Language Testing Reform in Hungary

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Abstract

After radical changes in Hungarian political life in the late 1980s, Hungary has moved towards joining Western institutions. It has recently joined NATO and is one of the first-wave Central European states preparing for accession to the EU in the 21st century. Hungary is concerned to ensure that EU access will bring mobility of students and labour. It therefore wishes to enhance the foreign language competence of the studying and working populations, and to achieve international recognition and comparability for its educational certificates.

As part of the educational reform process, Hungary has developed a new National Curriculum for school years 1-10, has declared its intention to create a new set of examinations at the official end of school in Year 10, and to reform Year 12 examinations, by the year 2004. Examination Reform will cover all curricular subjects, and currently involves developing Detailed Requirements for the Year 10 and Year 12 examinations (in the absence of a relevant national curriculum for Years 11 and 12), test specifications for Years 10 and 12 and sample tests.

In the case of English, an initial Baseline Study of the state of English Language Education in Hungary established current policies and examinations, the nature of teaching in schools, and the level of achievement of the English-learning school population. This Baseline Study has not only informed the planning of the exam reform project, but will also be used in an evaluation of the impact of the project in due course. Item writing teams have been created and trained, items at three hopefully different levels of achievement have been written and edited. The first pilot tests have been administered and are currently being analysed. Assessment criteria for the evaluation of performance on writing and speaking tests have been developed and are being refined. In addition, an in-service course has been written and pilotted to familiarise teachers with the principles, methods and content of the proposed new examinations, and to advise teachers on how they might most appropriately prepare their students for these examinations. In addition, a publicity campaign is being planned, and contacts have been established with Ministry officials in order to inform them of developments and concerns and to help to influence possible policy making.

This paper will report on this ongoing project, partially funded by the British

Council. In particular it will explore aspects of the examination reform project that might contribute to its success, and others that might endanger it, paying particular attention to the role of individuals, institutions and culture in the politics of examination reform.

Introduction

In my abstract I have presented a broad outline of the reasons for and the nature of examination reform in Hungary. I am currently British Council Adviser to this Reform Project. In what follows, I concentrate on issues that affect the implementation of an examination reform that is supposedly fervently desired by everybody. and will assume that the audience has read and understood the abstract, which is the background to this paper.

Educational reform has been on the agenda in Hungary for years: a new National Curriculum has taken some 15 years to be drafted, revised, and finally reach the verge of implementation. The last Government, which lost the General Election in May 1998, set up a national project to reform school-leaving examinations to parallel the new National Curriculum (NC). By and large, the new Government has continued with the policy of reform, although the implementation of the new NC has already been delayed by one year. Thus the reform was initiated and is owned by successive governments, political parties and Ministry officials.

Examination Reform is cross-curricular: ten school subjects are currently engaged in producing the detailed requirements and test specifications that the new exams must meet, and foreign languages are but one of these subjects. On the whole it appears that examination reform is warmly welcomed, and, especially in English, is felt to be long overdue.

Atitudes to the current examination

The Baseline Study mentioned in the abstract showed clearly that English teachers feel the current examination is old-fashioned, does not reflect current practice in language teaching, and constrains innovation in the final years of schooling. Moreover, it is clear that teachers feel the examination has virtually no currency. As there is no external monitoring of the examination at all, a Grade 5 achieved in one school does not mean the same as a Grade 5 in another school in the same city, or in another city. Results are simply not comparable, and are therefore largely ignored by employers and university admissions officers. In order to qualify for university entry, students have to take an additional University Entrance Examination which includes a stiff oral examination. The regular school-leaving examination alone does not qualify them for university entry.

However, the Baseline Study also revealed a curious ambivalence in attitudes among teachers. Enthusiasm for reform is tempered by an appreciation of the fact that virtually all students taking the English school-leaving exam pass, with high grades: far less than one percent of students fail the exam, and over 85% get a grade 4 or 5. Teachers bizarrely feel that this success rate reflects well on their teaching, and they believe that the exam motivates students to study English since they have good chances of getting good marks.

