

# UPRT 2009

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Edited by

Gábor Szabó, József Horváth and Marianne Nikolov

Lingua Franca Csoport



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# Introduction

Most of the studies in this volume focus on learners of different ages, and some look into how certain tasks work. The first two papers explore young learners of English in the lower primary school: Lucilla Lopriore and Jelena Mihaljević Djigunović analyze children's attitudes towards learning their new language, whereas Zsófia Turányi compares beliefs and practices.

Lukácsi Zoltán provides self-assessment data coming from thirty-eight Hungarian bilingual schools. Two studies give insights into the special year of intensive language learning experience. Ágnes Hódi, Marianne Nikolov and Ildikó Pathó approach it from the students' perspective, whereas Judit Dombi, Zsófia Turányi and Marianne Nikolov present their findings from the language teachers' viewpoint. Éva Barta's study of listening comprehension assessment tasks rounds off the secondary-school part of this volume.

The rest of the papers investigate themes arising in higher education. Katalin Doró is interested in how students in the Szeged BA program perceive their preparedness for participating in seminars and lectures. Judit Dombi discusses how a process syllabus worked in her two university courses in Pécs, the results showing that negotiation must be practiced before it can work well. Erasmus students and their experiences are discussed in the two final chapters. Karolina Kalocsai looks at how students' self-confidence developed by using English as a lingua franca with their peers at the University of Szeged. Erika Szentpáli Ujlaki explores a similar topic, but she looks at participants' cultural experiences and their reflections on them.

A wide-ranging selection of papers presented at UPRT 2009, we believe.

Thanks to all contributors for their willingness to share their results with Hungarian and international colleagues.

Finally, let us take this opportunity to report on how well-read the previous two UPRT collections have proved to be. As many of you know, the full content of UPRT 2007 and 2008 has been made available at a number of online libraries, the most popular being Google Books. As of October 9, 2011, over 1,700 readers looked up pages in or downloaded the full UPRT 2007 collection. The 2008 edition was looked up or downloaded by over 1,500 readers. Together with other services, such as the Hungarian Electronic Library, the contributors of UPRT can be considered veritable academic bestsellers!

We hope the current volume will continue that tradition.

*The Editors*



# Attitudinal Aspects of Early EFL Learning

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## Introduction

Considerable research in early language learning has been done to date in second language (L2) contexts with bilingual learners or immersion students (e. g., Harley & Hart, 1997). However, an increasing number of studies are now appearing that are carried out in foreign language (FL) contexts. This seems to be a lucky coincidence because some highly significant characteristics impinging on the language learning process distinguish the two contexts (e. g., amount of exposure to the target language, quality of teaching, teacher characteristics), as pointed out by Nikolov and Mihaljević Djigunović (2006). Since early FL programmes have mushroomed worldwide in the last decade or so, a number of comparative studies have appeared into the process of language learning by young FL learners, as well as into the process of teaching young learners (see, for example, Edelenbos, Johnstone & Kubanek, 2007; Mihaljević Djigunović, Nikolov & Ottó, 2008).

Young learners' attitudes, as one of individual learner differences, have not been researched extensively enough. One possible reason may be the assumption that, unlike adults, children do not differ much from one another. This has been shown to be a misconception (MacIntyre, Baker, Clément & Donovan, 2002; Vilke, 1979), however. Earlier approaches to studying attitudes implied that they were a stable construct (Gardner, 1985). This static perspective has recently been replaced by a more dynamic one, which assumes that attitudes change over time and that it is this continuous change that can offer the most relevant insights into the language learning process. The dynamic perspective in studying learner attitudes implies a longitudinal approach to attitudinal research. Longitudinal studies on young learners' attitudes are not very numerous. Those that have been conducted (Low et al., 1995; Mihaljević Djigunović, 1993, 1995; Nikolov, 2002; Szpotowicz, Mihaljević Djigunović & Enever, 2009) have thrown light not only on

the development of young learner attitudes and on the impact they have on learning behaviour and learning outcomes, but also on what impacts attitudes themselves.

## **Early Language Learning in Europe (ELLiE)**

The study to be described in this chapter is part of ELLiE, a longitudinal research project carried out in parallel in seven European countries (Croatia, England, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, Spain and Sweden), but also includes the preceding exploratory scoping year investigations with the same sample when they were first graders (aged 6-7 years). The main aim of this multinational research is to find out what can be achieved through early FL learning under ordinary conditions, i.e. in state schools and with limited time in the curriculum. These investigations (the scoping year and the three ELLiE years) will offer broad evidence of processes and outcomes of early language learning in Europe during the first four years of learning. Since 2007 the project has been a European Commission funded study, with Croatia (as a European Union candidate country) being supported by an additional British Council research grant.

Affective characteristics of young language learners are among the several research foci of ELLiE. In this chapter we will present findings obtained in two of the ELLiE countries: Croatia and Italy.

### **The context of the present study**

Croatia and Italy are neighbouring countries and as such have shared parts of their history. In terms of foreign language teaching and learning they are rather similar. The similarities that are most relevant for this study refer to the primary curriculum and tradition in foreign language learning. In Croatia the foreign language was compulsory from the age of 10-11 years for several decades, just like it was compulsory in Italy from the age of 8 years. Recent innovations in foreign language learning policies in Croatia, as of 2003, include a mandatory start of the first foreign language from grade 1 of primary education (age 6-7 years). The languages taught are English, French, German and Italian. The most popular language is English, with about 87% of primary pupils starting this language from grade 1 (Medved Krajnović & Letica, 2009). In Italy the mandatory starting age for foreign language learning was lowered to grade 1 in 2004, but English is the mandatory foreign language for all pupils.

In Italy foreign languages at the primary and kindergarten levels were originally part of experimental courses (1978-1993), then they were officially introduced in 1991; since 2003 the mandatory starting age for foreign language learning was lowered to grade 1 and English became the mandatory foreign language for all pupils (Balboni, 1993; Benvenuto & Lopriore, 2000a, 2000b; Lopriore, 1996, 1997). The Italian Ministry of Education (MPI) recommended that Italian primary teachers teach the foreign language too and since 1991 has regularly promoted teacher-

training courses, later defined the profile of the Primary Language Teacher of English, while requiring teachers to pass a language certification in order to teach English (Lopriore, 2006; MPI, 2007).

The major difference between the two contexts is the amount of out-of-school exposure to English. It is very high in Croatia: films and TV programmes are not dubbed but subtitled thus enabling Croats a lot of contact with English. Also, Croats seem to make good use of the English language input they are surrounded with (Mihaljević Djigunović & Geld, 2003). Italian learners, on the other hand, have limited exposure to English out-of-school, mainly because films in English are always dubbed and there is a tendency to limit the exposure to foreign languages to language classes rather than taking advantage of all the opportunities in the out-of-school context. Another major difference lies in the type of training and in the language competence of primary teachers. In Italy most primary teachers were trained to become language teachers later in their career thus causing lower self-confidence and learners' poorer results. In Croatia most teachers have a university teaching degree in English.

## **The study**

### **Aim**

In this study we focused on three aims. Firstly, we were interested in finding out about the initial attitudes of young beginners of English as a foreign language (EFL). Secondly, we wanted to see how these initial attitudes developed from grade 1 to grade 2. Thirdly, we tried to investigate the relationship of attitudes to other aspects of early learning of EFL, such as language behaviour during EFL classes and learning achievement.

### **Sample**

A total of 91 young learners participated in the study. There were 49 Italian and 42 Croatian EFL learners. These young learners were drawn from eight first grade classes in Italy and seven in Croatia. In both country contexts the schools were located in big cities, in small towns and in the countryside. The young participants were selected in the following manner: two low-ability, two average-ability and two high-ability learners were included from each class. The level of their ability was determined on the basis of teacher reports. The resulting sample was balanced in terms of gender.

### **Instruments and procedure**

In order to collect the necessary data a number of instruments were constructed by members of the ELLiE team. Attitudes were measured by means of smiley

questionnaires and oral interviews. The questionnaire used in grade 1 consisted of items referring to how the first graders liked speaking, listening, singing and playing in English, as well as how they liked learning English words. The grade 2 questionnaire also elicited attitudes to classroom activities but, additionally, required the participants to compare learning EFL in grades 1 and 2. In the oral interview used in grade 1 the young learners were asked about which classroom activities they liked and disliked, whether English was their favourite subject and how well they learned English in comparison with their peers in class. In grade two the interview included two additional parts. There were extra questions that required the participants to compare learning English in grades 1 and 2.

Data on the young learners' language behaviour was collected by means of classroom observation. An observation instrument was designed that focused on the amount, length and intensity of attention, interest and engagement in classroom activities. The findings are based on three rounds of observation.

English achievement was measured by means of listening and oral vocabulary tasks. Both involved visual material. The listening tasks included sets of three pictures. The young learners were required to select one among three pictures in each set that presented the information in the sentences that the investigator read out loud. In grade 1 the vocabulary tasks required the young learners to produce vocabulary items that referred to the scenes in the pictures they were presented. In grade two the learners were asked to say all the English words they knew.

In order to monitor the development of their attitudes during the first two years of their primary school we collected data during grades 1 and 2.

## **Results and discussion**

The gathered data offered a wealth of information on the young learners' attitudes to the various aspects of early EFL learning and teaching. We used the results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses carried out on the data to feed into the emerging attitudinal profiles of the young learners we followed. In this section we present four learners' profiles that, in our opinion, illustrate best the developmental aspects of young EFL learners' attitudes to learning English.

### **Profile 1**

Francesca (code 2213) is an Italian girl. Her teacher assessed her as an average-ability child. She enjoyed support in EFL learning from her parents and stated that they liked the idea of her learning English and that they helped her at home with her English tasks.

In the first grade she was observed as a very quiet student: she was sitting silently most of the time, apparently listening to the teacher and to her classmates. She was late in completing even simple tasks, did not seem to know how to go about them, or easily lost attention, except with songs. When the teacher encouraged learners to sing a song in English, she immediately participated following at the same pace as the others. She said she did not enjoy 'learning new words'.

In the second grade Francesca became more participative: she was often observed intervening to ask for repetition and raising her hand to answer teacher questions. She stated that she did not find English more difficult than in grade 1. Her self-perception was significantly higher in grade 2, but her teacher still assessed her as average-ability. Her language learning achievements were higher than the previous year.

Francesca is an example of young learners who take time to develop control of their learning experiences. Before they do, they have a quiet presence in class and mostly observe what is going on around them. This can be mistaken for a lack of interest or ability. Once they make English part of their experiences and feel they have control over them, they turn in-to more active members of the class and, at the same time, reach higher levels of language learning achievement. It seems, however, that the first image they created of themselves as language learners can linger on. It would be very interesting to see when the teacher's initial perception of a young learner's potential changes based on the new evidence of their increasing achievement. It seems to us that with many young learners, like in the case described above, young learners' self-perception mirrors the teacher's perception of them even when it is not warranted.

## Profile 2

Davor (code 7707) is a Croatian boy. According to teacher report he belongs to the high-ability group of learners in his class. He gets a lot of support in language learning from his parents. His out-of-class exposure to English can be defined as average, based on both his self-report and on information obtained from parents.

In grade 1 the learner self-assessed himself as high-ability. He showed a high interest in all EFL class activities and displayed high engagement during classes. He was very cooperative, serious and attentive, and got along well with the group.

In grade 2 his interest in most classroom activities decreased to the average level, and the same is true of his engagement during class. Although he did participate in all classroom activities, he did not seem too involved. Whenever he would finish earlier, he would just get up and walk around the class. English was easier for him than in grade 1 but he reported liking it less in grade 2 than in grade 1.

In terms of language achievement Davor had the highest scores on listening in both grades, while his vocabulary task score dropped from excellent to good. In both grades his final end-of-year mark was excellent.

Davor is an example of a capable young learner who gets considerable support in his language learning in class and out of class, and functions extremely well at the very start of EFL learning. Although he continued to have the highest end-of-year mark in grade two, his attitudes deteriorated. This was reflected in his behaviour during EFL classes: his initially high engagement in learning decreased and caused him to engage in off-task activities during the class. In our opinion this unfavourable change in positive attitudes in grade 2 may be ascribed to the change of the EFL teachers in charge of his class. In grade 2, the class he was in changed two teachers and our class observations offer evidence that the new teachers had

different approaches to teaching young learners from that of the grade 1 EFL teacher. Previous research on teaching young learners (e.g., Nikoloy, 2002; Vilke, 1993, 1995) has shown that young learners get attached to their EFL teacher and the teacher plays a key role in learner attitudes, thus impacting on learners behaviour and achievement. As already stressed, this particular learner's language achievement was assessed as still high in grade 2. We assume that, thanks to his high ability, he could still perform successfully in EFL because the demands in grade 2 were not that high. It would be very interesting to see how such attitudinal developments and their resulting learner class behaviour would impact on the learner's language achievement in later grades.

### Profile 3

Guido (code 2807) is an Italian boy. He was perceived by his teacher an average ability. He himself thought he was a low-ability EFL learner. According to his report, he was not getting much support from his parents and he even expressed a concern over this.

In grade 1 he displayed a high interest in games and in singing activities. He was late completing tasks, however, because he was quite slow and got easily distracted. Interestingly, during the activities he claimed he liked most he easily and often became disruptive and did not pay attention to what was going on. Among the activities he preferred doing he indicated drawing and colouring. He was showing characteristics of a highly kinesthetic child.

In the second grade, he calmed down and was observed paying attention and intervening with questions. He was very pleased whenever he could remember words other children could not. He found English was not more difficult than in grade 1. Although he was more attentive and had visibly improved, in terms of self-confidence he was still full of doubts, and now perceived himself as an average-ability learner who was not doing too well.

His language achievement was comparable to most other learners' in class. In grade 2 he scored quite low on the listening tasks because he got distracted during the test.

The learner whose profile is described above seems to belong to the group of young learners that can be highly self-critical. Guido had quite a strict teacher and, in our opinion, this may have contributed to his not too positive self-concept as a language learner. When all this is combined with a tendency to be competitive, the result cannot be too favourable. This learner apparently needed a lot more attention from his teacher and parents than he was getting. It will be interesting to see how this learner's attitudes to learning English and to himself as an EFL learner develop during the following grades, and what the interaction of his own and his teacher's perception of his potentials and his language learning achievement will be.

## Profile 4

Vesna (code 7402) is a Croatian learner. While she was assessed by the teacher as an average-ability learner, she herself claimed she had high-ability for learning English. Her out-of-class exposure to English was low, as was her parents' support for her EFL learning.

In grade 1 she showed high interest in what was going on in the EFL classes, and displayed high engagement in activities, especially during whole class and group work activities. In the interviews she said she liked all class-room activities in grade 1, and in grade 2 she liked EFL classes even more and only wanted more role-plays. During the grade 1 lessons she paid a lot of attention to the EFL teacher as well as to other learners, and was usually very active, loud and – competitive. However, she was often easily distracted. Observations in grade 2 showed that her interest and engagement decreased and she was often restless during EFL classes. She would frequently display low confidence: she would, for example, raise her hand briefly and put it down very quickly.

The learner's achievement deteriorated in grade 2: her average performance on listening tasks decreased from high to low scores, her achievement on vocabulary tasks remained in the average band during the two grades, and her end-of-year mark in EFL dropped from 3 to 2. Interestingly, she found English easier in grade 2 than in grade 1.

A special interaction of a number of variables can be detected in Vesna's case. She reports a positive self-perception as a language learner in spite of evidence to the contrary displayed through results of her performance on listening and vocabulary tasks and of teacher-assigned end-of-year marks. Her classroom behaviour in grade 2, which can be characterised as restless and which points to a lack of confidence, contradicts her self-reported perception of English getting easier for her. Quite a number of young learners show an unrealistic perception of their abilities at the beginning of FL learning (Mihaljević Djigunović, 1993) and take time before they start to base their self-perception on feedback from the teacher and peers, and adjust it accordingly. It often happens that the awareness of the discrepancy can be detected in their behaviour first, like in Vesna's case. It is often only later with the growing cognitive maturity that it turns into an attitude that can be verbalised.

## Conclusion

On the basis of data collected during the first two years of following young EFL learners in the two country contexts we can conclude that initial attitudes of young learners to EFL were mostly positive. Although with a number of young learners the attitudes continued to be positive in grade 2 as well, with many of them different trends could be observed. On the one hand, there are those young learners whose attitudes to learning English became less positive as they perceived it to be getting difficult in the second year of learning. On the other hand, some young learners' attitudes turned even more positive.

However, these general trends present only one perspective from which young language learners' attitudes can be viewed. A more interesting and insightful perspective seems to be the one which requires looking into the interaction of attitudes with other relevant factors, such as teacher perception of young learner potential, learner behaviour or parents' support. Once these interactions are considered trends are not easily discerned. Since the full scope of attitudinal development in early FL learning can be seen and accounted for only through longitudinal investigations, we hope to be able to offer more conclusive insights in our follow-up study.

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# An Exploratory Study of Beliefs and Practices in a First Grade EFL Class

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## **Introduction**

The study aims to provide insights into beliefs and practices concerning teaching vocabulary in a first-grade English as a Foreign Language (EFL) class. Mihaljevic Djigunovic (2001) assumes that children would teach their pupils as they would like to be taught. Thus the inquiry compares and contrasts a teacher's practice and her pupils' views on teaching vocabulary to an imaginary pupil. First, I give a short background to the study; then, I introduce the participants and the procedures of data collection. In the results section I analyze answers to the interview questions and findings of observations to answer the research questions on how beliefs and practices overlap.

## **Background to study**

Offering early EFL programs has recently gained major importance in the competition of primary schools for pupils in Hungary. While many parents are eager to ensure their children the possibility of learning English in lower-primary grades, teachers' beliefs about their role in the process and the methods they should employ is often controversial. A number of empirical studies document a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices, for example, Kiss (2000), Nikolov (2008), Lugossy (2007) and Nagy (2009). When analysing teachers' belief on using authentic narratives to teach, Lugossy (2007) reports that the beliefs teachers express does not shape their classroom practice. Kiss (2000) also concludes that there is no overlap between the theoretical knowledge of language teachers and their practice. The classroom practice defined as good practice by Nikolov (2008) is meaning-focused besides being playful and physically active.

Empirical research conducted to explore students' perception concerning their own language learning reveals that they have definite beliefs on language learning as a process. Kolb's (2007) results show that vocabulary acquisition, increasing the amount of known words in the target language, is one of the most prominent aims

of language learning. 'According to the first belief, language learning is the accumulation of vocabulary; it is important to take in as many unknown words of the language as possible' (Kolb, 2007, p. 233). This finding reflects that the more words learners can use, the more competent they feel. Szpotowicz (2000) gives a highly detailed account of classroom practice while teaching new words to first graders. Her findings clearly indicate that employing flashcards, miming and drawing can only be effective for motivated, well-disciplined and eager students. Those pupils whose concentration is not focused enough are unable to learn words with these methods. Nikolov (2000) emphasizes the advantages of involving students into decision making about their studies to allow children with different abilities to express their needs for learning words.

The present study aims to explore the methods children with different abilities, aptitudes and levels of motivation find effective. Cameron (2001), Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) and Trelease (2001) introduce a rich arsenal of activities and tasks aiming to enlarge children's vocabulary. These activities are playful, involve physical activity and require precise preparation on part of the teacher. Curtain and Dahlberg (2004) categorize activities according length and complexity of the utterances used in them; (1) word-level, (2) sentence-level and (3) paragraph-level. Many word-level activities are highly effective in both introducing and memorizing individual words in meaningful context. Cameron (2001) focuses on the importance of developing young learners' vocabulary learning strategies besides presenting or explaining the meaning of new words to help children not only to understand but also to remember them. Thus, the effectiveness of vocabulary teaching is measured by how clearly the meaning of the new word is presented and the extent to which children can memorize them.

A study by Mihaljevic Djigunovic (2001) focuses young learners' awareness on the strategies they use while learning a foreign language (FL). Employing a projection method she asked children to talk about the ways they would teach new English words to their dog or doll. The analysis of the strategies described by the children led the researcher to the logical conclusion that children teach their pupils as they would like to be taught.

Following this assumption I intend to explore how Hungarian children would like to be taught English words and compare their preferences to their teacher's beliefs and practices of vocabulary teaching.

## **The setting**

The setting is a private primary school in Budapest. This school accepts children who are at risk of learning and behavior problems and offers them FL classes from the beginning of their studies. EFL is taught in small and integrated lessons where teachers pay special attention to pupils' individual differences. Children have four 45-minute-long EFL lessons a week. The school is well-equipped, teaching assistants are available, and teachers have a free choice of the course books they use.

## Research questions

Two research questions were developed to study the beliefs of children about vocabulary teaching and the extent to which their beliefs overlap the practices they experience during their FL classes.

- 🎧 How would children teach English words to an imaginary language learner?
- 🎧 How do classroom practices overlap with children's beliefs about efficient vocabulary teaching?

## Participants

In the first-grade class where the study was conducted there are eight pupils: three boys and five girls. Their EFL teacher, Irene (pseudo name), has seven years of teaching experience in lower primary classes. She is an elementary generalist with additional certification in English as a foreign language (EFL). One child is diagnosed to be at risk of dyslexia and another one has behavior problems occasionally manifesting in aggression. Two pupils had FL learning experience prior to the first grade. All children's parents rank English as a priority, thus they are expected to show progress. All the children were actively involved in the study.

## Data collection instrument and procedure

EFL classes were observed over a term from September, 2008 until January, 2009 to gain insights into classroom practices. Pupils' beliefs about how they would teach EFL to an imaginary peer were investigated with the help of a group interview employing projection method in February, 2009. The interviews and the classroom observations were digitally recorded and transcribed. The two sets of data were matched by detailed notes taken during observations.

## Results and discussion

### The EFL teacher's practice

The classroom observation started in September, 2009. The atmosphere of the classes was friendly, warm and joyful. All the pupils were eager to start the lessons, many times even before the end of the break. They were active in carrying out tasks and volunteering for different activities. Irene was nice and friendly with the children. When reacting to behavior problems, she was calm and strict. Children obviously respected her. She spent most of the breaks with the children talking about their experiences and personal issues.

She taught a great number of individual words in her classes. These words were often uttered in sentences by the teacher but she did not create opportunities for her pupils to move from a receptive role to a productive one. Thus, children could understand the utterances but they could not produce them. Recalling and articulating individual words with the help of similarly looking flashcards and other realia were not challenging for the pupils, as they were part of the classroom routine. Children often commented on these activities negatively. ‘Cards again?’ or ‘Why do we need the picture, if we have a real TV set here?’. (Pupils’ interactions appear in English translation.)

Irene introduced new words in the beginning of the lessons. She mimed the verbs and pronounced them while acting out their meanings, for example, she did freestyle strokes for swimming. After repeating the word and the action a few times, she asked somebody to pronounce the word and mime the action. To make sure that everybody understood her, she finally translated the meaning into Hungarian. “Az úszást akartam mutatni” [I intended to show swimming]. At the end of every lesson ‘Simon Says’ is played to revise vocabulary.

#### Naming objects and describing places with flashcards or realia

Irene had a great collection of flashcards and realia including plastic fruits and vegetables, paper cans, tins and plush mascots. Children were eager to learn their names if they were allowed to touch and hold them as a reward. Irene randomly allowed the pupils to touch any pieces of realia or refused to hand them out to save them. Similarly to the teaching of verbs, Irene uttered the word and showed the flashcard or the realia at the same time. Later the whole class repeated the word, or only one child pronounced it. Many times flashcards stood for objects which were present in the classroom; pens, pencils, a computer or books.

#### Memorizing new words

As first-graders did not keep a vocabulary and they did not take audio material home to practice, they could memorize and practice new words on the lessons. Each new word was repeated by the whole class and one by one by the children in a lockstep fashion. Each lesson started with ‘Simon Says’ to revise verbs, while other activities and tasks were consciously designed to activate previously learnt vocabulary. Lessons usually ended with a task on collecting and counting the new words of the day. Children’s comments on this routine indicated that they were willing to know what they had achieved and whether their teacher was satisfied or not. “How many have we had today? ... Is that enough?”

## Applying similar tasks to teach different vocabulary

Irene applied a limited number of task types when teaching new words. During the classroom observations over a term the following types recurred. (1) 'Simon Says' for introducing verbs and revising them later, (2) memory cards on the board for describing objects, (3) colouring or drawing following the teacher's instructions for practicing colours, numbers and other already learnt words, (4) listening to a CD, and later (5) singing together with it for practicing intonation patterns and pronunciation while having fun. Despite the lack of variety in task types, children enjoyed the learning process unanimously.

## **Children's beliefs on efficient ways of teaching English**

A group interview was conducted with the first-graders applying the projection method to gain insights into their views on vocabulary teaching and learning. The method was borrowed from psychology by Mihaljevic Djigunovic and applied in a similar setting in 2001. I follow her assumption that children would teach as they would like to be taught. Thus, the results of this inquiry have direct pedagogical implications.

### Pupils and the cartoon characters they would teach

At the beginning of the interview I asked the pupils to think of their favorite cartoon character. Only six characters were finally identified as two of them were chosen by two children; (1) Johnny Bravo, (2) Ben Tennyson, (3) Pocket Polly, (4) Little Pony, (5) Power Angel and (6) Mary Poppins. After saying a few words about these favorites, I asked the pupils to imagine that they had to teach them some English words. At this point it turned out that Ben Tennyson is English, thus 'his teacher', Greg, decided to teach him the words in Hungarian. While categorizing data I concluded that this choice did not influence the techniques Greg applied to teaching words. Thus, I did not exclude his answers from further analysis.

## Categorizing pupils' techniques applied for teaching vocabulary

The pupils were asked how they would teach eight words to their 'pupil'. Children were familiar with all the words and the items were at different levels of concreteness. One participant, Helen tended to repeat ideas she heard from the previous participants. "I cannot help it, but I also wanted to say the same." Data were categorized in the case of each word taught by the children according to recurring patterns in the respondents' answers. The words they were invited to teach included *orange*, *bicycle*, *yellow*, *present*, *five*, *window*, *dog* and *bedroom*.

### Orange

Four categories are established concerning the word *orange*. (1) Two pupils would repeat the word many times assuming that it is a widely-known word, thus simply repeating it leads to memorizing the word. (2) Three children would show the referent and say the word, while (3) Mike would offer orange juice to Power Angel stressing the word *orange*. (4) Lilly would explain the meaning of the word in Hungarian to Mary Poppins, although she was not sure whether Mary Poppins spoke English or Hungarian. Manipulation with the referent seems to be the most prominent method to introduce *orange*.

### Bicycle

Ideas in connection with the word *bicycle* fall into three categories. (1) Riding together, (2) showing a bike and (3) borrowing Power Angel's motorbike are the most efficient ways of teaching it. Five children would ride and two would show a bicycle, while introducing the word. Thus, manipulation with the referent is overwhelmingly employed. Mike would also apply a kinesthetic method to teach the word and he takes his pupils' individual characteristics also into consideration. "Power Angel can ride his motorbike anyway, so I will just show how to pedal."

### Yellow

A color was chosen to explore how children would teach something less explicit than an object. (1) Four of them would color a piece of paper yellow as they regularly do in class. (2) Two pupils would show yellow paint and (3) one would wear a yellow T-shirt while teaching the word. Mike would call Power Angel with yellow shield again integrating Power Angel's individual difference into the teaching process. "I would ask Power Angel to wear his yellow shield, and I would just point at him." The main belief behind the methods to teach a color is that it is directly rendered to an object to make it concrete enough.

## Present and five

Ideas concerning *present* and *five* are concordant. All the participants would manipulate with the referent; they would give a present to their pupils saying that it is a *present*. Five would be taught by writing the number on the board while saying *five*.

## Window

Three categories are created to summarize the assumptions on the word *window*. (1) Four participants would simply point to the window and utter the word. "Just like in Simon Says, I would point to the window and say it." (2) Three respondents would show a picture of a window, whereas (3) one would write down the word many times, as her mother does when learning German. The influence of classroom practice is highly detectable in the answers.

## Dog

The highest number of categories is established when the word *dog* is taught. Each student has different ideas and all but one agree that a living dog is inevitably necessary to teach the word. (1) Buying one, (2) borrowing one from the neighbor, (3) bringing one to school and naming it, (4) writing the word on his own dog's lead, (5) visiting one, (6) visiting more than one and (7) taking one for a walk are mentioned as possible ways to teach the word. The obvious enthusiasm to find more and more extreme techniques indicates that by the end of the interview pupils got tired and started to make fun of the situation. Mike's answer again deserves special attention, as he introduces a brand new idea: he would call attention to the resemblance between the Hungarian word *dagi* and the English word *dog*.

