

Chapter 5

HOMWORK ASSIGNMENTS

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This chapter considers the role of homework assignments in the course. It describes how procedures for the assignments were developed, their design, selection and evaluation. The chapter focuses on a pre-course task and assignments connected with the speaking paper, and looks at participants' comments on the assignments.

5.1 Aims, role and place of homework assignments in the course

Homework assignments played a special role in the *NETT course*, just as homework plays a key role in the wider process of education. 25 of the 60 course hours were allocated for assignments. Great care was taken by the course designers to find a good balance between work spent in training sessions and on homework assignments. Equally important was the need to integrate the assignments fully into the course and to maintain a close link between the new examination system and its classroom implications, between theory and practice.

Homework assignment tasks also had to fit in with the four elements of the course approach described in Chapter 2: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Each task contained one or more of these four elements. It took concrete experience from the classroom as its starting point, stimulated reflection using information and knowledge gained from the sessions, lead to classroom investigation and finally the results were followed up in one of the sessions. This cycle gave participants a good opportunity to try out what they encountered in the sessions, and the follow-up helped to stimulate and develop ideas further through sharing experiences and discussion.

There were two types of assignment, *pre-course tasks* and *session follow up-tasks*. They had different aims and were used for different purposes. The pre-course tasks aimed to raise issues and elicit participants' opinions on specific topics, on special elements of the existing system or on hopes for a future system. The session follow-up assignments, on the other hand, encouraged participants to do some classroom investigation. Participants were asked to think over or re-think their classroom practice in the light of the session work, information received on the new examination system and to try out new examination tasks with their own students.

The pre-course assignments were completed in the week or so before the start of the course, the session follow-up assignments were done in the four-week gaps between day 2 and 3 and day 4 and 5.

This procedure aimed not only to focus on teaching and assessing methods and techniques, but also to give participants time to reflect and to realize that we all are in the same leaky boat and have the feeling that something must be done

about it. It also aimed to establish, both in the course and in general, that teachers can help each other, can regard themselves as sources of information, and can establish good supportive relationships, which can help their work in the long run.

5.2 Preparation for the homework assignments during sessions

5.2.1 Theory and practice

The basic ideas lying behind *the new skills-based examination system* should not be new or unknown for most Hungarian teachers, since they are built on a communicative approach. Several specific points may be new, however, such as techniques and task types used in the new exams. Attention to the development of the four skills and the fact that all four skills are tested may also be regarded as new.

One of the aims of the course is to help participants find effective ways to prepare students for the new exam. **Teaching implications** are therefore one of the most prominent parts of the course. Trainers together with participants look for flexible methods and techniques which help to exploit course books efficiently. The training package contains sample tasks taken from widely used course books. We, as course designers, want to get at the new exam from the side of practice. The course book samples link in with the sample exam tasks that participants meet, and also link in with general ideas concerning skills development.

5.2.2 Learning by doing

The whole course is built on tasks that give participants the opportunity first of all to experience themselves and then to discuss them as teachers. When they do the homework assignment tasks they can experience the same situation their students will face. It is important to prepare the participants for it by doing similar kind of tasks during the sessions. It is also a chance for sharing different ideas and feelings.

5.2.3 How to do it

Apart from session work homework assignment sheets also provide help, making participants' work easier. The tasks are formulated in a way (quite similar in each assignment), which encourages further reflection both on principles and practice. Participants use tasks they did in the sessions and reflect on the underlying ideas before putting into practice, to adjust to their classrooms. The layout suggests short, practical and factual work, so that participants do not have to engage in a lot of time-consuming writing. However, writing briefly can be more demanding than writing at length, so this layout stimulated better-considered, deliberate work, in which participants weigh their words. At the same time it helps the feedback and the follow-up discussion, since the similar structure of assignments makes it easier to compare the experience, the difficulties and the findings. In the last analysis it contributes to better preparation for the new examination system.

In the next part we shall have a closer look at the different homework tasks, examine how the whole system is built up, and what kind of assignment tasks were done in the pilot courses.

5.3 Description of assignments, homework tasks

5.3.1 Pre-course tasks

Pre-course task 1

With the help of this task we wanted our participants to think over how they prepare their students for the current *érettségi*. It is a **four-item questionnaire**, where participants put down their ideas concerning teaching grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening for the exam and summarise which course books they use, how they use them, and whether those books can be exploited effectively. This task focuses attention on current exam preparation in general.

