

Chapter 1

The Context: the Current School-Leaving Examination

Fekete, Major and Nikolov (1999) present a detailed analysis of the current forms of the Matura (Érettségi) examination. In this initial chapter, we complement those descriptions by two descriptions of the administration of the exam – the oral and the written parts – by an outsider, and reflections on the current examination by an insider – the current Chief Examiner for English.

An account of a visit to a gimnázium to view conduct of the Oral Érettségi (Matura), June, 1999

I was lucky enough to be allowed to sit in on a number of oral exams for Year 12 at the Gimnázium, thanks to the cooperation of the Deputy Principal, and by kind permission of the School Principal. I saw a number of bilingual-stream students being examined in History and English, in English, and Hungarian and Music, in Hungarian. I was also able to see the regular Matura being administered to normal stream pupils (EFL), for History (in Hungarian), English and German. I am very grateful to all who welcomed me and allowed me to experience the oral examination.

I was told that I would regret not having videoed the proceedings: I do. It is difficult to convey everything that I experienced, as a cultural outsider, in words.

The oral examination is a BIG event. It is the end of Year 12, a rite of passage, or an initiation ceremony into the adult world. When students finish their oral exams, they have finished school, and all that remains is the banquet put on by their parents for students and teachers, the closing ceremony, where their record cards are presented, and doubtless their own partying. Ballagás is the name of the family event in early May when students and their relatives process formally through the school, throughout all corridors and classrooms. This is part of the ceremonial celebrations, as is the habit of placing photographs of the Year 12 Group in shop and bank windows around town, later placing these on the walls in corridors in school. The students dress up for the occasion of the examination, boys in suits and ties (even a bow-tie, for one boy), girls in smart dresses and pretty blouses. Everybody looks their best. Mothers bake cakes and prepare refreshments, and serve them in a side room to students as they come out of one exam, before they go back to prepare for the next one.

The exam room is formally laid out, with a long table at one end, behind which sit members of the Examination Board, and on which are often placed vases of multicoloured flowers. In front of this long table is a small table and a chair, or just a chair, at which the candidate sits when being examined. To one side of the candidate is a table with textbooks and reference books like atlases (but not dictionaries, curiously), which students can borrow. Behind the candidate's seat are five more tables with chairs, at which are seated students who are preparing for their turn, scribbling furiously on notepaper, or staring into space thinking, or listening to the candidate's performance, and even, occasionally, joining in the laughter.

And the presence of laughter suggests that this is not entirely a seriously formal affair. In fact, in one exam I witnessed, the door was left open, and people came and went freely, people on the Examination Board chatted to each other whilst the candidate was performing, students preparing occasionally talked to each other or asked teachers on the Board questions, students came in and selected their questions from members of the Board, and their choices were registered, right by the side of the candidate who was performing, and who seemed not to be disturbed in the least by all these goings-on. The examining teachers try to encourage students, smile, fill in silences for them and laugh at mistakes or blunders. They often prompt for the right answer, sometimes giving it themselves. They even give feedback, nodding agreement, saying whether an answer was correct or not. But even such teachers were somewhat embarrassed when one rather eccentric student asked: 'Was I very bad?'. Formal feedback is presumably only given when the record cards are handed over, in the final ceremony.

Certainly, no decision is taken immediately after the performance. I did not witness it but was told that after all the examining is over, the Chair calls a meeting, and each teacher calls out the marks given to his or her student, and these are then formally recorded in the record card. I do not know whether there are ever disagreements at these meetings, but I saw no evidence of anybody making notes or noting down marks, except for the teacher actually asking the questions, and even then I did not always see marks being written or notes taken. So how there can be disagreement is unclear. In fact, I was told that there's hardly any, unless the examining teacher is uncertain about what final mark to give. Then s/he may ask members of the board who were present at that particular exam to suggest a mark. The Chair of the Board is not always in the room: he/she cannot be as the exams start at 8am and continue until 5pm, without any sort of break. And so the Chair cannot be keeping a record of impressions or marks – and in any case is clearly unable to judge performances in all subjects. S/he may not speak English, may not be a history specialist, or a Hungarian literature teacher. So I'm not too sure how the Chair can do anything much other than see that the exams are conducted according to regulations. There is also a secretary (who may be a teacher) present, who takes notes on, for example, numbers of questions asked, or s/he may be recording the grades of the previous day, preparing the record cards, and so on. That person ensures that all records are kept for 50 years (who ever looks at them again?).