## Bedroom

Although three children would teach this word outside the classroom, inviting their pupil to their flat to present a bedroom, five participants would use a picture to demonstrate the word.

These answers are highly influenced by classroom practice, as the day before the interview pupils were taught this word. Irene showed them pictures of bedrooms furnished in various styles while repeating the word.

## Conclusion

The present study aimed to provide insights into beliefs and practices concerning teaching vocabulary in a first grade EFL class. Data collected from the pupils' answers reflect that there is an overlap between the method pupils are taught with and the method they would employ. Manipulation with the referent is the most often applied technique offered by the children. It is often complemented with the use of some pictures of the referent.

Further research should explore whether pupils really consider these methods the most efficient or the familiar classroom practices influence their answers. It would be useful to examine how their beliefs change over a longer period of time as they develop cognitively and in proficiency.

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# Contextualisation and Self-Assessment of Bilingual Secondary Institutions in Hungary

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## **Introduction**

In spring 2008, a team of researchers led by Marianne Nikolov on a government assignment set out to explore how bilingual secondary institutions worked in Hungary, collect information about the conditions under which they were operated, describe their material supplies and human relations, and disclose their successes, problems, and suggested solutions. Of the 61 schools invited to participate, 38 decided on replying to the call. Our research instrument was a questionnaire of nine closed and four open ended questions. In the nine closed question items, the schools were to provide data, tick where appropriate, or choose from a list of options using a scroll bar. The first open question asked for a list of classroom materials, and finally, in the last part, the institutions were asked to list what they considered to be their greatest achievements, most ailing problems, and possible ways to sort these out.

This study does not wish to provide the reader with a comprehensive discussion on bilingualism or bilingual education in general; however, the first part of the review of the literature will contextualise dual language (DL) secondary education in Hungary. This will be followed by an overview of the achievements and problems based mostly on research published in Hungary, and the exploratory work by Patsy Duff.

## **Review of relevant literature**

DL education in Hungary

It was in 1987 that our system of education first embraced DL instruction in state tertiary education, which in turn was followed by secondary and primary institutions (Kovács, 2006; Mihály, 2006). While the paradigm shift in educational policy was an answer to changes in international economy, the system often lacked clear instructional objectives and set economic goals instead (Imre, 2006). The loosening of the political tension, the abolishment of compulsory Russian language classes,

and the attraction of the Western languages collectively assisted in raising the popularity of DL programmes (Duff, 1995). As a unique feature of the evolution of bilingual education in Hungary, contrary to the state-mandated programmes at tertiary and secondary levels, DL instruction in primary schools was introduced on parental request (Kovács, 2006).

DL secondary education has been popular ever since. Duff (1995) reports on 30 such institutions by the mid-1980s. These were often supported by non-governmental organisations, such as the British Council. Parallel to the political paradigm shift, changes started to appear in the language classroom, as well. The Prussian method with its frontal classroom dynamics was succeeded by project work and presentations (Duff, 1996). However, given that some of the underlying characteristics of the system of education continued unchanged, these instructional novelties were often short-lived. A longitudinal study by Duff (1996) saw 18 progressive teachers replaced by young but more dogmatic pedagogues in “Kisváros”.

#### The greatest achievements reported in the literature

The most eye-catching indicator of programme success is the students’ language attainment level, which is easily expressed in exam results. Duff’s (1991) findings of a gap-filling test reveal that by the end of the preparatory year, the learners are at the same linguistic level as their peers completing an academic year in the USA, and further, as a large group of native speakers. This explosive progress gradually slows down, and students feel like they are making a more modest headway (Duff, 1991; Hajdu, 2005).

Less easy to express in figures are the positive effects bilingualism has on human personality. Hajdu (2005) groups these under three main headings: 1) bilinguals display a higher level of cognitive competence; 2) they find it easier to name and rename objects, or to express symbolic meanings; 3) they are more open and tolerant towards other languages, their speakers, and cultures.

#### Ailing problems reported in the literature

The teacher is one of the key factors in DL education. These professionals need to possess up-to-date information and an adequate methodology in the subject taught, plus they are expected to speak the language of instruction at a high level. Nevertheless, as of today, there is no university course in Hungary that would prepare teachers for these requirements. While there are some seasonal training sessions to aid practising teachers (Mihály, 2006; Vámos, 2007), lack of professional help and respect together with an overwhelming workload might prove to be frustrating and de-motivating (Mihály, 2006; Nikolov, 2003).

One problem concerning the high-school graduation exam is that it fails to provide a challenge for the highly competent language learner. As a result of the high number of language classes, foreign language instruction in specialist subjects, selection of the most able learners, high levels of motivation, and other conducive factors, students attain level C1 in a foreign language by the end of their studies.

By contrast, even advanced-levels are just at level B2, which might demoralise examinees. Vámos (2007) reports that 78.4% of DL school-leavers passed the GCSE test in a foreign language without a single mistake. At the same time, careful streaming also implies that less able, or more socio-economically challenged students cannot enjoy the advantages of DL instruction (Hajdu, 2005).

First language and native culture might be truncated due to an excessive focus on L2 instruction. Besides, GCSE results from 2006 clearly contradict such fears. Students from DL schools achieved a much higher mean result (4.11) than those attending regular institutions (3.63) even without the L2 marks (Vámos, 2007).

In conclusion to this brief review of the literature, we can state that DL education first featured in the Hungarian system in the 1980s mirroring political-economic changes. These alterations formed part of a top-down process, often initiated by political and economic targets. The greatest achievements are primarily associated with students' L2 attainment levels, as well as a positive attitude towards foreign languages and cultures. However, such high achievement levels might generate problems, as can be seen in the GCSE. The prevailing problems were found to be in the spheres of teacher training and the workload teachers are expected to cope with.

## **Method**

The research instrument was an online questionnaire comprising nine closed and four open-ended questions. A total of 61 DL secondary institutions were invited to take part following a database search for potential participants. Altogether, 38 schools answered the call and provided useful information after a postponed deadline.

## **Results**

Selection criteria

DL institutions in this study considered five criteria when selecting students (Figure 1).

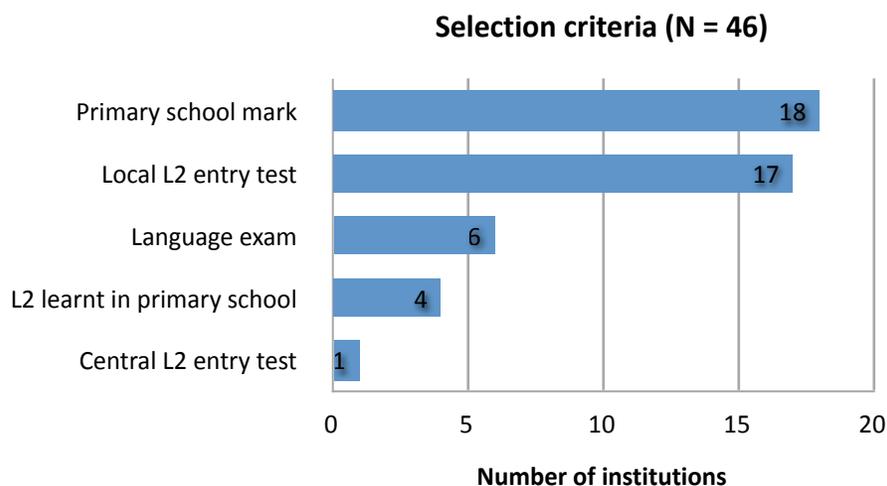


Figure 1: Selection criteria

According to Figure 1, primary school marks were definitive in the case of 18 secondary institutions, 17 schools decided on the basis of a local language test, six places considered whether the students had language exams, in four cases the L2 taught at primary was prioritised, and one school relied on the results of a central entry test. Dual secondary schools often used a combination of these elements (Table 1).

Table 1 shows that 13 schools made use of a single criterion rather than a combination of elements. Six secondary institutions applied the results of a local entry test and the primary school mark simultaneously, while five places based their decision on the local entry test or the primary school mark solely. Two secondary schools employed a combination of the local entry test, the mark, and possession of a language exam, and another two further added the L2 taught at primary level to this list. One participating institution each relied on the mark and the language exam, the L2 taught at primary, the L2 and the primary school mark, the local entry test together with a language exam, or the central and local entry tests plus the primary school mark.

Table 1: Observed combination of elements of selection criteria

Observed combinations of selection criteria	Number of schools
None	13
Local entry test + Mark	6
Mark only	5
Local entry test only	5
Local entry test + Mark + Language exam	2
Local entry test + L2 learnt + Mark + Language exam	2
Mark + Language exam	1
L2 learnt only	1
L2 learnt + Mark	1
Local entry test + Language exam	1
Central entry test + Local entry test + Mark	1

### L2 groups

Figure 2 displays the factors that played a role when grouping students into L2 classes.

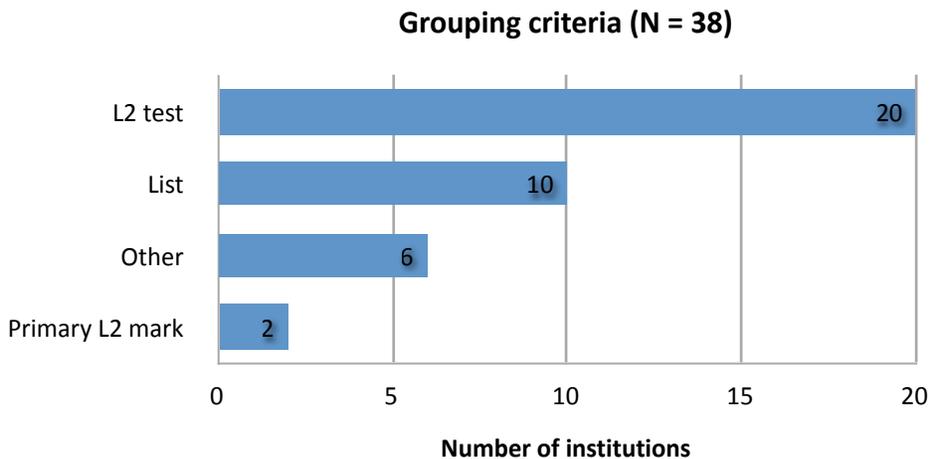


Figure 2: Grouping criteria for L2 classes

Figure 2 tells us that 20 schools used a L2 test to assign students to particular groups. The alphabetical log list played a decisive role in ten cases, the primary school mark was key in two schools, and six institutions employed various other techniques. Examples of these include 1) the ratio between the sexes, 2) results, or 3) personality types. Similarly to the selection criteria, dual language secondary schools often employed a combination of the grouping criteria (Table 2).

Table 2: Observed combinations of grouping criteria

Grouping criteria and their combinations	Number of institutions
Test only	20
List only	6
Other only	4
None	2
List + Test	2
Test + Other	1
Test + Mark	1
List + Other	1
List + Test + Mark + Other	1

Table 2 shows that 20 schools grouped their students on the basis of test results exclusively. The alphabetical log list was the sole criterion in six institutions, and four places used other techniques only. Two schools are labelled “none” because they were guided by the primary school mark. Another two schools combined the list with test results. One institution each combined 1) test results with other factors, 2) test results and marks, 3) the list and other elements, and 4) the list, test results, marks, and other techniques.

### Infrastructural background

When conducting this part of the research, our main area of interest was whether schools are properly equipped to be able to provide high quality language instruction. Besides indicating possession or lack, the schools were also invited to state if their facilities needed modernisation or improvement. The results are shown in Table 3.

According to Table 3, 66% of all DL secondary schools had a L2 laboratory, the state of which was not satisfactory in half of the institutions. However, 34% lacked a L2 lab, and 16% did not feel the need to have one. A L2 library featured in 90% of the schools, but these were not of a high quality: 33 institutions intended to improve their libraries, and a further four schools wished to set up theirs. All the participants had their CD or DVD players, although the majority of these (60%) needed improvement. With a single exception, all schools possessed projectors, too, again in need of improvement (63%). An interactive board helped instruction in 16 institutions, and overall 85% required modernisation. With the exception of two places, the schools had a computer lab, but these would also need to be updated (79%). Access to the internet was provided everywhere, with 66% in need of betterment. Most schools had a trolley (90%); these also need to be modernised (68%). Overall, the participating schools were equipped with the necessary facilities, although the quality of these was not satisfactory. The interactive board and L2 software stand out as missing.

Table 3: Infrastructural background in DL secondary schools

Equipment or facility	Lack			Presence		
	Improvement necessary?		Altogether	Improvement necessary?		Altogether
	No	Yes		No	Yes	
L2 lab	16%	18%	34%	16%	50%	66%
L2 library	0%	10%	10%	3%	87%	90%
CD/DVD player	0%	0%	0%	40%	60%	100%
Projector	0%	3%	3%	34%	63%	97%
Interactive board	10%	48%	58%	5%	37%	42%
PC lab	0%	5%	5%	21%	74%	95%
L2 instructional software	10%	32%	42%	3%	55%	58%
Internet	0%	0%	0%	34%	66%	100%
Trolley	3%	7%	10%	29%	61%	90%

#### Extracurricular L2 activities

Table 4 displays L2 activities provided by institutions outside of the language classroom. Apart from compiling the list, we also indicate whether these activities are charged for.

Table 4: Extracurricular L2 activities and their price

	None	Free	Charged for
L2 afternoon sessions	32%	62%	6%
L2 films	27%	73%	0%
L2 exam prep courses	40%	49%	11%
Internet afternoon	3%	97%	0%
L2 camp	60%	9%	31%

Table 4 shows that 68% of the participant institutions ran extracurricular L2 sessions in the afternoon, for the most part free of charge (62%). Foreign language films were freely available in 73% of the schools. Afternoon L2 exam prep courses were free in 49%, and charged for in 11% of all places. At the same time, 40% of the schools did not organise such courses. With one exception, schools catered for free internet after classes. 40% of the schools organised L2 camps, most of which had to be paid for (31%), with only 9% free.

#### International relations

Table 5 presents an overview of the international relations of DL secondary schools broken down according to language and type of connection.

Table 5: International relations between DL schools

Relation	Language		
	English	German	Other
Student exchange	32%	60%	50%
Teacher exchange	16%	24%	13%
Common project	26%	50%	34%
Study abroad	45%	32%	29%
Camp	8%	16%	18%

As Table 5 shows, students could visit partner institutions in English speaking countries (32%), German speaking countries (60%), and other foreign schools (50%). There were exchange programmes for teachers of English in 16%, teachers of German in 24%, and teachers of other languages in 13% of all cases. Schools worked on international projects in English (26%), German (50%), and other languages (34%). English camps were organised in 8%, Germans in 16%, and other languages in 18% by the participating institutions. This general German dominance is overruled in the case of study abroad experiences. Tours took students to an Anglophone environment in 45%, German speaking countries in 32%, and other countries in 29%.

### Teachers' qualifications

L2 teachers' qualifications are displayed in Figure 3.

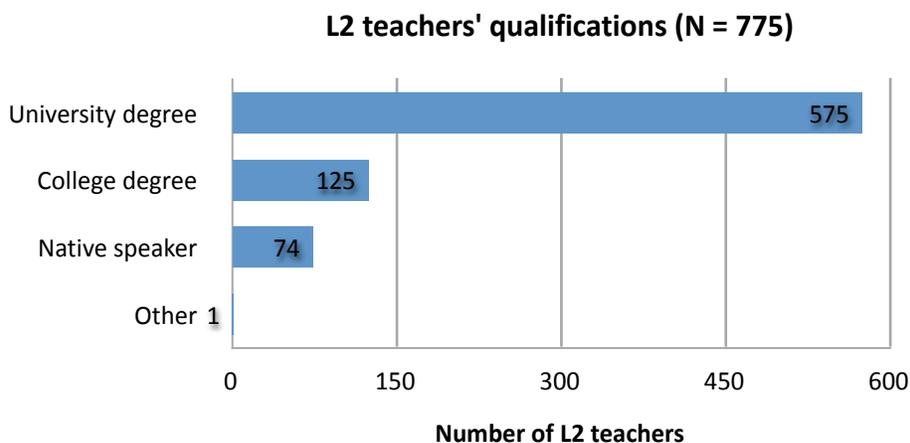


Figure 3: L2 teachers' qualifications

Figure 3 shows that the vast majority of L2 teachers in DL secondary schools, 575 professionals, held a university degree. Another 125 teachers completed a college education. The participating institutions employed 74 native speakers. At the time of the study, no unqualified teachers worked for the participant schools.

## Content subject teachers' L2 experience

The last closed question of the questionnaire sought to reveal content subject teachers' L2 experience (Figure 4).

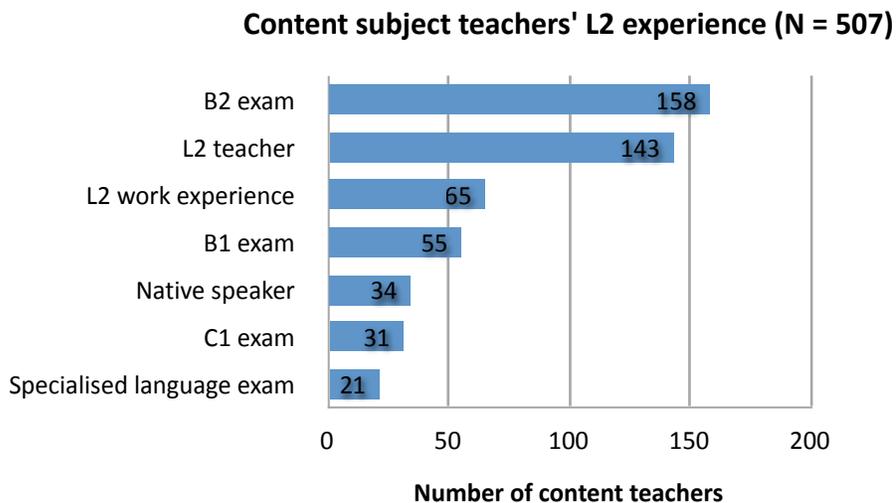


Figure 4: Content teachers' L2 experience

As Figure 4 shows, most content teachers ( $n = 158$ ) had a B2 level language exam. Besides teaching a content subject, 143 teachers were L2 professionals, as well. Some 65 people could take pride in target language work experience. Level B1 was attained by 55 content teachers. Besides the 34 native speakers, another 31 teachers achieved level C1, and 21 had a specialised exam in their content field.

In the next part of the study, I will discuss the achievements, problems, and suggested solutions. In this part of the questionnaire, schools were asked to list three items on each list in order of importance. However, when processing the data, I found that not all participants provided the targeted number of items, nor did they prioritise when compiling their lists. Therefore, the data were analysed as they were given originally. The sum total of 418 answers could be broken down to 170 achievements, followed by 139 problems, and 109 suggested solutions.

## Great achievements

Most of the achievements that DL secondary schools pride themselves on centred on students ( $n = 149$ ). The subcategories here are shown in Figure 5.

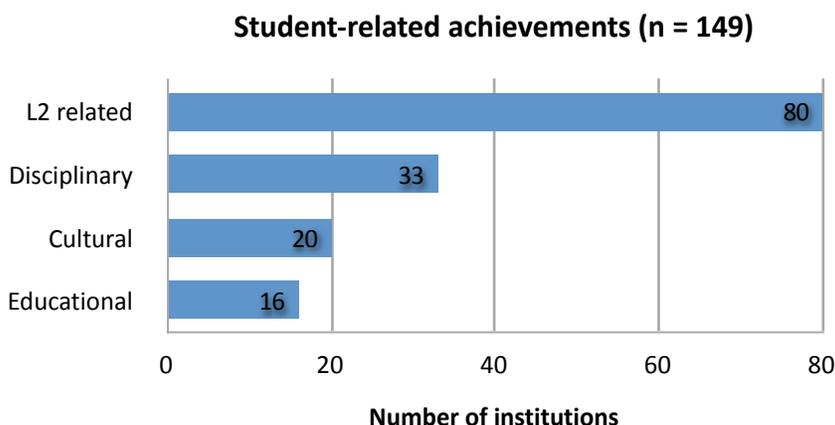


Figure 5: Student-related achievements

As Figure 5 shows, the participants considered L2 related achievements to be the greatest successes (n = 80). Subject-related disciplinary achievements were the second most often mentioned category (n = 33), followed by cultural (n = 20), and then educational (n = 16) attainments. The largest group, that of L2 related achievements, can be further subdivided (Figure 6).

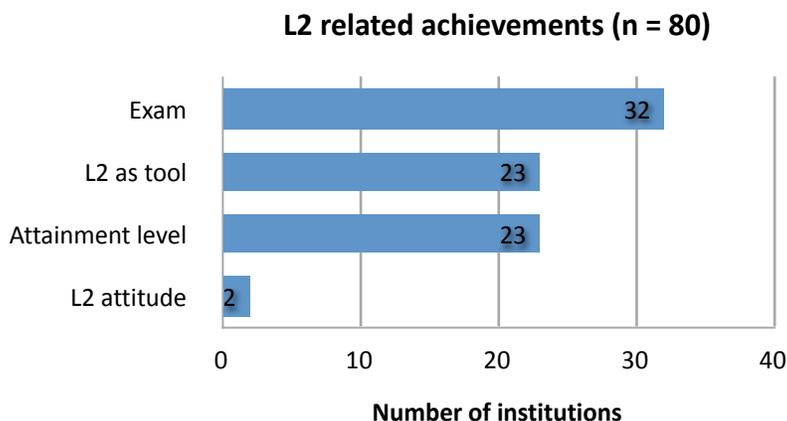


Figure 6: L2 related achievements

As is apparent from Figure 6, most schools regarded passing some language proficiency exam as a great achievement (n = 32). Within these, 19 institutions named level C1 as a plausible target, and 13 places mentioned A-level exams. Using an L2 as a tool and a general unspecified high attainment level was each listed by 23 DL schools. A positive attitude towards an L2 featured on two lists.

Subject-related disciplinary achievements were subcategorised as follows. Further education (n = 13) at Hungarian (n = 8) or foreign universities (n = 5), international integration (n = 9), preparedness (n = 6), and competitions (n = 5).

The 20 culture-related replies centred around two main topics. Profound L2 cultural and civilisational knowledge was implied by 12 schools. To give a taste of this category, some entries are listed next: “through native speakers and thanks to the carefully selected subject matter, students get to know Anglophone culture”, “profound knowledge of German culture and civilisation”, or “awareness of the customs and traditions of a given culture”. The other main topic dealt with finding work in an L2 environment (n = 8).

The 16 educational achievements included a versatile list of entries with few hits: (a) awareness; (b) openness, tolerance; (c) need for improvement (n = 3); (d) emotional stability (n = 2); (e) maturity (n = 1); (f) equality (n = 1); (g) willingness to communicate (n = 1). As one school put it, “the students leave the school as culturally open, flexible young people”.

Beside the 149 student-related achievements, 20 successes relate to the institutions themselves: (a) the quality of education (n = 9), (b) the special nature of education (n = 4), (c) its international respect (n = 4), and (d) popularity (n = 3). Finally, one DL school found it important to make mention of its “teachers’ selfless work”.

## Problems

In the following part of the analysis, I will discuss the problems that DL secondary schools experienced. There were altogether 139 such ailments, 137 of which derived from the absence, while two originated in the presence of something. In one of the latter cases, a German DL school found it hard to compete with the admittedly greater attraction of English. Another institution fought an internal war with its own parallel high prestige class within the same form.

The vast majority of all problems (n = 131) had their roots in the system of education. The largest group here, that of operational problems (n = 80), can be further broken down into objective circumstances (n = 51, Figure 7), and personnel (n = 29).

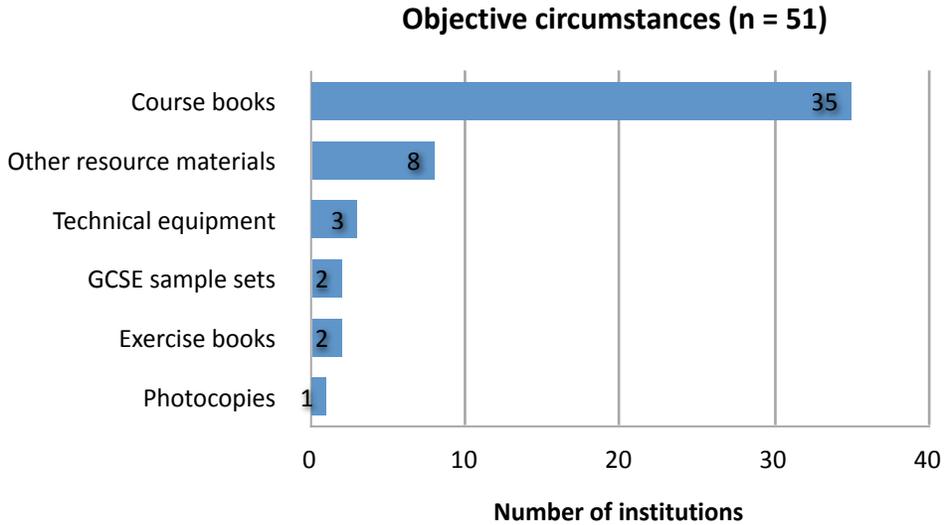


Figure 7: Problems deriving from objective circumstances

As Figure 7 shows, most schools had a problem with the course books they were using ( $n = 35$ ), which could be (a) an insufficient supply of books ( $n = 17$ ), (b) poor quality ( $n = 13$ ), or (c) high cost ( $n = 5$ ). Further resource materials would be needed in eight schools. Technical equipment was mentioned by three institutions. Two schools complained about the lack of GCSE sample sets and exercise books each. And one place indicated a need for photocopies. Figure 8 displays the distribution of personnel related problems.

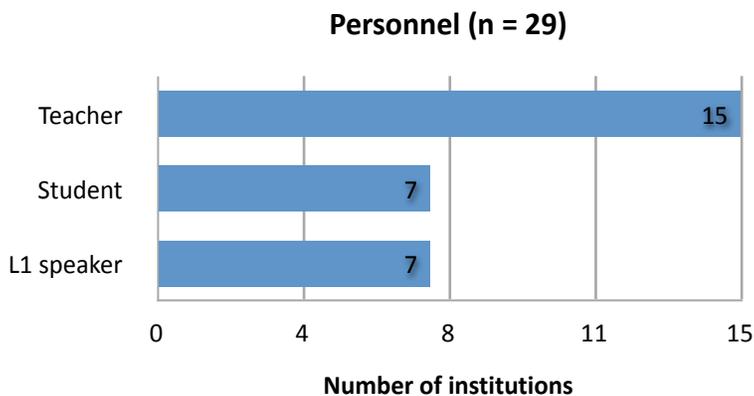


Figure 8: Problems deriving from personnel

Personnel related problems circled around three groups of agents (Figure 8). First, there was the largest group of teachers ( $n = 15$ ). In most cases this meant highly qualified secondary teachers ( $n = 12$ ), and for a smaller part qualified teachers with an L2 background ( $n = 3$ ). Second, DL secondary schools wished for harder

working ( $n = 4$ ) or better able ( $n = 3$ ) students. However, this was not meant as a criticism, but rather as an indication of the extra workload that is dumped on learners in this form of instruction. Last, seven schools felt the need for native speaker assistance.

Apart from problems in operation, a further 51 discrepancies were mentioned in organisation. Solvency problems paralysed the work in 10 schools, for higher costs would require more support, so the argument went. Respect and non-financial support would be welcome in 10 institutions. System failure was responsible for 31 problems, which can be subcategorised as follows: (a) number of classes, (b) DL teacher training, (c) GCSE ( $n = 6$ , each), (d) co-operation, (e) proper filtering ( $n = 3$ , each), (f) unspecified system change, (g) L2 studies ( $n = 2$ , each) (h) student awards, (i) student capabilities, and (j) number of students per class ( $n = 1$ , each). There seemed to be little agreement between schools as to the number of classes. While some schools believed that the number of content classes could be reduced so that students could get more L2 instruction, others blamed the high number of language classes for the gradual decrease of or complete halt in students' L2 progress. As far as the GCSE is concerned, one school was outspoken about how DL students are negatively discriminated in the present testing system with more challenging content subject tasks.