Pre-course task 2

This task attempts to focus on **individual classroom work** in connection with the current *érettségi*. Participants write a report of a lesson in a year 12 class preparing for the *érettségi*. A **task sheet** is provided which encourages participants to write a short factual report of what the aims of the lesson were, what the students and teacher did, and what materials were used.

These two tasks complement each other and cover both the general and the practical aspects of current exam preparation. They aim to establish in participants' minds that the course will be based on real classroom experiences.

Pre-course task 3

The third task provides the link between participants' everyday work and future practice. This task serves as a frame in the course, since it appears at the end of it as well. Participants formulate questions, **hopes and fears** concerning the new examination system. Comparing the pre-course and the end-course question sheets trainers can get a picture of how the situation has changed during the course, and which are the questions that remain unanswered at the end.

5.3.2 Session follow-up tasks

The follow-up tasks aim to provide time and opportunity for individual work in distant mode, in the four-week periods between days 2 and 3 and 4 and 5. Doing assignment tasks participants should re-think what they have considered in the different sessions, use the ideas they have met and draw conclusions in connection with the tasks, observation and investigation they have done.

Participants return to day 3 of the course with three **assignments on reading, listening and writing**. The main idea behind the tasks is the same: participants should give a test task in the given area to a class and record the results. While the writing task is a preparatory one (participants only bring their students' unmarked writing tasks), listening and reading assignments require participants to select one of the sample exam tasks to deliver to their students, record the results in a table provided, reflect on the results, ascertain and report student views, and compare the student views with their own. A time limit is placed on the task to prevent participants feeling that there is too great a time imposition on them. It is suggested that participants should spend about 4 hours on these assignments.

Participants return to day 5 of the course with the writing, the use of English and the speaking assignments, having been asked to spend 3 hours on each. The use of English assignment involves work similar to the earlier reading and listening assignments. The writing task is also similar, as it involves delivering, marking,

recording results and eliciting student views concerning one of the sample exam tasks. The difference is that the marking here is not objective, but involves using the scales that are looked at closely on day 3, thus the classroom investigation not only examines responses to the tasks themselves, but also to the method of assessment.

The **speaking assignment**, however, does not involve the delivery of a sample task under examination-type conditions. Instead, it asks participants to incorporate the sample exam tasks into a lesson and report on how it was done (thus focusing on teaching approach) as well as reporting on student responses. Participants are also asked to set up mutual observation for these lessons. In a subsequent lesson participants are asked to grade only one pair of students using the scales. There are several reasons for this. First of all the course designers did not feel teachers could reasonably be expected to set up oral examination-type situations in their schools just for the course (writing exams are quite different, of course, as they can be done by all students at the same time in a normal lesson). Secondly, the course designers wanted to keep the focus clearly on teaching rather than testing to increase any positive washback that might be achieved in the classroom. Thirdly, specific training for delivering the examination requires a separate course.

The pre-course and the follow-up tasks are used and built in the sessions on day 4 and 5, giving the participants and the trainers an opportunity to react upon the tasks, give feedback both to the trainers and the participants.

5.4 Changes in the course

One might think that the homework assignment system described above is logical and it comes from the course description naturally but it actually took a long time for the course designers to settle on this structure, to select the items to be built in, to identify the length of tasks and the time necessary to complete them. Although the main aim was clear from the very beginning the way to achieve it was not easy to work out. There were several changes in the system and the tasks, both during preparation for each pilot and between the two pilots. We used this **finalised version** in the Debrecen course. It looked quite different in Eger or in the preparatory period. I would now like to examine the most significant changes.

5.4.1 Simple task sheets or standardised ones?

Preparing for the first pilot of the course we focused our attention on the content, and the main question for us was “what” (what to include) and not “how” (how to carry out). It meant that the task designers spent a lot of time on finding, selecting and even wording the tasks. Finally the course booklet was ready, the tasks were clear, the wording was appropriate. The participants had some questions, of course, concerning the procedure for completing the assignments, but at the end of the day, it seemed to be understood, and everybody was happy.

Then the first assignments arrived by mail or email. They were thorough and enthusiastic descriptions of lessons and findings. Participants were eager to describe what happened and how it happened during their lessons or the lessons they observed. It was extremely exciting to read them. But later on we realised, as more and more assignments arrived, that we wanted something slightly different. We did not just want interesting and accurate descriptions, shared experience and

feelings, but we also wanted to exploit them in the forthcoming sessions in an effective way.