The record cards are interesting: they are hard-backed, with specially printed paper inside, issued by OKSZI – Országos Közoktatási Szolgáltató Iroda (National Bureau of Public Education Services) – I assume, and they are presumably forger-proof. In the bilingual stream, these are entitled General Certificate of Education as well as Érettségi Bizonyítvány. They contain, in handwriting, the name of the candidate, the subjects they have chosen to take and their marks, and the other certificates they have taken (like Rigó utca exams, or international exams). They are signed by the School Principal and by the Chair of the Board of Examiners, and stamped with the school seal. Yet they are never signed, sealed or validated by any external authority. The only external feature they have is the special non-forgable paper which they contain.

And this lack of external control or inspection is the hall mark of the system. Certainly, OKSZI produces guidelines for the exam at the beginning of Year 11 for any cohort (as far as I can tell: the 1999 exam I witnessed was referring to a 1997 document), and certainly, the Chair of the Board is from outside, although s/he may have an association with the school. But as noted above, the Chair can hardly be expected to intervene in the marking process, and the actual examination papers are prepared by the schools' own teachers. Presumably some are prepared in collaboration, but at least one board – the EFL one – had separate texts and conversation topics from each schoolteacher. These are written along the lines of a sample paper produced by OKSZI. In the case of the bilingual exam, this consisted of a list of 35 or so topics, on which the teachers write specific questions,

see below; and a sample text with gaps in it and underlined words, together with three tasks: fill in the blanks, explain the meaning of the underlined words, and discuss the source and style of the text. But teachers select their own texts, identify the gaps and words to underline themselves, and there are no guidelines on how to do this, what sort of texts to select, how to control for difficulty, what sort of words to delete or underline, or even how many texts to prepare. The only rule, at least in normal schools, seems to be that there must be at least one more text than there are students.

Topics and texts are distributed by students selecting texts face down or envelopes containing slips of paper with the topics. Some did this with eyes closed, others counted up to a magic number and took that envelope; some gasped when they saw their topic or text, and one or two even said they were impossible, but they were not allowed a second choice.

In fact, I understand that students are allowed to have a second choice but then the first is considered to be a 1. Thus even if the second choice is a 5, the best result can only be a 3 in that subject. Apparently teachers generally advise their students not to insist on a second choice, only in the case that it is absolutely hopeless that they can say anything about the topic selected. So they hope for good luck, and indeed, students are allowed to bring their lucky mascots in with them: I saw several teddy bears, and other cuddly toys.

When the examination is over, the texts and topics are recycled for the next day (which presumably means that second day students can discover what most of the topics and texts are, at least in general terms), but all scrap paper is handed in and destroyed, presumably.

This system seems to apply to all subjects: OKSZI lays down guidelines of a sort, at least a list of named topics, but the teachers themselves devise the actual questions. I gather they are passed to the Chair, I assume several days before the event, for checking against the OKSZI guidelines, but I doubt whether this is ever rigorously done, since the Chair cannot be an expert in all subjects.

And how are the students evaluated? As far as I can tell, they are examined by their own teacher only. Although other people are present (the rules say that there must ALWAYS be at least three members of the Board present, and there are often more) including teachers of the subject being examined, only one person seemed to ask questions or take any notes, if at all. Presumably only one person gives marks in the final meeting. I gather that each part of the exam, the A and the B questions, receives a mark, and the two are equally weighted, added and averaged to reach a final mark for the oral in that subject. If the subject is also examined in a written exam then the written and oral marks are added together and averaged to give one grade to be entered in the record card. Hungarian language and literature have both an oral and a written exam, history is only examined orally, mathematics is only examined in a written exam, foreign languages are both oral and written, as are physics & chemistry (students can choose to take an oral but the written exam is compulsory), geography is oral only, although the written exam is compulsory when students take the Joint exam for university entrance.

But how are grades (1-5) awarded? There appear to be no criteria, official or unofficial, which teachers must follow. No guidelines for marking exist as far as I can tell, although there are some vague definitions of what a 1 and a 5 are worth, the grades in between being up to the professional discretion of the teacher. No training is given in marking, no attempt is made to check for intra-rater reliability, much less inter-rater, and there is no monitoring of standards, despite the presence of many people on the board.

Indeed, as far as I can tell, the schools are not even required to submit the grades awarded to a central body, although a copy of the record of the examination is sent to the Registrar of the Local Government.

Certainly there is never any analysis of results by school or by subject and hence no corrective action is taken, or even questioning of results. Presumably the philosophy is that the teacher knows his/ her students best, and the exam rewards effort, personality, intelligence, discipline, motivation and the like as well as simple achievement. The teacher is an expert, a professional, and to suggest the need for training, for agreement, for exchange of marks, for monitoring, for explicit criteria, might be felt to question the professionalism of teachers. I wonder who believes that?

