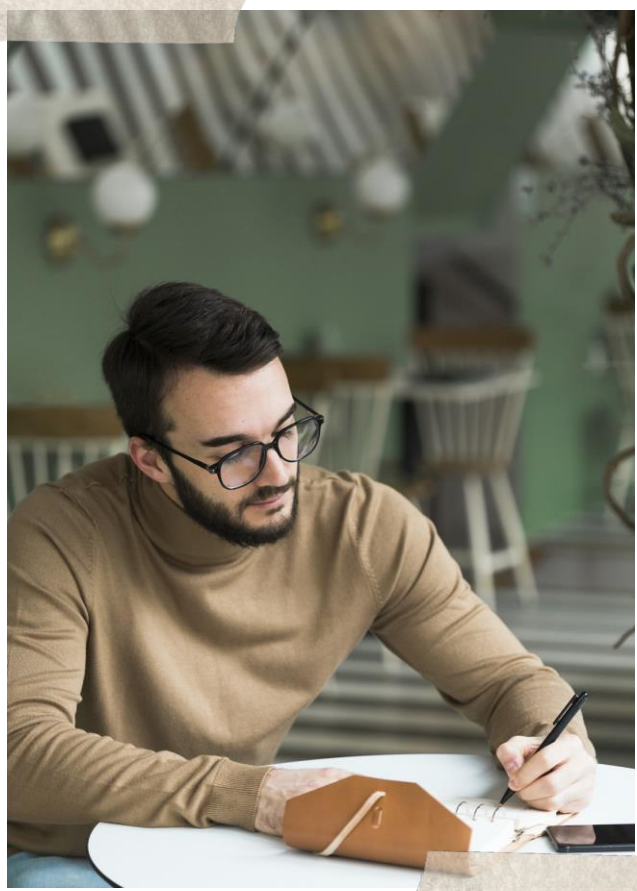# Writing culture clash:
English essay writing challenges in Romanian pre-university settings

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01

Introduction

In the Romanian pre-university setting, students (and parents alike) have become increasingly aware of the importance of learning English.

According to data provided by The National Institute of Statistics Romania [1], **English ranks first in the top of foreign languages** studied in schools in the Romanian educational system. In 2020, English was the first foreign language studied in the primary and lower-secondary educational system, with 87.75% of the total number of school students aged 6-14 and with 88.56% of the total number of upper-secondary school students aged 15-18.

Since 1989, Romania started adopting national educational policies which have led to **significant curricular changes** meant to redefine and refine the status of English as a First Foreign Language. The **key competences-based framework of reference** and their derived descriptors lay the foundation for curriculum development, as well as for the recommended methodology and practices.
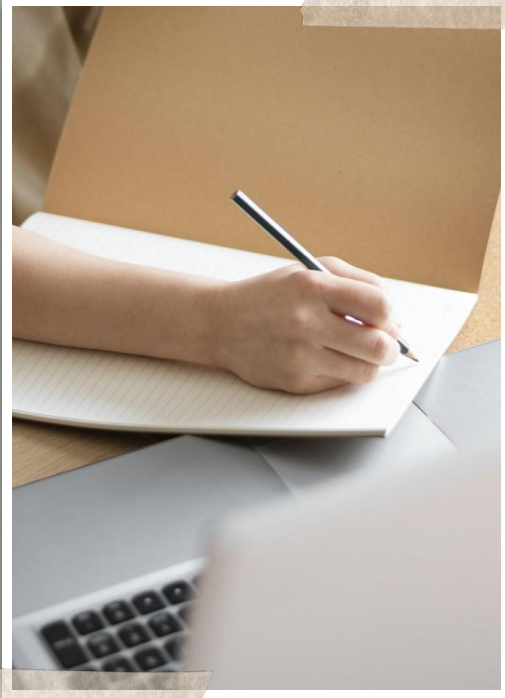
02

Essay writing framework in Romanian pre-university settings

2.1. Essay writing in national and international examinations

Essays are the most **common compulsory writing tasks** assessed in both national and international English examinations taken in Romania by high school students, more specifically, in the **B2 First and C1 Advanced Cambridge Examinations**, in Module C of the **National Baccalaureate Exam** (also known as Foreign Language Competence Exam) and in the **County and National English Olympiads**.

