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**PROFILING THE CAMBRIDGE PRELIMINARY CANDIDATE. A BRITISH
COUNCIL OPEN CENTRE CASE STUDY IN WESTERN ROMANIA**

CODRUȚA GOȘA and LUMINIȚA FRENȚIU
West University of Timișoara

***Abstract:** The study analyses the profile of the potential candidate sitting the Cambridge Preliminary Test. It joins a research trend focused on understanding the role of and attitudes to the Cambridge examinations in Romania.*

***Key words:** profile, candidate, EFL, testing.*

1. Introductory remarks

An interesting development could be observed over the last decade in Romania, when it comes to the most popular EFL external examinations, namely the suite offered by Cambridge English Language Assessment (in short CELA). This development refers to the growing popularity of the Lower Main Suite (Key and Preliminary) exams. At least in the south-western region allotted to the Timisoara open centre, this growth comes at the expense of the Upper Main Suite exams, First and Advanced (Proficiency no longer being organized in the open centre for some time now). Added to that, one can also notice the growing interest in CELA Young Learners' exams (Starters, Movers and Flyers) which are by and large, organised by close centres (state and private schools). The increasing demand for these latter exams is illustrated by the number of centres opened in Timisoara over the last decade. If ten years ago there was only one such centre, now there are twelve (nine state schools and three private ones). Moreover, two years ago the open centre started organizing YLE, two sessions per year for the schools which are not (yet) closed centres. The evident query popping into one's mind at this point is what might lie beneath this tendency. It is precisely what the present paper aims to discuss.

One possible overarching, underlying, reason is provided by the following:

...languages have become a fundamental basic skill to boost employability, particularly among young people, which in turn leads to economic growth and better living standards. (Gutierrez Eugenio, E., Saville N., 2016: 3)

It is no secret that **the** foreign language referred is English, which undoubtedly is the lingua franca of these days. A claim strongly supported by the study discussed by Gutierrez Eugenio and Saville (2016) which revealed that out of the 28 European states investigated, 26 have English as the first foreign language studied (Romania obviously included among them) (Gutierrez Eugenio, E., Saville N., 2016: 6)

In other words, it is in every (particularly young) person's interest to learn to speak (at least) English as a foreign language, if pursuing a better life.

Additionally, it might be that the 2012 *Rethinking Education* European proposal had some effects, too, even if it is not quite clear what unifying policies and strategies were identified and applied within the European Union. Anyway, what is clear is that this proposal suggested two main goals for 2021:

- at least 50% of 15 year-olds attain the level of independent user or above of a first foreign language
- at least 75% of pupils in lower education study at least two foreign languages besides their main language of instruction

Whether and how realistic these goals might be, and whether they will be achieved or not, is still to be seen, researched and then discussed elsewhere.

As concerns the query mentioned above, another way of dealing with it is by looking at things in a more regional way also by trying to profile the candidates for the exams mentioned above. It might prove equally useful to try and understand some of the factors and reasons associated with this phenomenon. It is what this study aims to do in particular.

Attempts at researching the status of Cambridge examinations have been done before in the Romanian contexts. For example Goşa and Frenţiu (2008) explored reactions to the Advanced level examination (CAE) in relation to the English component of the Romanian Baccalaureate and they discovered that the student-respondents investigated favoured the Cambridge exam to the detriment of the English language component of the *Bacalaureat* (the Romanian school leaving exam) which they perceived to lack validity and reliability, especially by being too easy. Another attempt was put forth by Goşa and Gherdan (2009) with reference to the fairly recently introduced Teaching Knowledge Test in Romania. The study conducted in the western part of Romania and concluded that the test-takers had positive reactions to the test considering it, valid, reliable and very useful.

The present paper joins this research trend of understanding the role of and attitudes to the Cambridge examinations in Romania.