Examination Reform, for Foreign Languages at least, thus faces a dilemma: if the examination is to have currency and be respected, it needs to be believable, and

this not only means that results must be comparable locally, regionally and nationally, and respected internationally, but that there must be a sense in which some students will "fail". If Hungary's European aspirations are to be met, reform is urgent and the examination must become believable. But this means that many less able students will not achieve the desired standards. Which in turn means that, if the new exam is more demanding than the current one - which teachers want, and which is clearly necessary - teachers will have to work hard to bring their students up to the required standard, and many students will not make it.

Private examinations for public education

This situation was recognised as long ago as 1987 to be problematic and in that year, the Government passed a law enabling the State Foreign Language Examinations Board - a QUANGO associated with the main university in Budapest - to offer its language examinations to candidates of school age as well as to the adult population for which the exams were intended. These exams - for which candidates have to pay a not-insubstantial fee - have considerable currency in the country (state employees can qualify for a salary enhancement if they pass the Intermediate Level exam), perhaps precisely because there is a high chance of failing the examination (roughly 70% of schoolchildren candidates are reported to fail the exam on first taking it).

Students who pass the SFLEB exams are, by virtue of the law, granted an automatic 5 in the school-leaving exam, and an exemption from taking it. Moreover, they are granted extra bonus points for university entry. Able students therefore choose to take the quasi-private SFLEB exams, and drop out of the study of English in school as soon as they have passed the exam!

As a result of this change in the law, the candidature for the SFLEB has risen enormously, such that 80% of the candidates are schoolchildren now, generating large amounts of income for the SFLEB, and associated textbook publishers, and teachers of test preparation courses. In contrast, there is virtually no test preparation industry for the school-leaving exam, although there is considerable evidence that teachers do indeed teach towards the exam in regular classes.

It can thus be expected that the SFLEB will resist any change to the status of its exams as a result of examination reform, and that it might well have an interest in undermining the success of the examination reform in English (and other languages).

Extra contact hours for English?

Teachers believe that in order to raise standards, they need more contact hours per week in the classroom. The NC currently stipulates 3 hours of English per week, and teachers believe they need at least 5 hours, and possibly more, in order to enable students to pass a demanding new exam. Needless to say, such demands are strongly resisted, since all other curricular subjects feel they have an

equal call on any extra hours that might become available (itself an unlikely event).

In point of fact, the pilotting of the experimental new exams on one thousand students this spring has shown that there are no significant differences in achievement regardless of how many hours students have studied the language, until students have studied at least 8 hours a week. But facts like this are unlikely to persuade teachers that merely increasing contact hours will not raise levels of achievement.

State of teaching in schools

Again, the Baseline Study revealed a rather parlous state of affairs with respect to the nature of English teaching in secondary schools. Despite years of communicative textbooks, widespread in-service training and at least partial reform of pre-service language education, much teaching remains very traditional: chalk and talk, teacher-fronted, focus on grammar and to some extent vocabulary, virtually no pair or group work or genuine communication in class, much use of the mother tongue, lots of translation in the final year, minimal teaching of listening skills or even writing (neither of which are tested on the current exam), and so on. Why two more hours per week of such teaching should be expected to raise standards is unclear. But it is fervently believed by many English teachers.

Of course, one of the aims of the Reform project is precisely to impact on classroom teaching: it is believed that changing the exam will change how teachers teach. Now we know that this belief is naive, and that much more than just changing the exam needs to be done - and indeed is being done. In the abstract I alluded to the in-service test preparation courses we are developing, and these are already proving popular. Whether they will have a major impact on how teachers teach is of course another matter. We believe that it is of crucial importance to understand why teachers teach the way they do, if we are to change their behaviour, and here we are barely beginning to understand teacher beliefs. How we might do this is the subject of a different paper.

