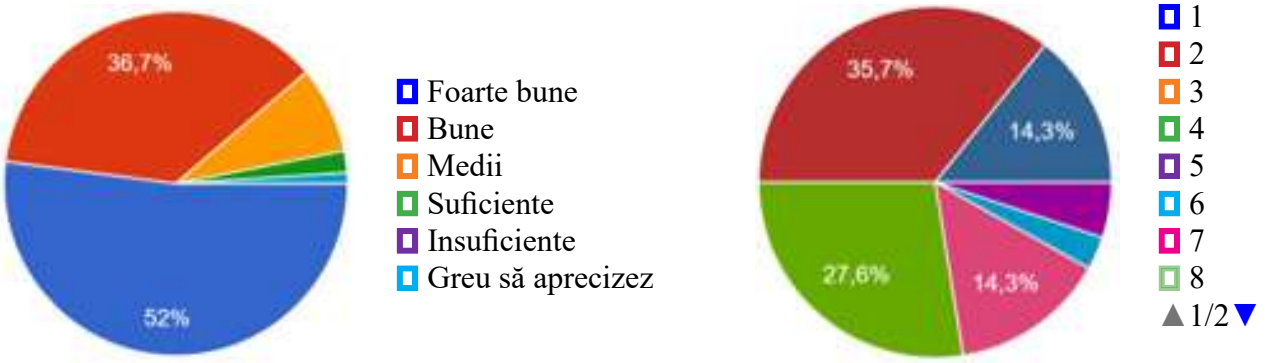


Figure 4. Self-Assessment of Romanian Language Proficiency by Medical Students

In response to the question, „What grade do you believe you deserve in Romanian as a compulsory university subject?”, 35.7% of respondents felt they deserved a grade of 10; 14.3% rated themselves a 9; 27.6% rated themselves an 8; and 14.3% self-assessed with a grade of 7. This suggests an overestimation or overly positive self-image, with a high degree of subjectivity. This becomes evident when comparing their self-assessments with the official university report on their academic performance for the academic year 2023-2024. Among 140 non-native students from the Faculty of Medicine 1, only 5 students received a grade of 10 (3.6%), 38 students received a grade of 9 (27.1%), 43 students received a grade of 8 (30.7%), and 30 students received a grade of 7 (21.4%).

Among the reasons provided by respondents for their grades, the following can be identified: „I know Romanian very well; I use Romanian frequently in my daily life and can communicate without significant issues; I did not know Romanian before university, but thanks to the university, I have improved my language skills; I do not know Romanian very well, but I try hard, which is why I believe I deserve this grade;

I think that grade 8 reflects my actual linguistic ability, but I understand the language at a grade 9 level; I have a greater knowledge of the language, but I am afraid to use Romanian because I am concerned that people will not understand me; my knowledge of Romanian is not very good; I believe I have made significant progress throughout the course; I scored a 7 on the Baccalaureat exam, and my level has improved at university, which is why I believe I can achieve grade 8; I make pronunciation errors and do not always understand what is being said; in my opinion, the contribution I have made to understanding, learning, and the desire to learn Romanian at a higher level for my personal development justifies this grade, as the Romanian language is an essential aspect of my career and life; I self-assess with a grade of 7 because I understand what I read or hear, but I still find it difficult to speak in Romanian; I am interested in learning Romanian and strive to improve because I do not know the language well; I make great efforts to achieve good results; I do not believe I know Romanian excellently, but I am doing my best" etc.

Thus, we derive very few substantial qualitative arguments in favor of very high proficiency in the Romanian language, with most responses focusing on a generally moderate level of self-assessment and the progress made or perceived at university. Additionally, the necessity of these communication competencies is understood by the students.

In response to the question, „What kind of problems have you encountered during this year (as a first-year student of initial training) in the process of learning and practicing the Romanian language?", the majority of respondents stated that they did not encounter any problems, while some listed the following: shortage of time; learning new words; the level of language proficiency, with expectations being higher than my current knowledge of the language; my linguistic potential, which makes learning difficult; many new words; the language barrier; too much to learn; difficulties in formulating my thoughts and questions in Romanian; problems with memorizing words, phrases, texts, etc. We conclude that students face common issues similar to those encountered in other fields of study and during primary school years, as well as specific challenges related to verbal linguistic competencies. These challenges, when identified and verbalized, can be more effectively addressed through systematic effort, study, and communication practice across various registers, from colloquial to formal academic language.