The question arose how we could compare, summarise and contrast our participants' thorough but quite longish work. Furthermore, that analysis should be the key point on days 3, 4 and 5. Analysing the assignments was hard work since participants brought a lot of different data collected using different approaches. That way the analysis of the assignments was not as effective as we desired, we could not work and come to a common agreement easily when we summarised the outcome of participants' homework. There was clearly a need to change the tasks, or rather the task format, so that we could use them as starting points in the next part of the course.

Standardisation of task sheets solved the problem, encouraging participants to limit their attention to certain key elements, to keep their thoughts in one direction. In that way it became much easier to exploit the outcome of assignments. The Debrecen course proved the idea right, and we received much more useable materials from our course members there. It was also much less time-consuming for participants and trainers.

5.4.2 Evaluation – written or oral?

Work produced by students should be responded to in one way or other– in teaching this golden rule is well known. It does not matter whether the students are youngsters or adults. However, the way assessment is done depends on the task itself and on the assessor's objective. It was clear from the first phase of course design that we should provide some kind of feedback on our participants' work. Since our aim was to encourage individual experimental work based on the sessions and to give an opportunity to link theory with practice, we decided it would not be appropriate to use an evaluation system. The solution found was for trainers to read the assignments and ascertain that course requirements had been met if participants had done their assignments, as set, and sent them to the trainers

The other main question for us was how to respond or give feedback, whether in a written form or orally. In the first pilot course we used oral feedback, for several reasons. Firstly, oral feedback given during the session can form part of discussions in sessions. Secondly, it can provide an excellent opportunity for information exchange. Thirdly, the time from receiving the assignments to the next sessions is very short, so it is very difficult to give written feedback. Taking into consideration these factors, we used oral feedback in Eger. However, trainers felt during Days 4 and 5 that participants would like to have something more personal and individual about their achievement. To meet their expectations the trainers had personal discussions with them in the breaks and after the sessions.

This experience made us think through the question of evaluation. A personal talk can work very satisfactorily, but it makes the whole process rather arbitrary. There was insufficient time to have detailed discussions with more than twenty people about four or five assignments per person. Consequently in Debrecen no written feedback was provided apart from the statement that course requirements had been met. **Oral feedback** came in the form of session discussions, statements from trainers that points in assignments had been noted and would inform future action, and offers from the trainers to discuss with individuals on request. This approach seems to have satisfied the participants as none identified assessment of assignments as an aspect of the course that could have been better.

5.4.3 Freedom of choice or specified assignments?

In Eger we organised setting the homework in a liberal way. Participants could partly choose which skill they wanted to work on. Speaking, writing, classroom observation and the pre-course tasks were identified as obligatory assignments, but participants could choose two from listening, reading and use of English, as optional ones, because of time limitations. Time was also a consideration for trainers to read and respond to assignments. Participants needed time to choose the task to complete with their students, then to prepare the lesson, and finally to do some investigation, to summarise the results and answer the questions. We did not want participants to rush through the tasks because of lack of time.

However, in Eger we realised that it was very difficult to build up the feedback sessions that dealt with the optional assignments. Since not everybody submitted them, some people did not know what the others were talking about. They did not know the tasks, did not have any experience in working with the new task types. We needed to organise things differently, and with the help of the **standardised task sheets** it became possible to cover the necessary amount of work. Work became more organised and effective. Instead of writing long reports participants focused on the main questions of the new task types. In that way, within the limited time frame they could deal with the four skills and use of English.

5.4.4 Follow-up or “frame” task?

Another possibility to make a change in the course occurred in Eger. On the last day we used a task which aimed to get information on participants' questions, hopes and fears concerning the new examination system. We thought it to be a good idea that after participants had learned the main characteristics of the exam, had had the opportunity to try out some of the tasks, either during the sessions or in their own classrooms, they could formulate their questions, hopes and fears. When reading the papers we realised how successfully we could use the task to compare feelings and ideas at the beginning and at the end of the course. At the same time, it would help us to identify the initial and the final problem points in connection with the new exams. Consequently in Debrecen we used that task as a frame, both as a pre-course and a follow-up on the last day. The findings are investigated in the next section.

5.5 Some interesting aspects of homework assignments results and what they show

Analysis of homework assignments received from participants in Eger and in Debrecen lets us have a closer look at teachers' opinion of possible new exams and helps to anticipate issues that will arise in the future. In this section I would like to show some interesting aspects and findings of the analysis made.