However, essay-writing is a compulsory task in the Baccalaureate exam in Romanian too, so **high school students prepare to become competent essay writers in their mother tongue and in English as a foreign language simultaneously**.

Since both the writing requirements and the assessment criteria in Romanian and in English differ in some respects, teachers and students alike need to pay considerable attention to the **writing culture clash pitfalls** that may occur.

2.1. Essay writing in national and international examinations

Over the years, the literature of second and foreign language writing research has suggested different approaches to teaching academic writing.

The **traditional approach to L2 writing** took the form of controlled compositions, that is writing grammatically correct sentences, based on given patterns. This type of writing was meant to focus on students' reaching a high level of accuracy in their written work mainly by imitation.

Nevertheless, the **paradigms needed to change** in order to accommodate the various deliberate functions of language. Thus, the focus has shifted from sentence-level accuracy to macro-level communicative purposes.

Students should always be aware that they do not write merely because their teachers ask them to do so, but because through their writing, they are able to fulfil a certain real-life social function. For instance, when writing a letter of complaint, students express dissatisfaction and ask for compensation, when writing a narrative essay, they entertain their target audience, while when writing an argumentative essay, their endeavour is to persuade their readers.

2.2. Essay quality assessment criteria

In the **Cambridge ESOL examinations** which are usually targeted by the Romanian high school students, more specifically the B2 First (FCE) and the C1 Advanced (CAE), there are four criteria considered when assessing writing: Content, Communicative Achievement, Organisation and Language (each marked 0 to 5, with 5 being the highest). On the right we can see the detailed descriptors for a Band 5 B2 First and for a C1 Advanced piece of writing [2].

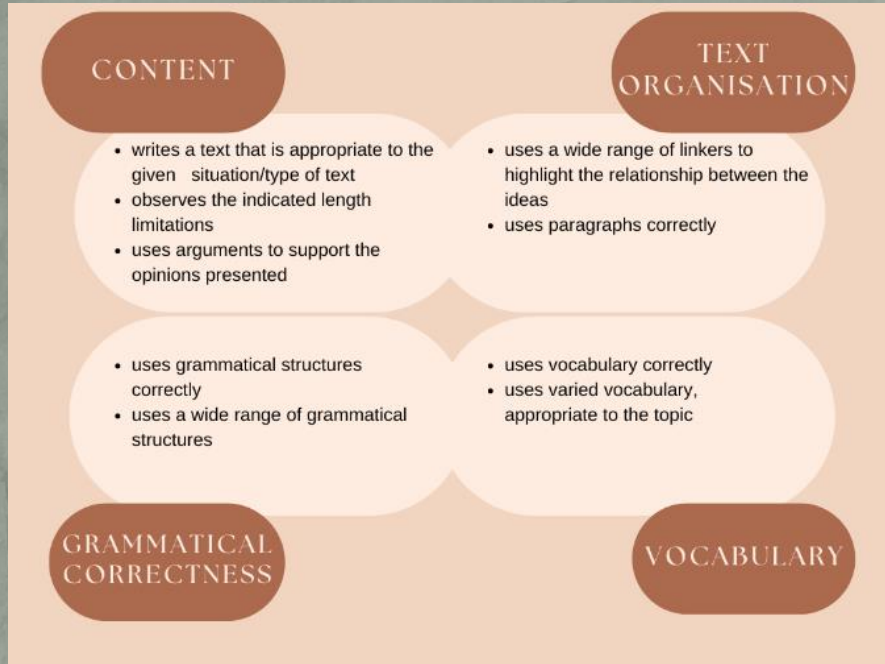|	CONTENT	COMMUNICATIVE ACHIEVEMENT	ORGANISATION	LANGUAGE
B2	All content is relevant to the task. Target reader is fully informed.	Uses the conventions of the communicative task effectively to hold the target reader's attention and communicate straightforward and complex ideas, as appropriate.	Text is well organised and coherent, using a variety of cohesive devices and organisational patterns to generally good effect.	Uses a range of vocabulary, including less common lexis, appropriately. Uses a range of simple and complex grammatical forms with control and flexibility. Occasional errors may be present but do not impede communication.
C1	All content is relevant to the task. Target reader is fully informed.	Uses the conventions of the communicative task with sufficient flexibility to communicate complex ideas in an effective way, holding the target reader's attention with ease, fulfilling all communicative purposes.	Text is a well organised, coherent whole, using a variety of cohesive devices and organisational patterns with flexibility.	Uses a range of vocabulary, including less common lexis, effectively and precisely. Uses a wide range of simple and complex grammatical forms with full control, flexibility and sophistication. Errors, if present, are related to less common words and structures, or occur as slips.

