

## Reforming public language examinations in Hungary

Krisztina Szollás *National Assessment and Examination Centre, Budapest*

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*a History of the reform:* The reform of school-leaving examinations started in 1996 when the Ministry of Education declared its wish to modernize the current examination, aiming to create a better quality examination that could both replace the university entrance examination and that would have value for employers as well as positive washback on teaching practice. The new General Examination Requirements came out in 1997 as a ministerial decree, which announced the introduction of a new school-leaving examination from 2005. According to this document a foreign language examination was compulsory for all school-leavers. The General Requirements for Modern Languages stated that the language examination should be skill-based and monolingual, defined the general requirements of each skill at two levels, intermediate and advanced, and provided a list of required topics and functions.

In May 1998, an examination reform project was launched with the cooperation of the British Council in order to develop the new examination model for English. The British Council invited experts to act as advisors and provided ongoing training of item writers, examiners, and secondary school teachers who would be involved in the new examination process. Within five years the project developed detailed requirements and test specifications, as well as training materials and courses for examiners of the productive skills. Item writing was organised by the British Council following strict professional requirements, and the team conducted nationwide pilots and calibrated hundreds of items. The project also published several studies that documented the achievements of this work.

Unfortunately, in 2002 a handful of top decision-makers decided to create a unified examination model (common to all foreign languages) despite differences of opinion between the various language teams, and stated that the traditional oral examination model at the intermediate level would not change. Since this meant that classroom teachers would be responsible for developing their own speaking tests, as well as marking them, with no quality control, and since there were features of the unified model that the English team found unprofessional and unacceptable, the project team resigned and a new English team was commissioned to produce the final versions of the exam according to the unified model.

*b The new model:* In May 2003, the ministry finally published the detailed requirements and test specifications of 22 subjects including English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Russian, and sample tasks accompanying them.

The detailed requirements are identical for each language, and test specifications include a common model of components, timing, and weighting. However, the number of items, tasks, task types, and length of texts used vary, and the marking scales use different categories and bands, despite being a “unified” model. The levels of the language examinations are said to be set at A2 and B1 for the intermediate exam and at B2 for the advanced exam (on the CEFR).

The intermediate examination of each subject will remain a partially internal examination, whereby the written papers are centrally designed but assessed by the candidate’s own teacher with centrally provided keys and analytical scales, but with no double marking or monitoring of standards. The oral paper is designed, administered, and assessed by the schoolteacher with centrally provided analytical scales. The final mark in the case of languages will have no value, though a pass is needed to be eligible for tertiary education.

In contrast, the advanced examination will be administered in examination centres with external, trained interlocutors and assessors, productive skills are double-marked<sup>i</sup> and all components are designed centrally. Although the advanced examination is optional, a reasonable percentage of students is expected to take the advanced exam in languages as the separate university entrance examination will be abolished from 2005 and university foreign language departments require advanced level examinations for entry. The advanced language exam also offers a state recognised language certificate at “intermediate” level when scores are 60% or more,

or “basic” level when scores are between 40% and 59%. This is an important issue in Hungary because without a state recognised language certificate a university or college degree cannot be obtained.

*c Major concern: test production:* The major professional concern remains the question of item production and quality control. Item production procedures will not change, being the responsibility of a handful of people in the ministry. No infrastructure (e.g., a modern language examination centre) has been created. There are currently no plans to establish general principles and procedures for item writing or to train would-be item writers specifically for the new examination. No central piloting or pretesting of draft examination items is planned, as some stakeholders fear that pretesting jeopardizes security. Moreover, as rigorous standards of test construction are costly and time consuming and must be repeated each year, they are not favoured by decision-makers. The result is that the items for the centrally designed papers at both levels will be born behind desks, based upon the expertise of the individual item writers. No regular data collection on the performance of candidates has been planned at either level.

These are worrying factors especially in the case of the advanced level examination, which is extremely high-stakes. In consequence, the validity, reliability, and standardisation of the examination are questionable. The lack of any provision for monitoring of standards adds to the problematic features of the new model.

*d Conclusion:* The extent of the modernisation of the language examination, or more specifically of the English exam, was limited by the fact that it had to fit into the general set-up of school-leaving examinations. In addition, English had to fit into the group of modern languages, with its unified requirements and specifications, which again led to compromises. The reformed English school-leaving examination is a big step forward as its content and documentation have improved immensely. However, it is essential to improve the questionable aspects of the new examination in order to achieve a high-quality examination.

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<sup>i</sup> In September 2004 the ministry decided against the double marking of the writing component at either levels.