5.5.1 Pre-course tasks 1 and 2

Pre-course Task 1 produced a number of interesting observations from participants concerning the current *érettségi*, for example the predominance of grammar and vocabulary, the absence of listening skills. The task also produced a

high level of agreement amongst participants. These observations were reinforced in the first session of the course.

Pre-course Task 2, on the other hand, proved to be less successful. The task asked participants to talk about their own practice for preparing students for the current *érettségi*. What seems to have been produced in most cases was a description of idealised teaching. These descriptions did not seem to show negative washback effects from the current *érettségi*, even though the course participants themselves suggested them in pre-course Task 1. The lessons described in this task also differ markedly from the lessons observed in the Baseline Study.

This mismatch is likely to be an indication of how difficult it is for teachers to open up in courses, to admit to the gap between idealised practice and what actually happens in the classroom. While it may be unrealistic to expect teachers to open up at the very start of a course, the relative failure of this task does point to an issue that arises elsewhere in the course, namely the difficulty of helping teachers establish exactly what is happening in the classroom.

5.5.2 The “frame” task – questions, hopes, fears before and after the course

The aim of this task is to encourage teachers to think about these issues in order to generate group discussion later on and to inform trainers of the orientation of the participants. The responses illustrate participants’ feelings, and it is rather difficult to analyse these feelings statistically. Nevertheless I have tried to gather some information by summarising, contrasting and comparing the data.

In the analysis I used data from the Debrecen group, because in Debrecen we used this task both as a pre-course and as a task delivered in the final session, at the very end of the course. We have 20 pre-course and 21 follow-up task sheets. Responses often overlap the questions categories. The same ideas and statements sometimes appear as questions, for other people they are hopes and some others evaluate them as fears.

Participants’ answers in all three parts can be grouped in nine groups:

1. Information
2. Content
3. Exam level
4. Exam quality
5. Assessment
6. Organisation
7. Exam preparation
8. Teaching conditions
9. PR

Table 1 Summary of information gathered from the frame task

		Questions		Hopes		Fears		Total	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
1.	Info	3	2	4	5	1	0	8	7
		5%	4%	10%	11%	3%	0	6%	5%
2.	Content	5	2	4	1	2	0	11	3
		9%	4%	10%	2%	6%	0	9%	2%
3.	Exam level	6	3	2	5	8	19	16	27

		11%	6%	5%	11%	26%	38%	13%	18%
4.	Exam quality	11	5	11	18	2	6	24	29
		20%	9%	28%	38%	6%	12%	19%	19%
5.	Assessment	4	7	2	1	1	1	7	9
		7%	13%	5%	2%	3%	2%	6%	6%
6.	Organisation	10	21	2	3	6	6	18	30
		18%	40%	5%	6%	19%	12%	14%	20%
7.	Preparation	12	8	6	4	5	3	23	15
		21%	15%	15%	9%	16%	6%	18%	10%
8.	Teaching cond.	5	5	7	8	6	12	18	25
		9%	9%	18%	17%	19%	24%	14%	17%
9.	PR	0	0	2	2	0	3	2	5
		0	0	5%	4%	0	6%	2%	3%
	Total	56	53	40	47	31	50	127	150

Looking into the different groups seems very instructive.

Information

I put in this group all answers concerning ideas such as “*Will we have enough information on the exam?*” “*Can we get information on task types?*”, “*I hope we get sample tasks in advance.*”, “*I don’t know the requirements.*”

Participants do not seem very worried about this, only 6% of pre-course and 5% of post-course responses dealt with this issue. What is more important for us, and for the project, only one person mentioned this factor as a fear. The reason for this positive picture could be that participants felt “*close to the fire*”, felt that they knew the way of getting information, that it is available, so that may be why they were not worried about it.

Content

In this group we have responses concerning the content of the exam: the four skills, students’ abilities, knowledge; whether the exam is based on course books, the testing approach. The data suggest this course was effective in providing information about content, and show the benefit of organising similar courses in future. Before the course 9% had questions, hopes or fears concerning content, by the end of the course this number dropped to 2% with nothing in the fears section at all. Content is a crucial aspect of the exam, and if the course can resolve uncertainties that is a big step towards success both for the course and for the reception of the new examination.

Level

Participants’ responses connected with levels were whether the levels are appropriate, whether they can meet the requirements, what the minimum requirements are and whether they are realistic. As the table shows, 6 people had questions prior to the course, 2 people expressed hopes and 8 had fears. Altogether 13% of the responses dealt with level.