### Suggested solutions

DL secondary schools put forward 109 possible solutions thereby creating the smallest group among the answers to the open-ended questions. These revolved around three major areas: (a) organisational ( $n = 79$ ), (b) operational ( $n = 25$ ), and (c) social tasks ( $n = 5$ ). Two of these tasks had been completed by the time of submitting the questionnaire. First, schools felt they could better inform parents, and second, DL programmes had become state accredited. Most of these solutions were considered to be central duties (Figure 9).

Figure 9 shows that 21 schools expect a central governing body to develop up-to-date quality material for teaching. Most important, already existing copies should be published ( $n = 9$ ), new material should be compiled ( $n = 7$ ), more books should be translated ( $n = 3$ ), and the authorisation procedure should be less stringent ( $n = 2$ ).

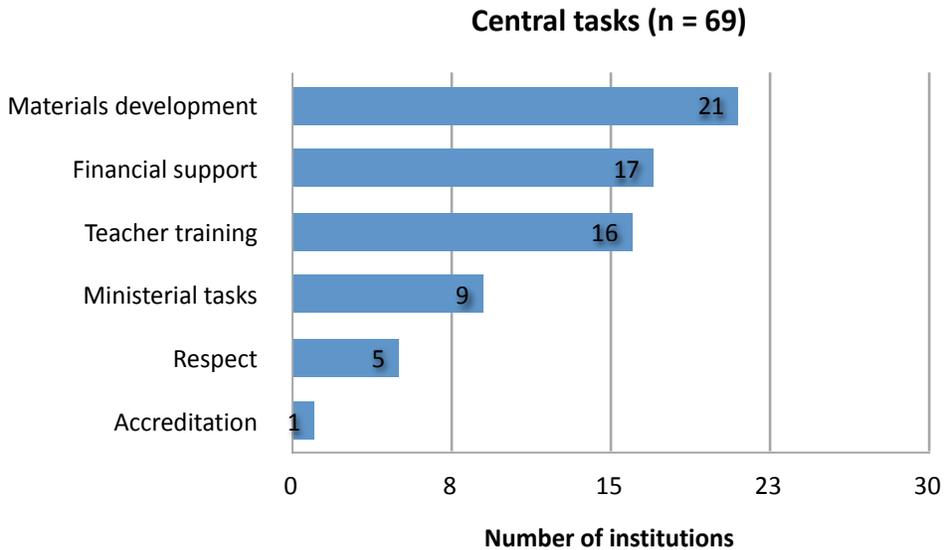


Figure 9: Central tasks of organisation

The second largest category within central tasks as for the number of hits was that of financial support ( $n = 17$ ). Seven schools would invest in writing course books, three would raise teachers' wages or increase the budget for educational expenses per capita, and one would set up a library from the extra funds. There were three further institutions that would plainly need more money for some unspecified reasons.

Teacher training was another fundamental problem to be sorted out. Most schools ( $n = 6$ ) would welcome an advantageous change in university DL teacher training. Specialist training and support courses were advocated by three institutions each, whereas two schools would send their staff on study tours. There were two answers proposing a change in current legislation: Content subject teachers at level C1 in an L2 should be allowed to teach DL classes.

A ministerial official responsible for DL instruction might be the solution to some problems according to nine schools. And a further five institutions would like to see a warmer attitude towards this form of education.

Local organisational tasks included (a) better communication with the parents ( $n = 3$ ), (b) proper arrangement of school forms ( $n = 2$ ), as well as (c) everyday nuisances, (d) exams, (e) popularisation, (f) entrance exams, and (g) materials development, with one hit each.

The second largest topic of solutions concerned operational issues ( $n = 25$ ). Schools sought central assistance in their co-operation by means of international or national treaties, or improving relations with the local administration ( $n = 7$ ). A central functionary was the solution according to six schools. Four institutions wanted more grants, three would like to see the number of classes modified, two schools were not happy with the entry test, and more student competitions, a

better GCSE, or a division of classes into groups was mentioned by one place each.

The five social tasks revolved around two areas. One, higher prestige for DL instruction ( $n = 3$ ), and two, less popular languages, like French, should be more accepted ( $n = 2$ ).

### An exemplary case

After the discussion of the achievements, problems, and suggested solutions, I will now provide the data given by one specific school to serve as an example of the answers to the open ended questions. This English DL secondary school considered “successful completion of A-level exams”, “passing an English language exam”, and “acquaintance with the English and US culture” to be its greatest achievements. “Poor financial support” was listed first among the problems the school had to face, followed by “too expensive / syllabus alien Geography and Civilisation books”. The solution to these would be “better state financial support”, “increasing the number of communicative classes (by means of a change in the lesson framework”, and “publishing new books / financially supporting the existing books”.

## Discussion

One problem when analysing the data was that in many cases the answers were incomplete or difficult to clearly understand. An English DL school, for example, did not provide a single achievement, used only two slots to list its problems, and failed to suggest possible ways of sorting these out. Typically, institutions were proud of and listed numerous great achievements, but they would mention more problems than they could solve or think of a solution to. I will approach this phenomenon from two angles: first, on the basis of Duff’s (1996) work from a socio-political perspective, then following Seligman’s (1975) experiments from a psychological one.

When assessing the efficiency of DL education, Duff (1996) finds it important to investigate the broader cultural, social, and political background to it. Part of this embeddedness is breaching the Warsaw Pact, the demolition of the Iron Curtain, and opening to the west and western languages. Apart from pop culture, these new media also imported the language of scientific research as well as international trade. From 1989, Russian was no longer a compulsory L2 in state education: students could now turn their high level and complex motivation towards English, German, and other western languages. Once again, these did not appear isolated: each brought along its fully-fledged L2 methodology. It is important to note that DL secondary schools were still the result of an undemocratic top-down process viewing the wishes of central political authorities. Therefore, although popular and very successful from the beginning, DL secondary instruction was not launched out of popular requirement but rather because the political and economic elite decided so. Continuing in the same steps as at the

outset, these institutions still require ample help from central governing bodies, as can be discerned from the need for a government functionary to be responsible for this type of instruction.

One of the first researchers to study acceptance of a higher leading force in favour of being proactive was Martin Seligman, who conducted primarily animal experiments when investigating clinical depression. In his most widely known series of studies between 1965 and 1969, Seligman worked with 150 dogs. A group of the animals were put in harnesses to hinder their movement, and stimulated their paws with little electric shocks. As the dogs were unable to move, soon they learnt that there was nothing they could do against their ailments: they had to endure them. In a follow-up experiment, the same dogs were put into cages with low walls, and ten seconds after a signal they were given electric shocks again. Seligman observed that the animals that were not harnessed easily jumped out of their cages. By contrast, his previously harnessed subjects did not try to escape but waited for the inconveniences to be over: they learnt to be helpless. Later, Garber and Seligman (1980) conducted similar clinical experiments, as well.

Seligman (1975) defined learned helplessness as the state of mind when the person who is not in full control of a specific situation mistakenly believes that they are not able to modify any other situations, either. Some highly important personal experiences that lead humans to such faulty conclusions include violent attacks, psychotic compensation, social prejudices, failed marriages, and unsuccessful education. One condition to learned helplessness is the feeling that our personal responses to stimuli are not in accordance with the result sought. Since we feel that our efforts are futile, we give up after a while, and will not venture to change the situation even when the target is objectively attainable.

Apart from often failing to suggest adequate solutions to their own problems in general, participants in this study followed a similar pattern in financing and co-operation in particular. Provision of “money, money, and even more money”, as one school put it, turned out to be a chief central task ( $n = 17$ ). However, schools were not proactive enough when it came to earning the necessary funds: 30 places did not organise exam prep classes or these were free, and 26 schools did not run L2 camps or these were free – both convenient ways of raising money. Expecting central assistance in local co-operation is another such example. Seven schools required external help to build relations with partner institutions or the local administration.

## **Conclusion**

This study aimed to collect data and reveal information about how DL secondary schools in Hungary viewed their status, circumstances, and how they evaluated their work. Out of the 61 institutions that were invited to participate, 38 replied to our call. We used an on-line questionnaire with nine closed and four open item questions.

Our participants for the best part considered primary school marks as well as local entry test results when selecting from their applicants. Students were allocated to study groups primarily on the basis of L2 test results, which were supplemented

with other factors, such as the alphabetical log list. Our findings suggest that DL secondary schools were well-equipped, although their tools and facilities often needed improvement. Afternoon study sessions, L2 films, exam prep classes, and access to the internet were often freely available extra-curricular activities. L2 camps, when organised, were charged for as a rule. Our participants did not have a wide array of partnerships with foreign institutions. Although some schools did cater for student or teacher exchange, took part in international projects, or arranged visits to target language countries, these were far from being typical. As far as their staff was concerned, most L2 teachers had a university education, and many of the content subject teachers were L2 professionals, as well.

Most schools were proud of their students' achievements. This is partly owing to the fact that students' aims were identified by schools as their educational goals; therefore, learner success was an adequate measure of program efficiency (Dörnyei, Csizér, & Németh, 2006). Learners in DL secondary schools attained outstandingly high levels of L2 proficiency. The number of L2 exams, and the quality of GCSE tests served as a positive feedback to educational work. As the literature suggested, this often meant an increased willingness to communicate, openness and tolerance towards L2 culture. The problems mentioned also mirrored international tendencies. DL schools found it difficult to find teachers that were both highly competent and well-qualified, and even more difficult to keep them. Materials were often scarce, too: development was underfinanced, publication painfully long, and naturalisation unresolved. Compared with the number of problems, suggested solutions were few and far between. Apparently, their socio-political structure and organisation predestined DL schools to expect help from outside. In particular, institutions would welcome financial assistance, positive educational policy, and up-to-date materials.

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# Emic Perspectives on Students' Year of Intensive Language Learning Experiences

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## **Introduction**

The year of intensive language learning (YILL) has been offered to 15-year-old Hungarian students since fall 2004. Students devote a full academic year to learning one or two foreign languages (FL) in 12 - 18 weekly classes besides information technology, Hungarian and History; thus, their secondary education lasts five years. The paper provides insights into the results of a large-scale survey of one group of stakeholders at a representative sample of YILL schools. A questionnaire was administered to four students at 62 institutions in March 2009. The instrument included closed items on background data and open questions to allow students to share their experiences.

Students were asked in what areas they felt they benefited from YILL, to what extent they had achieved their goals, whether they would join YILL and why, what they remembered with pleasure, how they evaluated the four years after YILL, what exams they passed and what new languages they wanted to study in the future. We analyze emerging patterns in the rich dataset and underpin claims in the participants' own words. As expected, the picture is complex. Besides enthusiastic voices on how YILL promoted not only language development, but also growing up and group dynamics, critical remarks throw light on the downside: some students feel they wasted their time.

## **The study**

Background to study: YILL program in a nutshell

The government established in 2002 was the first one to set up a clear FL policy in the country. Experts were invited to contribute to the program called later "World-Language" (W-L) as a result of which school-year 2003/04 was declared "The year

of foreign language learning”. Medgyes and Miklósy summarize principal goals and aims of the W-L program (2005, p. 120) in seven points: (1) FL competence should be established by learners during their primary and secondary education, (2) learners from socially disadvantaged families or with learning disabilities should be supported in order to have equal opportunities for everyone, (3) teachers and learners are given a framework instead of obligatory measures to study, (4) quality and innovations in language education are preferred, (5) learning is stimulated not only in the classrooms, but also outside of school, (6) Information and Communication Technology (ICT) and language teaching should be integrated, and (7) adults are encouraged to use opportunities offered in lifelong learning as a part of the W-L program.

The YILL program, which allows 15-year-old students to dedicate an extra year to improving primarily their L1 and L2 communication and ICT skills, was introduced in the fall of 2004 as an initiative of the Hungarian Ministry of Education and Culture primarily motivated by Hungary’s forthcoming EU accession. The rationale behind the program is that each and every student should have the opportunity to acquire, improve and maintain their language skills so that they would be able to use their rights of European Citizenship vested upon them by the Treaty of Maastricht.

A specific legislation of the W-L program allows schools to offer a year of intensive language training for 9<sup>th</sup> graders in secondary grammar and vocational schools. Since 2004, it has been possible to open one class per school of this kind and each year thereafter another class. A minimum of eleven contact hours per week or maximum 18 of a FL should be taught in this grade and also a sufficient number of lessons in further grades should support the advanced-level school-leaving examination in students’ first FL and possibly also in their second one. Students who started the program graduate from secondary education a year later, after grade 13. New syllabi and teaching materials were developed; furthermore, in-service teacher training supported the program (Medgyes & Miklósy, 2005, p. 121). Criteria for entrance to higher education institutions changed in 2005, when one of the four compulsory subjects of final school-leaving exams should be a FL exam at two levels: intermediate and advanced. The latter type equals a certificate of a state FL examination (Medgyes, 2005, p. 272).

The aims of the YILL Program according to Nikolov, Ottó, and Öveges (2009, p. 4) can be characterized as follows: (1) to allow a higher number of students to reach advanced level of proficiency in using a FL, (2) to allow disadvantaged students to catch up in learning a FL and in using IT in order to provide equal opportunities for everyone, and (3) to allow higher education study in a specific field of interest also in a FL for the purpose of equal opportunities when looking for a job in the EU or at home.

These goals in a shorter time frame mean: first of all, for those students who attend a YILL program to take the advanced level school-leaving examination in a FL; secondly, to gain positive attitudes and motivation to learn FLs and the culture where the language is used and originates from; and finally, to learn specific strategies to become an autonomous language learner in the future. Therefore, the aims of the YILL are, on the one hand, to allow students to achieve an advanced

level of language proficiency and to enable them to become autonomous language learners/users, and on the other hand, to allow disadvantaged students to catch up.

The first YILL was launched in 2004. Students who participated in the program graduated from secondary school in the spring of 2009. In the first year of the YILL (2004/05 academic year) 407 schools and 11,834 students volunteered to take part in the program. The numbers of the learners increased dramatically and in the school-year of 2007/08 the statistics register 16,999 students (Nikolov, Ottó, & Öveges, 2009, p. 2).

During the past five years the Ministry of Education supported studies in order to monitor the learning process in schools that signed up for the program. The first year of YILL (the school year of 2004/05) was surveyed by two studies carried out (Nikolov, & Ottó, 2005a, b, 2006). According to Nikolov, Ottó, and Öveges (2009, p. 4) the focus was on monitoring students' FL learning achievements in their primary education, their attitudes towards the intensive language learning program, their motivation to learn a FL in line with their abilities and achievements in the YILL, and investigating how the frequency of different kinds of classroom activities interact with other factors.

In order to gain an insight into stakeholders' views on the YILL program, two major studies were implemented. The first one was conducted in 2005, right at the end of the program (Nikolov, Ottó, & Öveges 2005a, b), whereas the second round, four years later (Nikolov, Ottó, & Öveges, 2009), involved a representative sample of schools, students, parents, teachers and school administrators. The second round comprised two phases: in the first phase a representative sample of schools, students, language teachers and school administrators filled in questionnaires on line. In the second phase, students and their parents were invited to give both a retrospective account on their attitudes towards the program and to share with us to what extent and how the outcomes fulfilled their expectations. All students' examination results were also available after their graduation, thus providing an opportunity to compare their final achievements with those of other students. The present study focuses on the data on students' views and experiences in the second phase.

### Aims of the study

The objectives of the present study were threefold (Nikolov, Ottó, & Öveges, 2009, p. 7): (1) to gain an insight into stakeholders' views on YILL, (2) to examine what the outcomes of the first YILL experience were, and (3) to examine to what extent YILL students achieved their aims set at the beginning of the program. As the present paper focuses on students' year of intensive language learning experiences, our main objective is to explore what they think about their YILL.

## Participants

Over 200 students of 64 schools took part in the study (N=227). The sample is representative in terms of regional distribution and institution type (grammar school/vocational school) (Nikolov, Ottó, & Öveges, 2009, p. 10). All respondents participated in YILL between 2004/2005 and 2008/2009. Our sample comprised 60% of female and 40% male participants; 66% of the respondents opted for English as a FL, whereas 34% chose German as a FL. A total of 68% passed the school-leaving exam before the last year of their studies.

## Data collection instruments and procedures

Participants were asked to fill in a short questionnaire of open questions. The questionnaire consisted of sixteen open-ended questions (see questions and results in next section), as we wanted to facilitate respondents' divergent thinking. The open-ended questions and the anonymity were expected to enhance students' openness and sincerity regarding the content of their answers. We asked teachers to choose two students who managed to benefit from YILL and two students who could not capitalize on the opportunities. Thus, four students were invited to fill in the data collection instrument at each school. Out of 256 questionnaires, 227 were returned and then analyzed. First, we read all the answers and looked for emerging patterns. Then, we discussed and agreed on categories for grouping them; finally, we quantified the answers in the categories and agreed on specific examples to include in the text. The results are as follows.

## Students' views on YILL

The open-ended questions aimed to explore a range of issues concerning the program: satisfaction with achievement, reflection on pleasant moments occurring during the YILL, fields of improvement, retrospections at the end of the school year and what they felt would be different if they hadn't chosen to be part of YILL. As the length of the paper is limited, we focus on some of the results.

## Students' self-assessment

The first question asked students to state how satisfied they were with their achievements in the FLs they studied during five years and to give reasons why. A total of 201 participants replied and their answers were categorized in four groups: 13% claimed to be fully satisfied; 44% were satisfied; 23% felt partly satisfied; whereas 20% were definitely not satisfied with their results. This means that the majority (57%) of the respondents were satisfied with their achievement in YILL.

As for why they assessed their achievements as they did, students wrote 132 reasons for being satisfied and 107 reasons why they were not, reflecting instrumental and mastery motivation. The most frequent type of answer within the

eight categories of positive answers (44, 33%) concerned passing proficiency exams. Although these are external exams, they represent the most valued measure of success. For example, "I've got what I planned (intermediate level exam)." The official school-leaving examination was mentioned in 28 cases (21%): "I think I dare to take the advanced level exam". Ten respondents mentioned taking the school-leaving exam earlier than the mandatory time: "I managed to pass the school-leaving exam earlier, so now I can concentrate on other things instead of the FL." Twenty-eight students (21%) claimed to have learnt and developed a lot in more general terms: "I've learnt a lot." "I've managed to reach a high level from a total beginner level." Nineteen answers (14%) elaborated on how students can apply their knowledge: "I can communicate in both languages". Nine answers mentioned the high quality of teaching: "My teachers always tried to elicit my best and helped me in everything." Three respondents appreciated the opportunity to apply to tertiary education as a result of their proficiency, whereas one simply mentioned many classes.

The 107 reasons why students were not satisfied with their achievements were put into nine categories. The most frequently mentioned problem was (55, 51%) their lack of development. They felt no difference in their knowledge before and after YILL. "What I've achieved here I could have done in the 'standard' program". Eleven percent of the students hinted at their own responsibility in failing to come up to expectations: "Had I worked harder, my knowledge would be better in these languages." The same ratio of answers blamed their failure on the quality of teaching: "Teaching should have been taken more seriously." Eleven respondents took it for granted that their mere presence in the lessons would result in a successful language exam. They ascribed their negative attitude towards YILL to a lack of language exam: "I am disappointed that the headmaster's promise of the language proficiency exam did not materialize at the end of the YILL." Six students blamed frequent change of teachers: "It was disturbing to have different teachers every year, teaching with different methods." It is worth mentioning that although the main purpose of YILL was to level out student differences, which in Hungary is mainly caused by differences in socio-economic status, five students claimed that they had to resort to a private teacher to achieve their goals: "I did not get what I had expected from my school. I achieved my results (an earlier school leaving examination, language proficiency exam) with the help of a private teacher." Finally, four students complained about the decrease in the number of classes, whereas one about the decline in learners' motivation over the years.

## Improvement

Besides students' overall impressions on YILL, the questionnaire inquired into students' experiences in depth as well. As an extra year of language learning is somehow expected to make a difference in students' skills, they were asked to report on the fields where they felt improvement was obvious and where they did not improve. As far as fields of improvement are concerned, students listed numerous areas and skills where they felt some progress was made. All the four language skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking were mentioned. Moreover,

some students felt that besides becoming more self-confident and able communicators in their new FL, they also advanced in the field of grammar by gaining a more systematic knowledge of the language.

Interestingly, the areas students discussed as their success were also mentioned among the fields where they felt no improvement. However, there were some new items among the reasons students gave for being dissatisfied with the program: the lack of adequate knowledge to pass a language exam or a school-leaving exam earlier than mandatory was a problem. As exam certificates are much valued in the Hungarian educational system, it is no wonder students consider their lack of this important indicator of no improvement.

### Pleasant memories

The next question aimed to map students' most pleasant experiences of their YILL. A total of 243 answers were given and only nine of them claimed there was nothing worth mentioning. From among the 14 categories, the most frequent ones (15%) related to specific classroom experiences, intrinsically motivating tasks: "An English class when we played detective." "Guessing games in English". "Acting out situations in German." Many answers were specifically focused on skill development: "Reading classes." "Copy and translate." Some students gave tongue-in-the-cheek answers: "Watching films for 3 hours out of 5 a day, then going home. In the afternoon private teacher for heavy payment." Many students appreciated their opportunities to socialize: making new friends and finding their place in their new peer group: "I managed to integrate into the group and I had a sense of achievement." Having to concentrate mainly on FL lessons was also reported as both beneficial and pleasant by 19 respondents: "It was great that there was no need to deal with not very interesting or not useful subjects. There were no dummy lessons: singing, media.... So, we could concentrate more on English." Finally, moments of mastery were recalled in 18 answers: "The moment when the inner barrier was broken and I started speaking fluently in English".

### Holistic evaluation of YILL

Several questions inquired into students' holistic evaluation of their YILL and the four years after it. The overall results indicate that respondents' views were much more positive about their first intensive year than about the subsequent years. What emerged from their answers reflecting their retrospection was that although YILL was mostly seen as useful and fun, at the age of 19, after having devoted five years to secondary education instead of four, students were critical about their experiences. To the question "Would you choose YILL if you were to choose today?" students' answers were distributed as follows: 48% said yes, 46% would not, and six percent were undecided. This means that in retrospect, after weighing all the pros and the cons, almost half of the students would not opt for YILL — which is a very serious criticism of the overall implementation of the program.

## Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this study was to explore students' views on their YILL experience by gaining insights into their emic perspectives: what does it mean to have studied in YILL and the four years following it. As was shown, about half of the respondents perceived YILL as a “fast lane” and a similar ratio as a “parking lane”. Students' positive views about the program were expressed as “it was worth it and I improved a lot” and “I liked it: the classmates and the atmosphere”. Opinions at the negative end of the continuum included views, like “It's a waste of time.” and “I am disappointed.”

Comparing students' evaluations and their parents' views (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 149) it is clear that parents had somewhat more positive opinions about their offsprings' YILL: 63% would choose the same program for their children without any additional concern or under certain conditions; whereas 63% would definitely not want their child to attend YILL.

The results of the final school-leaving examinations allow us to compare these findings with objective measures of FL development. A detailed comparison of all YILL and all non-YILL students in Hungary revealed that YILL students' scores were 3-13% higher than those of their non-YILL peers at the intermediate level; however, no significant differences were found at the advanced level (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009). It is an important fact that the intermediate-level exams are assessed by the students' teachers; at the advanced level external examiners assess students. Also, very few students took the advanced-level exam, due to changes in the system how bonus points are calculated in entrance exams. These results show very low gains in proficiency in light of the amount of investment: an extra year devoted to FL study.

YILL is a very special program implemented in Hungary only. It is meant to provide all students a chance to achieve an advanced level and disadvantaged learners with special opportunities to develop proficiency in FLs. The picture emerging from the students' answers is highly complex. There are good reasons to rethink if YILL is really worth the effort.

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# **‘It was a very pleasant experience’ Language Teachers’ Views on the Year of Intensive Language Learning Programme**

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## **Introduction**

This paper presents findings of a qualitative study on language teachers’ ideas concerning the Year of Intensive Language Learning (YILL) that was launched in the fall of 2004 under the auspices of the World-Language programme.

In this paper, first, we describe the context of the YILL programme; then, we overview studies on its implementation between 2004 and 2009. In the main part of the paper we focus on the final phase of the longitudinal inquiry when all stakeholders were asked about the YILL. We will analyze language teachers’ views on the year devoted to intensive language learning and the four years after it to find out what they think about their students’ development and their experiences over the past five years. We centre our inquiry on four focal points in line with the aims of the YILL: (1) students’ language proficiency, (2) motivation, (3) autonomy and (3) how the programme contributed to building a bridge for disadvantaged students.

## **Background to study**

Language education in Hungary has undergone major changes since the early 1990s. These changes, however, were rooted in the Public Education Act of 1985, which provided legal basis for individual schools to choose which foreign language (FL) to teach. These choices were based on local possibilities and needs, but they marked the beginning of a new era regarding FL education. The second important step was Hungary’s admission to the European Union in 2004. The twenty years that passed between these two landmarks witnessed an increased interest in FL teaching and learning. However, as Medgyes and Miklósy (2005, pp. 66-67) claim, setbacks of this period include but are not restricted to ineffectiveness of instruc-

tion, the chaos caused by the 'textbook boom' and the inconsistencies observed in secondary school leaving examinations.

A special programme, World-Language, was launched in 2003 by the Ministry of Education and Culture to reform language education in Hungary and to match the country's objectives to those of the EU's. The core document of this programme was drafted with the help of the country's prominent independent language teaching experts (Medgyes, 2005, p. 270). Among various significant projects the World-Language Programme enables secondary schools to launch a year of intensive language learning by inserting an extra academic year into the twelve-year curriculum in year nine. This means that 40 percent of compulsory educational time must be devoted to FL teaching; thus, students study one or two FLs in 11-18 hours a week and have other classes in computer science, math and Hungarian, but the latter subjects in reduced numbers. After the YILL, students follow the regular curriculum and study one or two FLs in regular weekly hours (3-5). The YILL Programme turned out to be extremely popular among secondary schools across the country. The first students to take part in it started their studies in the academic year of 2004/2005 and graduated five years later in 2009.

The present paper draws on data collected in the final phase of research (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009) and uses qualitative methods to analyze teachers' answers to open questions. Thus, we aim to get an in-depth understanding (Duff, 2007) of how teachers evaluate the effects of the YILL on students' proficiency and motivation to learn languages; besides, we also want to map how the YILL supported students in becoming autonomous language learners and whether it offered opportunities for disadvantaged students to fall in line with their peers.

To monitor how the YILL worked over the years and to what extent it achieved its goals the Ministry of Education and Culture initiated several large-scale studies in the past five years. Findings of these studies indicated that students' proficiency progressed dynamically and their motivation to learn languages increased during their YILL. However, large individual differences characterized learners and the effort to allow disadvantaged students to catch up with their peers proved to be less successful than expected (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2005a, 2005b; Nikolov & Ottó, 2006).

In a follow up study (Nikolov & Öveges, 2006) further advantageous aspects were also highlighted: students were reported to have positive attitudes towards studying languages and to gain self-confidence; the establishment of good relationships between teachers and students was also emphasized together with increasing cooperation among language teachers.

A final large-scale study was conducted in 2009 to uncover how the aims of the YILL had been achieved by the end of the five years when the first cohort of the YILL students graduated from their secondary schools. The aims of the YILL programme were as follows: (1) students should achieve advanced-level language proficiency, (2) the programme should provide equal opportunities for disadvantaged students, (3) it should give students a firm basis of knowledge to be expanded in tertiary education, (4) students should pass the advanced-level school-leaving exam, (5) they should develop positive attitudes and strong motivation towards language learning, and (6) they should become autonomous language learners (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 5).

The survey conducted by Nikolov and her colleagues (2009) comprised three phases: (1) First, every school starting YILL in the academic year of 2008/2009 was asked to submit data on their YILL classes in the past five years. (2) Then, a representative sample of schools (see Nikolov & Ottó, 2006) was involved to follow YILL students longitudinally by asking school administrators, students, parents and language teachers in retrospect. (3) Finally, all YILL graduates' school leaving exam data were analyzed and compared to all other graduates' achievements on intermediate and advanced levels.

Data were collected with various instruments and all YILL participants including students, teachers, institutions, parents were surveyed. The study is rather extended, as it addresses virtually all questions arising in connection with the implementation and the outcomes of the programme from all stakeholders' perspectives.