Everybody I spoke to seemed agreed that the exam was a waste of time: what really matters are the University Entrance Examinations, to be taken in a week or two. (Not that these are any different, at least the oral exams, from what I hear. Although the sciences, and languages, now have a Joint Érettségi and Entrance exam for the written part, many subjects are still examined by written papers set by each individual university department – and so are likely to be of very dubious quality). But they are important, and so are taken seriously. Students can select optional subjects for some 2-3 extra lessons per week in Years 11-12, so they have to study these subjects more, in more lessons, and they select their subjects in order to perform better on the entrance exam. Teachers clearly prepare their students for university entrance exams.

So what actually happens during this important ceremony, this 'worthless' School-leaving examination process? Students are timetabled in batches, normally of five. They enter at their allotted time, go to the Board, to the teacher of the first subject they will be examined in, and select blind an A question and a B question. The numbers of the questions they have selected are noted by the teacher, and the students then select any reference materials they want from the table, take note paper, and sit down and start thinking about their answers to the questions. Some write notes, some seem to write complete sentences, some write half a page, some cover three or four pages. I wonder how students are prepared for this: are they taught how to take notes? Are they given strategies for coping with the stress, and for remembering the main points? Are they told the difference between fact recitals and summarising gist? Hopefully, especially in their 12th grade.

Students may get up and have a drink of water or eat a cake from the refreshments in the room. If another candidate is being examined, they may try to ignore them – although that would have been difficult for those who were preparing their answers when I witnessed three students being examined in sight-reading of music, and especially when all three formed a group for the instrumental part of their exam, and two girls sang whilst the boy played the guitar! It seemed to me that students were not in fact disturbed by the noise around them, either when they were preparing or when they were performing.

Students are allowed a minimum of 30 minutes' preparation time, and some students insisted on their full allowance, even though the candidate timetabled before them had already finished. The examination time is ten minutes, but some candidates take less time, or their teachers stop the process earlier. Candidates are allowed to insist on full preparation time. In theory they are not supposed to have to wait for more than 40 minutes, although in practice there are delays for various reasons.

When it is their turn to be examined, they come to the Board, give the number of their A question, and then begin to recite their answer. This is usually a long monologue, for five minutes or so, uninterrupted by the teacher. Occasionally a teacher might check a fact, point out an error (including of pronunciation of English names in a History exam in Hungarian!) or ask a question or two. Teachers also comment on the performance (one teacher said 'Ügyes volt' – 'You/ that were/was clever', and others point out factual or pronunciation errors). The candidate is then asked to turn to the B question and perform, usually again a monologic recital. Comments and questions may ensue, or the teacher may simply say: 'that's enough', and the candidate hands over all paper, and then usually leaves the room for a while, or begins the preparation of the next examination

immediately. If they leave the room, they may go to the refreshment room where the mothers are gathered, and chat, but then they return to the examination room after five or ten minutes, according to the timetable, and begin the whole process again for the next subject.

For any one student, the whole process lasts about two and a half hours. In this time, they are examined on four subjects: how do they feel about having to prepare for so many exams on one occasion? How do they do it? After all, they know the topics, but not the actual test they will choose, and so presumably they must be solidly prepared for any eventuality. For history, for example, this presumably means knowing all the dates and facts about a range of events in a number of places, and hoping that their best topic will turn up, not their worst one. Small wonder they take their lucky mascots in with them! In effect, what they are asked to do in one ten-minute session is to deliver two oral essays – and in many ways, one might argue, that is fairer than requiring people to write essays for three hours, since they have the chance to explain themselves, answer questions, clarify, justify, correct and so on. But four subjects, in less than three hours is an incredible load. They must have to memorise enormous amounts of information. Again, small wonder that this is a big occasion, and perhaps it is fortunate that the results of the exams do not matter much! It would be important to explore students' perceptions of all this: I wonder if any research has been conducted on this?

For the Board, too, the day is tiring, and I myself found my attention wandering. The exams are timetabled right through the day without a break, but subject teachers are cycled through this: History teachers leaving when the English exams start, English teachers leaving when the Hungarian cycle begins. This means that any one teacher typically only has to be there for fifty minutes (one batch of five students) and then can go away for an hour or two – or go to another exam board where their students might be being examined. It does mean that the Secretary and Chair have a long stretch, but the rules apparently say that even the Chair does not HAVE to be there all the time, although it is clearly a boring job as the Chair was there for most of the exams I observed.

