General Introduction

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The aim of this book is to provide background and data for the Hungarian Examination Reform in foreign languages. It is hoped that this state-of-the-art document will serve as a starting point to which in a few years' time results and outcomes can be compared. By carefully analysing the situation, the authors of this volume hope to be able to provide a realistic picture of today and to prepare useful recommendations along which the Examination Reform can be implemented and foreseeable pitfalls can be avoided.

Sometimes it is useful to step back and take stock. All that has seemed natural and uninteresting turns into a puzzle, a sequence of intrinsically motivating questions. This is exactly what happened during the last one and a half years. In the summer of 1997 we thought we needed some basic facts and documents to summarize all about foreign language education in Hungary to be able to design good exams and tests. This was the period when enthusiastic members of two teams working on two independent examinations—the basic exam and the school-leaving (érettségi) exam—decided to join forces and applied to the British Council for support to develop an examination reform project. Although the two Hungarian team leaders had initiated the Project, it was Professor J Charles Alderson who suggested that we should start by writing our Baseline Study. Back then we did not think it would be such a challenge.

Since then we have gone through important stages: team members have been trained in the theory and practice of developing, marking, piloting and editing tests, all with the financial help of the British Council. The outlines of a three-level examination have emerged, and the Detailed Requirements and Exam Specifications are soon to be published. As part of the Project, we have conducted an enormous amount of research for this Baseline Study: what is included in this book is what we have been able to accomplish. As you will see, quite a lot, though even more is to be done. Since then we have realized how much we did not know and started designing research projects to answer our questions. Finally, we have understood that there is not enough time in what is left of this century to implement all enquiries. So what is included in this is book is what we have been able to accomplish. As you will see, quite a lot, though even more is to be done.

The book consists of eight chapters. The first one aims to place the Examination Reform into its wider social and educational context by describing and analysing traditions, some of the most important facts and underlying trends of recent years. The first part of Chapter One describes how the educational system has shifted from traditional input control towards output-based control, and how this change has reshaped the institutional structure. It examines official documents and their implications for the new exams, and pinpoints problems related to them. It overviews the role of the new National Core Curriculum and two major examinations: the Basic Exam (alapmıveltségi vizsga) at the end of year 10, and the two-level school-leaving examination (érettségi vizsga) after year 12. As will be shown, the system is a hybrid: the first ten years of schooling are controlled by the National Core Curriculum, whereas the last two years of secondary education have no curriculum, but an examination at the end. The second part of **Chapter One** describes the foreign language knowledge of Hungarians, and their attitudes towards foreign languages. It draws on data from the 1990 National Census, a representative enquiry conducted in 1994-95, international comparative studies on language proficiency, and research on Hungarians' attitudes towards learning and knowing foreign languages. Since 1989 English has become the most popular language, and a lot is to be done in foreign language education to improve the picture that emerges from these studies. Therefore, the last part of this

chapter focuses on language policy issues by discussing the Foreign Language Teaching Programme of the Ministry of Culture and Education.

Chapter Two describes the traditional school-leaving examinations students take at the end of year 12. At present altogether twelve different types of school-leaving examinations exist in Hungary: they differ according to the school type students attend and the intensity of language instruction they receive. The test batteries are compiled annually by three independent bodies, with no official coordination between them and without any piloting. All three are financed by the Ministry of Culture and Education. Marking the examinations is done locally by the teachers of the school-leavers, according to centrally provided keys and loose criteria, although no check is made of how or whether the keys are actually needed at all, much less of the appropriacy of their use. The chapter includes a detailed analysis of various types of school-leaving examinations, their oral and written parts, task types and weightings of their components. The second part of Chapter Two analyzes empirical data of the 1997 school-leaving examination from the capital and the country. Results of 1,705 Budapest and 1,033 Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén county students are discussed, together with insights gained from examiners' official written comments and views stated in structured interviews. The chapter concludes by listing all the problems related to the school-leaving examination, highlighting why reform is necessary, but also emphasizing why changes may mean a threat for both teachers and students.

The third chapter connects with the previous one as it describes the entrance examinations in foreign languages to tertiary institutions, thus elaborating on a special type of school-leaving examinations. It lists universities and colleges where entrance exams are required in English, and describes how students can be exempted from such an exam, and how they can get bonus points for language certificates. As a result of a questionnaire survey, a short overview is included on what 16 tertiary institutions claimed to require from their candidates and what skills they assessed in their locally compiled and administered oral examinations. It will be illustrated that even such high-stakes exams show a diversity of components, task types and skills, making comparisons difficult.

Chapter Four provides an overview of public examinations available in Hungary. The first part gives insights into the history and structure of the most important Hungarian examination body, the State Foreign Languages Examinations Board. It includes a detailed analysis of the infrastructure, the test batteries, how tests are produced and marked; how reliable they are; and how the test taking population has changed over the last decade. The most revealing lesson to be learnt from this chapter is that 80 percent of the test takers at the intermediate level are secondary-school students. These external state foreign language examinations available for a fee have taken over the role of the official, but unreliable, school-leaving examination, as students with a certificate are exempt from it and get a top grade automatically. Therefore, external examinations exert strong washback on foreign language teaching in state schools. The second part describes international examinations of proficiency in English as a Foreign Language (EFL), their correspondence to one another and to the Hungarian state foreign language exams, and characterizes their test takers.