One thing is clear, however, and that is that teachers in general in Hungary are poorly paid, and virtually all have to take a second and sometimes third job in order to survive. In such circumstances, thinking of better ways to teach becomes something of a luxury compared with the need to survive on a daily basis the grind of yet more classes. The easiest, possibly the only, and probably the most sensible way to survive and stay sane is to teach as you were taught, to follow well established routines. Even if you know other ways are possible, they cost effort, time, preparation, thought. And if you are not convinced that there is a better way to teach, or if you believe that your students are not capable of learning in different ways, that their level of English is too low to allow you to use different methods, or their motivation inadequate, there is little incentive to change.

All this may sound like a long way from examination reform, and from testing matters. But it is surely not, since the very aim of the examination reform is both to better reflect good practice in language education, and to motivate improvements

in classroom language teaching, as well as to improve and attest standards in foreign language proficiency. And if teachers do not accept the reformed examination, the reform will surely fail. Which is why we must understand the concerns and aspirations of teachers.

Multiple levels needed

Indeed, one of the proposals we have made to those responsible for the reform is that we need to develop examinations capable of recognising multiple levels of achievement. At present, the reform envisages two levels of Year 12 examinations; so-called Intermediate and Advanced (both undefined). In fact, achievement in foreign languages in Hungary is extremely heteregenous, from very high standards, to very low levels indeed. One or two levels of examination are incapable of covering the whole range of achievement. So either many students will not reach the so-called Intermediate standard, and thus fail, as feared by teachers, or there will need to be more levels of examination, at least until standards of achievement can be raised. In fact, we have made two proposals: one is that there be multiple levels in the school leaving examination, and the Ministry appears to be persuaded by our arguments, and also that results should be reported on a different scale, to allow the range of achievements to be certified.

Reporting scales

At present, school and university grades are reported on the time-honoured 1-5 scale. Everybody supposedly knows what it means, regardless of subject matter, and students consider that a 4, and certainly a 3, is an insult. Getting a 1 is virtually unheard-of and most are satisfied with nothing less than a 5 : a one-point scale in effect. It is quite simply not possible to certify heterogeneity on such a short scale. We have made the radical proposal that, at least for languages, achievement should in future be reported on a 1-100 scale, across the various difficulty levels of the new examinations. Moreoever, we recommend that there be no pass-fail distinctions: rather, it should be left up to users to decide what constitutes an adequate performance for their purposes. Thus one employer who does not require high levels of foreign language ability might consider a score of 35 adequate, whereas another, maybe a multinational company where English is used as a means of commercial communication, might require an 85. Universities would be free to decide what their cutoffs might be (as indeed they already are: they just have difficulty believing the results of any school-leaving examinations).

Whilst this might and does seem radical to many, and it can be expected to meet with consdierable resistance, it has already had considerable success in similar contexts in the Baltics States, where similar examination reform projects took place in the mid 1990s, and where universities and employers were surprisingly easily convinced to report scores on new scales. Resistance in Hungary will of course come from other curricular subjects, not just foreign languages, and the battle for hearts and minds is only just beginning. But we believe that something like this is esential both to enable us to certify what students do actually achieve - however little that might be - and in order to remove the stigma of failure from the

existing grading system, whilst at the same time giving credibility and status to the new examinations.

I have spent some time outlining some aspects of the reform project that are problematic and that present interesting challenges. Let me now describe in a little more detail some of the context in which our work is taking place, to add to the complexity of the picture.

The culture

I have already outlined some of the culture of assessment in schools: the grading system, the lack of failures, the lack of external quality control. However, there is more to be understood here. In fact, I believe that the whole philosophy of assessment is different from what I am used to from my experience elsewhere. In Hungary, the responsibility for assessment rests with the class teacher: only s/he is thought to be qualified to recognise, monitor, assess and attest the achievement, effort, motivation and persistence of her/ his own students. He or she is ultimately responsible to parents and to the school principal for the students' achievement and thus grades. Written examinations may be centrally set, and printed. But the students' responses are marked locally, usually by the class teacher alone, with no scales or grading criteria to guide their work. The only challenge to the teacher's marking comes from the individual students, who are allowed to inspect their marked papers after the written exam, before the oral, and they may query the grade awarded, but it is up to the individual teacher to accept or reject such a challenge.