For English, the precise nature of the exam is somewhat different for different levels.

The Bilingual oral exam has two parts, A and B. Question A is based on the topics issued by OKSZI, and included topics like:

'Describe some typical sports in the UK and USA.'

'Describe the British legal system.'

'Describe the variety of ethnic groups in America.'

'Describe some features of the British/ American educational system.'

'Discuss developments in technology in the late twentieth century.'

'How can natural catastrophes be prevented?' (this did not seem to correspond to the list of topics on the OKSZI list)?

Question B is a text with some words deleted and others underlined, as explained above. Texts varied considerably in difficulty and source: from Gerald Durrell to Dick Gregory.

I assume that the reason there is a supposed test of reading in this oral is because the written paper is two translations and a composition, but there is no test of reading as such.

As described above, students just recite an impromptu oral essay for Question A. What markers do about various problems is not known: what if the facts are wrong, incomplete, mixed up? What if the recital is superficial, trite? What if the candidate just dries up after two minutes and has nothing more to say? What if the recital was obviously rote-learned? What if it is off the topic (as happened in one case: the student started talking about the British legal system in excellent English and with plenty of facts about magistrates' courts and the like, but then wandered on to talking about Alcatraz!) What if it was intelligent, concise, showed great understanding of the topic, but the English was awful? What about

the importance of organisation over pronunciation, syntax over lexis? I suspect these issues are just not discussed and different teachers address them differently.

Question B is much shorter. The teacher asks the student to say out loud the missing words, and says whether they are correct or not, one by one (yet keeps no record of the number correct). S/he comments on or even prompts the explanation of underlined words, and in the stylistic description, as soon as the student has said something, it is accepted and the examination is over. Performance on Question B is much briefer and somewhat more interactive, yet the two questions are equally weighted!

The regular EFL oral is different. Questions are again compiled by class teachers for their own students. However, Question A is a short text, around 14 lines in length, on a range of topics (The Dustbin Guide; Pocket Money – How?; Equality of Opportunity; Complaining about a Holiday; Piccadilly Circus; Isaac Newton; Charles Darwin; Edward 1; etc) and they are very variable in difficulty. The student studies the text for 30 minutes (most seem to need no more than 10 minutes, then they gaze into space). The task is, first, to read the text aloud; then to give a summary of the text in Hungarian (usually this was a word-for-word translation, but the teacher did nothing about that). Then they might be asked questions on the text (one teacher I observed only did this with a couple of students, the rest of the time she forgot to, or chose not to).

Only then do students chose Question B: this is similar to Question A on the Bilingual exam, and is taken from a list of 20 topics prepared by the teacher ('What landmarks would you suggest a foreigner visit in Budapest?'; 'Why are your hobbies, the music you listen to important to you?'; 'Describe the house or flat you live in and where you would like to live;' etc). Students call out the number of their slip and are expected to begin talking immediately. They seem only to notice the topic and not the detailed questions, and usually they do not address the question, they just talk around the topic. The teacher may or may not draw their attention to the actual wording of the question, but it seems not to matter.

The teacher asks a number of questions to prompt the student, but they seem not to have been trained how to do this: questions were vague, sometimes inaudible, sometimes they are impossible to answer: 'Do you agree that Sri Lanka is the most beautiful country in the world?'. Sometimes the same question was repeated to the same student. At one point during a recital on the topic of 'Keeping fit and avoiding the doctor', the teacher switched to the topic of environmental problems and pollution – and the student seemed relieved! Obviously this had been rehearsed in class. One teacher pointed out 'his/her' pronominal adjective confusions during the questioning (and the student said 'Thank you'). The same teacher told one student before beginning: 'Watch your pronunciation: there is a native speaker present.' At the end, I was asked to ask the students some questions also. That clearly terrified the students, so I asked easy questions about how long they had been learning English, what they were going to study and so on. They answered, just. Incidentally the same procedures were followed in the German exam I witnessed, and the same problems occurred.

I do not understand why weaker students (after all, out of a class of 36 students, 30 did not take this exam since they had already passed Rigó utca) have the topics sprung on them whilst stronger students have 30 minutes to prepare. I should have thought the latter case much easier and less stressful. Presumably, though, this is the regulation and it cannot be varied, at least in the current year.