2. The Study

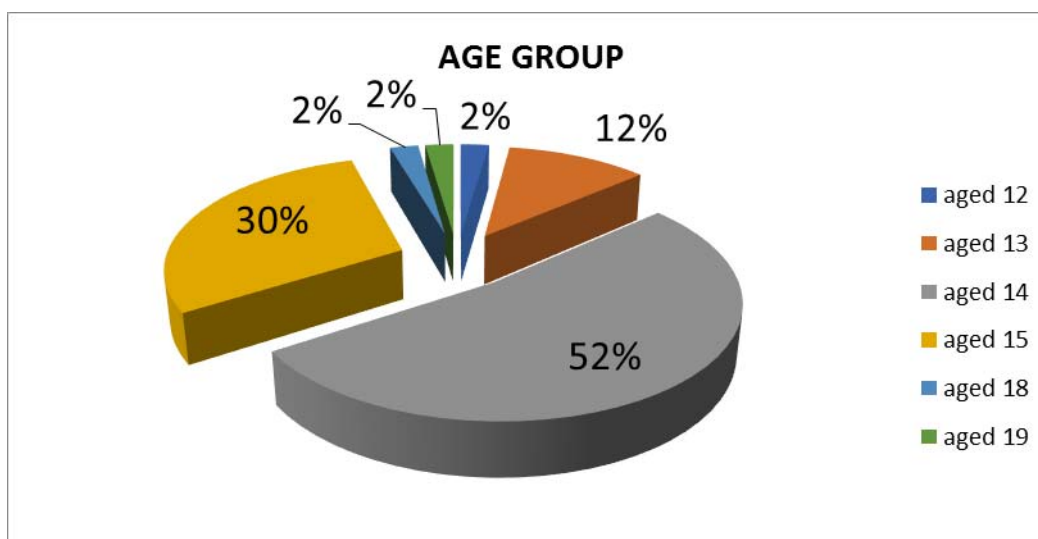
The study will be conducted in several stages, having targeting both diversity and chronological dimensions. The first stage, reported here, investigated the Preliminary candidates of the 2017 March session in Timisoara. It was based on the analysis of two questionnaires. One was the official Candidate Information Sheet (CIS) issued by CELA and administered to all Main Suite candidates. This questionnaire is entirely close-ended and the questions are all of a demographic and factual nature. This standardized questionnaire is generally administered before the first paper of the exam. The second questionnaire discussed here was designed by the authors of this paper and administered at the end of the examination, face-to face, on a voluntary basis. This latter questionnaire was meant to complement and validate the first compulsory, official, entirely close-ended questionnaire and for this reason it contained open-end questions. The CELA, CIS questionnaire was completed by all the candidates (sixty two), forty four candidates agreed to fill in our questionnaire.

We present and discuss the results obtained after analysing the two questionnaires, beginning with the CIS, factual close-ended one, followed by our open-ended complimentary variant.

2.1. Results of the CELA CIS questionnaire

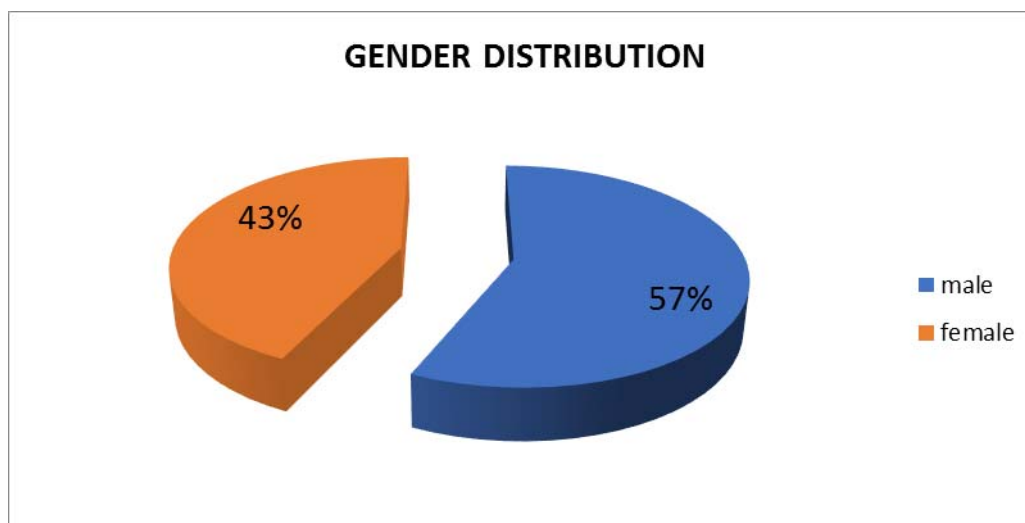
As mentioned before, the official Cambridge questionnaire elicited information of a factual nature. The questionnaire has six close-ended questions, two of them referring to the nationality and first language of the candidates. All the 62 candidates were Romanian and had Romanian as their first language. The remaining four questions are discussed as follows.