2.2. Essay quality assessment criteria

In the **high school graduation exam**, also known as Baccalaureate, the students' essay writing skills are assessed according to the following criteria:

As far as the **County and National English Olympiad** is concerned, the assessment framework for exemplary work is rather similar:

CONTENT

- writes a text that is appropriate to the given situation/type of text
- observes the indicated length limitations
- uses arguments to support the opinions presented

TEXT ORGANISATION

- uses a wide range of linkers to highlight the relationship between the ideas
- uses paragraphs correctly

GRAMMATICAL CORRECTNESS

- uses grammatical structures correctly
- uses a wide range of grammatical structures

VOCABULARY

- uses vocabulary correctly
- uses varied vocabulary, appropriate to the topic

Content	Organisation and cohesion	Vocabulary	Structures	Effect on target reader
The essay is completely relevant to the topic, all arguments are well-rounded, well-grounded, and balanced, developing the thesis of the introduction and leading to a balanced consideration and/or personal opinion.	There is complete logical connection of paragraphs due to a judicious use of linking devices, mechanics, and length requirements.	A wide range of vocabulary is used appropriately and accurately throughout the essay; precise meaning is conveyed; minor errors are rare; spelling is very well controlled. The register of the for and against essay is totally relevant to the task, being organically integrated all along the discourse.	A wide range of grammatical structures is used accurately and flexibly throughout the essay; minor errors are rare; punctuation is very well controlled.	The interest of the reader is aroused and sustained throughout.

2.3. Essay writing requirements and pitfalls

Teaching students to write a good essay is quite a challenging task, especially for non-native users of English. A proficient academic writer needs to possess **good command of grammar patterns, lexical variety, sentence complexity, cohesion, coherence and rhetorical devices, sequencing and attitude markers, register, appropriacy, spelling, punctuation, word order, word choice, paragraph building techniques and length limitations**.

Furthermore, producing a well-crafted essay encompasses **complex thinking processes at various stages** (planning, idea generation, organization, writing, revising, self-editing, responding to feedback), **creativity, critical thinking skills, referencing and contextualization skills, general knowledge** and, most importantly, **practice**.

2.3. Essay writing requirements and pitfalls

Testing is considered the ultimate tool to measure the efficiency of the teaching-learning process.

The teaching narrative is constricted when content coverage, test preparation and scores become central concerns.
Consequently, the influence of exams on teachers is undeniable, especially when it comes to high-stakes national examinations.

The tendency to '**teach for an exam**' is visible in many Romanian language and literature classes starting with lower-secondary school (more precisely, grades 7th and 8th), then in upper-secondary school too.
The pressure of obtaining good results in national exams determines teachers and students to resort to 'checklists' to ensure their essays are successful.

Thus, students develop **a routine-oriented approach to essay-writing** long before they begin to write opinion and argumentative essays in English. When they do start tackling essays in their L2 class, students already carry **template-based baggage** that is challenging to discard and often **leads to culture clashes**.