It is clear that change is possible and needed. Training for interviewers is urgently needed, as is monitoring of what they do. However, this will need to be handled carefully, as it will suggest to some that teachers do not know how to conduct oral exams. The marking needs careful reviewing, criteria need to be developed and the need for them explained, teachers will need training in their use, and the principle of reliability and double marking needs to be introduced. In point of fact, double marking is possible right now, since there

are usually at least two subject teachers present on the Board, and there is no reason why both should not get involved in marking, even if the exam is delivered by one teacher. This would have the effect of sharing and agreeing criteria. However, for the time being the School-leaving exam is considered to be the responsibility of the single teacher teaching that subject in the final year. To ask more teachers to become involved in grading might be perceived as requiring more time and therefore money, although at present teachers seem willing to sit through other teachers' grilling of their students without extra payment.

In principle, there is no reason why the questions have to be devised by one teacher alone, since we know that nobody writes good questions alone. However, one reason why this happens appears to be that different classes are at different levels of ability or achievement, and the class teacher is thought to be best placed to know the students' level. This suggests that the function of the exam may be different: it is NOT to identify the students' level, but to say how well they did at that level. The record card does not show what level the student is, either. It cannot. The class teacher 'knows' the level, hence the test is adapted in difficulty to the student's level.

Of course, teachers may be entirely wrong about the students' level, and the questions they devise and ask, the texts they select and the words they delete or underline, may be quite badly prepared and quite inappropriate for the level. But if the principle is in fact adaptivity to student level, this needs to be addressed. And if I am right to suggest that the test is not intended to identify a level, then the role of external assessors, or quality monitors, needs rethinking or at least its rationale needs to be thoroughly understood, as does the philosophy of the current culture of assessment.

Change in English examinations, or even in foreign languages more generally, needs to take account of the present system. It will be important to know what changes are planned for history, for Hungarian, and for geography. Do they plan to retain the ceremonial Board, and the rotation of subjects? If they do, then pair-based testing of speaking will be more difficult to arrange (not impossible, as has been experienced in the Baltic States), but we need to be wary of introducing change that will be undermined by the existing culture, as seems to have happened in Latvia. If the 30-minute test-preparation period is retained, how can this best be utilised for English? Or should students not have any formal preparation? If there is to be preparation, can it happen in a separate room from the examination, since this seems to me to be disturbing of candidates and unnecessarily stressful for those preparing? Doubtless, this will involve the issue of teachers' time and pay for invigilating.

But the system has many positive features on which we must build: an oral exam exists, so the principle is accepted of oral testing of languages, unlike in many countries. The administration of the exam runs smoothly, is properly timetabled and regulated, security seems fairly adequate. The principle of having outsiders present is already established through the presence of the Chair, and the event is public, so that parents can in principle monitor what is happening, so external quality control is possible (although intervention when things are not being done properly will need careful introduction).

Introducing training in delivery of oral exams, switching from a possible focus on facts and intelligence to different language-based criteria, and the use of explicit criteria and training in their use, as well as double-marking, are all needed, and possible, but they will need to be introduced sensitively, and in harmony with whatever innovations are intended in other curricular subjects. An exciting challenge! Above all, perhaps, we must be careful to preserve the ceremonial character of the event, to respect the cultural rite of passage, whilst introducing valid and reliable assessment methods consistent with the current philosophy, whatever it is perceived as being by those on the inside, not by people like me who are outside.

An account of a visit to a gimnázium to observe the Written Matura being administered, May, 1999

I am very grateful to the school's Principal and Deputy Principal for allowing me to witness the administration of the written exam (the regular EFL exam).

The examination papers are sent to the local Pedagogical Institute by OKSZI, and are collected from there by the School Principal a week before the exam season commences. They are contained in sealed envelopes, one for each subject paper, and the name of the school, the subject of the question paper, and the day and time of opening of the envelope is written on the label. There is one envelope for each Question paper (A and B). The envelopes are stored in the school safe, and may only be opened 15 minutes before the exam begins.

At the school I visited, an usher stood on guard outside the room, in the corridor where the exam was held. That person ensured silence in the corridor and accompanied students to the toilet if required.

There were two examination rooms, next to each other. In one, 10 students would be seated, in the other 7 (60 other students studying English did not take this exam as they had already passed the Rigó utca exam). Students were allowed into the examination room five minutes before the exam was due to begin. They were as usual formally dressed in suits and dresses. They sat at separate tables, one per table, and could only just barely see each other's papers, I estimated. The proctor/ invigilator was already in place – a non-English teacher – and that person was rotated every hour. I was told that a seating plan is completed for every room although desks are not numbered. This plan is presumably retained in case similarities of responses are detected and then inspected to see if those students were seated close to each other.