Figure 1 The age groups the Preliminary candidates belonged to



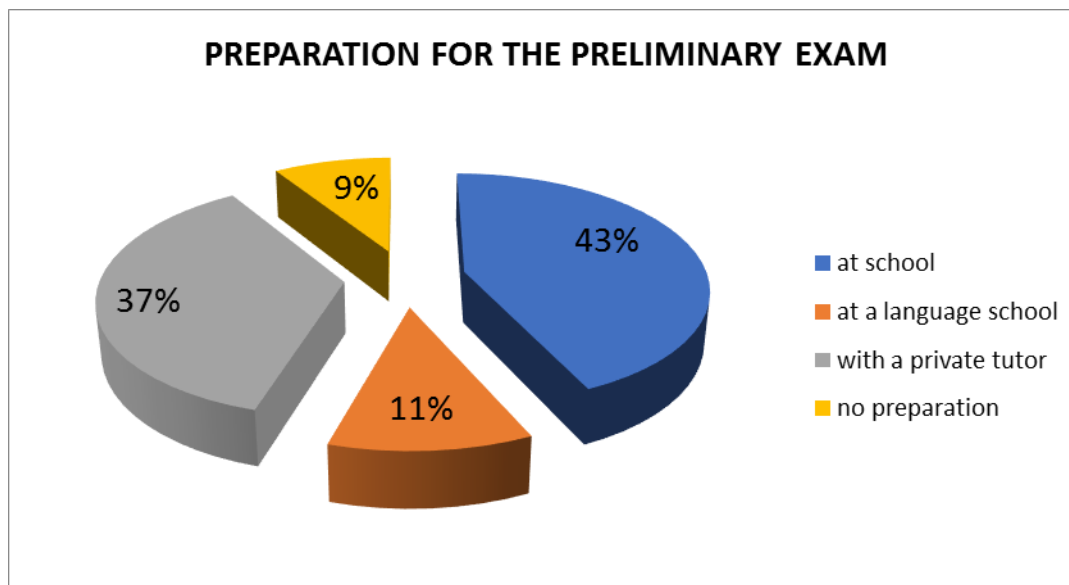
While most were in their teens, the candidates displayed a surprisingly wide range of age groups, from twelve to nineteen. However the overwhelming majority of the candidates were aged fourteen and fifteen. It is a clear indication that Preliminary targets mainly adults and CELA has a similar exams tailored for the needs of schoolchildren (Preliminary for Schools), the typical candidate in our study is a young teenager. It will be interesting to see whether the typical age group of the Preliminary for Schools candidates is similar to or different from the present one. This finding does seem to show that the Preliminary candidates are getting younger.