2.3. Essay writing requirements and pitfalls

There is much concern related to the approaches which are **highly examination-oriented** and **can result in the undesirable negative washback effect**: narrowing the curriculum down so as to accommodate the exam format.

When dealing with essay writing, the washback effect involves not only **unwelcome curricular leaps and gaps**, but also **unhealthy attitudes** towards the students' personal involvement and cognitive development.

Tucan et al. [3] argue that

> *"The exam essay is evaluated by looking at several pre-established academic writing parameters such as giving personal opinions or using connectors and opinion phrases correctly. Essay writing challenges arise precisely as a result of exaggerating – for convenience or other reasons – the importance of these elements at the expense of understanding the text,[…]. Personal input becomes secondary"* (p. 63).
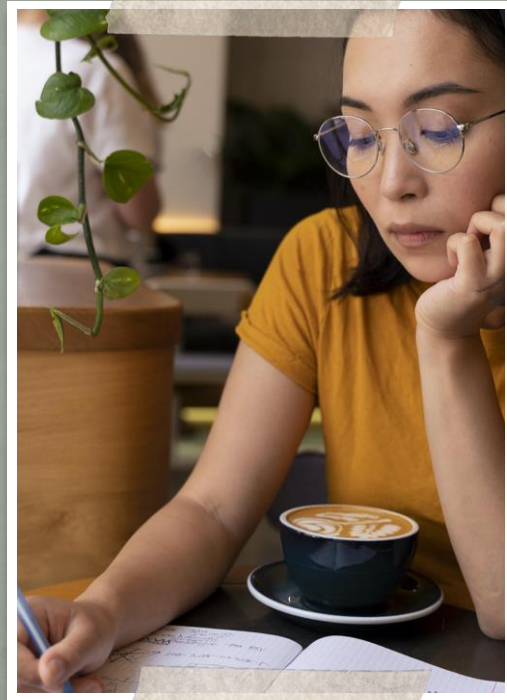
03

Research framework

3.1. Context

This article was inspired by the finding that, in the process of essay writing in English by Romanian students, the linguistic phenomenon of interference is found constantly and systematically.

Thus, we may consider the Romanian – English culture clash in pre-university essay writing contexts as a challenging research landmark in applied linguistics, since "the Romanian writing cultures, for example, are scarcely researched [4], both in Romanian L1 and English L2, especially from a data-intensive perspective" [5].

Due to the limitations of the present study, the focus will not be on the identification and analysis of errors made by Romanian high school students when using English L2 in order to complete their essay-writing tasks in various national examinations in an exhaustive manner, but rather on highlighting the culture clash implications and the linguistic interferences that may be generated when two language systems, namely, the mother tongue (L1 - Romanian) and the foreign language (L2 - English) come in contact.

3.2. Data & methodology

HISEC

a 14,000-word corpus: 60 argumentative/opinion essays

B2 First/C1 Advanced

20 essays written by students in their preparation stage in 2021-2022

Baccalaureate Exam

20 essays written by 12th grade graduates in 2019

County English Olympiad

20 essays written by 11th grade students in 2022

The texts that are part of the corpus were randomly selected, regardless of the marks granted for the student performance, and they illustrate the linguistic instruction the students have been provided during high school. In order to carry out a corpus-based analysis, **#LancsBox** [6] software package was employed. The corpus is a pilot extension of the **ROGER corpus** [7].

3.3. Results

The research report obtained by using the LancsBox tool Wizard indicates that, regardless of the writing context, most students largely use conventional patterns when it comes to expressing opinions or introducing arguments.

Search term	Number of occurrences (#)	Search term	Number of occurrences (#)
in my opinion	15	I think	14
I believe	9	however	14
firstly	24	because	71
secondly	18	for example	22
in conclusion	25	but	77
on the one hand	4	and	43
on the one hand	16		

3.3. Results

- it is noticeable that the Baccalaureate Exam papers have a lower level of English than the B2 First and C1 Advanced Cambridge preparation essays and the County English Olympiad essays;
- the same Baccalaureate Exam papers are more likely to display routine-oriented argumentative patterns, using linkers and other standard structures meant to accommodate the exam format, to the detriment of the substance;
- the corpus analysis indicates certain types of errors;
- most of them are caused by the linguistic interference of the students' mother tongue (Romanian, L1) and English (L2): misspellings, calques, semantic confusion, sentence structure/word order, even wrong verb tense/form (when it comes to the simple/continuous aspect of tenses);
- other types of errors deal with wrong subject-verb agreement, wrong noun endings (singular-plural) or wrong forms of degrees of comparison.