Moreover, communication competence in the Romanian language is currently regarded as a critical social value. Its cultivation is a fundamental objective of national education and, more specifically, of medical education, where effective communication forms the foundation of professional relationships - between doctor and patient, doctor and doctor, or doctor and society. Thus, learning Romanian medical terminology is a crucial step in preparing students for integration into academic and professional environments [7].

The development of Romanian language communication skills in institutions involves the use of various teaching, learning, and assessment techniques and methods to enhance motivation and improve the learning of medical language. This includes a range of practical communicative activities focused on reception, production, and interaction. Drawing on my teaching experience and over 20 years of systematic scientific and praxiological investigations conducted in collaboration with other colleagues of the teaching team, I have identified communication acts as particularly significant. These acts, structured in the figure below, have shown greater receptivity among students. Their impact is reflected positively in the development of both every day and professional language skills among medical students.

Table 1. Communicative Activities Involving Reception, Production, and Interaction

Communicative Activities Involving		
Reception in the Process of:	**Production/Creation of:**	**Interaction Based on:**
Making up of group or individual projects	Medical dialogues	Case studies
Presentation of texts, instructions, etc.	Discussions on various topics	Role play medical dialogues
Comprehension tasks on communication contexts, various types of speech acts, etc.	Texts, instructions, recommendations, advice, including audio/video recordings	Discussions with colleagues, friends, patients, etc., Romanian speakers

Among the students' proposals for optimizing their knowledge of the Romanian language, the following suggestions were identified: *more frequent application of ICT tools*, including activities on interactive online platforms and the use of educational applications to make lessons more interactive and facilitate individualized learning; *greater involvement in creative projects* that allow students to use the Romanian language while applying their creativity; *ongoing engagement in professional discussions and debates*, including the promotion of classroom discussions on diverse topics to enhance speaking and argumentative skills in Romanian; *provision of constructive feedback*, with detailed, personalized, and constructive comments on written work, emphasizing strengths and areas for improvement; and the inclusion of *video sequences during lessons*, using recordings of everyday Romanian language use, including content from virtual spaces and social media platforms popular among young people.

This is highly important, as shown by the responses to the multiple-choice question regarding the *language you commonly use to study and access resources for the main university subjects*: Russian was the primary choice for 90.8% of students, followed by Romanian (17.3%), English (over 5%), and Turkish, Gagauz, and Bulgarian (slightly above 1% for each). A similar pattern emerged in responses regarding the *language students commonly use for daily cultural reading and information acquisition*: Russian is used by 95.9% of students, while 19.94% additionally use Romanian, over 5% use English, and Turkish, Gagauz, and Bulgarian are each used by slightly above 1%.

However, since the language of instruction is Romanian, the percentage of students who use *Romanian for academic purposes* is low, considering our multicultural and multilingual environment, particularly in the context of globalization and an open society (K. Popper). Still, its usage remains significantly below the level required for academic and professional excellence. Furthermore, when asked, *„Which ethnicity's culture have you become most familiar with during this academic year?”,* students responded: Romanian/Moldovan – 58.2%, Russian – 33.7%, followed by Ukrainian, Arab, Gagauz, Bulgarian, and others.

Conclusions and Recommendations

As a result of this study, we emphasize the importance of developing both oral and written competencies, as well as reading skills, among medical students, despite certain challenges in the academic process. These challenges arise from gaps in general education and the „lack of a clear necessity” for interpersonal and professional communication among non-native speakers. To improve pedagogical conditions and raise institutional standards, while emphasizing the relevance of both theoretical and practical knowledge of the Romanian language, collaboration between philology professors and medical colleagues from various specialties must be expanded. This should include more collaborative activities in the classroom, as well as in other professional contexts.

Moreover, extracurricular activities - such as conferences, scientific symposiums, masterclasses, workshops on medical topics, and cultural, artistic, recreational, and social events - should be promoted. Teachers' involvement should be facilitated through collaboration, interconnections, teaching tasks, and joint projects (both formal and non-formal education) conducted together with native-speaking students. These initiatives could add significant value to the communicative act in its entirety.

In conclusion, social and professional integration through the Romanian language, facilitated by the official social context as well as the academic and cultural environment, and supported by an individual's recognition of the need for continuous development, can help medical students achieve an advanced level (C1 and C2) across all items defined by the Common European Framework of Reference, as well as by curricular documents. Virtual communication, in this context, can be beneficial when it involves verbal expression exercises. However, it can also inhibit open expression if the device becomes addictive and replaces direct, face-to-face human relationship.

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