Figure 2 The gender distribution of the Preliminary candidates



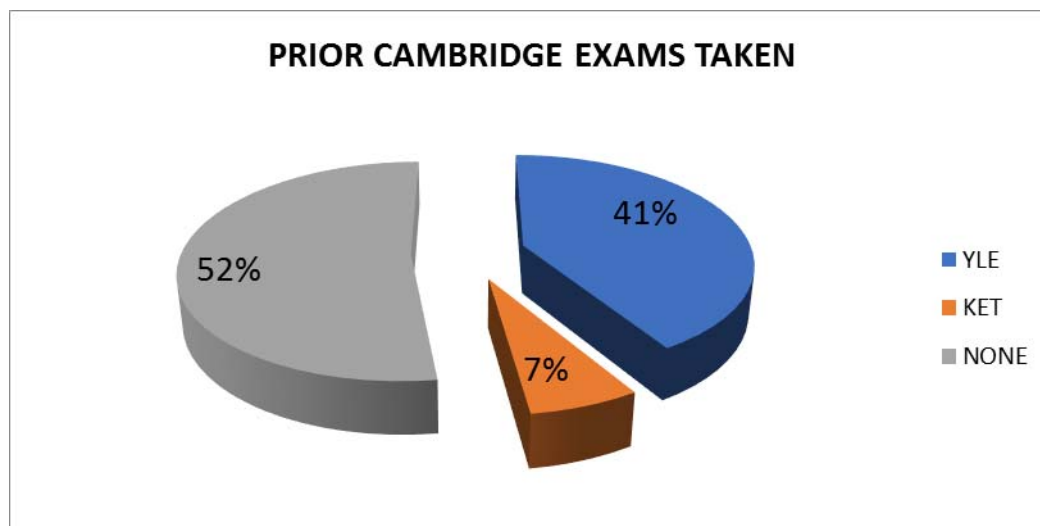
It was somehow unexpected to see that the majority of the test-takers were males, since it is generally believed that the female population in Romania is slightly more numerous on the one hand, and, on the other, girls are better equipped, more interested and more efficient when it comes to foreign language studies.

Figure 3 The candidates' choices to prepare for the Preliminary exam



As can be seen, the preparation took place predominantly at school, which undoubtedly shows the teacher's preoccupation with the success of the candidates, followed by preparation with a private tutor. It is also interesting to note that quite a small percentage of the candidates did not prepare for this exam.

Figure 4 Other Cambridge exams taken by the Preliminary candidates



The majority of the candidates investigated sat a Cambridge exam for the first time, however quite a number (41%) had sat the Young Learners exams prior to the Preliminary one, added to that a small number sat Key. This finding can be seen as an indication that the

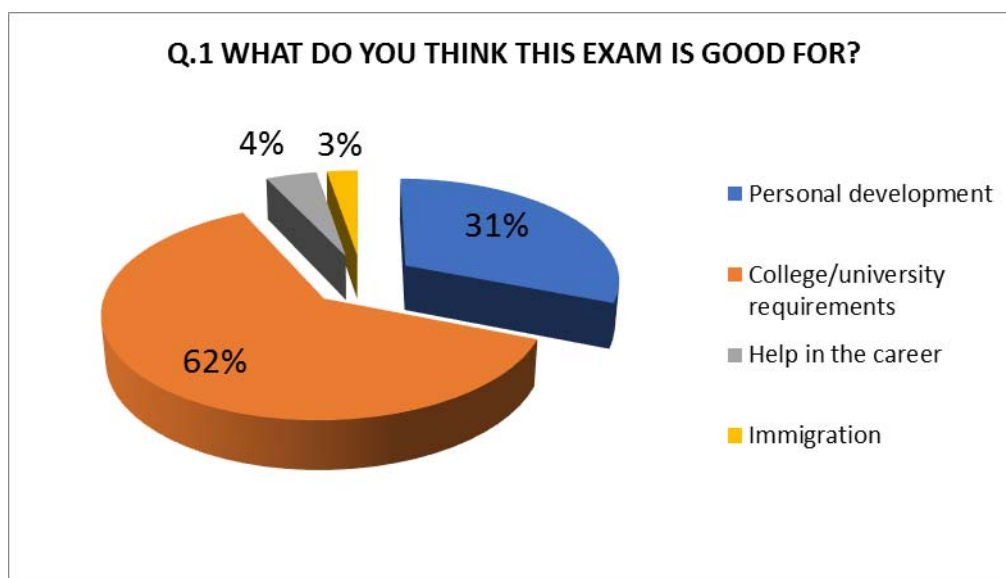
interest in Cambridge external examinations starts at an early age. It is also reasonable to surmise that the interest is rather due to the parents or the teachers of these candidates.

In short, as far as the official CELA standardized Candidate Information Sheet is concerned, the typical Preliminary candidate (at least in the case the March 2017 Timișoara open centre is a Romanian native and citizen, he is a young teenage male (fourteen or younger), has attended preparation classes at school and or/privately, has barely missed sitting previously other Cambridge exams and has had some contact with Cambridge exams as a young learner.