The main findings indicate that the popularity of the YILL programme increased over five years. The study also highlights certain problems: students, teachers and parents unanimously think that the decrease in the number of language classes after the YILL is dramatic. A second important setback concerns the school-leaving examination: only every fifth YILL student takes the advanced level exam, though preparation for this exam is among the aims. Regarding performance on the intermediate-level exams, only a slight (3-13%) but significant difference has been found between the results of YILL students and non-YILL students; however, YILL students did not outperform their peers at the advanced level (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 172).

Students and teachers value external language proficiency exams more than the official school-leaving examination, as the survey shows. However, as teachers consistently report, students are likely to lose motivation after passing exams. It is also pointed out that students mostly failed to acquire the essential strategies necessary for becoming autonomous language learners. As for providing equal opportunities, yet another aim of the programme, this point is also problematic. Both parents and teachers complain about large differences in students' abilities within groups and teachers find it difficult to tune instruction to learners' needs (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, pp. 175-181).

The present study provides insights into teachers' views in a representative sample of YILL secondary schools in the large-scale survey discussed above (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009).

## **Method**

This study follows the well-established tradition of the qualitative research paradigm. According to Mackey and Gass (2005, p. 162), qualitative research can be described as 'research that is based on descriptive data that does not make (regular) use of statistical procedures'. We aimed to get a holistic view (Duff, 2008) based on teachers' opinion on the YILL to be able to gain an in-depth understanding of their experiences in the programme. The thick-description provided in this paper serves the purpose of presenting an emic perspective to enable readers to view the YILL programme 'from the perspective of the insiders,' an aim of qualitative

research (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 38). In other words, this study is meant to provide insights into findings of the large-scale survey from the perspective of key stakeholders: language teachers.

## Research questions

In this study we aim to find answers to the following research questions:

- (1) How do teachers evaluate the effects of the YILL on their students' language proficiency over five years?
- (2) How does students' motivation to learn foreign languages change during the YILL and the subsequent four years?
- (3) What are the teachers' views on learners' autonomous language learning?
- (4) In what ways and to what extent do teachers think the YILL supports disadvantaged students to catch up with their peers?

## Participants

In the present study data collected at 59 secondary schools, a representative sample of YILL schools, are analyzed. Two teachers from each school were asked to share their opinion on the YILL programme. A total of 114 participants, 38 German and 72 English teachers filled in a questionnaire (four did not indicate the language). The majority, 79 percent of the respondents taught their students in the four years after the YILL, whereas 21 percent was their teacher only in the YILL (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 10). Thus, the majority of the respondents had first-hand information on the five years students spent at their schools.

## Data collection instruments and procedures

A four-page questionnaire was used to collect data in Hungarian (see Appendix for a version translated into English). The first questions focus on the participants' participation in the YILL: (1) what language they taught (2) in which academic year between 2004/2005 and 2008/2009 (3) in how many lessons per week. Open-ended questions aim to elicit answers on teachers' experiences and views:

1. teacher's best memories during the YILL
2. characteristics of YILL students
3. achievements of students' goals
4. advanced level school-leaving exam as a realistic outcome of the YILL
5. possibility for disadvantaged students to fall in line with their peers
6. differences between the YILL and traditional language teaching

7. causes of success and failure in the YILL
8. changes introduced after the YILL at schools
9. autonomy in language learners
10. colleagues' and school administrators' attitudes towards the YILL
11. recommendations for changes in the YILL

The questionnaire was administered at the YILL schools as part of the large-scale study conducted by Nikolov et al. (2009) in spring, 2009. Teachers were asked to answer the questions either on a printed version or in a file format of the questionnaire. They were not asked to give their names or any other data to identify them. The questionnaires were mailed together with other data collection instruments in the second phase of the survey.

Qualitative analyses on the dataset of 114 responses were performed in early summer of 2009. First, all questionnaires were coded, read and the answers to questions were categorized according to their contents. Four focal points were identified on the basis of the research questions and a thick description of these points is presented with quotations from the participants. Teachers' answers are given in English; they are the authors' translations.

## Findings

We present findings on four focal points: teachers' views on their students' (1) language proficiency, (2) motivation, (3) autonomy and (4) how the programme bridged the gap between disadvantaged students and their peers. These focal points were identified on the basis of emerging issues in teachers' answers given to different questions of the questionnaire.

When teachers were asked to characterize the YILL students they tended to describe them either in terms of their language proficiency or their motivation. Figure 1 provides the categories they used to characterize their students together with the respective frequencies.

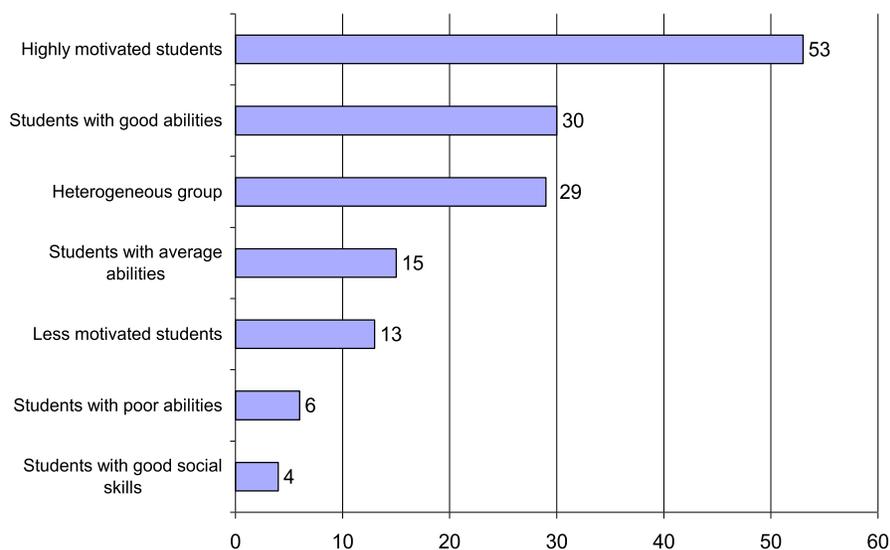


Figure 1: Categories in teachers' descriptions of students

Figure 1 shows that teachers overwhelmingly characterized their students either on the basis of their aptitude (good, average, poor abilities, heterogeneous groups) or motivation (highly/less motivated students). Only four answers described YILL students in social terms. The total of 150 opinions comprised 87 features worded positively, whereas the rest were more critical or negative.

### Language proficiency

When recalling their best memories of YILL students', increasing language proficiency was one of the most important sources for teachers' best memories regarding the initial year. Forty answers refer to the outstanding achievements of students during the YILL. Pride in students' successful performance was often mentioned: 'Three or four months after the onset of the programme a county assessment was carried out in the YILL class. Their achievement was outstanding on the regional level, which makes both teacher and students proud.'

### Documented proficiency

Teachers were also asked what they considered success during the YILL. Twenty-three teachers (16%) reported to have experienced success in connection with the students passing an external language exam, emphasizing the value of documented language proficiency: 'The students passing intermediate level language proficiency exam meant success for me.' The next quotation illustrates that this is quite frequent among students: 'After one year of study the quarter of the group successfully passed the language exam.' Every fifth teacher considered success the

passing of the advanced or intermediate level school leaving exam earlier than compulsory. For example, 'Two students passed the advanced level school leaving exam before it was due.'

When asked to characterize a student benefiting from the YILL and one missing the opportunity to do so, teachers tended to describe these students in terms of their documented proficiency. 'S/he has passed the intermediate level proficiency and the advanced school leaving exam earlier than compulsory.' A few also mentioned authentic language use: e.g., 'S/he has passed a basic level exam and manages well in everyday life contexts.'

### Streaming on the basis of proficiency

However, differences in students' language proficiency were regarded highly problematic by 31 teachers (30%). They often referred to students' aptitude, most frequently worded as abilities or IQ: 'The problem lay in preparing students with different abilities in the same group.'

Twenty-two teachers (21%) mentioned that as there was no entrance exam at their school, students were not streamed according to their level of proficiency, which resulted in heterogeneous groups that teachers found challenging to cope with: 'As students did not have to pass an entrance exam, their abilities were rather dissimilar.' Managing learners' individual differences in heterogeneous groups was one of the most challenging tasks for 31 teachers (30%): 'Harmonizing and motivating students with different abilities was the most tiring.'

As a solution to problems 13 (11%) teachers suggested that students should be streamed on the basis of their proficiency before entering the programme: 'There must be a filter at entrance!', 'Students applying for the YILL programme should write a central entrance exam, and the ones not reaching a certain level should not be admitted.' Teachers argue that filtering out low aptitude students would serve the interest of both high and low ability learners: 'The really good ones must be sorted out by all means, so that we can achieve a really high level with them. The rest should continue in a more relaxed way, with more practice. This would be better for both teacher and student.'

### Motivation

Apart from characterizing YILL students in terms of their proficiency, 53 teachers (35%) described them on the basis of their high motivation: 'they are creative and interested', 'ambitious and hardworking children', 'They really came here to study the language'.

Students' motivation during the YILL was also a source of unforgettable memories for teachers. Forty-five teachers (22%) remember with pleasure their motivated students and their attitudes towards language learning: '(I remember with pleasure) the enthusiasm of those students who were willing to study. The students took part in different activities with pleasure; they studied the new language with enthusiasm.' High motivation created a sense of competition among

students which was regarded positive by teachers and also described as a source of ongoing motivation: 'It was an issue of vanity to perform well.'

### Motivated students

When asked to contrast how YILL and non-YILL students compared to one another, 18 teachers (12%) wrote about higher level of general motivation among YILL students: 'They are more motivated students; they have a broader scope of interest'. They emphasized the presence of greater group cohesion among more motivated students. 'Students' willingness to study the language is better; they are more helpful and motivate one another in the group.' Students' high motivation to participate in classes was regarded a major success of the YILL by 12 teachers (8%) 'Success: students' willingness to learn the language – they all studied it with pleasure and actively participated in class.'

When asked to characterize a successful and an unsuccessful YILL student, motivation as an essential component leading to success is present in 59 answers (24%): 'Highly motivated student with strong task-consciousness who took all opportunities to learn and use the language.' Mastery and motivation also emerged in the dataset: 'This student did not want to receive a 'document' or good grades, but really wants to learn German.'

### Losing motivation

Findings indicate that students were likely to lose motivation after successfully completing either an external proficiency exam or the school leaving exam that many of them took earlier than compulsory – an option available in schools. This was considered highly problematic by ten teachers (10%). 'After passing the language exam and the advanced level school leaving exam it was more difficult to motivate them to study.', 'After a certain level they are hard to motivate.'

In their characterizations of students not benefiting from YILL six teachers (5%) emphasized demotivation after passing an exam: 'S/he passed the language exam after the first year. Since then s/he has not dealt with English.' These examples indicate the narrow range of phenomena teachers referred to as loss of motivation. In fact, students accomplished what they meant to: they achieved their goals. Thus, instrumental motivation led to success, but teachers felt this unfair despite the fact that their own measure of achievement was the same: passing an examination.

### Students with low motivation

Students' low motivation was indicated by 19 teachers (14%). For example: 'They choose it, as due to the high number of classes they can achieve good results with not too much effort.' In some cases teachers compared YILL students to other classes. Sometimes they were contrasted with their most able and motivated peers

at their schools: 'I find these students less motivated compared to the ones studying in the dual-language programme.'

There were attempts to find the reasons of low motivation, as the following extract shows: 'These students are either less ready or they have no definite goals.' Another typical answer shows how varied learners' motivation was within a group, again pointing to individual differences: 'it was an extremely heterogeneous group with different levels of motivation.'

A total of twenty answers (19%) report on the lack of students' motivation throughout the whole YILL. Some reports suggest that teachers did not manage to raise learners' interest, failed to find incentives and explicitly word helplessness: 'There were some students who did not study from the beginnings, and we did not know how to handle them.' Teachers often blame the lack of assessment during the YILL for low motivation emphasizing that for many students getting good grades is a source of motivation and without this they are less likely to work. This clearly indicates that external, mostly instrumental motives are expected to work well in language learning. Some of the comments are negatively worded: 'As they cannot flunk, they do not study. So, it is difficult to make them work in English, too.'

When describing students not benefiting from the YILL 55 answers reported on learners' lack of language learning motivation: 'This student was held back from achieving their goals by their lack of interest', 'S/he was not hardworking, did everything half-heartedly.' In other words, unsuccessful students were made responsible for their lagging behind: they lacked goals, will, hard work and enthusiasm, and teachers did not see how they could have changed them.

### Language learning autonomy

One of the aims of the YILL programme was to develop autonomous language learners: 60 respondents (57%) think that their students managed to achieve this aim to a great extent; 29 teachers (27%) report that the level of achieved learner autonomy significantly varied within the group, and only seven teachers responded in strong negative terms. Exact data are presented in Figure 2.

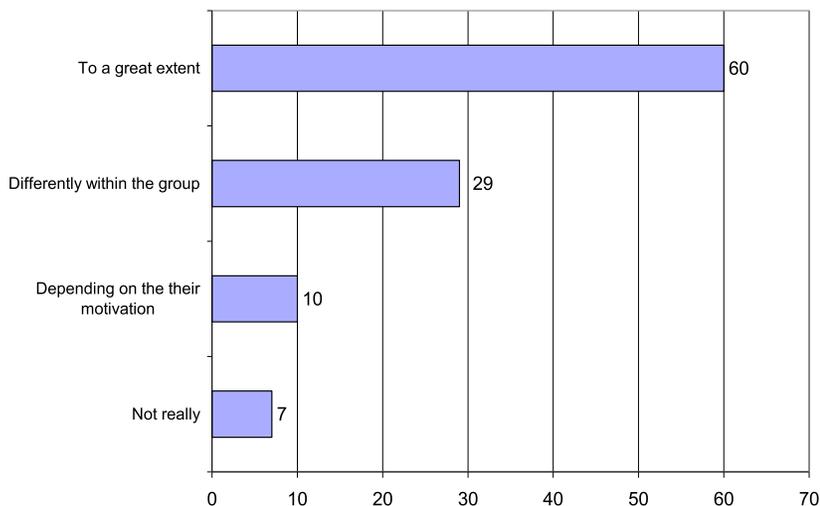


Figure 2. The extent to which students managed to develop learning strategies

### Autonomous language learners

These 60 positive answers include reflections on the improvement of learners' responsibility for their own learning in highly appropriate professional vocabulary: 'By the end of the year they became absolutely conscious, autonomous language learners responsible for their own learning.'

These teachers highlight their roles in helping students learn strategies necessary for becoming autonomous learners, as the next example shows: 'We consciously and systematically developed their ability of "learning to learn".'

Teachers suggest that this aim was achieved through the unique opportunity offered by the programme: 'Most students develop good learning strategies thanks to frequency of lessons and regular preparation'. However, 'regular preparation' in the previous example also suggests that in teachers' view, developing learning skills depends on students. For example, 'I realized while talking to them that many developed individual learning techniques]. This example suggests reflection on learning strategies through discussions with students - an important strategy helping them find their own way.

### Lack of learner autonomy

Seven teachers (6%), however, do not perceive their roles in teaching students to learn, but they claim it is the students' responsibility: 'Those who wanted to managed to acquire it'. Also, many teachers tended to associate language learning strategies with good cognitive skills: 'Being smart and intelligent students, they managed to'.

Twenty-nine answers (27%) revealed that individual differences were large in both aptitude and learner autonomy, as a rather pessimistic, but typical extract suggests: 'We can go on explaining to ones with no talent whatsoever for years; they will not be able to say anything meaningful on their own beyond some rote-learned (by repeating till bored to tears) phrases. Unfortunately, these are my experiences at secondary school, language school, with private students. It is like music. Not everyone can do it. Without talent, they get stuck.' This typical view shows that teachers attribute a significant role to aptitude and do not think that learning strategies and motivation could help less able students become proficient in a foreign language.

Motivation was also mentioned in 40 answers (38%): teachers often associated the lack of motivation with not managing to become autonomous language learners: 'The frequent passivity and undermotivation was problematic, together with the lack of commitment to individual learning'. Thus, the vicious circle has closed for many learners: strategies and motivation cannot counterbalance low aptitude.

#### Influence of decrease in number of classes

Thirty-five teachers (31%) mentioned that students' development plateaued as a result of the decrease of language classes after the YILL and students failed to supplement instruction with self-study: 'After twelve hours per week in the first year children's knowledge and speed of development receded', or 'In the years after the YILL their language learning slowed down thanks to the decreased number of classes and the vast amount of new material]. In other words, going back to mainstream education is blamed for a decline in language proficiency. Many teachers argued for maintaining increased classes over the years.

#### Bridging the gap

The YILL programme meant to help disadvantaged students to fall in line with their peers. Figure 3 presents data on teachers' beliefs on disadvantaged students' success in catching up with their peers.

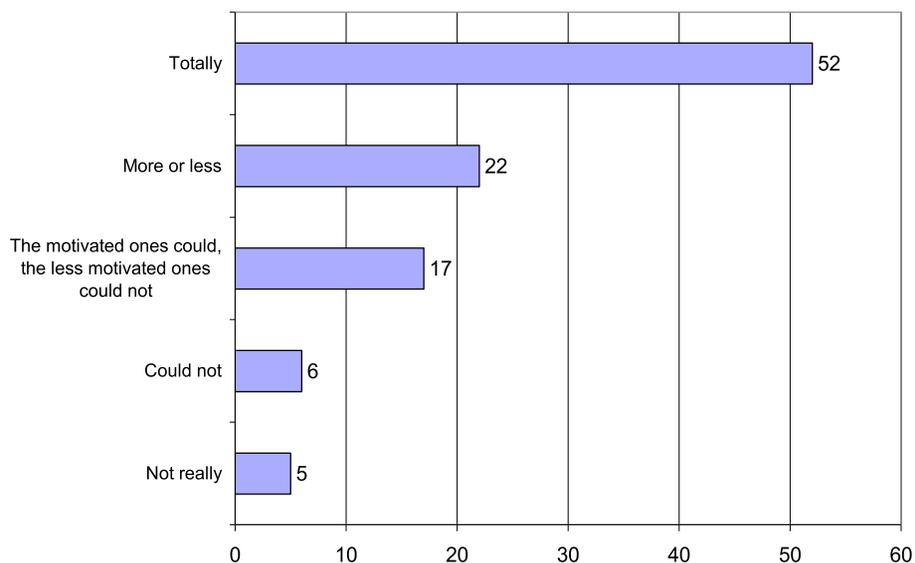


Figure 3: The extent to which students caught up with their peers

Fifty-one percent of teachers claim that this goal was achieved as a result of the YILL, whereas others' views vary: 39 emphasize the importance of motivation and other individual differences influencing students' success. Eleven teachers responded in entirely negative terms stating that at their school the YILL did not provide equal opportunities to all students. In their answers, disadvantaged students can be categorized into three groups: according to their (1) socio-economic background, (2) level of proficiency and (3) cognitive abilities.

### Socio-economic background

In teachers' views, it is possible to bridge the gap rooted in disadvantaged socio-economic background. For example, 'A village boy, interested and hardworking'. He passed the intermediate level exam and he also has the language proficiency exam.'

Motivation and effort are recurring features in the answers explaining how low SES learners managed to catch up with other students, as two examples show. 'The ones who wanted to succeed.' 'Those students who devoted the necessary amount of energy into language learning, they were enthusiastic enough and a bit hardworking, managed to fall in line entirely.]' The wordings underpin the claim that students are responsible for their own success and failure.

## Cognitive abilities and discipline problems

In their characterisations of students who could not benefit from the opportunities offered by the YILL 48 teachers mentioned learning and behaviour problems. For example, 'A student with serious dyslexia, unfortunately, could not achieve good results' or 'There were students with reading and writing problems in their mother tongue, too.' Some answers reflect that teachers were aware of students' learning difficulties, but they were not prepared for scaffolding their development and motivating them to learn. 'The main problem is to make them fall in line. They have a relatively small chance, as the high number of lessons means more rapid development.' Some students dropped out or families had to pay for extracurricular classes to allow their offspring to keep up pace with their peers: 'S/he had to be dismissed from the class as s/he had such low abilities. Some went to private lessons besides the school lessons; that's really sticky.' Thirteen teachers (11%) refused to accept the aim to provide equal opportunities. 'Parents should be made aware that the YILL can only be effective with good ability students.' It is small wonder that the programme left many low ability students behind.

## Streaming and proficiency

Speaking about the difficulties they had to face in the YILL, eleven percent of teachers mentioned the lack of streaming before the onset of the programme. Thus, varying level of proficiency also causes major challenges for teachers. Seventy-four respondents (73%) report on success in narrowing the gap between students – a major achievement. 'They managed to progress significantly.' or 'They developed a lot.' Some opinions reflect the positive influence of students with higher language proficiency on their peers: 'The weaker ones were driven by the good ones.'

## Discussion

The overall picture emerging from the answers is biased for good, but teachers perceive many problems, mostly related to students' motivation and abilities, organizational matters like streaming, and they do not seem to take responsibility for any of the critical aspects, unlike the feeling of success mostly results from students' achievements and classes they conducted with them.

According to teachers' answers, learners' language learning motivation is the key in their involvement in classes, in the improvement of their proficiency, and overall attitude towards learning. Most teachers report on instrumental motivation: they believe that the main force driving students is documented language knowledge; however, achieving this goal leads to loss of motivation. Findings suggest that teachers do not see their role in raising and maintaining motivation, but view motivation as a trait students bring to class. Hardly any reference is made to intrinsic motivation highlighting students' enjoyment of learning the language.

The analyses revealed that teachers frequently complain about individual differences as their most pressing problem, implying that they lack techniques to manage classes comprising students of varied abilities. The norm is seen as homogeneous groups, any deviation from this means a challenge. Lack of motivation is often associated with poor cognitive abilities suggesting that teachers are not always aware of the nature of learning difficulties. However, when they do mention specific problems, they use labels (dyslexic, learning difficulties).

Besides the set aims of the YILL programme, it turned out to be beneficial in other aspects, such as (1) group dynamics, (2) student-teacher relationship, and (3) teacher creativity. In their holistic evaluation of the YILL teachers emphasized that it had a favourable impact on group-cohesion and it also resulted in better cooperation among teachers working with the same class: 'The strengthening of cooperation among teachers.' Answers concerning the YILL threw light on teachers' motivation as well. They emphasized variety of tasks and activities allowing them to be more creative as a result of more time. Their creativity triggers similar attitudes in students, as teachers often describe them as 'creative and interested in various things.'

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to draw a detailed picture of how teachers view their YILL experience and in what ways they think it impacts on learners' proficiency, motivation, autonomy and group dynamics and how disadvantaged students can catch up with their peers. Our analyses show how these areas interact with one another in complex ways and outcomes in the form of examinations, the most valued achievements in teachers' and students' eyes, tend to terminate language learning motivation. As for the main reason of the YILL's existence, to provide equal opportunities for students who would not manage to develop good proficiency in a foreign language, the findings reveal controversial practices and beliefs. Teachers view streaming as the only acceptable way of managing students' individual differences and argue for gate keeping strategies in the form of filter exams. In other words, they want administrative steps instead of working with low ability or otherwise problematic students.

The YILL offers many teachers and their students a great opportunity to develop proficiency in a new language, although some students are left behind, as teachers find it hard to manage low ability and low motivation. Another important finding is that teachers are not aware of their own role in shaping language learning motivation, but expect students to be motivated as if it were a trait not influenced by classroom processes in context.

Teachers overwhelmingly thought that autonomous language learning was achieved by students as a result of the YILL; yet, individual differences were emphasized suggesting that learner autonomy varied greatly within the group, or depended on motivation. Teachers complained about fewer language classes after the YILL and reported it had a negative effect on students' proficiency and motivation, which implies that students were not able to improve outside classes.

All in all, although teachers' views show that the YILL programme is a mixed blessing, they tend to perceive it as a good opportunity to contribute to their students' language development.

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## Appendix

Translated questionnaire

What language(s) do you teach?

Number of lessons per week:

Students' level of proficiency:

How did you take part in the initial YILL class in the following four years?

Recalling the experiences of the 2004/2005 academic year what are your best memories concerning the YILL class?

How would you describe students choosing the YILL programme in your school?

To what extent do you think your students managed to achieve their goals by the end of the YILL?

How many of your students from the YILL class do you think could be expected to pass the advanced level school leaving exam in their foreign language?

How many of your YILL students do you think could not be expected to pass the advanced level school leaving exam in their foreign language?

In your view, to what extent did students lagging behind manage to fall in line with their peers?

In what respect do you think students lagging behind managed to fall in line with their peers?

According to your experiences in what respect is language learning different in a YILL class from in a regular secondary school class, from the point of view of the students?

What do you consider success in the YILL class compared to other classes?

What do you consider problematic in the YILL class compared to other classes?

What changes were made in your school based on the experiences of the first YILL class?

How did the first YILL students carry on with their studies in the following four years?

What changes would you recommend after the YILL? Why?

In your view, to what extent did students manage to learn how to learn a foreign language?

Give a short description of a student (without name) who could take advantage of the YILL during the last five years?

Give a short description of a student who could not benefit from the possibilities given by the YILL.

In your opinion, what do your colleagues and the management of your school think of the YILL?

Please share your further ideas with us concerning the evaluation of the YILL and the following four years.



# Analysis of Listening Comprehension Assessment Tasks

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## **Introduction**

Among the several variables affecting test takers' performance in listening comprehension tests the two most essential ones are undoubtedly their listening ability and the method applied in the assessment. Testing textbooks usually provide lists of testing methods or tasks that can be used to assess listening comprehension, mostly without discussing the issues of task validity or test method effect. Some of these tasks are commonly used through tradition, which very often stems from convenience, efficiency or reliability but the assumption that a task is valid just because it is widely used is certainly flawed. The issue of validity is of primary importance in testing in general. However, the unique and often stressful nature of testing listening comprehension – caused (among others) by the real-time nature of the input and the pre-determined speed of text procession – calls for the application of appropriately operationalized and valid task types even more.

In order to unambiguously interpret the differences in performance on listening comprehension tests and to identify the reasons behind the differences it is essential to examine what the task types measure, what the main facets of the tasks are and how these facets affect or might affect performance. That is why in the present study the author set the aim of analysing two task types frequently involved in measuring second language listening comprehension: multiple choice questions and completing a table. As a novel approach, retrospective interviews were applied with the purpose of exploring what effects of the task facets can be identified in the test-takers' thought processes during the task-solving procedure and how these effects might impact performance. These issues constitute the research questions of this study.

## Review of literature

As the first step of the task structure analysis, the literature was consulted to provide a general background of the two main variables of performance in testing listening comprehension: on the one hand the listening comprehension ability (what do we measure?), and on the other hand the test method (how do we measure it?).

### The listening construct

Since we are aiming at measuring listening comprehension, the starting point is answering the question: what is listening comprehension? In the testing literature there has been a move away from the concept of listening as auditory discrimination and decoding of contextualized utterances towards a “much more complex and interactive model which reflects the ability to understand authentic discourse in context” (Brindley, 1998, p.172). In spite of the wide variety of terms used in the literature to describe this construct, there seems to be a broad consensus that listening is an active rather than a passive skill and, what is more, Vandergrift (1999) declares that “listening comprehension is anything but a passive activity” (p. 168). According to Rost (1990) listening involves ‘interpretation’ rather than ‘comprehension’ because listeners do much more than just decoding the aural message; among others they are involved in hypothesis-testing and inferring (p. 82). Brown (1995) argues in a similar way stating that listening is a process by which listeners construct ‘shared mutual beliefs’ rather than ‘shared mutual knowledge’ (p. 219). Anderson and Lynch (1988) suggest the same notions in terms of metaphors, regarding listeners as ‘active model builders’ rather than ‘tape recorders’ (p.15).

The next step in defining the listening construct is to look into how ‘active model builders’ interpret, infer, test hypotheses and construct shared mutual beliefs. It is obvious that a number of different types of knowledge are involved, both linguistic knowledge (phonology, lexis, syntax, semantics, discourse structure, etc.) and non-linguistic knowledge (knowledge about the topic, about the context, general knowledge about the world, etc.). The latter categories are frequently referred to as schemata, mental structures that organize the listeners’ knowledge of the world which listeners rely on when interpreting texts. Much research has been conducted on the apparent dichotomy between two views as to how these two types of knowledge are applied by listeners or readers in text comprehension (Alderson, 2000). These views refer to the order in which the different types of knowledge are applied during listening comprehension. The bottom-up model represents the traditional view of comprehension and was typically proposed by behaviourism in the 1940s and 1950s. It assumes that the listening process takes place in a definite order, starting with the lowest level of detail (acoustic input, phonemes, etc.) and moving up to the highest (communicative situation, non-linguistic knowledge). According to the top-down model (Goodman, 1969; Smith, 1971), the reader and listener uses the schemata (non-linguistic knowledge) to comprehend a text by interpretation, prediction and hypothesis testing, that is comprehension is seen primarily as the result of applying the schemata the listener

brings to the text. Both Alderson (2000) and Buck (2001) rely on a third model of comprehension in their most comprehensive books on assessing reading and listening, respectively. They outline comprehension as the interaction of bottom-up and top-down processing and emphasize that these complex mental actions can be performed in any order, simultaneously or cyclically rather than in any fixed order. This is the interactive (Grabe, 1991) or interactive compensatory (Stanovich, 1980) model.