At 8am on the dot, the School Principal came into the first room, held the envelope up to show that it was still sealed, and then ceremonially opened it with a pair of scissors. He walked round the class distributing the A paper to each student, and spare copies were kept at the front. This took a minute or so and he then rapidly went into the next examination room to repeat the ceremony. I was not sure what happened in other subjects where numbers might be greater, but once the Rigó utca examination cannot replace the Érettségi, there will be more students – 77 in total in this school – and thus more administration and rooms will be required.

The proctor wrote the start and finish times on the blackboard. The students were told in Hungarian to write their names on the last page of their question/ answer sheets, and at the top of any scrap paper they used. No dictionaries were allowed for Paper A, which included 'Use of English', and 'Reading' (although one student had a dictionary on her desk, which she never consulted).

The paper consisted of 8 tasks: a text with 8 gaps, where the appropriate form of the verbs given above the text were to be entered; a text with eight gaps to be filled; a table with an A-B dialogue, where the B parts of the dialogue had to be put into the correct order (5 items); a 5-item sentence transformation task, double-weighted to give 10 points; a 9-item multiple-choice sentential grammar test; a short passage with four constructed-response questions, again double-weighted; a vocabulary task, with 6 words to be found in the text to match a set of definitions; and a brief composition based on the text, worth 6 points.

Some students started with the composition, and worked through the paper backwards; others started at the beginning and worked forwards. It was not clear to me why they did anything other than start at the beginning.

Students were allowed to eat and drink during the exam, and to leave the room if accompanied. If they finished early, they were allowed to leave the room after handing in their paper and having a register completed by the proctor, including details of time of completion of paper.

The examination proceeded in silence, with no signs of cheating. Traffic noise outside was somewhat loud and made worse by the fact that it was hot, and so the windows were open. (This is likely to be inevitable in May but it will affect the Listening paper for the new test.)

The time allowed for Paper A was 90 minutes. I completed all tasks in 10 minutes. The first student finished in 40 minutes, but then spent time revising her paper. After one hour, most students were either revising their answers, or dozing. After an hour a new proctor entered and replaced the first one. Unlike the first proctor, who spent her time reading and marking scripts, this one sat and observed the students.

The first student left after 75 minutes, the second only 3 minutes before the end of the allotted time. The time was more than ample, allowing much revision and reflection, and this was clearly not a speed test of spontaneous language use.

After lining up to have their answer papers registered, students left the room for 10 minutes or so, and returned before the end of the scheduled 15-minute break, for Paper 2: translation from English into Hungarian. (Note that the bilingual schools have three parts: composition, translation into and out of Hungarian. I do not know how this is administered.)

A new proctor handed out blank sheets of paper, and students collected their dictionaries from the back of the class. This time the Principal opened the envelope in the other room first, and then carried out the same opening ceremony with scissors, in this room. The proctor put the finishing time on the board, and got it wrong by 30 minutes. It took several minutes of calculation and discussion to sort this out, some students giggling, but the rest starting work. There was a master dictionary at the front of the class, and one student quickly went to consult that, taking it back to her seat for some time before being asked to return it. Thereafter, students occasionally went to the front to consult it.

The text was only 17 lines long and appeared to have been taken from a travel section of a magazine, although no source was given. It was not the sort of text students might expect to have to translate in real life, and it was unclear how or why it had been selected. It contained some difficult vocabulary, and was written in a personal style. It was also rather culturally biased.

Some students worked systematically through the text with their dictionaries, writing in the translation of words interlinearly. Others drafted out translations on their scrap paper. Only one student took time to read through the full text before beginning to consult dictionaries. Most appeared to be looking up virtually every word. A new proctor entered.

The students were very well behaved, and clearly took this seriously. Silence reigned. I do not know what sanctions exist in case of indiscipline, cheating, talking, or other malpractice, but I saw no signs of any problems.

The translation proceeded painfully slowly, and the students spent quite a lot of time towards the end copying out their draft translations into fair copy. They put their names on their fair copies (and so anonymous marking was impossible).

After 75 minutes, the first student left, the proctor again completing the register of events and timing and signing the answer sheet handed in. With four minutes to go, 7 students out of the ten were still making a fair copy of their translation. Unlike the previous proctor, this one announced that there were three minutes left to go, and then announced the end of the exam.

Regulations say that the maximum length of a written examination, excluding breaks, is four hours, for Hungarian. Most exams, including English, take 3 hours, excluding breaks.

The examination is clearly taken very seriously: the administration and security is very good, and the system is clearly capable of handling a reformed exam. Since 12 different exams are given for different schools, it is, in principle, also capable of distributing different exam papers, though whether it can handle pre-registration at different levels or the administration of different papers in the same room, is not clear. However, it can clearly handle the administration of different papers in different rooms, to which students have been pre-allocated.