2.2 Results of the open ended questionnaire

The questionnaire we designed comprised only open-ended questions which, we believe serve the purpose of both complimenting and validating the responses elicited by the standardised CIS. Qualitative means were used to analyse the answers given by the forty four Preliminary candidates who agreed to participate in our study. As follows we present the analysis of these answers which take the form of both the categories we identified in the process of analysis and their quantification.

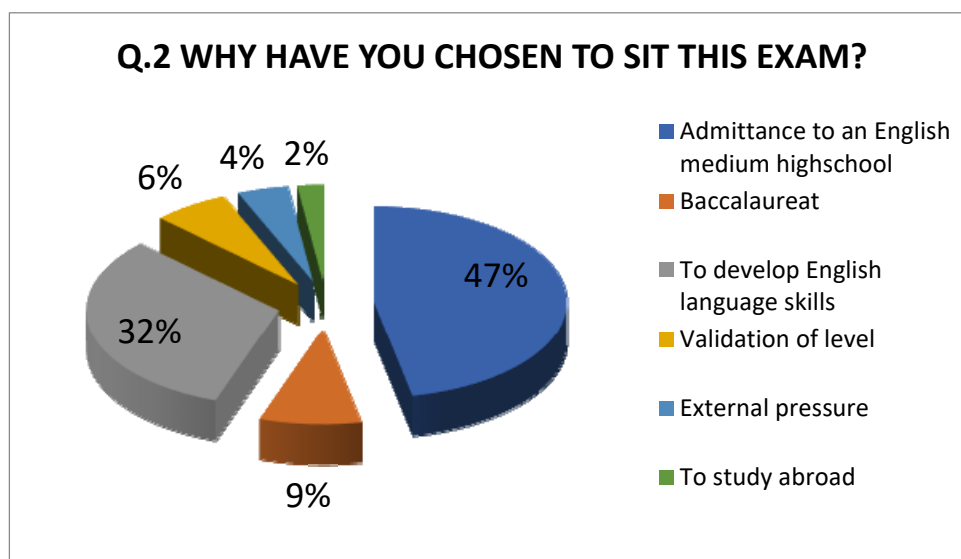
Figure 5 Exam usefulness



A large majority think that the exam will help them to use it for gaining free way to secondary schools or universities, as well as passing the Romanian school leaving exam, the *Bacalaureat*. The candidates are most certainly aware that Preliminary is on the recognition list of exams issued by the Romanian Ministry of education. Nonetheless we were pleasantly surprised that the next choice of our respondents referred to personal development, at the same time immigration being the last with a very low percentage. Can it be interpreted as a sign of unexpected maturity for persons so young? It is a difficult question to answer. It is equally possible that the respondents were barely ventriloquizing their teachers' or parents' voices. Whatever the reason, the Preliminary candidates do seem to display an interesting mixture of pragmatism and maturity of thinking. None of the respondents gave answers suggesting that they did not see the use of the exam, an encouraging finding, indicating a definite positive attitude towards the exam, however to be expected since the respondents chose to sit the exam anyway.

The next question presented in Figure 6 below personalized the question discussed above and also sought to validate it.