### Test method

Now the other major variable affecting listening test takers' performance, the method (how we measure it) will be briefly outlined based on the literature since "if we are to develop and use language tests appropriately, for the purpose for which they are intended, we must base them on clear definitions of both the abilities we wish to measure and the means by which we observe and measure these abilities." (Bachman, 1990, p. 81)

### The test task

After defining the listening construct the next step in test construction is to operationalize the construct through a series of tasks to be carried out by the test-taker. In other words, the construct is turned into actual practice by these tasks. Then, based on how testees perform on these tasks, testers can make inferences about how well testees have mastered the construct.

The testing literature is unclear as for any possible difference between the various terms referring to the procedures we need to apply when eliciting performance in testing (Alderson, 2000, p. 202). The terms 'test method', 'test technique', 'test format', 'task type' and 'task' are either used more or less synonymously or the authors state their preference and the reason behind it rather than defining these terms. In this paper I chose to use the term 'task', following Bachman and Palmer (1996), who prefer this term since "this refers directly to what the test taker is actually presented with in a language test, rather to an abstract entity" (p. 60).

The term 'task' is used variably both by language testers and language teaching methodologists. Traditionally, it is used to refer to any device for carrying out an assessment from a multiple choice item to a role-play (Chalhoub-Deville, 2001). Ellis (2003) defines assessment tasks as "devices for eliciting and evaluating communicative performances from learners in the context of language use that is meaning-focused and directed towards some specific goal" (p. 279). Test tasks are usually broken down into a series of items, the item being the part of the test that requires a scorable response from the test-taker (Buck, 2001, p. 61).

Most tests use several different task types to operationalize the construct with each individual task aiming at this construct or a part of it, but taken together the tasks have to represent the whole construct in order to achieve construct validity. Besides, by using a variety of different task types, the test is far more likely to

ensure a balanced assessment and it will usually be a fairer test, given that on the one hand all tasks have their weaknesses which are compensated for by other tasks' strengths, on the other hand each task may lean to the strength of one group of testees or another. (Brindley, 1998; Buck, 2001).

### The framework of test method facets

We have all experienced both as testers and test-takers that test performance is affected by the characteristics of the method used to elicit test performance. These characteristics, or 'facets' constitute the 'how' of language testing and are of particular importance, since it is these over which we potentially have some control. Bachman (1990) found it necessary, in order to more fully understand variation in language test performance, to develop a framework for delineating the specific facets of test methods. Bachman's (1990) Framework extended and recast several previous taxonomies incorporating the latest views and introducing new terms. He presents the Framework not as a definitive statement but rather as a guide for empirical research and a valuable tool for analysing tasks for various purposes, which will lead to the discovery of additional facets not included. Indeed, Bachman's Framework has become, together with its updated version (Bachman and Palmer, 1996) one of the most influential descriptions, which, among other scholars, both Alderson (2000) and Buck (2001) analysed, modified and applied in their books on assessing reading and listening, respectively.

In this paper, the author relies on Bachman and Palmer's (1996) Framework adapted to listening by Buck (2001, p.107). This Framework breaks down the facets of the listening test task into five main groups: characteristics of the setting, characteristics of the test rubrics, characteristics of the input, characteristics of the expected response, and relationship between the input and response.

### Description of method

#### Participants and material

The participants of the research were 6 Hungarian students from intermediate courses that the author teaches at the Budapest Business School. Since these courses lasted for a year and the author had a good insight into the students' language performance, the criterion for selecting the 6 students from the volunteers was to make sure that they represent a wide range of levels from B1 to strong B2 according to the CEFR and to avoid the issue that usually the best performers volunteer.

As the first step in the preparation of the interviews, 2 tasks representing 2 different task types were selected from *Are you listening?* (Barta, 2004), a book containing validated intermediate tasks for general listening comprehension tests. Both tasks are built on authentic texts. The first, *Depicted as an ape* is a multiple choice task and the text is an extract from a BBC radio programme on Darwin's work, private life and age. The second task, *Getting beard* is table completion

(Appendix A) and the text is part of an interview with an English mayor conducted by the author of the book about the various petitions citizens submit to him.

In addition to this, the Interview prompts (Appendix B) were compiled according to the research purposes. The pre-listening prompt was meant to be eliciting introspective comments on the task with the aim of exploring the interviewee's thought processes while reviewing the task before listening, whereas the Retrospective interview prompts were applied after listening to the sections of the texts. It was complemented by one further prompt which aimed at the cognitive processes during finalizing the answers after listening.

### Data collection

The data collection took place in a small room with good acoustics at the foreign language department of the college mostly under undisturbed, quiet circumstances in the year 2005. The interviews, each of which took 1–1.5 hours with feedback, were conducted by the author who met individually with each informant according to a mutually agreed appointment. Since the participants were native Hungarian speakers, the interviews were conducted in Hungarian in order to guarantee unhindered expression of their ideas.

Before the interview began, the author and the interviewee engaged in informal small talk in order to put the interviewee at ease and establish rapport. Then the author explained the purpose of the interview very briefly, the procedure of the interview in more detail and the Interview prompts were read and interpreted. The author illustrated retrospection on one item of a multiple choice task and the participant could rehearse on another item or a simple arithmetic task.

The procedure of the interview was the following. Before listening, the interviewee provided introspective accounts of her thoughts while reviewing and reading the task sheet. During the first listening of the text the interviewee was working on the task sheet while listening to the input. It was followed by the second listening of the text section by section: the author played a cohesive section of the text, with a pause after the section, which covered 2-4 task items each. During listening, the interviewee was working on the task sheet. When the author paused the text of the task, the interviewee verbalized their thoughts retrospectively. After the last section, the interviewees were encouraged to verbalize their thoughts introspectively while making the final decisions on the task sheet. It is to be noted that the data collection was implemented in a free interview format and the Interview prompts were used rather as guidelines for the interviewee.

### Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed by the author. The Framework of listening task characteristics was used as coding scheme where the facets comprised the coding categories. The segmented transcripts were coded by assigning

the utterances to these categories based on what test method characteristic the utterance is related to.

In this study, the Framework serves as a tool for systematically scrutinizing the protocols generated by the participants in order to get an insight into the structure and nature of the listening comprehension test tasks from the test takers' perspective. Consequently, the lessons learnt about the ways the tasks work are in the focus rather than unambiguously matching the verbalizations with the categories of the selected coding scheme. However, in order to enhance reliability in the application of this method, the segments were independently double-coded by the author and a testing expert, who compared and discussed their assignments at the end of the coding process.

## Results and discussion

The characteristics within the five main groups of the Framework will be discussed in turn below. Although all the facets are absolutely relevant as for the effects of tasks on performance, in this paper only those characteristics will be dealt with which are dependent on the task types on the one hand and were elicited by the method of retrospective interview on the other hand. The translated excerpts from the protocols are in italics, words that the interviewees say in English are in capital letters, the short clarifications added to the excerpts by the author are in brackets.

### Characteristics of the setting

These characteristics refer to the circumstances in which a test is administered; the acoustic quality of the room, the efficiency of the test administrators, the time of day the test is administered, etc. The participants didn't comment on this task feature except for one case when a participant blamed her afternoon fatigue for her worse than self-expected performance.

### Characteristics of the test rubric

These characteristics provide the structure for the test.

### Instructions

Instructions are not relevant with multiple choice tasks, based on the protocol data. The participants who mentioned the MC instructions reported exclusively that they “rarely”, “hardly ever” or “never ever” read it. This is a warning signal for item writers to beware of making any minor change to the standard MC format, e.g. picking the non-acceptable option instead of the best/right one.

There is evidence though in the protocol of how important it is to provide clear, simple and explicit instructions in case test-takers are less familiar with the

task and the instruction carries the burden of specifying what the text is about and what the test-taker is supposed to do, as in the case of completing a table. Examples 1-2 show that unfamiliar words can lead to anxiety or even to panic. This suggests that either the vocabulary level of the instructions should be slightly below that of the exam or important but difficult words in the instructions should be explained.

1 Ágnes: *The wording of the task frightened me a bit because I came across words I don't know and I felt they were very important.*

2 Andrea: (About the word 'petition') *Here is this main word, I looked at this word and said goodness me what does it mean? Later I understood but here (in the instruction) I got stuck. Later I understood it but when I first read it, it was like Greek. Black out.*

However, there are examples that students find the same instruction satisfactory:

3 Nóra: *The introductory text (instruction) helps to some extent.*

4 Szabina: *I think it is pretty unambiguous what we have to do.*

#### Time allotment

Listening test takers are usually not in control of their own speed of working and they cannot respond at a rate they feel comfortable with. Time allotment seemed to be a general problem rather than a task-specific feature. Some of the interviewees described how they lost the thread for various reasons, which could lead to getting lost completely and even giving up during doing the task. Listening comprehension test-takers are expected to follow a task while listening and their attention is or should be shared between the aural and written input continuously while listening. In example 5 the participant relates that she could follow the aural input but the attempt to share her attention between the two types of input failed and caused information breakdown.

5 Ágnes: *I understood the text for a while then I cast my eyes on the test paper and skipped what exactly happened at his age of fifty. (Task 1)*

Other participants report getting stuck in following the aural input due to lingering on an expression (example 6) or because they cannot help analysing some chunks of the aural input (example 7).

6 Ágnes: *I tend to concentrate on tiny things like DEALT WITH and I can't step further. (Task 1)*

7 Nóra: *I could catch the answer at the second listening only, because at the first listening I was slipped behind and couldn't pay attention to this part properly. It sometimes happens at listening comprehension that I get indulged in analysing certain parts and we are already at the next item. (Task 2)*

The most frequent reason for losing the thread is focusing on the previous item, which manifested itself at both tasks. Excerpts 8 and 9 are examples of this:

8 Szabina: *I couldn't catch it because my brain was still at the previous question.* (Task 1)

9 Zsuzsa: *I got stuck at the previous two items because I sometimes lag behind the text and I can't hear the next one... that is I can't perceive it.* (Task 2)

In excerpt 10 the participant describes an interesting, individual strategy how she took her time with more difficult items by scribbling all the words she heard around the item and leaving the decision-making for later. After listening to the text she selected the reply from the jotted expressions by fitting each of them in turn into the gap in the table.

10 Dóra: *I have written all the words that I heard around that item and after listening I will sort out which ones don't fit there. I wrote BENEFITTED, BENEFIT HOUSE, VOICE, PARKING PROBLEM. I would sort out by... PARKING PROBLEM will be the answer to the next item so we can exclude that from item 2. I heard house or profit or something like that... and heard voice, hubbub,... yes, VOICE means voice, not hubbub . Then it can be deleted, too. Then the reply is some BENEFIT and HOUSE that are left...* (Task 1 item 2)

Although the participant in example 10 got close to the right answer (housing benefit), test-takers shouldn't be left to turn to last resources like this. The frequency and the range of causes of losing the thread in following the aural input means a potential threat both to the reliability and the validity of the listening test, since missing some or all the subsequent items does not necessarily denote lack of comprehension. First of all, every effort should be made to produce a test that makes it easier for testees to follow both the aural and written inputs and to relate them to each other (appropriacy of the length of text and of expected response, time allowed for jotting the answer, etc.) Also, since losing the thread cannot be totally eliminated, some kind of signposting would be recommended to help testees get back into it again. This signposting can be for example structuring the task by breaking down the questions into smaller sections or including acoustically salient expressions (numbers, proper names, etc.) of the aural text in the written input. These examples are based on the author's item-writing experience, however, this issue appears to require further research.

## Scoring method

Whereas the criterion for correctness is straightforward with MC, this seemingly tiny aspect of the scoring method proved crucial in its impact on performance at Table completion. Excerpts 11-15 clearly show how vital the explicitness of criterion for correctness is, i.e. test-takers should know what constitutes a sufficient response. Otherwise they can easily lose marks if they do not know that e.g. spelling mistakes (example 11) and minimally exceeding the length of expected response (example 12) are not penalized.

11 Dóra: *I realized it was the reply and I know the word, but it didn't immediately occur to me how to spell it so I got stuck a little bit.*

12 Zsuzsa: (After looking at the sentence in the rubric: Write a maximum of 3 words in a gap.) *Well, the first one. I have just noticed that I didn't write a correct answer because I used 4 words.*

Similarly, unawareness that relevant information is required rather than exact quoting of text has the potential to distort performance. Example 13 shows how it makes Nóra uncertain about the adequacy of her answer, whereas Zsuzsa (example 14) dismisses the correct answer and constructs a completely false one.

13 Nóra: *I wrote CROSSING but I am not sure at all, because it is expected to write its quality as well... So where or for whom should crossing opportunity be ensured.*

14 Zsuzsa: *I caught CAN YOU DO SOMETHING and wrote it down. There was some CROSSING before that but I didn't catch it so I wrote this. Well, CROSSING seemed credible, that it should go here, but I couldn't understand the end of it and so much as CROSSING is not enough... that's why I wrote this.*

The following examples illustrate how this characteristic can influence risk-taking in responding strategies in general from avoiding (15) to consciously taking risk (16).

15 Szabina: *I heard something like four weeks before but I would leave it blank because I don't want to write nonsense.*

16 Andrea: *I wrote it because as teachers say there is no minus point and it might be the answer and I might have an extra score. It is more than nothing.*

Based on the findings of this research, the extent to which this facet has the potential to influence test results should warn examination boards to give appropriate information with examples about the criteria of correctness in their public test descriptions, which rarely happens in the present practice.

## Characteristics of the input

The format of multiple choice was profusely commented – praised for its straightforwardness (example 17) and the simple procedure of selection (example 18) or reproached for the reading load (example 19).

17 Dóra: *I like multiple choice much more than any visual things like picture; it is straightforward.*

18 Szabina: *It gives me lots of support that the concrete answers are given and I have to pay attention only to what refers to them.*

19 Zsuzsa: *I don't like this type of task because I have to read a lot before, while and after listening. I don't like it because it is not as easy as it seems.*

All of the interviewees resented plausible distracters and labelled them confusing, disturbing and purposefully tricky (examples 20-22).

20 Dóra: *The problem with multiple choice for me is that at least two of them are said, which are in the text (of the task) but it isn't all the same from what aspect. If somebody's proficiency is not very good, or it is good just his listening comprehension is not very good, then it is terribly confusing and he has to guess.*

21 Nóra: *It disturbed me that all the pieces of sub-information are said in the text.*

22 Ágnes: *It was tricky that they purposefully mentioned all the three options.*

The participant in example 23 concedes that recognizing a word or string of words from the written input in the spoken text is not measuring comprehension. Nevertheless, she would favour such items similarly to the other participants.

23 Andrea: *Tests are usually like that. They speak about all the possible answers because the point is for us to understand but I don't like it. I like those tests where only that one word is said, it is a good test from the student's aspect but from the teacher's... from the aspect of assessing knowledge it is not good. But I'm a student so I view it from this aspect.*

The fact that test takers expect invalid multiple choice items with lexical overlap between the correct option and the text and dummy distracters reflects more than blurred face validity and can even lead to threatening construct validity. Even more so that test-takers displayed a wide range of guesswork techniques: first impression before listening, the last bit that could be heard, looking at the ceiling and deciding, circling the longest item which was considered to work in ninety percent of the cases, etc.

The identification of the intensity of this false expectation about MC listening items is an important outcome of the study, but it seems to be beyond the test developer's authority to put it right. However, it alerts teachers to the appropriate teaching of listening comprehension and preparation for the exam.

The format of completing a table, although less familiar and more complex, seemed to provide an appropriate framework for finding the way around the

spoken text (examples 24-25), minimize reading load (example 26) and activate non-linguistic schemata beneficially (example 27).

24 Dóra: *I find this task totally understandable. It helps to systematize; it isn't a problem for me to understand it. It's simpler for me that it is arranged in a table than when I have to write everything. There is a stable point I can rely on.*

25 Szabina: *This table format is more understandable because the table summarizes it better than when I have to write on my own. I think it is easier to follow the text, too.*

26 Nóra: *The table is quite well built up as there are lots of data in it so you could understand the task even without reading the instruction.*

27 Nóra: *Here it was completed in the box that you have to concentrate on what those things are that can be improved in a park and than you pay direct attention to it. Here logics helped too that you have to write down that trees should be planted and playgrounds should be built for children, because these were the things that fit here. (Items 9-10)*

However, the data of the protocol also demonstrate that during the pre-listening task review it requires concentration to grasp the system of how the information is supposed to be transferred, as in example 28. Furthermore, during the task preview a formal detail like presenting two tables in one task may disturb the test-taker since there is no indication of how to handle them during the task-solving, which definitely stems from a deficiency in the instructions (example 29).

28 Andrea: *The table format... No, it's not clear how it's arranged. Maybe while listening... The main titles (of the table)... yes, they make it more understandable. I skipped the main titles again.*

29 Agnes: *The table made it clear what the task wants me to do, but as I can see two tables in front of me, one of them is about the content of the petition, but I don't know if I have to fill this in simultaneously with the other little table which contains the data concerning the acceptance of petitions if I interpret it well. It is disturbing a little bit. It's not clear to me if I have to deal with both immediately while listening.*

Similarly, the systematisation method of information of the task does not always coincide with that of the test-taker, which might confuse them while listening and during the post-listening decision-making, too, as happened in example 30.

30 Zsuzsa: *The eighth item... I don't know, maybe I have to write there that it (the park) should be kept clean or does it belong to the REQUEST? That is to keep it clean, to plant trees and perhaps some playground was also mentioned that children would need that but I'm not sure. Well, I would write keeping clean here (item 8 in Complaint column) but it is involved in NEGLECTED I think... So I didn't know if I should write it there as a separate point.*

Examples 28-30 confirm that every detail of a non-standard information transfer task is crucial from the concept of information rearrangement to the presentation and layout of the task, which all have to be clear and unambiguous before and while listening as well.

## Characteristics of the expected response

This facet exerts a crucial effect on the performance, especially when constructed responses are elicited as in the case when testees are expected to complete a table. It is important that the criteria for scoring (evaluation for correctness, appropriacy, expected length of response, penalization, etc) are clearly defined and consistently applied by markers. However, since in this paper the facets are approached from the aspect of the data provided by the interviewees, the emphasis is on the explicitness for the test takers of the criteria for scoring (see above) rather than on the criteria for scoring.

## Relationship between the input and response

Data on the directness of relationship between the input and response were elicited within the pre-listening interview, which took place after the interviewee read and interpreted the task, but this issue emerged automatically during retro-spection as well. The purpose of this interview was to investigate the passage dependency of the two task types, i.e. if the successful completion of the task is dependent on comprehension of the text. These results showed that the effects of this facet depend on the topic of the passage and how it is exploited in the task rather than on the task type, since both tasks triggered the resourcefulness of the test-takers both while pre-reviewing the task and in finding ways to compensate for a lack of comprehension. In contrast, exploiting possible weaknesses of passage dependency showed a high degree of idiosyncrasy with refusal to probe the task during the pre-view at one end of the scale (example 31) and at the other end tale-weaving based on stereotypes about the modest, reserved scholar and his pretty, outgoing wife (example 32).

31 Zsuzsa: *To guess in advance...not really. I haven't thought about it, my purpose was to skim it quickly to have an overview but I didn't think what was predictable.*

32 Szabina: *It seems I heard that the wife wanted to change Darwin's attitude to things, because I think I understood that this wife was absolutely beautiful and wanted to go out or dine out in the evenings but her husband didn't like the crowd and would have preferred to stay at home.*

The following two excerpts about finding the answer to where the petitions are accepted (task 1 item 13) show another aspect of passage dependency:

33 Ágnes: *The place... I couldn't catch it but I've got an idea. It is from French, *mairie* (French word) and maybe it's the mayor's office? To tell the truth I don't know the mayor's office in English but I think they must be similar a little bit.*

34 Dóra: *I couldn't understand it but I could write something I work out by logics and fits there. It must be an official place I would write something like self-government. In English? I don't know it in English, but I wouldn't leave it blank. I would write OFFICIAL dot dot dot PLACE. To tell the truth I don't know this word and I would try to find a word in my poor vocabulary that fits there in my opinion because I'm sure it's*

*an official place, self-government or something like that. Yes! Mayor..., it must be mayor's office...In English... MAJORITY? I think there is a word MAJORITY.*

Examples 33-34 point out a big lesson learnt from the analysis of this facet; namely that retrospective interviews can detect invalid items that could get through the usual validation process carried out by other methods. The excerpts undoubtedly reveal that this item lacks passage dependency but measures vocabulary very well, which naturally does not make it a valid item in a listening comprehension test.

## Conclusion

“Of the many factors that can affect test performance..., the characteristics of the test task are the only factors directly under our control as test developers. We therefore believe that attempting to control the test task characteristics by design provides the most useful and practical means for maximizing the usefulness of our tests for their intended purposes” (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 47). The author of this study couldn't agree more with these words and trusts that the exploitation of the retrospective interviews for looking into the characteristics of two tasks from the task-takers' aspect has contributed to understanding one of the major variables of performance. Furthermore, in addition to learning more about the characteristics of test tasks, it is hoped that the numerous lessons concluded from what test-takers gave account of can be utilised in improving listening comprehension tests at various levels, from task validation to elaborating tiny details of an item.

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## Appendix A

### Task 2

#### Getting heard

Lambeth is one of the biggest boroughs of London. Stephen Bourne, the Mayor of Lambeth will talk about the petitions that various communities put in to him after collecting the necessary number of signatures. While listening, fill in the boxes of the following tables according to what he says. Write a maximum of 3 words in a gap. There is one example (0) at the beginning.

The contents of petitions		
Problem area	Complaint	Request
A road	.....Lots of accidents (Example)..... (0)	(Proper) crossing .....(1)
Housing benefit .....(2)	Distress	<del>.....</del>
Parking problems .....(3)	Inconvenience caused by people driving from outside London	<del>.....</del>
Library	a) Not having certain books .....(4) b) closed / closing .....(5)	<del>.....</del>
School .....(6)	Vandalism	<del>.....</del>
Open space / Park (area) .....(7)	a) Neglected b) Not kept clean .....(8)	Things should be made better: a) More trees (planted) .....(9) b) .....(10)

Better (children's) playground

The acceptance of petitions	
Hours:	..... 10 - 12 .....(11)
Days:	..... Mondays .....(12) (Except for public holidays)
Place:	..... Town Hall / Mayor's parlour .....(13)
Document given to petitioners:	..... (official) (Mayor's) receipt .....(14)

Barta, É. (2004). *Are you listening?* Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó.

## Appendix B

Interview prompts (Translation from Hungarian)

Pre-listening prompt

Please verbalize all your thoughts you have while looking at/reading the task before the listening.

Retrospective interview prompts

Please, as much as you can remember verbalize what thoughts you had while listening to the text and answering the item.

Guidelines:

-  What made you give that answer? / What helped you in answering the question? (e. g.: understanding words or grammar, context, the situation suggested it, excluded improbable answers, based on logics, anything else)
-  What other replies did you consider and why did you discard it?
-  What answer did you definitely exclude as totally impossible?
-  What made you uncertain about the reply? What disturbed you? (e. g.: you found something unambiguous, the speed of text, anything else)

Post-listening prompt

Please verbalize all your thoughts you have while finalizing your answers after the second listening to the text.

# Students' Perceptions About their Preparedness for Undergraduate Studies of English

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## **Introduction**

In the last years, as enrollment in institutions of higher education has increased, problems concerning academic achievement have grown proportionally. This is not a local, but a world-wide tendency, which has also affected Hungary, especially after the introduction of the Bologna system in many fields of study in the year 2006. This shift from the 4-year college and the 5-year university level education in the arts and sciences to a 3-year bachelor and an extra 2-year masters program brought with it problems that are showing only now, as the system is being introduced. First, due to the practically open access of students to the BA level programs, there is a general feeling among instructors that the students' level of preparation has been dropping. There is a great debate whether we should lower the standards to help weaker students stay in higher education or lose those who are lacking the academic preparation required for success. Second, while universities are struggling between elite and mass education, they are often forced to accept and keep even the less prepared students, as institutional funding is based on student numbers (McNay, 2006). Third, as the new curricula are in their first years of implementation, uncertainties are visible from the parents', the students', the instructors', and the job market's side in interpreting the content and the value of the degrees students are to earn.

This paper investigates the case of English and American Studies majors and minors at the Faculty of Arts of one of the leading universities in Hungary. Overall, many students seem to struggle with the demands of their university studies and fail to successfully fulfill even the first-year requirements. In the next sections I shall provide a brief background to some of the contributing factors on which empirical research has been carried out: academic literacy demands of a foreign language medium education, the difficulties students face when entering university, and finally their language skills, as well as their performance at courses and exams. Then, in order to understand whether students themselves have realistic goals for their studies and what their beliefs are regarding their ability to follow courses, questionnaire data will be explored. The findings of this study should help instruc-

tors, as well as supervisors, in understanding student performance and in helping students participate fully and successfully in the intellectual life of the university.

## Background

Newman (2001) compares the academic achievement of undergraduate students to that of a game. Accordingly, from the students' perspective, achievement involves the finding and processing of the course content, interpreting the requirements presented by each instructor, as well as understanding the rules and tasks that vary from class to class. This game-like view implies that learning is not the only reason for studying from the students' point of view, and that the immediate goal is rather the surviving of the courses with a passing grade. Only skillful students are able to recognize the demands of their studies and modify strategies accordingly. We can conclude that clear goals, good skills and good learning strategies are essential for academic achievement.

Many language majors and minors in Hungary can also be considered players of an academic achievement game. However, I believe that not everyone possesses the above skills and strategies necessary for academic success. The following sections will provide a brief overview of what we know about the academic demands of the curriculum and the education system as well as the language and study skills of this student population.

### Academic literacy demands in an L2 medium higher education for first-year undergraduate students

Academic literacy is a term used in a variety of ways in the literature, but it most often refers to the reading and writing done in school. For this study I will adopt a broader understanding of the term that goes beyond the ability to read and write in the target language. Academic literacy demands, in the case of the student population in question, will be understood as the needs and challenges they face when adapting to a language and discourse which is specific to their discipline area, namely English or American Studies. Academic literacy includes, above all, the ability to understand main points in different genres, in both written texts and oral presentations, to take notes in classes, to study from these notes, to ask and answer questions and to discuss problems. Most first-year students of English meet a discourse community that is foreign to them for two main reasons: first, they undergo a shift towards a different form of education, and second, the courses of their major or minor are held in English, compared to the L1 medium education in secondary school.

As for the first reason, studies have shown that the greatest risk of retention is seen in the first year of studies in higher education even when language skills are not contributing factors. Crosling *et al.* (2008) and Moxley *et al.* (2001), for example, among the possible reasons for high drop-out rate list personal factors, lack of support, financial issues, problems with integration, timetable and inadequate pre-

course information and guidance. Smith (2003) and Marland (2003) also point to the fact that adolescents are unsure about the field to choose and what the differences are between a school subject and an academic field with a similar name. If, for these reasons, students upon entering university find themselves in a major or minor by chance, they are unlikely to successfully function in the new academic environment.

As many of the first-year students have little or no experience in studying at tertiary level and have vague ideas concerning the academic content of the chosen field, they may also face unexpected study-related demands in the new academic environment (Édes, 2009). On a daily basis they often find it very challenging to be left on their own to complete assignments, prepare for exams, learn new study skills and understand what the expectations of the instructors are. Students need to learn to identify important points in lectures held in English, to find an adequate format for note-taking, and to do substantial amounts of course-related reading on their own. This implies that students should be active participants in their own learning process. However, this idea is new for most students in Hungary, as in secondary school they are still too often given materials to memorize rather than to analyze; therefore, they are used to being viewers rather than participants of the teaching/learning process.