Types of errors	Examples
misspellings	products from *wich* you can choose, *necesity* of buying, having *notoriety,* bigger *cantites,* are *definetly* better, it gives the *oportunity,* a *responsable* person, more *convinient,* for *exemple,* more *useful,* good *cuality,* take care of their *buget, physichal* and mental health, actual *whealth, recieve* a ton of praise;
calques	they *make* part of our everyday life, on one *side/* on the other *side,* uses ordinary people *in place of* professional actors, people *get themselfs embarrassed,* for *correctiveness;*
semantic confusion	*weather* or not the vegetables or fruits are fresh, go *till* the supermarket, *in* the other side of the city, *clients* do not have to go, takes *a whale of a time, Ultimately,* I strongly believe that, *giving light* to the truth, could *outcost* the price, *in the matter of* food, some issues with the *conquerence;*
sentence structure/word order	depends on what *do you* want to buy, in order *to not be* manipulated, but that *is it;*
wrong verb tense/form	everything *is being placed* there, nowadays people *believed* that, you *not have* to wait, they *takes* up a lot of space, shows *are not giving* the actor intimacy;
wrong subject-verb agreement	local markets *doesn't* have, supermarkets *represents, Are* fact-checkers and journalists work*ing* in vain, journalists' work *is paying* off;
wrong noun endings (singular-plural)	do their *shoppings,* makes people *lifes* easier;
wrong forms of degrees of comparison	*more and more bigger,* much *more healthier* than.

04

Discussion & conclusions

It is obvious that, when developing essay-writing skills, L2 teachers and students need to be aware of not only the **L1 linguistic interference** which inherently leads to errors, but also of the **dangers of structuring written work based on pre-established writing parameters** largely consisting in the use of specific linkers and phrases.

Actually, it is in this aspect that resides the highest level of **culture clash between L1 Romanian and L2 English**. Instead of focusing students' efforts on the socio-cognitive approach to writing, which places emphasis on the reader's expectations, on socio-cultural contexts, and on thinking processes involved in bringing arguments in favour of a personal opinion or idea, many L1 Romanian teaching narratives focus on providing students with prescriptive methods and checklists that lead to superficial arguments being built on phraseological parameters. This habit is often 'imported' in the L2 English class and considerable efforts need to be made to help students break themselves of it.

Thus, L2 English teachers should push their students to **explore their social, cultural, linguistic background and go beyond pre-set formulas and structures** in their written (and spoken) production. They should also undergo **professional training** in terms of teaching and assessing writing to better assist their students in the learning process and keep away from the washback effect.

Acknowledgement

References

[1] *National Institute of Statistics*. Content available at: http://statistici.insse.ro:8077/tempo-online/#/pages/tables/insse-table

[2] *Assessing writing for Cambridge English Qualifications: A guide for teachers* https://www.cambridgeenglish.org/pl/Images/603901-cer_6647_v1b_jul20_teacher-guide-for-writing_b2_first_schools_prf2.pdf, p. 23 https://assets.cambridgeenglish.org/schools/CER_6647_V1d_JUL20_Teacher-Guide-for-Writing-C1_Advanced.pdf, p. 23

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[6] Brezina, V., McEnery, T., & Wattam, S. LancsBox, 2020.

[7] Chitez, M., Bercuci, L., Dincă, A., Rogobete, R., & Csürös, K. (2021). *Corpus of Romanian Academic Genres* (ROGER). West University of Timisoara. Available at https://roger-corpus.org/.

Thank you!

Do you have any questions?