

# English Language Education in Hungary: Examining Hungarian Learners' Achievements in English

## Foreword

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It is rare in my experience of language education and language examinations that much thought is given to the needs of classroom teachers to understand a radical reform of the examination system before the reform itself has been designed. It is even more unusual that in-service courses, developed to meet such needs, are written up in much detail. And I cannot think of one other example where a team of in-service course developers managed to produce a book which describes fully the genesis, rationale and development of such a course, much less to provide a detailed account of its delivery and its reception by teachers. This volume is thus a major contribution to the literature on innovation in language education, specifically in the field of language assessment.

It is of course located in one context, in Hungary. Its lessons and its examples are generalisable, however, well beyond the borders of that country. The content of the various modules could certainly be adapted to other circumstances, the methodology by which the course was delivered, and the rationale of that methodology, are relevant to many other situations, where it is believed important to involve teachers in doing, and in reflecting, as part of their in-service development. And the account of the formative and summative evaluation of the course, the way in which data was gathered from observation of the course and its participants in action, the way the course was modified in the light of reactions, and then trialled again: all these are exemplary, and could and should be repeated in other contexts and further accounts should be produced of the results of such innovations.

It is also very unusual in my experience that teachers are encouraged to think positively about how best to prepare students for examinations. Of course, there are many test preparation course books on the market, but these are often aimed at students directly. Those that are also aimed at teachers do not often contain detailed guidance on HOW to prepare students for examinations. Rather, they concentrate on the content of the tests, and neglect to consider the ways in which teachers might behave in class, how they might involve their learners in understanding the rationale and the constructs of the tests, and what might be the most professional ways of helping students to prepare themselves for the test. All too many teachers simply assume that the best way of preparing for tests is to make students do practice test after practice test, learn test-taking strategies that are not transferable to language use outside the examination context, and drill formulaic responses to predicted questions and tasks.

The course reported in this volume is nothing like that. It seeks to help teachers understand the rationale behind the proposed innovations, it helps them explore the nature of what is to be tested and why it might be being tested in that particular way. It encourages teachers to reflect on their normal everyday teaching practice, and to consider

what might be appropriate ways of teaching language skills and language use, irrespective of the examination that may be looming. It then seeks to encourage teachers to consider how such "best practice" might be relevant to the specific task of preparing students for the examination and of helping them to perform to the best of their ability on that examination. In short, what this course seeks to do is to engineer positive washback, both on the content of examination preparation and on its methodology, but also on regular classroom teaching. It is the view of the editors and authors of this volume and this course that examination preparation is not a task that teachers should be ashamed of engaging in - some rather disreputable activity that is only done by exam coaching schools, or by teachers in the private lessons they give to students in their spare time, to earn extra money or to give their students extra help. Rather, preparing students for exams is one of the most important things teachers can do for their students, it is a serious professional responsibility, and thus deserves much more attention, much more critical reflection, much more understanding on the part of teachers, teacher trainers and course designers, than it has hitherto received. This volume celebrates that belief.

What is particularly interesting about this course, aimed at preparing teachers for innovation in examinations, is that it has been developed in parallel with the examination reform itself. It has contributed to the thinking of the test developers, as they see how teachers have reacted to their ideas, and it has actually been drafted, trialled, revised and produced in its current form several years before the actual examination will be introduced in schools. At the time of writing, April 2001, the plan is for the new school-leaving examination to be first administered officially in 2005! Teachers are thus being allowed a considerable period of time to prepare themselves for the new exams. Of course, it is entirely possible that the nature of the new school-leaving examination will change somewhat in the light of further piloting of that sort that is reported in Volume 2 of this series of books on English language education in Hungary (Alderson et al, 2000). But the principles that the new examinations will follow are firmly entrenched in test specifications and test design, and examples already exist - and are used in this course - of test tasks that have been trialled and calibrated and thus whose suitability for the Hungarian school-leaving population is known. Indeed, one of the benefits of this close collaboration between in-service course development and examination development is that participants on the course can experience at first- and second-hand how students react to the new test tasks, and they can therefore explore students' ability to cope with what might appear to many teachers to be too different from current practice, too unfamiliar and thus beyond their students' capacities. The results of the piloting show clearly that this is not the case, and through this course teachers are encouraged to develop their students' capacity to cope with the unknown and to use the language to express themselves and their understandings.

The development of this in-service course to prepare teachers for innovation in English language examinations is part of a large programme of reform of school-leaving examinations in Hungary, which was started by the Ministry of Education in 1996. The British Council has materially supported this reform by setting up a project to contribute to the reform of the English language examinations. This project worked in collaboration with OKI, the National Institute of Education, for three years, from 1998 to 2001, and

continues to work with the new body charged with implementing the reform plans, KAOKSZI. As a result of this British Council Project, a Baseline Study was conducted (and published as Volume 1 in this series - Fekete et al, 1999) to document the state of English language education in Hungary, as a foundation for reforming the English exams. Some 40 teachers have been extensively trained in test development and item writing, the authors of this volume and colleagues have been trained as teacher trainers and developers of in-service courses, and materials have been prepared to train teachers in marking student performances on writing tasks. Using locally produced videos of student performance, teachers are also being trained to assess students on speaking tasks and to conduct such speaking test as interlocutors. And of course, as documented in the second volume of this series, many test tasks and test items have been written, edited, revised, piloted and calibrated, in order to contribute to a bank of suitable materials that will be available for use in the new examinations. The British Council is to be congratulated for its foresight in supporting this Project, without which the in-service course reported in this volume would not have been written, nor would this volume have been produced.

However, this volume is also a great achievement by a considerable number of dedicated and enthusiastic people. Firstly, it is the result of hard work by the editors and authors, who have carefully crafted their account of the in-service course. Secondly, it is the product of the teacher trainers and advisers who designed the course, wrote and rewrote the materials, organised the delivery of the course, not once but twice, and actually taught it, observed participants working on the materials, evaluated the work, and commented extensively on the success, strengths and weaknesses of their work, and revised the materials again and again in the light of that experience. And very importantly, it is the result of the participation of those colleagues who attended the course, contributed enthusiastically to it, and through their involvement and thoughtful criticism helped to improve it.

I am honoured to have been invited to write this Foreword to this excellent volume and I comment it to its readers. I am certain you will find it interesting and useful and I share the authors' hopes that you will be influenced by it.