Adjustment problems to the new discourse community for first-year students of English are also mainly contributable to the shift from an exclusively L1 medium education to a predominantly L2 medium education. For most of them the only form of formal schooling in English has been the language classes in elementary and secondary schools. While in their first-year of English Studies, undergraduates are required to complete language courses targeted to improve all four language skills (which may be similar to their earlier English classes), they also have content courses in both small-group seminars and large-group lectures on linguistics, literature and culture. The lack of academic skills and the inadequate preparation for the chosen field are risk factors for all students, but for those who carry out their studies in an L2 the difficulties are multiplied.

We can voice the concerns listed above mainly based on anecdotal evidence and everyday teaching practice, as there is limited larger-scale empirical data on Hungarian English majors' (especially first-year students') language skills, goals, or achievement problems (Horváth, 2001; Nagy & Nikolov, 2007; Doró, 2008, 2009c; Kormos, Csizér, Menyhárt & Török, 2008). It is possible to compare the Hungarian students' case to those discussed in international studies, namely the immigrant or international students in US community colleges or in institutions of higher education in other English-speaking countries (Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999; Rosenthal, 2000; Curry, 2004; Leki, 2007). Ramsay Barker and Jones (1999), for example, compared the experience of first-year international and local students at an Australian university and found that international students had difficulties understanding lecturers and tutors mainly because of the vocabulary content and speed of input. These two factors have been found to be sources of difficulty also for Hungarian students, especially in large lecture halls where there is no immediate exchange of feedback between students and instructors (Doró, 2009b).

As has been pointed out in the introduction, in the existing Bologna system in Hungary admittance to BA level tertiary education is calculated on the basis of

academic work done in secondary school. Preparedness for tertiary education in an L2 is not directly measured at an entrance exam, although it needs to be pointed out that secondary school foreign language achievement in itself is not a good indicator of tertiary level academic literacy or a guarantee for success in a foreign language major. It is often the case even among students with really advanced general language proficiency that they struggle through their courses as they find the technical language too difficult, the content too abstract or the course demands too high. Pre-university information should be clearer to students regarding the academic content and nature of the programs, as students realize quite late that the BA level tertiary education is neither a language school nor an informal forum of exchange of ideas on English-related topics, moreover, it does not provide an easy access to a degree for those who speak English.

### Language skills of first-year students of English

It has been discussed so far that the achievement of English majors and minors whose native language is not English is affected by their English proficiency level, study skills, educational background, goals, motivations, plus the academic strategies that balance for the lack of any of these factors. Language proficiency, above all, seems to be a crucial point in the academic achievement process. My teaching experience with Hungarian students suggests that good language proficiency in itself is not sufficient to declare a student prepared for academic studies in L2, but it is an indispensable factor without which academic achievement is close to impossible. Many students seem to arrive at the university with the conviction that their English proficiency level is adequate for their studies, as their secondary school grades or their ability to communicate with friends in the target language make them believe so.

Course grades and end-of-the-year exam results are general indicators of students' achievement; however, they fail to show what the starting point is or how much knowledge and what skills and strategies are gained throughout the semesters. For this reason, at the University of Szeged incoming students' language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge are tested upon their entry to the BA English program by using the Oxford Placement Test and the Vocabulary Levels Test. Although most of these data have remained for internal use, they provide an excellent source of feedback both for instructors and students. The findings of the research that I myself have carried out with students at the University of Szeged concerning their vocabulary knowledge indicate that the majority of the first-year students do not have the minimal vocabulary knowledge necessary for reading academic texts in English. This vocabulary threshold level for them can be defined as the knowledge of the first 3,000 most frequent English word families, the academic word list and the technical vocabulary related to the fields they study (see Doró, 2008, 2009b, 2009c). Similar results of insufficient vocabulary size of first-year students have been registered by Lehmann (2006, 2007) at another Hungarian university. Moreover, the study carried out by Nagy and Nikolov (2007) has pointed out that many first-year students of English lack the willingness to communicate in class. It has also been empirically documented that students read very

little in English, both with academic and personal aims, and they engage in limited written text production during their studies (Doró, 2008). These factors may directly effect students' academic achievement, as they slow them down in their progress.

The above findings are disturbing if we take into account the fact that many foreign language majors and minors have years of exposure to English in educational environments before enrolling in a university. Therefore, they often believe that good grades in secondary school provide them with language skills necessary for L2 medium tertiary education and ensure their success at the university. However, there is no guarantee that in a few months time students' language and general academic skills develop to the level that makes them able to participate in courses and receive passing grades.

Another factor that needs to be pointed out is that Hungarian students are rarely offered remedial courses in academic reading and writing, unlike ESL learners enrolled in colleges and universities in English-speaking countries (Curry, 2004; Newman, 2001; Melles, Millar, Morton & Fegan, 2005). English for academic purposes classes in the BA level English programs in Hungary are limited in number and are not offered as a form of preparation for academic studies in the L2. They are rather part of the second- and third-year syllabi and are offered parallel to content courses. Therefore, many students, especially in their first year, are required to follow courses in the target language while they have inadequate linguistic and content area knowledge.

## **The study**

The previous sections have raised a number of concerns relative to the degree of success in the integration of first-year students into English BA programs that offer great challenges to them, many of which they are not prepared for. Therefore, they often end up playing a survival game of academic achievement which focuses on the basic survival of each course and exam with a passing grade rather than helping them integrate into an academic discourse community with advanced language and study skills as well as content knowledge. The concerns are twofold: First, how can we, instructors and course designers pinpoint the core problems that students face? Moreover, what are the problems that we are able and should be concerned with in order to help students? Second, what are the students' point of view, expectation and concerns in the process of becoming tertiary level students in their chosen field of studies? In order to fully answer the first questions, it is also crucial to explore the second aspect. This study will focus on some points of this second aspect, because we need an understanding of the students' goals and their perception about their own abilities. If student expectations are not clear or do not match those of their instructors, or if they do not have a realistic picture of their skills and abilities, we can expect that the transition from secondary to tertiary education is even more problematic and less smooth.

## Methods

As has been discussed above, I was primarily interested in why first-year students had chosen English or American Studies and how prepared they felt for their undergraduate studies of English at a Hungarian university. Since the English program in this institution is almost identical for first-year English and American Studies students, they were treated as one student population. Similarly, majors and minors were grouped together, as the first-year program and the general requirements are very similar for both groups.

A questionnaire on students' perception, expectations and course-related experience was administered to 126 first-year students of English or American Studies at the University of Szeged in October 2008, at the end of the second month in the given academic year. This includes approximately 90% of the first-year students, and, therefore, can be viewed as fairly representative of the student population in question. To ensure student participation, the questionnaire was filled at the end of a mandatory seminar, in small groups, supervised by the instructors. Answers were given anonymously.

The questionnaire included both general and course-specific questions. For the purpose of this study, only the introductory part of the research instrument will be closely examined, the course-specific questions have been discussed in a previous study and will be referred to only for comparison (Doró, 2009c). The introductory part of the questionnaire included three questions and three statements in Hungarian. The English translation of the first three questions is as follows:

1. Why did you choose English (or American) studies?
2. How prepared did you feel, in terms of language proficiency, for your studies of English before starting the program?
3. How prepared do you feel now, in terms of language proficiency, for your studies of English?

The first question was open-ended in order not to influence the respondents' answers with previously stated categories. Students were free to give one or more reasons. With the second and third questions students were prompted about their self-judgment of language proficiency, whether they had felt it adequate for their studies of English before they started the BA program and whether this had changed after the first two months spent with course work. Students had to rate themselves on a Likert scale ranging between 1 and 4, one referring to 'serious language problems' and 4 described as 'fully adequate language skills'.

In the introductory part of the questionnaire students also had to respond to three statements and choose from the options offered. These statements were the following:

1. Usually I can follow the information presented in the English courses.
2. The information presented in the English courses is new to me.
3. The English program corresponds to my expectations.

For the first two statements respondents were offered the following four answers: 'always', 'usually yes', 'usually not' and 'never'. Regarding the last statement students could choose between 'not at all', 'partly' and 'fully'.

Moreover, students were asked to indicate their Oxford Placement Test result that they had taken a few weeks earlier. This was done to monitor a possible gap between their language proficiency measured by a test and the language preparedness judged by themselves as adequate or not for their studies. 107 students provided their placement test score (the remaining 19 students had most probably not taken the test). Scores range between 35% and 88%, with a 63.31% mean. This suggests that many students could be identified as 'at risk' regarding their general English proficiency level and are unlikely to succeed in the academic achievement process. For all students starting their studies of English a minimum score of 80% on this test would be desirable, which can be interpreted as a good knowledge of the basic grammar rules of the language. However, only five of the 107 students scored above this threshold level. Based on these test results, we can expect students to meet great difficulties while trying to engage in meaningful information exchange during their studies.

## Results and discussion

Answers given to the first question regarding the reasons for choosing English or American Studies could be grouped into ten main categories that are shown in Table 1.

Students in some cases provided two distinct reasons; in this case the two answers were counted and entered into the table separately. For this reason the overall number of responses does not equal the number of participants. However, it was not taken into consideration whether the specific answers were listed as first or second reasons, because the order seemed to carry no significant meaning for the overall results. It needs to be noted, however, that in many cases the actual answers were worded slightly differently, but not to the point of distorting the grouping-based results. Of the 126 students, 44 (35%) indicated answers belonging to the 'I like English' category, followed by future career goals written by 24 students (19%). The English as a favorite school subject type answers (19 students, 15.1%), the desire to improve English proficiency (18 students, 14.3%), the interest in culture (16 students, 12.7%) or languages in general (12 answers, 9.5%) also came up relatively frequently. Only two students (1.6%) were motivated to choose this field of studies based on previous stays abroad. All these reasons seem to be very general, and could have oriented students towards other fields of studies. Only 8 respondents (6.4%) indicated the wish to become English teachers, for which the BA degree is a prerequisite. An additional 9 students (7.2%) answered that they would like to become translators, for which an English BA is only the very first step, something that students are often not aware of. Moreover, seven students (5.6%) were unable or unwilling to indicate a good reason for choosing this field and nine (7.2%) found it a forced choice. Answers in this last category included, for example, the non-acceptance to other programs, the seemingly no chances of getting a degree in other fields or no better career goals.

Table 1: Reasons given for choosing English or American studies

Main types of reason	Number of Percentage	
	students	points
I am interested in languages.	12	9.5
I like English.	44	35
I would like to improve my English proficiency.	18	14.3
I am interested in the culture of English-speaking countries.	16	12.7
This was my strongest/favorite school subject. / This is a language I have studied previously.	19	15.1
It seemed a good choice.	16	12.7
I would like to become an English teacher.	8	6.4
I would like to become an interpreter/translator.	9	7.2
In the future I will need English (for my job).	24	19
Previous stay in a foreign country.	2	1.6
Forced choice.	9	7.2
No answer	7	5.6

These answers seem to support the general concerns voiced in the previous sections that many students start their studies of English with vague, unclear or unrealistic goals. With regard to the last statement concerning the possible mismatch between students' expectation and first experience, we can note that only 39 students (31%) claimed that their studies fully matched their expectation. An additional 70 students (55.6%) indicated that what they experienced during the first two months of their studies partly matched their expectation. To summarize, only one-third of the students found what they had expected to find in their studies. This can partly be explained by their lack of information concerning the English program or their inability to fulfill the requirements.

The next two questions of the questionnaire focused on students' perception of their language proficiency level, before and after admission to the university. Although, as already mentioned, we would expect an advanced proficiency level from undergraduates entering university as English or American Studies majors and minors, we found that only five of 107 respondents scored above 80 % on the Oxford Placement Test. This would imply that students themselves feel the need for better language skills, a basis for succeeding in their student career. Answers given to these two questions, however, do not support these expectations. As summarized in Table 2, half of the students, upon their entry to the English program, believed to have good language skills and expected to face few problems caused by their language proficiency level. An additional 8.7 % felt to have fully adequate language skills. All remaining students expected to encounter some language problems, but only one of them expected serious difficulties in the English program due to inadequate language proficiency level. It is, therefore, clear from these data that many students overestimated their preparedness for their studies, an issue that is often raised during informal feedback sessions given to students on their course performance.

Another interesting aspect to analyze is whether students' judgment changes and becomes more realistic as they gain some academic experience. The answers students gave approximately two months after enrolling in the BA program indicate that there was some shift toward the lower scores. Overall, students felt less prepared for their studies after having faced the first challenges. A closer examination, however, reveals that 79 students (62.7%) were not influenced in their judgment by the introductory months, eleven (8.7%) even felt more prepared than previously. For one of these students this meant moving up two points on the scale. Not surprisingly, however, there were students who modified their answers and moved one or two points down on the scale: 32 respondents (27%) lowered their judgment by one point and two (1.6%) by two points. These last students changed their answer from the 'good language skills, few expected problems' to the 'serious language problems' category. It needs to be underlined, however, that in light of the test results and course work, many more students should have lowered their scores. The results seem to support instructors' general feeling that students are often unable to identify and foresee the problems that they will face while progressing through their years of studies.

Table 2: Students' perceived language proficiency level and preparedness for university studies of English

Answer	Before starting university		In the second month of the first semester	
	Number of students	Percentage points	Number of students	Percentage points
1	1	0.8	7	5.6
2	51	40.5	61	48.4
3	63	50	51	40.5
4	11	8.7	7	5.6
Total	126	100	126	100

1 = serious language problems

2 = not very good language skills which causes problems

3 = good language skills, few problems

4 = fully adequate language skills

Answers given to the remaining two statements further indicate a mismatch between students' self-judgment and reality: 37.3% of the students believed that they could always follow the courses held in English, and an additional 57.9% claimed that language-wise they were usually able to understand the instructors. This is a much better picture than what the same students gave in the second part of the questionnaire when asked about specific seminars and lectures (Doró, 2009b, 2009c). This result might also support my frequent concern that students are often unable to understand how much they do not understand of the course material. Difficulties deriving mainly from language problems are also too often paired up with difficulties deriving from the lack of content knowledge: 64.3% of

the students claimed that the information presented in class was usually new to them, while the remaining 33.3% claimed that it was usually not.

Findings from the present study suggest that many students in question believe that their language skills are adequate for carrying out undergraduate studies in an L2-dominant academic environment. However, their level of academic literacy even in their mother tongue might not be high enough to experience a smooth shift from secondary to tertiary level education. The simple fact of having progressed through secondary education with good enough English grades and having been accepted for undergraduate studies in English can create the impression that their skills are adequate enough for their chosen field. They have little reason to believe differently, especially if they do not know what to expect from their tertiary level education or if they are unable to form realistic judgments about their abilities, skills and program requirements.

## **Conclusion**

This article has demonstrated that first-year students of English often have little preparation for overcoming the challenges they face while learning the academic language and content of the courses. They seem to play a daily survival game of academic achievement, but many are unsuccessful players because too often they do not only miss clear goals, lack language and study skills, but are also unable to evaluate their own abilities and failures. This complexity makes teaching and learning academic literacy a great challenge and often presents a frustrating point for both undergraduate students and instructors. Support should be given to students in becoming academically literate and navigate through the challenges of higher education. This should be done not only through teaching class content, but also through awareness-raising, in order to assist students in finding the roles they themselves should play in their own academic achievement. The research instrument applied in this study was very general in nature; therefore, it could be used with other similar student populations. The information gained from the data can serve instructors' need to learn more about their students' backgrounds, understand their aspirations, and build on their (lack of) competencies when designing the syllabus or reacting to student failures.

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# Preconceptions Are Not Likely to Change Overnight: A Study on Students' Understanding of Negotiation in Two University Classes

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## **Introduction**

Cooperation is important in every segment of our lives, and academic circumstances are no exception to this. University students experience the need for cooperation day by day: they have to share the few copies of frequently requested books from the library, enter the queue to wait for registrar's office administration, and discuss which daily menu to split, which pizza to halve in the canteen. Occasionally, they also need to cooperate with their instructors: some require arranging office-hour meetings via email, and at times unforeseen absences can be redeemed by take-home tasks. In cases of cancelled classes students and instructors decide together the time for a supplement class. Although it is evident that mutual assistance is essential in academia, discussion and joint decision making are not frequent practices in Hungarian higher education.

After giving an account of the relevant literature, the paper presents the findings of an empirical study on negotiation in two university classrooms. The study attempts to get deeper insight into students' relation to and understanding of negotiation at university. Results reveal that the situation is indeed more complex than it might seem first and socialization into a certain learning/teaching context has greater impact on students' perception than enthusiasm and positive learning experiences.

## **Theoretical background**

Negotiation may be best described as a process of joint decision making through discussion between the parties involved. A great number of studies agree that negotiation is beneficial in improving learners' autonomy (Bloor & Bloor, 1988;

Breen 1987a, 1987b, Nunan, 1996) while other authors emphasize its motivational force (Martyn, 2000; Nikolov, 1991).

Nikolov (2000) has demonstrated that negotiation is feasible in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in a Hungarian primary school context. In a different study Nikolov (1991) shows the motivating force of negotiation and concludes that students 'appreciated the fact that they were always involved in decision-making' (Nikolov, 1991, p. 45). Furthermore, she emphasizes that in her view students 'became self-confident and responsible for their own learning' (Nikolov, 2000, p. 93). A different benefit of negotiation is highlighted by Ribé who states that in classes where activities are negotiated students are more willing to carry out work, because it is 'totally self-generated' (2000, p. 63). Smith (2000) comes to the conclusion that an important feature of negotiation is that as a result learners have a more appropriate picture of themselves, they become aware of their strengths and weaknesses, since they 'have to face their own reality as learners' (2000, p. 60).

Researchers tend to agree that in the changing academic world prescribed syllabi no longer suit learners' needs. Hall (no date) views the negotiated syllabus as the product of social interaction: in his understanding, making joint decisions concerning the teaching/learning context 'involves not only asking learners their views and trying to incorporate them, but a whole process of teacher-learner negotiation and renegotiation of the syllabus throughout the course of lessons' (p. 14). The same social aspect is also highlighted by Nikolov (2000) who described negotiation in terms of cooperation in class. However, as Bloor & Bloor claim, in certain contexts negotiation may be perceived as disturbing by students who are not used to it (1988, p. 72). This same view is echoed by Clarke (1991), who questions whether negotiation is feasible in tertiary education, due to the large number of students attending courses.

## **Background to study**

I started teaching Listening and Speaking Skills seminars at the University of Pécs in the spring of 2009. To experiment with negotiation I decided to involve students in planning the syllabus and designing the course itself. At the beginning I had no idea if this way of teaching would work or not. I knew from different studies of Nikolov (1991, 2000) how negotiation worked in a primary school and I was also aware of the possible setbacks. I started teaching in a way that I involved my students in decision making and always asked their opinion about course-related subjects, which generated a friendly atmosphere in class and out of it. This evolved into corridor-discussions before and after classes, during which I tried to find out my students ideas concerning the way I was teaching. These talks, though never tape-recorded, can be seen as the quasi piloting phase of the research, since it was this time when my underlying questions, that later on formed the basis of the questionnaire, emerged. First I inquired about students' opinion concerning the classes, later on I tried to focus on different issues such as syllabus design, teacher-role, student-role, good learning and good teaching. At some points I took notes,

but apart from this I held it important to keep these discussions rather informal and thus relaxed.

The main part of the study was conducted in a formal way at the Institute of English Studies, University of Pécs, Hungary. Actual data collection took place during the spring term of the academic year 2008/2009.

## Method

Employing both qualitative and quantitative means of data collection this empirical study follows the tradition of mixed-method research. According to Dörnyei's definition, mixed-method studies 'integrate the two approaches [i.e. quantitative and qualitative] at one or more stages of the research process' (2007, p. 163) with the aim of achieving 'a fuller understanding of a target phenomenon' (p. 164).

Mixed-method research has been in the centre of attention recently, as Cresswell notes: 'with the development and perceived legitimacy of both qualitative and quantitative research in the social and human sciences, mixed method research, employing the data collection associated with both forms of data, is expanding' (2003, p. 208).

Following Johnson and Christensen's typology of method constituents (cited in Dörnyei, 2007, p. 169) this study employs a 'QUAN→QUAL' approach, where the capitalized abbreviations mean that regarding dominance neither constituent is of lower importance, while the arrow indicates the sequence of data collection. A quantitative instrument was used to map participants' ideas and preconceptions in connection with learning/teaching. Answers to the qualitative instruments, on the other hand, made it possible to in-depth understand the way participants shaped their beliefs and developed their schemes on the basis of their previous conceptions and experiences.

## Research questions

The research questions addressed in this study are exploratory and were formulated on the basis of the quasi piloting phase. The research question originally motivating this study was:

1. How do students relate to negotiation?

However, as a result of the inconsistencies I encountered during data collection I broadened my inquiry and targeted to understand the nature of controversy between students' preconceptions and their actual experiences. Thus, a second research question was also addressed:

2. What may be the reason behind students' conflicting answers?

## Research participants

This study was conducted on a convenience sample of 30 first-year BA students of English studies at the University of Pécs. Participants were all native speakers of Hungarian and considered English their second language (L2). Their ages varied between 18-24. They were all attending a compulsory seminar course, Listening and Speaking Skills. Research participants were asked to cooperate and fill in a questionnaire, and they all agreed to do so. Out of the 30 participants answering the questionnaire six were randomly selected to take part in a focus-group interview, and they all consented.

## Data collection instruments and procedures

Data collection had three subsequent phases over a period of six weeks. Data were collected through various instruments: first, all the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire. My purpose with this was to establish a Negotiation Acceptance Index (NAI) for each participant. This concept denotes to what extent participants find negotiation an acceptable practice. The value of NAI is calculated as follows: twenty statements concerning different aspects of negotiation were listed in the questionnaire and with the help of a 5-point Likert-scale participants had to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statements. In cases of statements declaring negotiation a positive practice the 'totally agree' answer equaled 5 points, while in cases of reversed statements the 'totally disagree' answer meant 5 points (reversed statements are italicized in Table 1). Thus, participants' NAI possibly varied between 20-100, the lower meaning more negative attitude to negotiation, the higher more positive. I also calculated the average of answers given to different statements, and this way was able to find out what participants' actually liked or disliked. The language of the questionnaire was Hungarian. A copy of the questionnaire is enclosed in Appendix A.

During the second phase, six students were asked to take part in a focus-group interview. The interview was administered in Hungarian, the duration of it was 47 minutes. By the time the interview was conducted, I had already established a very good relationship with my students, so they were completely relaxed while answering my questions.

Finally, as part of the seminar, students were asked to complete a class evaluation sheet that was made up of two open-ended statements. A copy of this instrument is enclosed in Appendix B.

## Findings

During the analysis the initial aim was to measure participants' NAI in order to have an overall picture of how they – both individually and as a group – related to negotiation as such. NAI values within the sample varied between 51-62. The mean value was 56.56. This is rather low, since the middle value of the index scale would be 60. Only four participants achieved 60 or more on the NAI scale, showing that the majority of the sample was more negative about negotiation.

After NAI values were calculated answers given to the different set of statements were explored in order to get a more detailed picture. Table 1 provides the English translations of the statements in the questionnaire together with their respective means and standard deviations. There are three sets of statements: the first five concern participants' perception of negotiation, the second concerns their ideas about the syllabus while the last ten statements are about overall beliefs about teaching and learning.

Conflicting ideas can be observed regarding the first set of statements: although participants appreciated being asked about their opinions and they thought it important to have the opportunity to tell teachers their opinions, they were not ready to do so. Another disagreement occurs if we consider the answers given to Statement 4, since participants mostly thought that asking students' opinion was a waste of time. They were also undecided on the subject of whether students can be expected to tell their opinion in class. This might mean the rejection of the idea of learners' responsibility about their own learning, or can be simply the sign that participants did not encounter any contexts in which such behavior would be accepted. From this set of statements it is evident that students' attitude towards the idea of negotiation is not really established, and the relatively low values of standard deviation show that answers were evenly distributed within the sample.

With regard to the syllabus, participants overwhelmingly thought that syllabus design was the task of the teacher, and they did not agree with the idea that students should contribute in designing the syllabus. In their answers they also rejected the idea of the renegotiation of the syllabus, which was a very surprising finding for me, as this was a practice we did course after course, and students did not seem reluctant at all. This gives rise to the idea that the answers were not based on their new experiences concerning negotiation, but rather on their previous experiences, and were rooted in the way they have been socialized in the Hungarian educational system for 12 years.

Looking at participants' answers to the statements related to their beliefs about learning and teaching, we may draw similar conclusions. Nevertheless, it must be noted that differences between the values of standard deviation are the most diverse among this set of statements, and this is the set that includes the lowest, as well as the highest values of standard deviation. This means that participants had more varied views on these issues than on previous ones.

Table 1: Statements with means and standard deviation values

#	Statements	Mean	Std.d.
1	I like it when teachers ask their students what they would like to do	4.76	0.430
2	I think it is important for students to have the opportunity to tell the teachers what they are interested in.	4.23	0.430
3	When teachers ask students' opinion on something, I am ready to share mine.	3.53	0.571
4	<i>Asking students about their interests is a waste of time and it makes no sense.</i>	4.0	0.525
5	Students can be expected to tell what they would like to study in seminars.	3.03	0.413
6	<i>The teacher should develop the syllabus and then decide together with students whether they want any change.</i>	4.53	0.507
7	The teacher should develop the syllabus to be used as a draft the final version of which can be established in the first class.	3.16	0.530
8	Students should make up the syllabus and then discuss it with their teacher.	1.86	0.434
9	The items of the syllabus should be reconsidered during the semester, and altered if necessary.	2.55	0.507
10	<i>The items of the syllabus should remain unchanged during the semester.</i>	3.96	0.614
11	<i>When teachers ask students what they want to do in class, the teachers actually don't know what to do.</i>	3.03	<b>0.319</b>
12	<i>When teachers ask students what they want to do in class, the teachers actually are not prepared.</i>	2.86	0.345
13	When teachers ask students what they want to do in class, they are actually interested in students' opinion.	3.46	0.628
14	<i>Teachers should decide what to do in class, because they know it better.</i>	<b>4.83</b>	0.379
15	I like being asked to choose between group-work and pair-work, because this way I can choose what I like.	4.26	0.739
16	<i>I don't like being asked to choose between group-work and pair-work, because the task must be done anyway.</i>	2.76	0.626
17	<i>Students benefit more from classes in which the teachers prescribe both content and task-type.</i>	4.33	0.606
18	<i>I think the best way of learning is to read everything the teacher recommends, no matter what those readings are.</i>	4.00	0.639
19	I make my opinion clear when I think that we are doing tasks in class which make no sense.	<b>2.00</b>	0.614
20	I would rather do tasks made by my peer(s) than by the teacher.	4.15	<b>0.776</b>

Three statements (numbers 11, 12 and 3) inquired about participants' ideas on why teachers ask students' opinion. From the answers it is evident that participants rejected the ideas that teachers ask for opinions because they are either not prepared for class or do not know what to do in class. Standard deviations are also the lowest in the case of these two statements, meaning that participants had basically similar opinions.

Answers given to statement 14 are very interesting: this statement got the highest mean score, 4.83, with a very low value of standard deviation, which shows that the idea of the teacher as a 'know-it-all' figure is widely held among these students. The uniform opinion of students on this issue is in accordance with the overall findings of this study.

Participants thought that the best way of learning is to read everything teachers say, no matter whether those readings make sense or not. This suggests that critical thinking and learner autonomy are almost non-existing concepts in participants' beliefs about good teaching/learning. The belief that students benefit more from classes in which both content and form is prescribed by teachers is strongly held, too. The idea of openly criticizing teachers' choices is absolutely rejected by participants: statement 19 got the lowest mean score out of all statements, but interestingly enough, standard deviation value is relatively high.

The answers given to statement 20 were ambiguous, too: participants mostly agreed that they would rather do tasks made by peers, yet the value of standard deviation is the highest with this item, meaning that opinions varied to the greatest extent in this issue.

To support the findings of the questionnaire, a semi-structured focus-group interview was conducted with six randomly-chosen participants. Here I would like to present direct quotations in order to provide a contextualized thick-description of participants' experiences. I would like to highlight two relevant questions asked during the interview.

(1) To what extent and in what respect did your English improve this semester as a result of the LSS course?