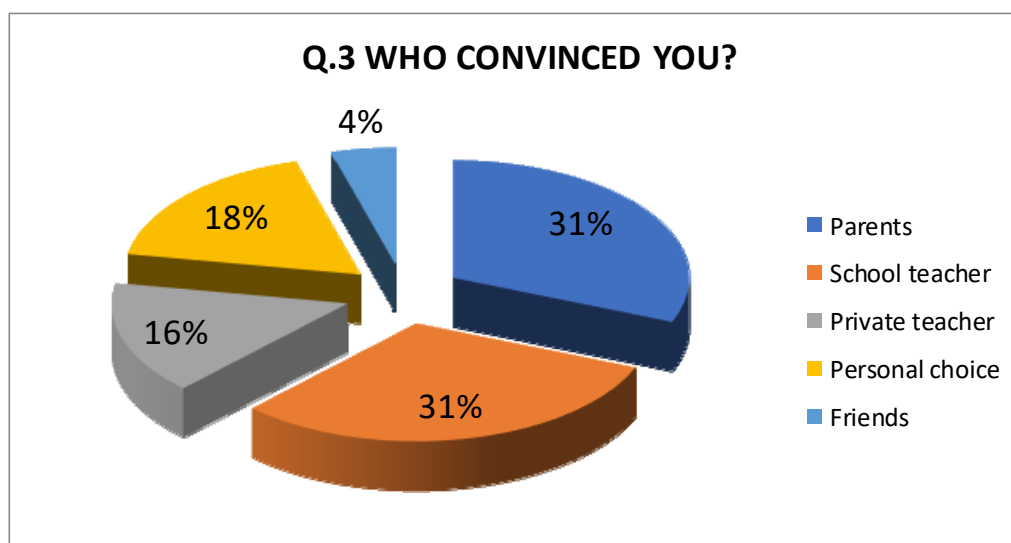
Figure 6 The candidates' reasons for sitting Preliminary



The largest portion of candidates gave as main reason for sitting the exam the admittance to an English medium school. This result is consistent with the age group of the typical candidate shown before. In addition, the third largest portion had to do with the replacement of the English component of the *Bacalaureat*. The fact that the second largest portion represented the desire to develop English language skills while preparing for this exam is not only another sign of the candidates' maturity when deciding to invest in their future, but it is also indicative of the trust the candidates' (and possibly their advisors') have on the validity and the worth of this exam.

The following chart shows what kind of advisors might be instrumental in the candidates' decision to sit and prepare for the exam under scrutiny.

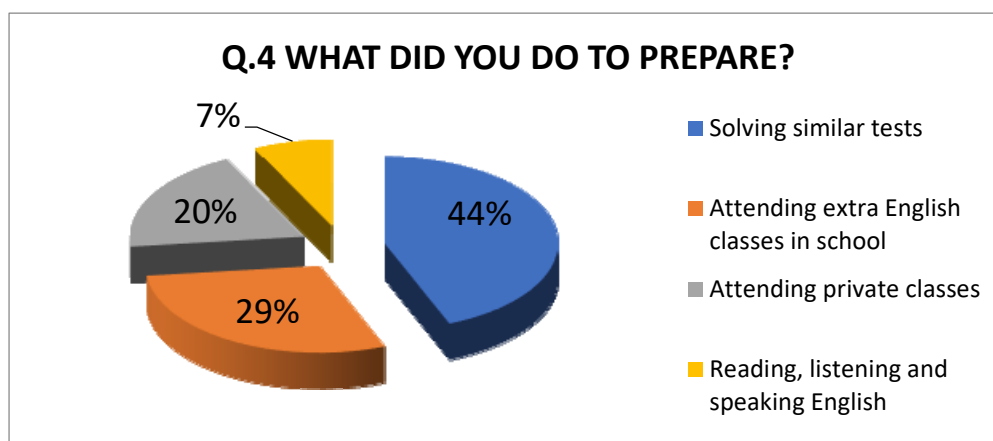
Figure 7 The Preliminary candidates' advisors



Though parents and school teachers appear as equally important in the candidates' decision to sit the exam, it is without any doubt that teachers are most influential as the school teachers and the private ones outnumber all the other factors referred to by the Preliminary candidates. It is slightly intriguing that the influence of friends is the least mentioned by the candidates. One would have expected that within the age group of the majority of the candidates the influence of friends would be much more potent.