How the marking is done is a mystery. No criteria are given, there are no guidelines to markers and no training is given. In this school I was told that the marking would happen in groups, but whether problems would be discussed was unclear. I also gather that the majority of errors in the translation are errors in Hungarian, not English, and so students' Hungarian is tested rather than English. In most schools, teachers mark individually, on their own, and therefore clearly criteria and their application will vary and problems will not be discussed, nor will common standards be applied. Nor is there any external quality control. The only rule seems to be that the results must be ready by early June, and that students have the right to examine their marks and inspect how their papers were marked. Appeals are allowed (and sometimes succeed). This will clearly present problems. Students must have made any complaint or lodged appeals before the oral exam which in this school would be held near the end of June.

The current school leaving examination from the test writer's point of view or: do we care about the current school leaving examination?

Introduction

In this section I will discuss the important features of the construction of the current written English school leaving examination. The aim of this paper is

- to give an insight into the principles and procedures of the construction of the written part of the current school leaving exam (érettségi) in English,
- to draw the attention of the bodies involved in administration and professionals who could help the development of the current examination.

There is quite a lot of publicity about the ongoing Examination Reform Project. However, the present exam gets very little or no attention at all. It is considered to be a necessary evil which will be wiped out when the new one is implemented and in the meantime it is not worth paying attention to its development. It seems, though, that it will be another four or five years at least until the introduction of the new model into the public educational system. That means that approximately 100.000 students will have to sit for the English exam in the current system, a fact which cannot be ignored.

The history

In 1978 a major reform of public education went into operation when curricula were updated and adjusted to the latest findings and trends of language teaching methodology and assessment theories. The curriculum was centrally designed and compulsory for everyone and it was accompanied by a set of course books and supplementary material. The examination model was set up in accordance with the aims and requirements of the curriculum. The School-leaving examination was supposed to be an achievement test assessing the acquisition of the requirements of the curriculum. (This apparently still works well with Russian.)

The documents that regulate the current examination

The examination model for all subjects of the School-leaving examination is laid down in the Regulations for Grammar Schools which is issued by the Ministry of Education. Languages are not dealt with separately but under the heading Modern Languages and the examination model is set for all of them uniformly.

The content of an examination paper is generally regulated by Detailed Requirements. In Hungary, the case is very difficult. The curriculum of the year 1978 is still in force. In addition, there are numerous local curricula and hundreds of coursebooks and supplementary materials (there are more than 400 hundred titles on the Ministry's list) that should be considered when writing an achievement test. Since it is quite impossible to design a test paper that incorporates all of them, basically it is largely the experience and 'gut-feeling' of the item writers that determines test content.

Types of English written examination papers

There are seven separate types of written examination papers (two variations are designed for each). Examination papers for students of the Ballet Institute, comprehensive schools, music schools and evening schools are of the same level as the examination paper designed for students following the basic curriculum but are written on different days. This is a very unfortunate practice since it implies the production of 75 pages of written material every year which uses up a lot of energy and money without real benefits. It increases the risks of committing errors and it hinders any concentration on quality rather than on quantity.

Level

In this paper I focus on the construction of the written test for students following the basic curriculum (alaptanterv). I find the translation 'basic' misleading in this context since it does not refer to the Basic level of the State Foreign Language Examination (Rigó utca) or to the proposed Year 10 exam level. What is meant by 'basic curriculum' is the traditional teaching practice in Hungary requiring 3-5 contact hours per week and at least 4 years study. The majority (four-fifths) of the students taking the English exam apply for this particular test paper.

The intended level of the examination is between the Basic and Intermediate level of the Hungarian State Foreign Language Exam or A2 and B1 level of the Council of Europe Framework. I have no doubt that some of the teachers of the top schools of the country find it ridiculously easy, although it is fairly demanding for a large proportion of the exam-taking population.

Population

The school-leaving population is a very heterogeneous population with very different learning experiences and teaching environments. The population taking the English exam is the second largest after mathematics: around 15000 each year with a steady increase. Statistics include the number of students who, although they do not actually sit for the examination, still get an automatic mark of 5 as a result of their having passed the State Foreign Language Exam. Students who are able to pass the State Examination are exempt from taking the School-leaving Examination which leaves the actual examination-taking population considerably weaker than the real general level of learners.

Examination model

The written paper consists of two separate 90-minute papers: Use of English + Translation from English into Hungarian.