Chapter Five aims to sample Hungarian students' performances on proficiency tests. To achieve this aim two strategies were used: available sources were analysed from the point of view of how well Hungarian students performed in the OKI-CITO Project and in country competitions (OKTV) organized annually for the best students. As a second thread, special projects were designed and implemented to test students' performances in an international (ICC) and a national (Hungarian State Foreign Language Examination) exam. A mock exam of the ICC examination involved 144 students from Budapest and 102 from various regions in the country in the spring of 1998. All of them did the written tasks, but only 42 took the oral component. Although they were expected to represent the population of students in years 11 and 12 of Hungarian secondary schools, vocational schools turned out to be underrepresented in the sample. Other data were also collected with the help of a questionnaire to supplement the results

of the exam. The lowest performance was achieved in the writing task, and students performed best on the Vocabulary and Structures and the Reading components. All in all, over 60% of these Hungarian students were found to be at or above the Threshold level, although most of the task types were not familiar to them. A worrying result showed that year 11 students consistently outperformed year 12 testees. Students from big cities and grammar schools achieved higher scores than their peers from the country and vocational schools. Performances on tasks involving the passive skills exceeded those exploiting the active skills.

The second project aiming to sample students' performances involved 149 real State Foreign Language Examination papers written by secondary-school students in two big towns in the summer of 1997. The findings of the analysis confirmed the results of the ICC mock exam: year 12 students were outscored by their younger peers in all tasks, except for translation. The reason is suspected to relate to the fact that more proficient students take the exam before their final year, and get exempted from attending classes and from taking the school-leaving examination. Therefore, the year 12 students must be the ones who have not been able to pass in their earlier years. Altogether, about one-third of the applicants passed the examination.

Chapter Six gives a detailed and panoramic overview of stakeholders' attitudes to foreign language examinations. Altogether, almost two thousand people filled in questionnaires, most of them in the country. Data were collected in 26 schools from language teachers, headmasters, parents and school-leavers. University students and employers were also involved. All participants were asked about various aspects of the school-leaving examination, about the number of classes they considered necessary to attain good language levels, their attitudes towards changes and suggestions for improving FL education. The discussion of the responses follows the sequence of questions, so that the enormous amount of data becomes self-explanatory. Results of these surveys support our expectations: all stakeholders consider foreign language knowledge a priority. Parents require schools to provide intensive language courses and both headmasters and language teachers are aware of the pressure put on them. Participants in the surveys welcome the idea of innovation, they feel the need to raise standards, to make examinations more objective and consistent. They agree that tasks should be more lifelike and varied, and all four skills should be assessed. Employers emphasised the importance of oral communication skills, and it became obvious that they do not accept or trust the school-leaving examinations.

Chapter Seven takes teacher education into consideration. It starts with a short historical overview of pre- and in-service teacher education, illustrating how the political decision of 1989 brought about a sudden and acute need for more foreign language teachers and has transformed the traditional framework and content of teacher education programmes. The second part of the chapter includes a survey of 12 teacher training institutions' pre-service curricula with a special focus on how much emphasis is put on the theory and practice of testing-related issues. The third part enquired about in-service programmes run at regional pedagogical institutions. A lot of interest was found in testing matters in both types of teacher education programmes, but not enough emphasis is given to exam preparation and practical classroom implications.

Chapter Eight focuses on classrooms. It gives a detailed analysis of a classroom observation project aiming to find out what goes on in schools. In the spring term of 1998, 118 English classes were observed by nine teachers in 55 secondary institutions all over Hungary. Schools were carefully sampled to represent institutions on peripheries: two-thirds of the classes were observed in vocational schools, one third in non-specialised grammar schools. The findings of the enquiry included the following: half of the teachers were not qualified to teach in secondary schools, and all 107 of them felt that they were overworked and underpaid. Most of the classes were teacher-fronted, levels were perceived as generally low, and both teachers and students used the mother tongue excessively. Although the majority used modern teaching materials, they were exploited traditionally, whereas supplementary materials, mostly Hungarian publications, focused on grammar and exam preparation. The most frequently observed tasks were questions-

answers, translation, reading aloud, copying from the board, and grammar exercises. Facilities in schools were not properly exploited, classrooms looked unfriendly. According to teachers, their students lacked favourable attitudes and motivations. Most teachers were pleasantly surprised to be involved in the project and showed interest in the outcomes.

The conclusions and recommendations section of the book is perhaps the most important one. It integrates the findings of all the eight chapters and provides guidelines for the future.

Methods of data collection vary in different chapters of the book. The first type of source of information includes published and unpublished documents, like the National Core Curriculum, laws, newspaper articles, television interviews, research studies, statistical data and ministry documents from various sources. The second type of information comes from interviews with decision-makers, stakeholders and other officials and professionals asked formally and informally in an on-going fashion in order to fill gaps in available documents. The third source is represented by empirical research designed and implemented specifically for the sake of answering questions related to the Examination Reform. Wherever we felt that information was limited or missing, or when we suspected that more insights might be useful in addition to what was available, relatively large-scale studies were launched to provide underpinnings to claims. Such projects include classroom observation in secondary institutions on the periphery to find out more about the teaching situation in the country; questionnaire surveys of parents', students', teachers', headteachers' and other stakeholders' attitudes; and actual testing of students' levels.

Over the last year throughout the writing of this book we have become aware of more and more areas for investigation, but we needed to limit ourselves. Also, we have taken various common beliefs and myths for facts, and perhaps have not even reached the point of formulating questions on some issues. Therefore, we admit that more detail could have been added, and the chapters may not be balanced in scope or weight. Still, we hope we have achieved our aims set at the beginning: we know where we have started from and what to strive for.

The writing of this book has taught us not only how to form research questions and hypotheses, design appropriate instruments, collect, analyse and present data, and draw conclusions, but we have also established valuable and enduring professional links with each other, learnt a lot about one another's interests and strengths. This volume should be seen as a result of an enormous amount of networking and team work. Besides the authors and editors, a lot of other people have contributed to the book by collecting data, reading drafts and giving feedback. Hopefully, the end product of our joint effort will be as challenging, informative and inspiring for our readers as working together has been for all of us.