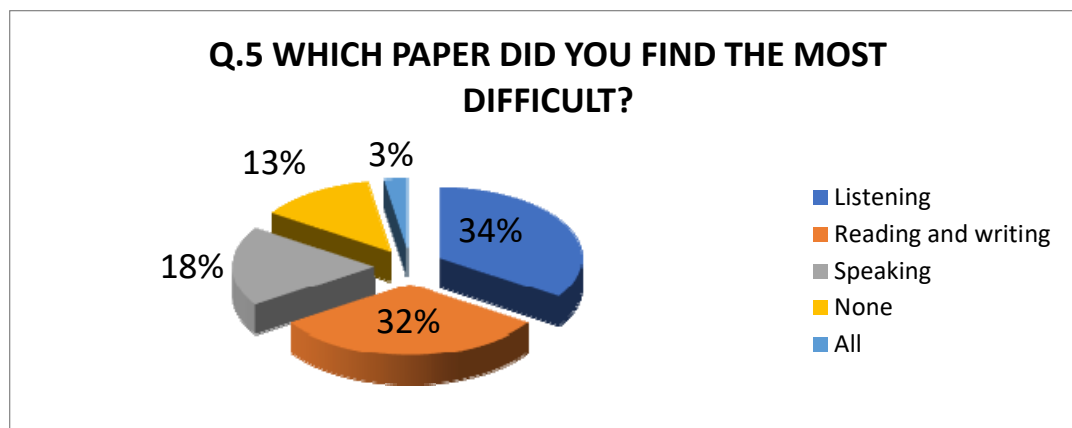
The next question in our open-ended questionnaire tried to elicit answers related to the way in which the candidates prepared for the exam. The answers were categorized and counted as shown by the chart below.

Figure 8 The Preliminary candidates choice of preparation exam strategies



If in the answers given to other questions the candidates (or their advisors) seemed to display a certain maturity, the preferred way of preparation chosen shows that this maturity as well as appropriateness when it comes to what counts as good practice in language teaching and testing do seem to fade away. Barely solving similar tests can promote a certain routine and familiarity with the test structure but definitely not the acquisition of language skills. Unfortunately the questionnaire was not clear enough for establishing who recommended this preparation strategy. Can this be a reminiscence of deeply engrained practices in the Romanian educational system where rote-learning was (and still is) seen as paramount? This is indeed a question worth exploring in the future.

Figure 9 The candidates' views on the difficulties of the Preliminary papers

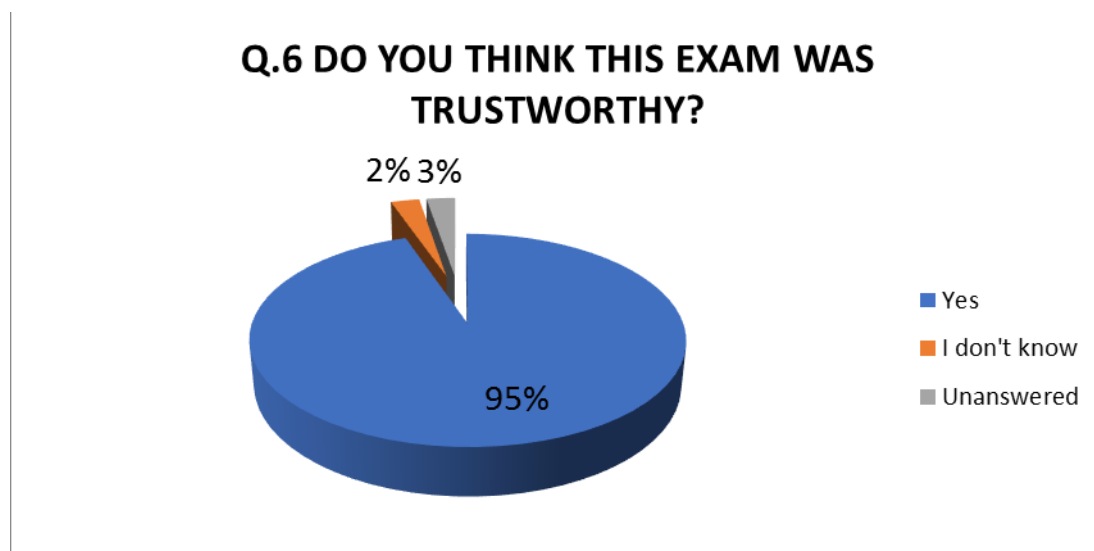


As the chart shows, the respondents found the listening and the reading and writing papers the most difficult, and in a similar percentage. This finding is somewhat surprising

because receptive skills are generally seen as being easier to deal with than the productive skills. And students in general favour close-ended items to the open-ended ones. Two possible reasons might lie at the bottom of this unexpected result, both having a technical connotation. The listening paper, on the one hand, relies on the use of equipment which is often blamed for poor results by some of the test-takers who just assimilate faulty equipment with test difficulty. On the other hand, when viewing the Reading and writing paper as difficult, the respondents might actually refer to the writing component of this paper. It would have been much more useful to particularly formulate the questions in such a way that the answers provided refer to the two skills separately.