- 'my listening skills improved a lot, now I am able to watch movies without subtitles'
- 'I think I became a better listener. Now I don't think that listening tasks are that awful'
- 'I think I can speak more freely and accurately'
- 'I have better reasoning skills'

Answers show that participants thought they had improved during the semester, although they had previously stated that they believed students benefit more from traditional classes and can learn better following the traditional way. However, when asking a direct question on negotiation, they expressed their doubts concerning the effectiveness of this way of teaching:

(2) 'What do you think of negotiation?'

- 'I think it is a liberal practice.'
- 'I think you should decide things. I mean you should have the final word. After all, you are the teacher.'
- 'Was this just an experiment? Or you always teach like this? Isn't that chaotic for you? I mean I liked it, I just don't believe it works.'

These answers draw attention to what has been reported previously, namely when students' beliefs about good learning/teaching were analyzed. During the interview it became evident that participants had certain preconceptions which are the results of the way they have been socialized into the learning environment, and these conceptions are very unlikely to change, even after encountering positive experiences.

The second instrument to collect qualitative data was a class evaluation sheet made up of two open ended sentences concerning the course and participants were asked to continue them. A copy of the instrument is enclosed in Appendix B.

Results confirmed what has been suggested during the analysis of the interview: participants reported to have enjoyed the class and believed that they had improved during the semester. These findings contradicted the results of the questionnaire, according to which students did not think that they should take part in designing the syllabus, and were convinced that performing teacher-prescribed tasks would be a better way of improving. Here follow the two questions, together with some examples of answers:

(1) I liked this course because...

- 'we've been always asked about our opinion what kind of topics we should have on lessons'
- 'it was more free, friendlier and cosier than other courses'
- 'you always asked what to do in the next class, and you are interested in our problems and you try to help us'
- 'we had an opportunity to tell you what we liked'
- 'I've never been in this kind of lessons, I mean where I was always happy'
- 'it's fantastic. When I told about your course to my friends, they just couldn't believe it'

Participants characterized the course as 'free', 'friendly', 'cosy' 'fantastic', unusual and they associated happiness with the experience. This shows that they had positive feelings about the class and gives the impression that they had a good time. When asked about what they disliked, none of them mentioned negotiation, syllabus design or cooperation, and not even the 'chaotic' or 'liberal' experiences they had reported during the interview. All negative motives concerned organizational issues:

(2) I didn't like the course because...

- 'I had to wake up early'
- 'The room was rather gloomy'
- '8 o'clock!!!!!!'
- 'Some tasks were heavy'
- 'There were four tests.'
- 'we should do more picture talk'
- 'The group was too large compared to the one last semester.'

It is also important to note that one sentence here is an actual suggestion about what should be done in class. While asking for 'more picture talk' one participant actually engaged in negotiation and told about the idea about how the course could be improved in order to meet his/her needs. This might be taken as a sign that participants will slowly understand the purpose of negotiation and realize that their ideas are important in developing the course.

## Conclusion

The original purpose of this exploratory study was to map students' perceptions of and attitude to negotiation in a university setting. During the study, as a result of the controversies encountered, a different question also evolved addressing the possible reasons for this controversy.

Quantitative analysis provided an overall view on how students relate to negotiation and enabled us to map their beliefs and ideas concerning teaching and learning. Qualitative data showed an even more detailed picture of the inconsistencies between preconceptions and actual experiences allowing us to conclude that beliefs in roles and socialization into a rather traditional educational context have greater impact on students' ideas than actual experiences.

The study shows that students' acquaintance with negotiation in this setting had an impact on their minds, but this experience seems to be insufficient to overwrite their previously engraved conceptions in such a short period of time. However, relying on the positive feedback it can be concluded that this approach is worth trying and my experiences convinced me to continue this way of teaching. I aim to conduct constant research on students' relation to negotiation and would like to view how their attitudes change depending on the time they are exposed to it.

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## Appendix A

Please indicate with the help of numbers 1-5 to what extent do you agree with the statements below.

- 1- Totally disagree
- 2- Disagree
- 3- Undecided
- 4- Agree
- 5- Totally agree

1 Tetszik, amikor a tanár megkérdezi, hogy mit szeretne csinálni a hallgató.

1 2 3 4 5

2 Fontos, hogy a hallgatónak legyen lehetősége arra, hogy megmondja a tanárnak, hogy mi érdekli.

1 2 3 4 5

3 Ha a tanár a véleményünket kérdezi, én szívesen elmondom.

1 2 3 4 5

4 A hallgatók véleményének megkérdezése értelmetlen időpocsékolás.

1 2 3 4 5

5 Egy szemináriumon elvárható a hallgatóktól, hogy elmondják, mit szeretnének tanulni.

1 2 3 4 5

6 A tanárnak kell kialakítani a tanmenetet, és a hallgatókkal megbeszélni, hogy szeretnének-e változtatni rajta.

1 2 3 4 5

7 A tanárnak kell kialakítani a tanmenetet, amit vázlatként használ ahhoz, hogy az első órán kialakítsák a véglegest.

1 2 3 4 5

8 A hallgatóknak kell kialakítani a tanmenetet, amit aztán megbeszélnek a tanárral.

1 2 3 4 5

9 A tanmenet pontjait félév közben újra kell gondolni, és ha szükséges változtatni kell rajta.

1 2 3 4 5

10 A tanmenet pontjain változtatás nélkül kell végighaladni a félév során.

1 2 3 4 5

11 Amikor a tanár megkérdezi, hogy mit szeretnék csinálni az órán, nem tudja, hogy mit csináljon.

1 2 3 4 5

12 Amikor a tanár megkérdezi, hogy mit szeretnék csinálni az órán, nem készült fel.

1 2 3 4 5

13 Amikor a tanár megkérdezi, hogy mit szeretnék csinálni az órán, kíváncsi arra, hogy mi érdekel.

1 2 3 4 5

14 A tanároknak kell eldönteni, hogy mit csináljunk órán, mert ők ezt jobban tudják.

1 2 3 4 5

15 Szeretem, ha a tanár megkérdezi, hogy párban vagy csoportban szeretnék-e dolgozni, mert így azt tudom választani, amihez kedvem van.

1 2 3 4 5

16 Nem szeretem, ha a tanár megkérdezi, hogy párban vagy csoportban szeretnék-e dolgozni, mert úgyis meg kell csinálni a feladatot.

1 2 3 4 5

17 A diákok többet tanulnak azokon az órákon, amelyeken a tanár mondja meg, hogy mit hogyan csináljanak.

1 2 3 4 5

18 Szerintem a legjobban úgy lehet tanulni, ha mindent elolvasunk amit a tanár mond, mindegy, hogy miről szólnak ezek.

1 2 3 4 5

19 Ha azt gondolom, hogy az órán értelmetlen dolgokat csinálunk, akkor hangot adok ennek a véleményemnek.

1 2 3 4 5

20 Szívesebben csinálnék olyan feladatot, amit valamelyik társam/társaim találnak ki, mint olyat, amit a tanár.

1 2 3 4 5

Thank you!

## **Appendix B**

YOUR OPINION IS IMPORTANT

Please continue the sentences below.

I liked this course because...

I didn't like this course because...

Thank you!



# Building Self-Confidence in the Use of English as a Lingua Franca: A Case Study of Erasmus Students at the University of Szeged

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## **Introduction**

At the beginning of one particular school year between 2006 and 2010, some Erasmus exchange students went to study abroad. Three weeks after their arrival, the students were scattered in small groups, chatting and drinking alcoholic drinks at one of their house parties. At one point, a student called Dominik told two funny stories to a small group of friends standing around him. Excerpts 1 and 2 present the two stories as recorded in my fieldnotes:

### Excerpt 1

Dominik is joking about one of the courses he and Marcel are taking in Szeged. They both study law and sit in the very last row. Dominik explains that he had difficulties in the beginning because of his not knowing the English technical terminology. Now he is putting effort into learning the terminology and today, for the first time, to please himself and his teacher, he has contributed to the class by asking a question. Hearing this, everybody bursts out laughing (field notes, September 19).

### Excerpt 2

He tells that he didn't have a pillow, or a blanket in his flat so he had to ask the "owner of the flat" to get him a blanket. Although he wanted to say that he needed a blanket, he mistakenly asked for a pillow. He didn't realize that he asked for the wrong thing until the man appeared in the door, holding a small pillow in his hand. He was so surprised seeing the small pillow instead of the blanket in his hands that he couldn't utter a word. Until he meets him again, he will sleep in his sleeping bag (field notes, September 19).

The two stories illustrate the same point; Dominik spoke "bad" English, which put him in strange or awkward situations in the foreign land of Hungary. Following the norms of the Szeged Erasmus community, which focused on humor, he talked

about his lack of English skills in a humorous manner. He joked about his language learning and misunderstandings; yet, they were a serious issue for him, involving others, too.

In the first few weeks of their study abroad, several students involved in the building of the Szeged Erasmus community articulated similar views. The Szeged Erasmus community, “family” as the students called it, was a dynamically shaping community of practice with English as a lingua franca (ELF) being a key practice in it (see Kalocsai, 2009). Although the students themselves turned the Szeged Erasmus “family” into an ELF-resourced community, in the interviews they made clear that they were “afraid” and “shy” to use English in Szeged. They expressed fears not only in reference to the school context, as shown in Excerpt 1, but also in reference to the emerging Erasmus community, which was an informal site of language socialization. As Maria put it (see Excerpt 3), students majoring in English were not an exception, and they too lacked self-confidence in English:

#### Excerpt 3

I think that uh most people here or those of whom I talked about it uh have the same impression that [...] at the beginnings, they felt that they shouldn't really say anything because they were not confident about their competence. (interview, May 28)

These quotes reflect views from the beginning of the students' study abroad. However, over time, the members underwent a change in perspectives and gained self-confidence in their abilities to use English “well”. The purpose of the present paper is to examine how and why the participants became more self-confident speakers of their ELF-resourced community. To that end, I will look into moments of word search and non-understandings, which the community members found most problematic at the start, and which involved the greatest learning over time.

From a Conversation Analytic (CA) perspective, which emphasizes intersubjectivity (Heritage, 1984, p. 256; Schegloff, 1992, pp. 1295-1300), both word search and non-understanding emerge in situations where, due to some problem, the speaker alters from the “normal state” of talk in progress. That is, “instead of providing the ‘next relevant turn’, [they] orient to some prior turn or to the turn-under-construction” (Kuhila, 2006, p. 20). In particular, in the case of a word search, the problem lies in the fact that the speaker has begun a turn, but for lack of a particular word, they cannot finish it (Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974, p. 72). Following Kuhila's (2006, p. 96) distinction between “self-directed” and “recipient-directed” search, the speaker in need of help may hold on to the trouble-source turn, and invite other-repair *implicitly*, or they may give up their turn, and request help *explicitly*. As regards cases of non-understanding, the problem lies in the fact that a speaker cannot make (complete) sense of the previous turn (Bremer, Roberts, Vasseur, Simonot, & Broeder, 1996, p. 40), which they either signal explicitly by an overt claim such as “I don't understand” or implicitly by, for instance, repeating (part of) the trouble-source turn with a rising intonation.

My analysis will show that the students' gaining of self-confidence was, in large part, the result of their co-operative and supportive behavior, which led to some practices developing. The two mutually accepted key practices that developed at moments of word search and non-understandings were collaborative utterance building and negotiations of meaning, respectively. After a brief overview of the ELF perspective and the relevant research findings, I will first present the participants' views about their use of ELF, and then the linguistic means through which they built self-confidence in using ELF.

## **Details of findings: English as a lingua franca perspective**

English as a lingua franca is a relatively young but vibrant field of research. It concerns itself with English in use among bi- or multilinguals whose primary concern is to reach intelligibility in the only shared language available to them. ELF speakers transmit "old" and co-create "new" linguacultures, and learn appropriateness for momentary effectiveness, and alternatively for long-term group formation as well. ELF researchers warn that ELF speakers cannot in any useful way be conceptualized as speech communities. Firstly, their communities are linguistically heterogeneous, and often dislocated; and secondly, they do not speak a variety in any traditional sense of the notion, but rather, in the dynamic process of learning appropriateness and efficiency, they negotiate the norms of speaking "online". As ELF is differently co-constructed in every situation anew, it is based on the "function that it performs rather than on the form that it takes" (Kaur 2008, p. 54). Given its highly fluid and changeable nature, researchers increasingly tie the use of ELF to the notion of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), which does not only allow speakers to "appropriate" their linguistic resources, but requires them to do so. In the communities of practice framework, speakers who repeatedly meet with each other use their linguistic and other resources to realize a dynamically evolving common goal.

Empirical work is now undertaken to show how ELF speakers creatively exploit their plurilingual repertoires to reach their communicative and interpersonal goals. Researchers emphasize the co-operative nature of ELF, and the role of accommodation for convergence in accomplishing mutual understanding. Despite the great analytical potential of the communities of practice model for the field of ELF, the focus (still) remains on language use defined in terms of linguistic data. Current ELF researchers mainly examine the type of features CA researchers first recognized and analyzed such as word search and non-understandings.

### Word search

ELF researchers identify three major processes with regard to word search. The first is called the "coconstruction of expressions" (Mauranen, 2006, p. 135), and is taken to pre-empt or prevent problematic moments. It occurs when a participant, not waiting for the current speaker to request help explicitly, volunteers language support. That is, they guess where the current speaker's line of conversation is

going, and when needed, they provide the missing expression in a co-operative spirit. By doing so, they jointly construct the utterance, and make the conversation smooth and successful (Cogo, 2007; Mauranen, 2006, 2007; Kaur, 2008, 2009). The second process is “collaborative utterance building as a way of helping out” (Cogo, 2007). In this case, word search is seen as a problem, which the participants jointly manage by co-constructing the utterance. That is, after the current speaker’s apparent difficulty with expressing themselves, a co-participant offers a scaffold: they either provide the missing utterance in an overlapping speech, or immediately after the prior turn. These repair processes are called completion overlaps and utterance completions, respectively (Cogo, 2007). Finally, ELF researchers emphasize the role of repetitions in repairing word search. When a co-participant has provided the missing utterance, the current speaker has the opportunity to repeat the utterance, thus showing their listenership, acknowledgment of the help and their recognition of the word (Klimpfinger, 2007, p. 49). Thus, repetitions play an important role both as acknowledgment tokens and as cohesion builders in the process of word search.

Overall, the co-operative processes underlying word search are seen to have two main functions: “flow-function” and “rapport function” (Kordon, 2006). The former function makes the communication smooth and successful, whereas the latter creates a positive atmosphere, displays friendliness, and establishes positive interpersonal relations. The rapport function is achieved through the speakers’ show of interest, involvement and investment in the conversation to a point where they can guess what the current speaker is to say next.

## Non-understandings

Non-understandings have been widely examined in NS-NNS type of conversations in fields such as Intercultural Communication, Interactional Sociolinguistics, Intercultural Pragmatics and Second Language Acquisition where problematic talk is seen as disruptive and as resulting from the participants’ systematically different linguistic and cultural backgrounds (e.g., Coupland, Giles, & Wiemann, 1991). ELF researchers break with the traditional approach, and treat non-understandings as part and parcel of all natural languages, and thus of ELF, too. They view understanding as “an interactive and jointly constructed process which is dynamic and co-operative and which all participants of a conversation continuously engage in” (Pitzl, 2005, p. 52). Accordingly, their interest is not in how participants fail to reach mutual understanding in the minute details of talk, but rather in how it is repaired or co-constructed in the face of difficulties (e.g., Cogo, 2007; Cogo & Dewey, 2006; Kaur, 2008, 2009; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). To this end, they explicate the processes through which speakers carefully and skillfully negotiate and jointly construct shared understanding.

In identifying, describing and analyzing the processes that ELF speakers employ in the collaborative process of meaning-making, ELF researchers tend to draw on Varonis and Gass’s (1985) model. Despite the limitations of the model (see, for instance, Lichtkoppler, 2007, pp. 56-57; or Kaur, 2008, p. 63), it has proved fruitful in explicating the ways in which the participants of the ELF

interactions indicate, manage, jointly negotiate and ultimately repair moments of failed understanding. ELF researchers identify and describe a wide range of strategies used in the face of non-understandings. These involve repetitions, paraphrase, confirmation and clarification practices, and the use of multilingual repertoires. The researchers emphasize the different function of repetitions in the negotiation of meaning process. They point out that repetitions may serve the purpose of signaling a non-understanding, showing understanding, or repairing a problem (Cogo, 2007, pp. 84-104).

Studies covering a variety of settings, from business meetings (Pitzl, 2005) to academic settings (Kaur, 2008, 2009; Mauranen, 2006) through casual conversation (Cogo, 2007), all point to the conclusion that non-understandings are rare in ELF, but when they do occur, speakers deal with them “most adequately and most competently” (Pitzl, 2005, p. 69), and almost always reach shared understanding. Another finding of the empirical work is that the negotiation sequences may also contribute something positive at the interpersonal level of talk. They may help the speakers express solidarity and show affection (Cogo, 2007, 2010).

## Methodology

This study grew out of a larger project which was conducted in Szeged with the participation of 142 Erasmus exchange students, of whom 15 were closely involved in the study (Kalocsai, 2009, 2011). The study spanned one academic year while I was working as a LINEE researcher between 2006 and 2010. As the result of the nearly one-year data collection procedure, I compiled a large corpus of interview data including audio-taped and transcribed interviews and prompted e-mails, as well as observational data including audio-taped and transcribed naturally occurring interactions, field notes, Facebook posts and e-mail messages. The 15 closely involved students participated in a variety of data collection methods each, whereas the majority of the students participated in events where the data collection method was participant observation only. The data analysis has employed both qualitative and discourse analytic methods. In the analysis, I have aligned the key practices that emerged from the data with what I knew about language and interaction, which included insights from CA and ELF research and theorizing.

## Results

### Participants' views on developing self-confidence in English

At the beginning of their stay, the students held rather negative views about their English skills (which will necessarily be interpreted as ELF) mainly due to their fears regarding problematic moments. Their areas of problems concerned word search moments, which may be associated with the question “Oh, how, how do I can say it in English?”, and moments of non-understandings, which correspond to the question “What are we talking about?” In both cases, mutual understanding was at risk: at moments of word search, the students had difficulty communicating

their message whereas at moments of failed understanding they had difficulty understanding what a co-participant was saying. As shown in Excerpts 4 and 5, they viewed moments of word search as “most difficult”, and non-understandings as most “embarrassing”:

Excerpt 4

I think the most difficult was when you want to do, speak about something and you don't know how to express it (interview, December 30).

Excerpt 5

I think that in the beginning it used to be more uhm (.) embarrassing for you, you know you are talking and you didn't understand the others like oh (.) how can I solve that, how can I deal with it (interview, October 25).

However, over time their perceptions of word search and non-understandings changed substantially. In the area of word search, like Lena put it, they learnt that “[they] are not alone with, with describing”. That is, they learnt that their co-participants will readily offer language support to complete or to jointly construct the utterance. As regards their difficulty understanding the prior turn, they learnt, as Lucia claimed, that “[the co-participants] just try to explain in another way, nothing happened!” That is, they learnt that the co-participants (not necessarily the trouble-source turn speaker) will readily modify the problematic utterance to help them understand what they may not have understood otherwise. Moreover, as Lucia's use of “just” implies, they realized that offering help was not a hassle for the co-participants and hence signaling failed understanding was not at all embarrassing. Furthermore, through their joint effort at repairing problematic moments, they understood that “nobody can speak English perfect”, and “everybody have his own prob- problems”. This shared knowledge strengthened the belief that they were a valuable resource for each other, and through collaboration they could make their English “work”.

With regard to word search, the participants further learnt that repair could be successful not only when an external (most likely, a native-like) notion was brought into the exchange, but also when a new, local meaning was created on the spot. As Karla pointed out, “it's uh not to get the right solution, it's more for understanding each other”. That is, when intelligibility was called into question, it little mattered what utterance was “right” by NS standards; more important was the desire to reach a local meaning, or a temporary “solution” which satisfied them all. By following this principle, the Szeged Erasmus students felt that they “always” accomplished mutual understanding. According to Franco, they “always get to the point and get understood”. As we will later see, they did not “always” reach mutual understanding; yet, the fact that they felt they did confirms the claim that after a certain amount of time they stopped viewing word search moments as problems. Karla's view in Excerpt 6 resonates with Franco's. She states that in English, unlike in Hungarian, they did not have to drop a subject due to their lack of language skills:

## Excerpt 6

in English it wasn't the case but sometimes now in Hungarian it's like oh it doesn't matter, okay we change the subject or something (interview, July 14).

The question emerging is whether the participants were always happy with their co-participants' joining in and providing the missing utterance. As indicated by their comments above, they were happy indeed: these practices helped them feel more at ease with English, which was a salient practice to the group, given their propensity to talk and joke in it and about it. However, the students drew a strong dividing line between the co-participants' attempts to fill in moments of word search and their efforts at "correcting" them, as they said. Providing a notion was acceptable and desirable when it was offered at a moment of word search, but it was strongly unacceptable and undesirable when no request for help had been made. That is, other-repair that meant to gear the current speaker towards some external norm was an inappropriate "intervention" unless the current speaker had expressed their need for help, either implicitly or explicitly. As an example, Micha was often criticized on the grounds that he inappropriately tried to "correct" his co-participants. And indeed, in an interview he explained that he had an urge to "correct" what to him seemed a "simple mistake". Micha's practice of "correcting" other students was unique, but frequent enough to be noticed, and to be rejected by the students. In Excerpt 7, Lena explained how she refused to accept Micha's offer of a native-like English idiom. She had just translated an L1 German idiom into English for the purposes of fun, and Micha, rather than appreciating her creativity, insisted on accuracy:

## Excerpt 7

I know one situation at the beginning that I made uh such a translation and there was Micha and he said, @you ca- can't translate it like this@ ((mocks a teacher)) (.) I said, yes Micha, I think I know, but (.) doesn't matter, it's funny. @You can't translate like this, you have to say, blablablablablaba@ ((mocks a teacher)). @Yes: so? ((laughing voice)) (interview, December 15).

Thus, in the Szeged Erasmus community language support at a moment of word search was truly welcome, but unrequested "help" geared toward NS norms was strongly rejected.

As the students' perceptions about word search moments and non-understandings changed, so did their overall attitude towards their use of English. After the first few weeks of their stay in Hungary when they were afraid of, and ashamed about, using English, they gradually became more "self-confident" in, and "proud" of, their English skills. As an example, towards the end of her stay in Hungary, Maria expressed the view that by then "starting to talk in English [was] much easier" than at the beginning. Furthermore, Jerard made the claim that in the Szeged Erasmus community a widely shared view was that "everybody [had] improved their English" and "everybody became more fluent" in it. Likewise, William argued that all the Szeged Erasmus students had gained self-confidence in their English

skills through “developing together.” For Jerard’s and William’s quotes, see Excerpts 8 and 9:

#### Excerpt 8

I think everybody improved for vocabulary and also just everybody became more fluent, could have some talks and talk normally in English like they do /with their own/ language. Yeah (interview, December 30).

#### Excerpt 9

I kind of see why they are getting closer and why why they, they are not scared to talk any more because, for example in language p- point of view that they’re getting more confidence talking and they are realizing that (.) not many of them speak speak speak very good English, you know, that they all develop together (interview, June 18).

Whether the students “improved” their English, and if they did, by what norms, are not relevant for the present purposes. What is important is that they claimed that they had gained self-confidence in English, and this mainly through the co-operative work with which they approached moments of word search and non-understandings.

#### Language support at moments of word search and non-understandings

When the participants faced a moment of word search, they offered a scaffold, and thus helped the speaker finish their turn constructional unit (Sacks et al., 1974, p. 72). In return, the trouble-source turn speaker accepted, or alternatively incorporated the supplied element into their original utterance. By doing so, they expressed their listenership, acknowledgment of the help and their recognition of the word (Klimpfinger, 2007, p. 49), and jointly built an utterance (Tannen, 1984, p. 56). The participants had three types of practices for the construction, in fact co-construction of meaning at moments of word search. Firstly, they developed a shared practice of supplying the missing utterance when no explicit request for help had been made; secondly, they had a shared practice for providing the missing utterance when there had been an overt statement of the help needed; and finally, they had a shared practice for co-constructing a local meaning on the spot, rather than invoking some external meaning. Creating a local meaning on the spot involved a negotiation process in which the speaker in need of help did not immediately take up the utterance which a co-participant had provided (if they had provided any), but rather they further clarified the meaning. Other students joined in, and the clarification (or negotiation) of the meaning continued for over several turns, often until they reached “common ground”. This type of practice typically occurred when, as Karla put it, the “right solution” was not available.

As regards non-understandings, following Bremer et al. (1996) and Kurhila (2006), when a speaker overtly displayed their difficulty with interpreting the prior

turn, a speaker (not necessarily the trouble-source turn speaker) offered repair. That is, they helped the speaker understand what they may not have (fully) understood otherwise. The students had three groups of practices for negotiating – in fact co-constructing – meaning at a moment of non-understanding. One group of practices involved repeating the trouble-source turn with no modification, or with some slight change in the grammar and lexis, a practice also known as paraphrasing (Schegloff, 1996, p. 179); the second group involved repetition with expansion or clarification; and finally, the third involved switching codes, and drawing on the speakers’ plurilingual repertoires.

Excerpts 10 and 11 exemplify both the practice of trying to co-construct a local meaning on the spot as well as the practice of clarification (for further practices, see Kalocsai, 2011). Excerpt 10 starts as a one-to-one conversation between Fabio and William. Fabio wants to say that he loves Metallica concerts for “they don’t use so much [time]” before their concert reaches its climax. He runs into a word search when due to his momentary forgetting he cannot recall the word “climax”. He elicits help from William:

Excerpt 10

(Fabio: L1 Italian; William: L1 Estonian)

1. F: They don’t use (.) so much uh (.) how do you say
2. W: /? /
3. F: No nonono.
4. W: <sup>L</sup>No. [/? /.
5. F: [When (.) you wait for /beautiful/ something that is
6. W: So much
7. F: Yeah. What is the word? When you wait for something?
8. W: Uh: /? /.
9. F: /? / uh
10. W: Who is waiting?
11. F: Friends. Friends are waiting for something. I don’t know, ok.

In utterance 1, Fabio directly appeals for help, and asks “how do you say?” Most of William’s utterances are inaudible, but still it is evident that he is trying to help. After his first offer of help in utterance 2, Fabio rejects his notion with four “no’s”. During his second offer of help – that is, in overlapping speech – Fabio circumscribes the missing utterance (“when you wait for beautiful something”), and thus invites William to continue his co-operative work. In the next turn, trying to gain some thinking time, William repeats part of Fabio’s earlier utterance (“so much”). In utterance 7, Fabio appeals for help once again (“What is the word?”), and then, as a way of prompting William, he repeats part of his earlier description of the missing notion (“When you wait for something”). The next two utterances are inaudible. However, on the basis of utterance 10, in which William prompts Fabio to further clarify the missing notion (“Who is waiting?”), it is evident that they have not yet reached shared understanding.

In the next turn, Fabio turns to Andrew, who is involved in another conversation, and makes a direct request for help. By interrupting Andrew, he catches all the other participants' attention as well:

Excerpt 11

(Fabio: L1 Italian; Andrew: L1 English; Emese: L1 Hungarian; William: L1 Estonian, Researcher: L1 Hungarian)

12. F: @Andrew, I am sorry. When (.) when you@ ((silently)) love so much one thing, and you are waiting for it, there is a specific word, but I don't =

13. A: = You long for it →

14. F: No.

15. A: you crave it →

16. F: No.

17. A: you desire it

18. E: <sup>⊥</sup>You eager for

19. W: Desire. [No?

20. F: [No.

21. R: You look forward to it?

22. F: No:

23. W: [/? /

24. E: [What is eager for?

25. R: <Hu> Mohó {Eager} →

26. E: <Hu> Ja {Aha}

27. R: <Hu> valamire. {for something}

28. E: Mhm.

29. A: Ache?

30. F: Something concerning the (.) apex

31. W: Touch- touchiness.

32. R: What is apex?

33. F: The the

34. A: The top, the /? /, the point (..) on edge?

(..)