The post-course responses show a different picture. Participants had fewer questions (only 3) suggesting they felt they had learned something during the course about likely levels, the number of responses concerning hopes grew to 5 and fears increased greatly to 19, the largest number of fears expressed, 38% of the

total. Before the course 13% of responses showed some interest or concern over level, this increased to 18% after the course.

It seems that the issue had been raised by the course (the pilot examinations tasks looked at were labelled basic, intermediate or advanced) but had not been answered in a satisfactory way. This is not surprising, as no decisions had been made at that time concerning levels (in spite of the labels used in pilots), so no information on levels could be provided. The responses show, however, that levels are a major concern of teachers for the future. When available maximum information needs to be provided, and future courses will need to make even more strenuous efforts to convince teachers that the new examination requirements are realistic.

Quality

The quality question is the one that drew the largest number of participants' responses, 19% of the total both before and after the course. The overwhelming majority of the responses (95) were in the questions and hopes sections, with only 8 in the fears section. The shift from questions as the largest number of responses (11) before the course to hopes (18) after the course suggests the course was able to promote a positive view of the prospects for a new exam from participants. In particular several participants expressed the hope that the new examinations would be prestigious and widely accepted. Participants expressed their hopes that *"a pass will show real knowledge"* and that the *"new exam will give equal chance for each student"*. They also wrote about *"fitting the new exam into the Hungarian examination system"*. They seem to understand the importance of external assessment when writing, *"it will be a reliable and consistent exam, which will work"*. Course participants also hoped that *"the exam will be stable"* and claimed their satisfaction with the new exam *"being more life-like, which will help students communicate better"*.

Assessment

Only 6% of responses both before and after the course were about assessment, suggesting it is not a major concern. Some questions and only few hopes and fears are in this group, which indicates that people need information on the new evaluation system. Participants asked a lot about the grading system itself and the second main group of questions referred to examiners. The fact that the number of questions in connection with assessment even increased by the end shows the importance of this area. Since the evaluation system of the new exam differs a lot from current practice, and has not yet been finalised, these questions are understandable. Future courses should be able to answer these questions with authority.

Organisation

Organisational questions, hopes and fears form a large group, which can be divided into three sections. The first refers to financial problems. A lot of people asked, *"Will we have enough money for it?"* or *"Who will finance it?"* or the same point appears as a hope *"I hope we could finance it"*. The new examination is much more complex than the existing one and knowing the financial situation of our country this is a question of paramount importance. A third of all responses writings in the organisational group touch upon this problem.

The second subgroup is about the relationship of the project with officials, the Ministry of Education, Rigó utca and universities. It is interesting that the number of questions increased after the course but not the number of fears, suggesting that

although questions remained unanswered, participants had gained some confidence in the organisational prospects of the new examination.

Questions of administering the exam go in the third subgroup. People have worries in connection with rubrics in English, with no aids (no dictionaries), the length of the tests and the number of tests on one day. They are worried about the other subjects as well and whether the new English exam will fit in the Hungarian educational system. 14% of responses mentioned these organisational questions before the course percentage grew to 20% by the end.

Preparation

These responses suggest teachers are very much interested in getting training to be able to prepare their students for the exam. 18% of responses before and 10% after the course mention preparation, raising questions like, *“How can we prepare our students successfully?”* or *“What kind of help will be provided to choose the right course books and task types?”* Contrasting pre- and post- course responses the drop in numbers seems to show that teachers felt preparation was less of a concern thanks to the course. By the end of the course only 6% of responses feared lack of help saying things like, *“There will be little help for teachers”*.

Teaching conditions

As practising teachers, participants of the course wrote quite a lot about this problem, mentioning it either as a question, a hope or a fear, with an increase in fears by the end of the course from 19% to 24%. The most often covered issues were:

- The number of lessons per week – enough time for preparation and practice.
- Importance of good books and supplementary materials.
- Better conditions at schools (technical equipment, classrooms, class size etc.).

Concerning the number of lessons participants mainly had questions initially, but by the end there were more fears. The question of good books appeared mainly as a hope suggesting the course had been able to allay fears in that area.

Several group members feared that technical problems may jeopardise the success of the introduction of the exam.

PR

Five people mentioned the problem of good relationship with colleagues, other teachers, directors, students and parents. They mentioned it as a hope or a fear. They wrote, *“I hope students won’t lose their interest in English, because they think it’s too difficult.”* or *“I hope students, parents and colleagues will have positive attitude towards the exam”* or *“I fear some of my colleagues won’t be pleased with this exam”*.