Producing the items

Test papers are produced and distributed by The National Bureau of Public Education Services (Országos Közoktatási Szolgáltató Iroda – OKSZI). OKSZI's experts are responsible for item writing and final editing. At the moment there are no official specifications of any languages for the School-leaving examination. A series of principles are set by the expert in charge of the given language which serve as guidance for both individual item writing as well as the editing of the test paper as a whole. Producing the test paper is highly dependent on the general experience of the item writer, previous teaching and gut feelings.

Principles of the construction of the Use of English testpaper

Item types

- the total score is 60 points (applicable for all languages)
- it is the normal procedure generally to include 8-10 item types with a value of 5-10 points each
- item types are deliberately varied year by year so that no one method predominates and becomes predictable
- item types or test methods vary within the test paper so overall performance does not depend on the students' ability to do better at one or other test type
- the paper should contain text-based as well as sentence-based items
- the paper should contain item types that can be objectively assessed but there is no restriction on subjectively assessable item types
- item types should be familiar to students (e.g. similar to the exercises found in pre-intermediate and intermediate coursebooks)
- there should not be much overlap in the testing of particular grammar points or vocabulary
- testing of reading and writing on a very small scale should be 'smuggled in' (usually one 10-point item for reading and writing respectively)
- the exam should contain real-life or communicative tasks
- test papers as a whole should reflect general teaching methods: they should be a natural outcome of classroom assessment techniques.

Layout

- as sophisticated graphics as possible with the available software should be applied (including visuals of a good quality is impossible because of the lack of expertise and software)
- rubrics are in Hungarian (a question of tradition rather than a professional decision, as it matches the practice of other foreign languages)
- since item types are expected to be well-known to students, examples are not given.

Texts for the text-based items

- should be suitable for the age group
- some of them should be taken from authentic sources but they can be adapted to match the required level
- they should lend themselves to item development.

Translation texts

- texts should require very little adaptation
- texts should be suitable for the age group
- texts are likely to contain some cultural content but this can only be of a general matter that is easily understood by all students
- texts should not contain very complex language
- unfamiliar vocabulary which requires the use of dictionary should not exceed 6-8 words
- vocabulary should not include slang.

Test Construction Procedures

1. produce a text bank
2. write text-based items
3. write sentence-based items
4. weight the items
5. select the items of the particular test paper
6. first reading (native and non-native experts)
7. first revision of items based on the reading team's findings and replacement of unsuitable items
8. second reading
9. second revision
10. proof-reading.

Pre-testing

Pre-testing is not conducted at the moment for two reasons: security and lack of infrastructure. Security is the Ministry's number one concern in the present system of test construction and administration, so this limits the possibility of pre-testing. Although the first reading stage can be interpreted as some form of pre-testing no piloting is conducted among members of the target group.

Marking

No key is provided for the Use of English test. A centrally designed marking scheme for both test papers is sent out to schools and it is supposed to be applied for all modern languages. We strongly believe that if we accept that teachers are sufficiently qualified to assess students all year round, they are capable of marking the final tests too. Should problems arise, individual teachers are expected to seek help from the school's English staff.

Feedback

Although teachers are required to write reports about the results of their students' performances there is no official channel to inform the body responsible for test paper construction, the National Bureau of Public Education Services (OKSZI), about their findings, opinions or conclusions. Apart from the number of students that have to repeat the exam at the beginning of the next term (a considerable number of students takes the exam in the autumn for other reasons than having failed in the summer) the only feedback OKSZI receives comes from informal contacts. This means that there is simply no possibility to analyse results. On the other hand it is also true that there is no infrastructure (staff, software, budget) to cope with such a task.

Conclusion

The item writers' aim is to design a test paper whose results correspond to the students' marks at the end of the term: that is, to distinguish excellent from good, pass from fail. At the moment the School-leaving examination (and this applies to all exam subjects) does

not have any real value for students except that it gives them the right to apply for further training and to enter higher education. So it is basically a question of pass or fail with no important significance attached to marks. An important factor of any reform is whether it could succeed in changing the role of the examination by significantly improving its quality.

We would need much more support from others involved in the examination – the Ministry and the professionals – in order to further improve the quality of the current examination paper, which could facilitate the introduction of the examination reform. As a short-term aim it would be desirable

- to organise feedback (probably not on a very large scale but taking a random sample of counties, collecting and analysing data)
- to conduct small-scale piloting to elicit errors.

Until this happens, the test writers' greatest challenge is to include as much as possible in the 60-point Use of English test paper which matches the requirements of the regulations, meets the expectations of the professional community and takes account of the latest trends in language testing and methodology at the same time. Easy!