35. W: Pull a bird.

36. R: Impatient.

37. W: <sup>⊥</sup>/? /

38. A: <sup>⊥</sup>Is it for (.) for relationships?

39. F: No: even for music when you are waiting for your favorite band playing and you are

40. R: Excited?

As is shown in Excerpt 11, Fabio applies two different strategies to elicit help. First, he circumscribes his notion (“when you love so much one thing, and you are waiting for it”), and then makes an explicit request for help (“there is a specific

word, but I don't [know]"). Andrew responds by offering his first scaffold ("You long for it"), then his second one ("you crave it"), and finally his third one ("you desire it"). After each of his scaffolds, Fabio says, "No", thus indicating that no satisfying "solution" has yet been reached. After Andrew's third offer of help, Emese joins in. She says, "you eager for", which is a clear continuation of Andrew's structure in the previous turns ("you" plus no more than three words). Then, following Emese's contribution, William jumps in. Thinking that Andrew might be right, he repeats his notion of "desire". As Fabio is still not satisfied with the shared understanding reached, the researcher makes a new contribution. In making her offer of help, she too adopts Andrew's structure but with a rising intonation ("you look forward to it?"). In utterance 23, William makes another offer of help, which remains inaudible due to his and Emese's simultaneous talk.

In utterance 24, Emese asks a question with which she expresses her uncertainty regarding her earlier notion ("What is eager for?"). To help Emese (fully) understand the notion which she herself has brought into the exchange, the researcher switches to Hungarian, which is an L1 for both of them. She applies the strategy of code-switching as judges it to be the fastest (and therefore the most effective) way of offering help. As soon as Emese's lack of understanding is repaired, the co-construction of the utterance continues.

In the next utterance, Andrew offers another scaffold with a rising intonation ("Ache?") to which Fabio responds by further clarifying the missing utterance ("something concerning the apex"). Fabio's utterance is taken by the co-participants as an invitation to continue the collaborative utterance building. In the next two turns, William provides another scaffold ("touchiness"), and the researcher signals her lack of understanding of Fabio's clarification ("What is apex?"). The non-understanding gets repaired by Andrew who, after clarifying the problematic utterance in different ways, continues focusing his attention on Fabio's word search. In the same utterance, he makes another attempt to co-construct meaning ("on edge?"). After Andrew's offers of help, there comes a short pause, and then the joint process of meaning-making continues.

Following the break, the participants offer three more scaffolds. The first offer of help comes from William ("pull a bird"), the second one from the researcher ("impatient"), and the third one from William again, which is inaudible this time. In utterance 38, Andrew prompts Fabio to clarify his notion further ("Is it for (.) for relationships?") Fabio complies with Andrew's request ("You are waiting for your favorite band playing"), and when his utterance draws to its end ("and you are"), the researcher takes over, and in a co-operative spirit completes his utterance ("excited?"). In the next utterance William suggests taking a group photo. When they have made a few photos, Fabio leaves the room to return a few minutes later. When he enters the room, he happily cries out, "Yeah, climax. Climax." He has looked up the notion in a dictionary.

## Discussion

In the foregoing, I have explored the Szeged Erasmus students' repair work at moments of word search and failed understanding within their ELF-resourced community. In the analyzed extracts of talk, which *are* a typical example of repair practices within the Szeged Erasmus community, the participants successfully repaired the non-understanding but failed to repair the word search with which they were faced. This points to at least two conclusions. Firstly, once the participants learnt that within their local community signaling non-understandings was not “embarrassing”, as they originally thought, they readily signaled, and relatively easily repaired moments of failed understanding. Secondly, through repeated encounters with moments of word search, they learnt that the process was more important than the actual outcome. That is, contrary to their original expectations that word search moments had to be resolved through a native-like expression, they learnt that word search moments had alternative outcomes. It was equally acceptable to create a local meaning on the spot, or to attempt – but not to reach – “common ground”. To reach any of the outcomes, it was essential that, in line with Smit's (2010) principle of joint forces, the participants bring to the exchange whatever they could. Thus, the success of word search moments depended not so much on mutual understanding as on the participants' collaborative work through which they worked towards shared understanding.

In the Szeged Erasmus community, the co-operative work underlying moments of word search and non-understandings resulted in, and in a dynamic process created and maintained, a higher level goal – the goal of becoming more self-confident speakers. That is, the analyzed linguistic practices emerged and strengthened the goal of developing self-confidence in one's abilities to use ELF “well”. The participants themselves did not use the notion “lingua franca” once but given that their context of use within the Szeged Erasmus community (and in the wider context in Hungary), was one of English as a lingua franca, their shared goal of developing self-confidence in their *English* skills translates as self-confidence in their *ELF* skills. This being the case, a great contribution of the present study is that it offers a link between the practices of word search and non-understandings, on the one hand, and the students' growing self-confidence in their language skills, on the other, a link that is missing from the field of ELF. The above analysis has shown that the Szeged Erasmus students, who were initially concerned about speaking “bad English”, and who felt they “shouldn't really say anything” in English, put themselves at ease in speaking English over time. They realized that they did not have to accomplish problematic moments “alone”, and did not necessarily have to invoke native-speaker meanings, but rather they could anticipate their co-participants' help, and could try to create their own local meanings. It was the safe knowledge that they would receive help when in need of help that made them more self-confident speakers of their ELF-resourced community.

Another contribution of the present analysis is that it opens up the way for examining the link between word search and non-understanding, on the one hand, and solidarity and rapport on the other. Current ELF researchers increasingly recognize that the analyzed practices have positive effects at the interpersonal level

of talk. Cogo (2007), in particular, stresses the link between the analyzed linguistic practices and their function of showing solidarity and rapport. In addition, current ELF researchers increasingly see the analyzed linguistic practices as interactional phenomena. That is, they treat them as co-operative processes, which involve both or all the interlocutors, and are resolved through both or all the participants' activities (Kaur, 2008; Mauranen, 2006; Pitzl, 2005). In light of these views, when the participants were negotiating moments of word search or non-understandings, they simultaneously created and solidified the goal of building a "family" and friendship support community with a focus on self-confidence (for details, see Kalocsai, 2011).

A third major contribution of the analysis focusing on word search and non-understandings is that it has brought to light a key concern in current ELF research and theorizing as to whether ELF speakers can usefully be conceptualized as "L2 learners". The answer is yes, indeed. When faced with a word search and non-understanding, they readily oriented to restrictions in their linguistic knowledge, thereby demonstrating their "L2 learner" status. However, their shared practices did not imply an L2 learner who is on the way to becoming more native-like but is doomed never to get there (Cook, 2005, p. 3), but rather an L2 learner who takes on a learner identity by choice, as and when appropriate, as a way of exploiting a shared resource.

## Conclusion

The present study has explored how a group of Erasmus exchange students studying in Szeged turned the once problematic moments of word search and non-understandings into mutually accepted practices boosting their own self-confidence in their ELF skills. The vast majority of the participants were non-native or L2 speakers of English, meaning their competencies in and experiences with English varied to quite some extent. Some students had relatively little experience in using ELF outside of class, others had more; yet, there was one thing they had in common: initially they all lacked self-confidence in their ability to use English. The shared practice of jointly repairing problematic moments developed in response to the students' need to deal with different competencies and experiences, on the one hand, and to their desire to become more self-confident speakers of their local community, on the other. Thus, when the students were faced with a word search or non-understanding which occurred due to their non-native or L2 speaker identities, they looked to each other for language support. The co-participants almost always offered help: drawing on their linguistic resources, they contributed to the repair practice with whatever they could. The repair was successful *not* when the participants observed the NS norms, but when they reached – or at least attempted to reach – "common ground". The participants' efforts proved successful for, as they claimed, by the time they left Szeged, they had become more self-confident speakers of the local ELF community of practice, and had built a friendship and "family" based community based on solidarity and rapport.

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# An Exploratory Study of Foreign Erasmus Students' Initial Cultural Experiences

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## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on a research conducted in Kaposvár University during the 2008 summer EILC (Erasmus Intensive Language Course) period. The aim of the survey was to examine the quality of the university's EILC programme and gain insights into student experiences. The survey involved nineteen foreign students. Data collection instruments included questionnaires, interviews, class observations and discussions with teachers of the course.

Initial experiences of incoming students were examined to determine the types of challenges encountered during the first part of their stay in Hungary, with focus on how content and organization of the course could be improved. Interviews with course teachers provided feedback on organizational issues and course content.

## **Background to study**

### Definition of EILC

The acronym EILC stands for Erasmus Intensive Language Courses; special courses supported by the European Commission. These pre-semester courses are organized for students participating in Erasmus exchanges in countries where the language is less widely used and taught. Such courses give students opportunities to study the language of a host country, become familiar with the culture via interpersonal experiences, such as field trips. Course length may vary from three to six weeks, incorporating at least 60 teaching hours. Participants do not pay a tuition fee; they contribute to the course evaluation. Organizing institutions receive funding from the European Commission through the Hungarian coordinator, Tempus Public Foundation. The commission does not prescribe course content. Rather, they provide basic guidelines regarding course length, minimum number of lessons and the qualification of teachers. The Hungarian language instructor must be a certified Hungarian as a Foreign Language (HFL) teacher.

Organizing institutions prepare an information form for prospective EILC participants. In it, Kaposvár University describes Kaposvár in terms of its short history and location, main local and cultural events, transportation, the organizing institution itself, accommodation, meals, reception of students, and extramural activities. The second part of the information form outlines the language and cultural components and the duration of the course (three weeks). The total number of classes (114) and course facilities such as teaching aids, library, language laboratory and the number of teachers and support staff are also explained.

### Intercultural learning

Kaposvár Erasmus students spend the first few weeks of their study-abroad participating in the EILC. Afterwards they study for at least one academic resident term in Hungary. For most students the resident phase is the first time they personally encounter Hungarian culture. As a result they tend to experience social, psychological and adjustment problems, which are addressed by psychology, intercultural research and the study of cross-cultural adjustment.

When a multicultural group participates in a course that intends to familiarize them with the language and culture of a different country, aspects of intercultural learning become vital components worthy of consideration due to potential impacts on learning and positive experiences. In this case participants represent and encounter different cultural backgrounds while simultaneously coping with a host culture different from their own. Fantini (2000) claims successful intercultural communication involves awareness, attitudes, skills, knowledge and language proficiency. He describes several other attributes of a successful intercultural speaker such as respect, empathy, flexibility, patience, interest, curiosity, openness, motivation, sense of humour, tolerance for ambiguity and willingness to suspend judgment.

Byram (1997) suggests that intercultural communication is an ability to participate in a “form of life”. He further postulates a relationship between foreign language (FL) teaching and the development of intercultural communication competence (Byram, 1997, p. 3). “FL courses involving the larger global lingua francas, such as Spanish or English, also need to promote the development of this intercultural component as it is likely that graduates will end up using the FL primarily with fellow nonnative speakers of different nationalities” (Planken, van Hooft & Korzilius, 2004, p. 309) Even though learning HFL forms the main part of the EILC course, course participants use English as a lingua franca.

## The study

### Aims

The purpose of the study is to find out about the first experiences of foreign students to Hungary in order to improve EILC course content and organization. It aims to find out what kind of challenges participants face during their EILC course, to investigate their opinions and attitudes towards the host culture, and attempts to describe signs of cultural adaptation.

The study aims to provide as much detail as possible of the initial study-abroad experiences of foreigners in Hungary. It tries to identify recurring patterns of students' behavior during a short-term stay in Kaposvár. It focuses on input from participants, and uses their opinions to develop a broader, more complex picture of the course itself.

### Participants

Originally, 24 students were to be divided into two courses of 12 students each. However, only 19 students applied to Kaposvár, which resulted in one course. There were 7 male and 12 female students in the group. The typical age of the students was between 20 and 26 years. The youngest were two 20-year old students and there was one person of 26 years of age. As for the nationalities: there were five Turkish, seven German, five Finnish, and three Lithuanian students. There was no conflict between the nationalities.

Course participants came from different academic backgrounds. All of them were university students and their majors included: fine arts, English, pedagogy, veterinary science, mechanical engineering, biological engineering, medicine, sociology, special needs education, political science, environmental engineering, logistics, costume design, land surveying technology.

Fifteen students had not been in Hungary before the EILC course. Three Finnish students, one German and one Lithuanian student had visited Hungary on holiday. Four students claimed they had never been abroad before this EILC experience. Eight students had previously been abroad for one to three months before; four students had been abroad for four to eight months; two students for nine to twelve months and one student spent 1-2 years abroad.

Applicants were supplied with ample information on course content, the area, the university and Hungary. They could ask questions by email prior to attending the course. They were picked up by a university bus in Budapest and brought to Kaposvár. They were accommodated in modern double rooms of the new university student hostel. Three student assistants accompanied them every day as helpers. One important prerequisite of the course was that students had to be able to speak English at a level that they understand lectures and the teacher's explanations.

The program started with a two-day introduction of Kaposvár and its surroundings. Intent was to give students a chance to familiarize themselves with the area. Weekdays started with classes in the morning and early afternoon. The rest of

the afternoon and evenings were free. There were three major organized trips involving all of the course participants.

#### Data collection instruments and procedures

For the analysis I used personal observations, questionnaires before and at the end of the course and personal interviews with selected students. The questionnaires were developed, used and validated by Nagy in her study on “International students’ study abroad experience” in 2003.

On the first day of the course all students filled out a questionnaire. During the course I conducted class observations and interviews with five students on their experiences in Hungary. At the end I interviewed teachers, and students filled out a second questionnaire and an evaluation of the course.

Interviews were conducted towards the end of the second week and the beginning of the third week of the course. That provided ample time for satisfactory experiences with the course, the country and its people. Students were interviewed individually; each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and later transcribed. Notes were taken during the interviews.

I planned to conduct interviews to learn more about the same areas I asked about in the questionnaires. Each interview was semi structured using questions to guide students. I was hoping that they would add some valuable comments on their own initiative. The questions were the following:

1. What is your overall experience of the course? How do you feel in the new environment?
2. Have you got any interesting (funny/striking) stories that happened to you during your EILC period that you would like to share?
3. What were your views and expectations towards the country and its people?
4. Have they changed during the course in any direction? If yes, how?
5. What do you like about Hungary?
6. What was difficult to accept?
7. What did you expect from the course? Please share some course experiences.
8. How did you prepare for studying in Hungary?
9. What steps did you take before arrival to ensure comfortable and easy transition?
10. To what extent can you accommodate to the local culture?
11. What sort of fears or reservations have you got in connection with the new environment?
12. What does intercultural learning mean for you? What do you think you can learn in Hungary?

Since there were nineteen students attending the course, not all students’ views are examined in detail. This number is too small to make generalizations possible. In

the case of qualitative research, generalization is rarely possible. Interviews, however, do give the insider's view and help triangulation.

My analysis might be influenced by the fact that I had designed and organized the course and served as the main contact and the everyday troubleshooter. Thus, some organizational issues may get a stronger focus in the analysis.

## Results and discussion

### Questionnaires

Two questionnaires were administered during the three-week course, one at the beginning, which covered motivation, language, culture and personal areas. The questionnaire at the end covered language and cultural issues. There were recurring questions in both instruments. This presented a case where washback effect was observable, since only three weeks passed from the time when students were presented the first questionnaire, and their initial answers might have carried over to the second questionnaire. Nonetheless, I was interested whether participants' views had changed during the sojourn.

The first questionnaire consisted of four sections. The first section addressed motivations for studying abroad, the second addressed experiences with the Hungarian and English language, the third asked about cultural experiences in Hungary, the fourth section investigated the students' personal and academic background. In the following I will focus on students' motivation for studying in Hungary and taking part in EILC.

### Motivation

In the first section I addressed participants' motivation for studying abroad (SA). There were four closed questions (three Likert-scale items) and one open question. The first question investigated the reason for applying for an Erasmus grant. The three most frequently mentioned reasons mentioned by students were (in order of frequency)

1. to get to know a different culture (13 people listed it as absolutely true);
2. to improve my knowledge of a FL (10 people listed it as absolutely true);
3. to gain new academic knowledge (8 students listed it as absolutely true).

Reasons ranked lesser in importance included: making new friends, learning a new FL and gaining new academic knowledge (seven students rated all of them somewhat true).

Altogether, gaining new academic knowledge proved to be the most important reason, followed by the intention to discover a different culture, improving knowledge of a FL, and learning a new FL. Erasmus students primarily have academic goals and an intention to gain cultural knowledge. Students were not concerned about money, 9 of them listed the least important, 7 of them as the

second least important factor. One student listed “carpe diem” as the reason for application for an Erasmus grant.

In the case of the Kaposvár EILC course, the most important reasons for enrolment were: improving knowledge of a FL (11 students), getting to know a different culture (10 students) and making new friends (9 students). Learning a new FL became increasingly important (nine students listed it as true).

When asked why they chose Hungary as the host country of the study abroad experience, most students answered that the academic programme of the accepting university was attractive and that they had heard it was a ‘nice place’. Students did not think the reason for coming here was cheap living, the presence of friends and relatives or the availability of scholarships. These factors did not play an important role in their decision of coming to Hungary. Thirteen said study abroad was very important in their career. Six students found it mildly important (one of them made the following comment: ‘Employers surely appreciate it, but it isn’t a must.’) Only one participant thought study abroad was not important in his/her career.

The last question in this section was open ended and inquired about expectations from the EILC period in Kaposvár. There was a considerable backwash effect, students mostly cited what they read in the questionnaire (to find out how I can manage on my own; make new friends; improve my knowledge of English). Some unique answers included:

I would like to see some other places than Budapest in Hungary.

To get to know about Hungarians and the daily life in Hungary.

Improve Hungarian language skills but also English and German.

Getting in touch with the Erasmus period before starting the “real studies”.

Students mainly spent time with university-affiliated people, even in their free-time. They were relying heavily on the help of student assistants who very often sacrificed their free-time to be able to assist them. They frequented pubs and sometimes travelled to places of interest. The most important categories of cultural differences noted by participants included food, people, going out, shopping, transportation, language and general comments on perceived cultural differences. Students thought Hungarians are polite, helpful and friendly people who also tend to be impatient and loud.

Course participants managed to overcome language difficulties by using sign and body language, as well as English. A three-week Hungarian language course could not prepare them for solving complex tasks resorting only to their Hungarian language knowledge, but students reported increased proficiency in both English and Hungarian at the end of the course.

After comparing and contrasting results of both questionnaires, the following patterns emerged:

## Overcoming language difficulties

At the beginning of the course students planned to make themselves understood by using a FL and in sign- and body language. By the end, students learned just enough Hungarian to be able to throw in some words, but basically they were still resorting to English, German or body language, when trying to make themselves understood.

## Hungarian proficiency

By the end of the course, 18 respondents said they intended to improve their Hungarian proficiency. Students claimed that their Hungarian speaking and listening skills improved quite a lot.

## Cultural experiences

The second common area in the two questionnaires addressed cultural experiences. Originally, students were planning to socialize mainly with fellow Erasmus students. This was actually the case during the course. They also socialized with Hungarian students and teachers who were helping out in the course. This shows that they had time or opportunity to form social connections mainly in the university world.

## Free time

At the beginning, students had plans for spending time in the library, playing sports, travelling and visiting pubs, in that order of importance. By the end of the course the order had changed. Visiting pubs and travelling became the most popular activities while playing sports or going to the library became very rare. As their final advice to future EILC participants revealed, they had enjoyed life and had a good time here.

## Interviews

For triangulation purposes I decided to interview six participants representing the four countries in the EILC group. I chose representatives of every participating country to equally include each cultural perspective.

Participants' overall experience of the course was positive. "I loved it, because I learned language and culture, and met new people." "I liked it from the first minute, although the schedule was quite crowded." "I'm very happy that I came here. First I considered not to come, because we had to come one month earlier but now I think it will be much easier to adapt in Budapest."

## Expectations

Turkish students had no expectations about Hungary, although they talked to people who had previously been to Hungary. Many had searched the Internet for information. Lithuanian students thought Hungary was a warm and beautiful country. One Lithuanian student noted that she had expected that life would be cheaper here. The German student thought the country would be poorer. In her view the country was very traditional and it was nice to see –as she said- that “people are proud of their country”. The Finnish student noted that people are polite. The Lithuanians liked the city (Kaposvár) and the food, while the Turkish students liked the cheap things in the stores and the food.

As for their expectations towards the course, one of the Turkish students noted that he expected Hungarian language to be very difficult. However, as our student, he found it not to be as hard as he thought. Another Turkish participant expected to learn some words only, but instead he managed to learn quite a few: “yesterday I used my Hungarian language. You showed us that we can speak Hungarian.” One of the Lithuanian girls noted that she expected a larger number of foreign students. The Finnish student was open-minded. She had no expectations, but was surprised to find the course well organized. The German student confessed that she had not read the resource book, and she was pleasantly surprised that so many trips were included.

## Preparations

I also aimed to find out what preparations students made for studying in Hungary. Three of the respondents did not prepare at all. One thought EILC was going to be enough preparation, another merely talked to a friend who studied at the same university. One student learned numbers and question words at home (he was the one who showed a lot of improvement during the language course). The Finnish student read books. She showed a different connection as well, because her mother could speak Hungarian. This brought her closer to the country.

Two students did not take any steps to ensure comfortable and easy transition. Two of them communicated with other people who had lived or studied in Hungary before, one student read books on the history of the country. Accommodation to the local culture was very easy for one student. She thought the hostel was nice and they were provided a lot of things they needed. Another student noted that she already knew some Hungarian students, which implies that she managed to accommodate to some extent at least to the locals. The Finnish student thought the culture was quite similar, so she did not have many accommodation problems.

Two students did not have any fears or reservations in connection with the new environment, although one of the Turkish participants noted that food proved to be a big problem here, he had not thought that would be the case. When asked about how they felt in the new environment, the students said they felt well, satisfied, with one student noting that he liked the weather and the green environment. Another participant noted: “at the moment I feel I could be here

longer than half a year”. The German student was the only person who did not like the environment, because, as she said, it felt like a prison.

The last question resulted in some misunderstandings, and two students did not provide input at all. I wanted to know whether participants viewed the course as an intercultural learning experience. I asked them what they thought they could learn in Hungary. The German student perceived sensitive aspects, such as personal space was smaller here compared to her own culture. The Finnish participant found the course to be an opportunity to improve her social skills in an international context. She intended to improve personally and she expected to become more open-minded, perhaps better aware of other cultures. The Lithuanian student expected improvement in social skills, languages, and learning methods in general. The other participant from Lithuania wanted to be more self-confident, learn to live by herself and learn how to manage by herself.

### Class observations

When students asked questions in the class, topics were directed mostly toward vocabulary and useful expressions. They were also interested in learning details about the personal lives of the teacher or the others. They liked small dialogues. Moreover, while they already had pages of words to learn, some of them still asked for more words to be taught. They were also interested in names of typical Hungarian foods they had tried or were considering to try. A Finnish girl said it was quite easy to remember Hungarian words. She even had some favourites, like “merőkanál” (ladle) or “távírányító” (remote control). Students liked using adjectives to describe the other’s characteristics “Csinos, kedves és szép vagy” (You are pretty, nice and beautiful). They were quite flattered when they got complimented in Hungarian.

Students found the topic of making friends very useful. They thought the material was quite enough for three weeks. Only one student said he would have wanted more practice of verb conjugation. It was noticeable that the two Finnish students were using Finnish language among themselves to clarify meaning. One Finnish girl found it unusual that everybody greets everybody at every time of the day.

Course participants found after-class programmes too much, they also confessed that they had mainly learned the language from each other, not from the Hungarians. The primary reason for this could be that there were not too many Hungarians on campus in August and they did not go out of their way to be able to meet one. One student noted that she was able to pick out words she understood.

## Summary of findings

EILC students' short-term acculturation experiences and study-abroad experiences were collected with the help of questionnaires, interviews, observations. 19 students of four nations participated in the Kaposvár EILC course. Three of them had previous experiences in Hungary before. Four students had never been abroad before, the rest of them had shorter or longer (1 month to 2 years) experiences abroad.

Kaposvár EILC participants' motivations for studying abroad correspond with European research results (Altbach, Teichler, 2001; Bracht, 2007; Coleman, 1996, 1997, 1998). Most of the participants expected to get to know a different culture and to improve knowledge of a FL. By joining the EILC course students hoped to learn about Hungary, its culture and language and also because they needed some time to get used to the new culture.

However, these students' primary aim is not language learning. The Erasmus program tries to facilitate the transfer of knowledge in various disciplines by allowing students to be able to study their chosen subject at a foreign university. EILC students to Kaposvár were not to study in Hungary in Hungarian, but mostly in English; therefore, their primary focus was not language learning, but getting to know a different culture.

Kaposvár EILC students did not have many opportunities to interact with the representatives of the host culture apart from student assistants. They were mainly among themselves and with those few Hungarians who were working around them. There were, though signs of noticing and experiencing differences.

Initially, students expected Hungarian culture to be different from their own culture in terms of food, people and transportation, apart from minor miscellaneous issues. Towards the end of the course these categories of differences remained, and some more were added. During the sojourn students faced various cultural differences: among them they stressed food, people, free time, shopping, transportation, language and people. Food issues included bad tasting tap water, greasy, unhealthy food. Public transportation was praised by most participants. They found it very well-organized, the buses comfortable and clean, and the passengers more polite.

Regarding Hungarian people incoming students had mixed views, such as people here were more polite, friendly and helpful. They seem to be enjoying life, connected to the country and culture. Hungarians also keep a lot of dogs. Older Hungarians do not speak English, they met some rude people and some of them tried to cheat. More than half of the participants thought Hungarians are good humoured, but also they are impatient and loud.

Difficulties faced by foreigners included language, they found the intonation of Hungarian language different. Distance from family and friends did not present a big problem. The same was the case with weather, food and living in the residence hall, although there were comments on differences in food. Some students lacked privacy, since they lived in double rooms.

Students claimed their self-confidence improved, they have learned about a new culture and discovered that their Hungarian and English language skills improved. They got new international friends and many of them found they became more

social than they thought they were. Experts point out that “living and studying in another country and socializing with its citizens will enhance the knowledge about culture, society and economy of the host country and at the same time of other countries as well” (Bracht & Teichler, 2007, p. 6).

Gains were reflected in the advice participants gave to future Erasmus students, such as being open-minded, tolerant, enjoy the possibility of meeting new people and being open for everything new. This shows participants were mostly aware that they might be experiencing culture shock. Even though students knew this, there is a necessity of good preparation and perhaps counseling during the stay.

Interviews reflected similarly on these difficulties. Moreover, interviews provided the opportunity to listen to students’ personal concerns, such as Lithuanians and issues of money or the confusion of Turkish students and different interpretations of common Turkish-Hungarian history.

## **Limitations of the research**

The course lasted for three weeks. This is obviously a very short time both for students to study Hungarian and for researchers to gather a lot of data. Even though one person was doing the organizational work and performing the researcher’s duties, this central position ensured enough insight to every aspect of the course. This double duty took a lot of time and energy away from talking to students, interviewing, observing lessons and extracurricular activities. This way some aspects may be less detailed.

A more structured investigation of EILC periods would prove to be interesting, and these experiences could be compared to longitudinal studies of the Erasmus period. In Hungary many institutions organize such courses. They are different from language courses because it is usually the first time foreigners encounter a new culture. Many courses and their effects could be compared in order to find common elements and ideas for good practice.

## **Conclusion**

Many people study abroad each year, a lot of them with the help of Erasmus. Those students, who study at countries where a lesser known European language is spoken, have the possibility of attending EILC courses, although an introductory course would be essential in every country for all Erasmus students. Few studies have been carried out on the processes during the EILC period, and to my knowledge nobody studied EILC courses in Hungary. It would add greatly to the impact of the course on foreigners if there was a set content that students could expect from every course. Although students can read the offers of different institutions on the EU homepage before registering for a course, accounts of this kind could help in developing or standardizing EILC course content.

The effect of such courses is little discussed. The original aim, that is to familiarize students with the culture of the host country and teach them the lan-

guage to some extent, has been achieved. Participants' low level of proficiency in English is a major challenge for the teachers. Students' motivation and positive attitude towards the course balances this negative aspect.

Students' perceptions of Hungary were investigated both at the beginning and at the end of the course and found that there was not too much difference or improvement. In three weeks it was hardly expected. Language skills showed considerable improvement. English was used as a lingua franca and students claimed their level of English improved during the course. Knowledge of Hungarian improved as well, although the level did not rise considerably in such a short time.

This study illustrated the initial experiences of foreign students to Hungary from various aspects. Initial motivation for studying abroad was investigated and found that gaining cultural knowledge was the primary reason for undertaking Erasmus studies. However, when choosing Hungary, the attractiveness of academic program played a major role, together with the attractiveness of the country. More study is needed to further identify data and trends that will make the cultural experience more useful and productive to the students who participate.

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