5.5.3 Conclusion

This short analysis makes some points clear for us. Participants of the course:

- are very interested in the project
- have adequate questions worth taking into account
- show a positive attitude towards the exam
- express realistic fears

It should fortify our resolution to provide teachers with adequate and up-to-date information on the new exam system. Comparison of pre- and post- course answer sheets shows that in-service teacher training courses of this type give an excellent opportunity to achieve this goal. On the other hand course participants also asked questions which need answers – so we should strengthen our PR work, too.

5.6 Speaking tasks with challenging new elements

The speaking test in the new examination has retained its name only and it has become a totally new exam with interesting, challenging and lifelike elements in it. After finding out about the new structure of the test, the task and text types, useful and useable strategies, for the homework assignment participants had to plan and deliver a lesson to prepare students for a sample speaking task and do it the next lesson.

In Eger participants had to do more tasks (2 or 3), in Debrecen they only had to do one. In Eger they could choose whether to organise a paired exam or not, in Debrecen the task had to be paired. Participants had to grade students' performance using the grading scales that had been provided and discussed on Day 4.

In this part I would like to show some interesting and sometimes surprising aspects of these homework assignments.

5.6.1 The tasks

Participants had a choice of three sample tasks that had already been piloted. In **Eger** these tasks were:

1. Calling a restaurant and making arrangements
2. Making a soup
3. Planning a holiday

In **Debrecen** the tasks were:

- A, Calling a restaurant and making arrangements
 - B, Agreeing on an afternoon programme
 - C, A map-reading exercise – asking for and giving directions
- (See Alderson *et al*, 2000, Chapter 11)

In Eger choices differed proportionally, although the favourite one was 'Planning a holiday'. The second option had very difficult vocabulary and was not easy to act out, but 23% of teachers chose it. In Debrecen there were different tasks (that is why the Eger tasks are marked 1-2-3 and the Debrecen ones are marked A-B-C) and a large majority chose the second one (90%). Nobody liked the map-reading exercise enough to choose it perhaps because the task was rather confusing. Participants' choices are shown in full in the table below.

Table 2 The ratio of tasks chosen in Eger and in Debrecen

Eger		Debrecen	
Task 1	27.5%	Task A	10%
Task 2	27.5%	Task B	90%
Task 3	45%	Task C	0%

5.6.2 Instructions

The question of rubrics and instructions was one of the most debated one during the sessions. Some of the teachers doubted whether students could understand them properly if given only in English. In spite of this everybody (100%) both in Eger and in Debrecen chose ***instructions in English only***. They explained this choice by saying that it was natural, they always did the same way. For others it was not usual, but they wanted to try out real exam situations. It seems from the reports that most of the students could cope with it, although one admitted they felt they had to translate the rubrics as students could not understand them and some of the participants wrote that students' performance indicated that they had not understood the task.

5.6.3 Format

It is interesting and perhaps surprising that only 30% of teachers chose the traditional teacher-student format, with the vast majority (and in Debrecen all) wanting to try out **paired exams**.

Table 3 Format of the exams chosen in Eger and in Debrecen

	Eger %	Debrecen %
1 student + 1 interlocutor	23	-
1 student + 1 interlocutor + 1 assessor	7	-
2 students + 1 interlocutor	23	45,5
2 students + 1 interlocutor + 1 assessor	46	54,5

Participants were asked if the pairing worked successfully. Here are the results:

Table 4 How successful pairing was in Eger and in Debrecen

	Yes %	No %	Partly %
Eger	44	12	44
Debrecen	90	10	-

Pairs were considered successful, especially when students with equal knowledge were chosen and when students were able to co-operate. In Eger turn-taking was mentioned as a problem point and some students felt embarrassed or shy. In Debrecen teachers anticipated the same problems before delivering the tasks but often did not meet them.

The differences in the perceived success of the paired format between Eger and Debrecen could be because the sample examination tasks had improved, or because the assignments and preparation of assignments in the course had improved.

5.6.4 Difficulties

Teachers were asked to anticipate student difficulties in the speaking test and apart from the problems mentioned above they had the following elements in mind:

- Students' reluctance to speak
- Lack of tolerance
- Narrow vocabulary range
- Students not talkative
- Students will not understand the task
- One students is too dominant
- Task requires too difficult for the students vocabulary

Teachers in both groups had approximately the same fears. The assignment proved most of the fears unfounded. In the Eger group difficult vocabulary did cause problems and it could be the reason why 44% of pairs were felt to be only

partly successful. The difficulty of the tasks in Eger may have influenced students' performance.