The last question of our open-ended questionnaire sought to find answers that would indicate the attitude towards the test as such, in a similar way questions 1 did.

Figure 10 The candidates' views on the trustworthiness of Preliminary



The answers provided by the respondents do seem to indicate an overwhelmingly positive attitude towards the exam. Even though, one could argue, the fact they decided to sit Preliminary is a sign that the respondents (or their advisors) must find it trustworthy, the results are self-evident. After all there are quite a number of exams in Romania which are not seen as trustworthy and still students sit them. The results shown after analysing this question do confirm, along with the results rendered by other questions, that Preliminary is an exam that produces mainly positive feelings both when it comes to its usefulness and its trustworthiness.

The respondents were given the possibility to add any comments they might find relevant, however none of them chose to do so. Most probably their age in addition to the time of the face-to-face completion of the open-ended questions (a task that in general respondents find rather daunting) provide a reasonable explanation for this absence.

In the final section of our paper we try to pull the strings of this endeavour together and come up with the profile of the typical candidate for Preliminary.

3. Conclusions

The study discussed in this paper offers a cross-sectional angle of the typical candidate for the Cambridge Preliminary exam in a close centre in Western Romania.

The profile emerged once we analysed two complementary questionnaires, an official, standardized, entirely close-ended one completed by all the test-takers and an open-ended questionnaire designed by the authors of this paper voluntarily filled in by a number of respondent test-takers.

The analysis showed that the typical Preliminary candidate is a mid-teenager (fourteen to fifteen), male (not representative for the gender structure of the Romanian population, neither in accordance with the popular belief that females are more interested/god at language learning than males). He has not sat another Cambridge exam before, and if he did, he favoured Cambridge Young Learners. The typical candidate prepared for this exam at school by solving similar tests. His best advisor in the decision to sit this exam was a teacher, most often the school teacher, but also the private teacher played an important role in this respect. He found the most difficult the listening paper and the reading and writing one. Considering that these papers mainly elicit receptive skills (thought to be easier to acquire), this findings is quite surprising. However it is not clear whether the writing component of the reading and writing paper is not more likely to blame for their belief. Being familiar with what other students and teachers said after sitting other paper-based Cambridge exams, it is not too much of a speculation to consider that test-takers fear bad sound in the listening paper.

The typical attitude of the typical candidate toward this exam is almost entirely positive, confirming the findings of the other two studies conducted in Romania mentioned earlier in this paper. Thus the typical candidate thinks Preliminary is a trustworthy exam and one that will help him primarily in his personal development, even though the main reason for choosing it is quite pragmatic: secondary school or university requirements, or, in other words the desire to replace other Romanian designed English language exams with the Cambridge one.

To sum up, by conducting this study we may have not discovered what underlies the decrease in Cambridge Upper Main suite candidature in Romania, or in our region for that matter, and the increase of the Lower Main suite volumes, but we managed to construct the profile of the typical candidate for the Preliminary exam. Our findings, nevertheless due seem to indicate that the policies Ministries of education encourage trends, but the most important factor in encouraging people to sit exams are their teachers. Extended research into this area for understanding exam related phenomena is sorely needed.

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Notes on the authors

Codruţa GOŞA is a reader in the English Department of the West University of Timişoara, Romania. She holds a doctoral degree in applied linguistics awarded by Lancaster University. Her main area of interest is the theory and practice of qualitative research methods, diary studies in particular. She is actively involved in the Cambridge Exams administration and oral examination.

Luminița FRENȚIU is a reader in the English Department at the West University of Timisoara, Romania. Her PhD thesis was on *Communication strategies in verbal interaction*. She has specialized in translation studies, pragmatics, discourse analysis and ELT. She is the founder and editor of the *Romanian Journal of English Studies* currently published in online format by DeGruyer Open.