The teacher's responsibility is also exercised in public, in oral examinations. In the Reform project, there is pressure for external monitoring and external assessment. But of course external monitoring implies that the individual class teacher's judgement is suspect, or at least open to challenge. This will doubtless be difficult for some teachers to accept (as was experienced in the Baltics States also), and so the reasons for and benefits of external assessment will need to be carefully prepared and debated. In a country that has only recently thrown off a fairly repressive system of central control of many aspects of life, where for example the post of school inspector was abolished early in the reforms that followed the easing of the political system, such apparent re-imposition of central control will need to be handled very sensitively indeed.

Rites of passage

There is a strong tradition - I am told it goes back over 130 years - of panels of examiners quizzing their students in public. It would take too long to describe this tradition in detail here, and I can only attempt to give a flavour of what happens. Suffice it to say that the whole event is part of the rites of passage from adolescence to adulthood, from school to the real world. Students dress up in their finest clothes for the examination period, parent bake delicious cakes for refreshments during interludes in the exam process and treat teachers to expensive meals in restaurants after the exams are over. Regardless of school

subject, students are given notice of what topics they might be tested on, and they cram for days in advance. They appear before the panel of examiners, and blindly select a topic on which they are expected to deliver a monologue. They are given 15 minutes in which to prepare notes in this chosen topic in the exam room, whilst other candidates are being orally examined by the panel. When their turn comes, they hold forth for ten to twelve minutes in front of their class teacher, and anybody else present: there must be at least three examiners present, but only the class teacher pays attention. Visitors like me are allowed to come and go, as are parents. The Chair of the Exam Board is external to the school but will not necessarily be an expert in the subject being examined, and probably does not speak English at all. Once a student has been examined on one subject, they may leave the room briefly for refreshments but then return to prepare for their next school subject. These examinations go on for eight and more hours a day, and for days and days, where any one student might expect it to take up to three hours before they have been deal with.

Any reform of the school-leaving examination system must take account of this tradition. Not only will the ritual meaning of the event be affected if students are likely to fail the examination, but even the logistics will need to be considered. If specially trained external examiners are to be used, which we are contempating, in order to introduce an element of external quality control and monitoring of standards, timetabling will be problematic, and each school subject may need to be examined on different days, rather than all being examined all the time, as happens at present. This will, of course, require the cooperation and understanding of the other curricular subjects.

Institutions

In Hungary, as elsewhere, there is a long tradition of institutional rivalry. A small country, whose middle classes were educated in the same schools and universities, and who are both friends and rivals to each other, Hungary is riven with factions. ELTE, the main University in Budapest, is envied by the big universities in Szeged, Debrecen and Pecs, and they are in constant competition. One branch of the Ministry of Education - Secondary Education - is in rivalry with others, Higher Education and International Relations. A number of OKIs - national institutes of public education - were created in the 1960s, and they vye with each other for funding and influence. The system plays on these rivalries. There is a saying that if you have a problem to solve, give it to two separate institutions, and let them fight it out: you'll never be bothered by the problem again.

The Ministry of Education followed this dictum by commissioning OKI Budapest to develop the school-leaving examinations for Year 12, and OKI Szeged to develop new examinations for Year 10. The two institutes barely communicate with each other, despite the obvious need for continuity of philosophy and systems across the final two years of schooling. Only in English is there an attempt to bring Years 10 and Year 12 teams together under the auspices of the British Council-funded project, but this has created suspicion and bad feeling among the civil servants who run each institution: they cannot see the need for such collaboration.