In both groups students often wanted to come to an agreement too quickly and make the dialogue as short as possible. They mainly avoided arguing. The other main problem was that sometimes students wanted to translate the prompts.

The problems mentioned above are avoidable if students are taught how to cope with them. They need proper training and practice in these task types. This course does seem to have raised the issue, and the improvement in task quality from Eger to Debrecen helped a great deal. Future courses should continue to pay careful attention to learner training in this area.

5.6.5 Likes and dislikes

It is an important question both for teachers and students if they like the tasks or not, if they consider them appropriate and adequate exam tasks. The assignments show the majority of teachers and students liked the tasks, as the next table shows.

Table 5 How teachers and students liked the exam tasks in Eger and in Debrecen

	Students			Teachers		
	Yes	No	Partly	Yes	No	Partly
Eger	50	10	40	90	10	-
Debrecen	82	-	18	90	-	10

This “*I partly like it*” feeling emerged for mainly technical reasons. Some of the exams were taped and some students may have felt it was unusual or embarrassing. About the tasks (except for Task 2 in Eger) they wrote in a very positive way evaluating them as lifelike, accessible, enjoyable and better than the tasks of current exam practice.

Teachers were asked to suggest any changes they considered useful. Most of them would give more time for preparation giving students an opportunity to take into account all the factors of the task. Some of them recommended to word the instructions very carefully so that students could understand them properly.

5.6.6 Conclusion

The trial of sample exam tasks in speaking shows that:

- It is extremely important to design interesting, authentic and at the same time enjoyable tasks.
- Instructions and rubrics should be formulated in a clear and simple way at the right language level.
- Teachers and students are eager to use and take part in paired exams.
- Proper teacher and student preparation for the exam is vital.
- Teachers are likely to anticipate more difficulties than they meet later.

5.7 Reading – the unexplored land

When I started examining homework assignments I chose one productive and one receptive skill. From the receptive skills reading assignments seemed more interesting to me, a sort of unexplored land. There is a kind of reading task in the current *érettségi* but it is very different from those in the new examinations. The current reading task is a “read and summarise” task while the reading test of the new examination is much more sophisticated. The secondary school examination system has never had anything like it. Part of the reading assignment involved participants investigating how students felt about the new reading tasks, so I decided to look into this question more deeply. We also had the reading results of the first pilot examination, which provided a good opportunity for comparison. I use data from the Debrecen course because the tasks participants tried out with their students were the same as those in the pilot examination.

5.7.1 The tasks

Participants could choose from three reading tasks.

- Task A: “Fatherhood has transformed me”, paragraph insertion in a text
- Task B: “Read the following advertisements”, matching advertisements and descriptions
- Task C: “Tadpoles”, matching the numbered sentences with pictures in a sequence.

(See Alderson *et al*, 2000, Chapter 11)

Course participants chose the tasks as follows:

Table 6 The ratio of tasks chosen in Debrecen

Debrecen	
Task A	45%
Task B	41%
Task C	14%

The tasks had been tried out and discussed extensively, along with the student scores from the pilots, on day 1. We can speculate that Task C was not chosen by many because it was felt to be too easy or short.

5.7.2 Course participants’ comments from assignments

Task A

The majority of teachers found the task enjoyable, interesting and challenging (77%), and reported that their students did too. There was a small number of negative comments, such as, “*students were frightened by the new task type and the number of unfamiliar words*”. Some teachers praised the task because students “*had to use their logic*”. Some of them thought the task “*measured the ability of guessing*”. Several teachers admitted that their students need more practice in the field of reading.

Results

The scores achieved by course participants' students are much higher than in the pilot exam.

Table 7 Student scores– Reading Paper, Task A

Pilot examination	Debrecen pilot course
29%	54%

We can only guess at reasons for this discrepancy. The participants' classes do not seem to be a representative sample, as most of the teachers on the course were from *gimnázium*, leaving the *szakközépiskola* under-represented. For the purposes of the assignment teachers are likely to have chosen stronger, more articulate classes than weaker ones, and the task may have been delivered more in a spirit of investigation rather than under examination conditions. On the other hand, the range of scores (18%-83%) is wide, showing that some students found the task demanding, as in the pilot examinations.