But it is more complex than this, even: the current hopelessly inadequate school-leaving exams are devised by another national institution, OKSZI, and we have recently heard that the Ministry has asked that institute to develop models for school-leaving examinations in French, Spanish, Italian and Russian, while OKI Budapest continues to develop the model exams for English and German. The idea, plainly, is to play one institution off against the other, and to see which are the cheapest or least problematic proposals to emerge. It should perhaps not need saying that the expertise of the respective institutions appears to be irrelevant: OKSZI has nobody on the staff or associated with it who has any training or expertise in testing or measurement, and OKI Budapest's expertise lies in conducting national and international surveys, not in devising public examinations systems or papers. And finally, yet another institution, OFFI, commissions diferent university departments to devise the so-called Joint School-leaving/ University Entrance examination: this is an annual commission so if one institution becomes too demanding, ambitious, radical or expensive,the commission can be removed and given to a rival institution (this has already happened twice to my knowledge). And of course OFFI has no involvement in or apparent interest in the Examination Reform project, which is supposedly producing an advanced level exam to replace the Joint School-leaving/ University Entrance examination. Perhaps it goes without saying that so far, no university has been consulted about its attitude to revised entrance exams, and whether they will consider accepting these new certificates.

And when thinking of these rival institutions, remember the State Foreign Language Examinations Board I mentioned earlier, hiding in the wings, and looking to protect its commercial interest in school-leaving examinations!

The individual

What of the individuals in all this? Who are they, and why are they involved? Many are, of course, convinced of the need for radical exam reform and have been campaigning for it for years. Many welcome the opportunity to influence the nature of these exams, and to see their own concepts of appropriate assessment implemented. Some are national figures in language education, and wish to continue to be influential, recognising that, even though they are not experts in assessment, they must be involved in examination reform if they are to continue to have an influence.

Others are involved because it is a job: one person was made redundant as a part-time teacher of ESP in a university, and got the two-day a week job of Team Leader for English, despite having no expertise or experience in language testing, purely on account of her friendship with the Director of OKI Budapest. She managed to avoid any hard work or responsibility for over two years, always getting others to do the work for her, and she even managed to stall the pilotting of the first new experimental tests by six months, until eventually her superiors were persuaded that she ought to be encouraged to find a job elsewhere.

Financial motives are often foremost for many teachers. English teachers in

particular are said to be in demand from industry, for translation work, and for private tuition, and many have grown accustomed to being paid for any developmental work they undertake, be that in-service training, test design, materials writing, or whatever. (Unlike elsewhere in Central Europe, where teachers are often very happy to work long hours, weeks and years for nothing, contributing to projects in language education, teacher training and examination reform, and regarding the privilege of being able to contribute to change sufficient reward.Two examples are the three Baltics States, and Romania.

In Hungary, thing are somewhat different and especially in the universities teachers have grown accustomed to receiving money, often from foreign-funded projects, for work that others do for free. Thus many are motivated to join examination reform by money, not simply the ideal of reform. A small team of people working to the Year 12 OKI Team Leader resigned en masse from the project when their demands for higher levels of payment for producing test tasks were turned down by the funder. (The terms offered by the funder were considered acceptable by all other project members, and we have recruited about 40 people to write items for the tests on these very terms.)

In fact, items are written by secondary and tertiary teachers in their spare time, who are commissioned and paid by the British Council. It is not clear how many people would get involved in the project if they were not paid - for writing items, for marking, for administering the tests - despite the fact that as part of their involvement, they receive extensive in-country and overseas training. Their involvement clearly gives their schools a perceived advantage, and being on the inside of the reform means that such item writers will be in demand to write textbooks to help students prepare for the tests, when these are commissioned.

Conclusion

Clearly any project involving change on a national level is complex. However, in language testing we often give the impression that all we have to do to improve our tests is to concentrate on the technical aspects of the measuring instruments, design appropriate specifications, commission suitable test tasks, devise suitable procedures for pilotting and analysis, train markers, and let the system get on with things. Reform, in short, is considered a technical matter, not a social problem.

In my recent experience, however, I have learned that innovations in examinations are social experiments that are subject to all sorts of forces and vicissitudes, that are driven by personal, institutional, political and cultural agendas, and that a concentration on the technical at the expense of these other, more powerful forces, is to risk the success of the innovation. I hope this paper has illustrated some of these factors, and has resonated with your own particular experiences.