It is interesting to note that some students felt that this type of task “*doesn't measure English knowledge*”, is “*not interesting*” and “*not too difficult*” even when their performance was not very strong. This suggests that students need to have their awareness of examination issues raised as well as the teachers.

Instruction – layout

There were a lot of comments on the instructions. About 60% found them “*complicated*”, “*problematic*” and “*it took for a long time to understand*”. Some called for instructions in Hungarian. From the answers it is seen that layout was the most problematic part of the task. 77% of comments considered it confusing. However, the results do not seem to suggest that this had a serious effect on performance.

Task B

The vast majority of groups found the task easy (75%), some of them even too easy or “*childish*”. At the same time 42% of the students liked it. These preferences may be connected to level. One of the teachers wrote, “*I was surprised to see so many didn't like this type of work*”. In some cases students thought they were “*supposed to know all the words*” and in 2 groups they wanted to use dictionaries. They complained about “*too many unfamiliar words*”. Some stated, “*blind guessing can also bring fairly good results*”. One teacher was pleased because “*This type of reading comprehension measures students' ability to think ... they can deduce and finally come up with the right solution.*” Another teacher wrote, “*It's a useful task for predicting*”. It appears from these comments that awareness of reading skills is not high amongst all teachers, and that students have even less awareness, in spite of the fact that our training course goes into reading skills quite deeply. It appears that resistance to the idea of teaching and testing skills rather than knowledge is quite strong amongst some teachers, and future courses need to take this into account.

Results

The results are higher again than they are in the pilot exam, probably for the same reasons. The range of scores is 57% -98%.

Table 8 Student scores– Reading Paper, Task B

Pilot examination	Debrecen pilot course
80%	86%

It is surprising that in one of the groups, where the percentage is much higher than the average (93%) students said they found the task “a bit difficult”. Some students stated that identifying the key words helped them a lot, showing that there is at least some awareness of reading strategies.

Instructions – layout

The groups found them all right, although some of them considered the extra item (distractor) confusing.

Task C

The majority found the task easy (75%) but most of the students complained about the text being too specialist, commenting “*You need good knowledge of biology to solve it, language abilities should be tested instead*” or “*Who are not interested in biology might have a hard time with it*”. Some would prefer more general topics. In some groups students again wanted dictionaries and complained about the “*unknown words*”. At the same time 50% of groups liked the task.

Results

The results in this case are close to the pilot exam result, suggesting less able students were given the task. The range of scores is 68% -88%.

Table 9 Student scores– Reading Paper, Task C

Pilot examination	Debrecen pilot course
76%	80%

In students’ opinion pictures helped a lot. Some of them thought, “*This task assesses knowledge of English as well as the ability of guessing*”.

Instruction – layout

Students and teachers found them “*understandable*”, “*straightforward*”, “*clear*” and “*unambiguous*”.

5.7.3 Conclusion

This analysis shows that the majority of students and teachers like the new task types, although there are doubts and uncertainties in connection with what they measure and how they work. The results are fairly good and students found the tasks easy. The frequent calls for dictionaries and the complaints about unfamiliar words need to be taken into account by future courses and those responsible for promoting the new examinations.

Table 10 Summary of student scores

	Results %		Range %	Choice %	Liked %	Easy %
	Pilot	Debrecen	Debrecen	Debrecen	Debrecen	Debrecen
Task A	29	54	18-83	45	77	31
Task B	80	56	57-98	41	42	75
Task C	76	80	68-88	14	50	75

It is interesting and promising that students found the most difficult task the most enjoyable.

5.8 Summary

Homework assignments played a special and prominent role in the course. The purpose of the assignments is to enable teachers to explore ideas encountered and discussed during the sessions. They gave our participants an opportunity to raise questions, report on their success and the problems they encountered during their investigations. We also aimed to raise course participants' awareness and build confidence in the field of new task types. It can be seen from the analysis of the assignments that these aims were achieved to some extent.

The **pre-course tasks** focused teachers' attention on current practice and elicited views concerning changes. The **follow-up tasks** provided an opportunity for individual work based on course sessions carried out in their everyday teaching environment, in the participants' own classes. The investigations, observations, trying out sample examination tasks with students, helped the participants feel they were both finding out about the new examinations and contributing to their development.

The **short analysis of speaking and reading assignments** suggests that the structure and content of the course works fairly well. Our participants successfully applied and developed ideas from the sessions. Results of the assignments help to identify the different areas teachers and students need help and training in to be able to take part successfully in the implementation of the new examination.