

Hungarian Students' Performances on English and German Tests

Results of a Large-scale Assessment Project

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Background

- School knowledge and examination reform;
- National Core Curriculum and Frame Curricula
- Timing
 - pilot: April 2000
 - live: May-June 2000

Aims and research questions

To explore:

- students' levels in the two most frequently taught modern languages
 - attitudes and motivations
 - cognitive skills
- foreign language learning conditions in state schools
- trends in different school types
- how type of settlement, parents' educational background, choice of foreign languages, intensity of FLL are interrelated

To provide feedback:

- to students, schools and other stakeholders
- to Ministry of Education to allow them to set realistic achievement targets for curricula and exams, and rationale for allocating funds.

Methods

Participants

A representative sample of students in years 6 (age 12; n = 8974), 8 (age 14; n = 8307) and 10 (age 16; n = 11317) in Hungarian state schools

Instruments

- Language test booklets enquiring into students' listening comprehension, reading comprehension and writing skills in English and German
- Range of tasks: from one-word and sentence level to more complex language

Table 1 Components of test booklet for Year 8

Skills	Task	Input	Response	No of items
Reading 1	Match notice with meaning	Public notices and their meanings	Filling in letters	10
Reading 2*	Match quiz question with answer	Quiz questions and answers	Filling in letters	8
Reading 3	Match words with definitions	Definitions	Filling in letters	10
Reading 4*	Match titles with texts	Titles and blurbs	Filling in letters	8
Reading 5*	Match advertisement with missing words	Advertisements	Filling in letters	9
Listening 1	Multiple choice on videos	Conversation (scripted)	Filling in letters	7
Listening 2*	MC on planning a holiday	Conversation (scripted)	Filling in letters	8
Writing	Letterwriting	Diary with notes	Informal letter, evaluated according to marking scheme	

- Standardized test on inductive reasoning
- Questionnaire for learners on their attitudes and motivation
- Questionnaire for schools on teaching conditions

Procedure

All instruments were administered in May and June 2000 in 45-minute class sessions at students' schools. Reliability was ensured by centrally developed manuals and copies according to required number, standardized rubrics and centrally produced cassettes, one person being responsible for each school, and central marking (with special marking scale for writing tasks) over the summer.

Results

Test data have been analyzed in two phases. In phase one, methods of classical test theories were applied, reliability coefficients (Cronbach alpha) were computed in this framework, and, test results were presented as percentages of the total test scores. These type of detailed results were sent back to the participating schools, and summaries compiled on the basis of these figures were presented to ministry officials and policy makers. In phase two, methods of IRT are used and more sophisticated reporting scales are to be developed. These analyses are still in progress.

This paper presents the overall results of the project using the outcomes of the first phase of data analysis.

Students' performances on tests of English and German as foreign languages

Table 2 Test results (%)

Year		English			German		
		Reading	Writing	Listening	Reading	Writing	Listening
6	Mean	57.55	61.59	81.74	52.44	57.97	61.47
	Std. Dev.	26.41	26.30	19.40	25.05	22.91	15.66
8	Mean	60.01	29.20	64.99	59.23	19.89	52.51
	Std. Dev.	28.25	29.56	22.69	25.50	26.08	18.74
10	Mean	61.09	46.72	63.49	54.02	31.20	61.60
	Std. Dev.	23.70	31.54	19.06	24.27	26.78	19.54

- A wide range of performances was found: some students could hardly copy words into slots or attempt some tasks, while some others achieved top scores on most tasks.
- In English, listening was students' strongest skill, writing their poorest. Reading tasks were most reliable. Same results for German in years 6 and 10, but not in year 8.
- Average scores on German tasks were lower than on English ones.

The impact of some background factors on achievements

Regional differences in language study

Table 3 Ratio of learners of English and German across regions in year 8

Region	Language (%)	
	English	German
Central Hungary	72.2	27.8
Central Transdanubia	28.0	72.0
Western Transdanubia	10.4	89.6
Southern Transdanubia	26.6	73.4
Northern Hungary	57.0	43.0
Northern Great Plain	57.8	42.2
Southern Great Plain	63.9	36.1
Total	49.3	50.7

Table 4 Test results by region at year 8 (%)

Region	English reading	English listening	English writing	German reading	German listening	German writing
Central Hungary	61.6	64.5	30.6	50.1	50.2	21.1
Central Tansdanubia	56.3	67.3	27.6	61.1	56.2	21.2
Western Transdanubia	75.5	68.1	41.4	62.2	55.3	23.1
Southern Transdanubia	60.0	63.9	22.4	63.6	53.9	23.3
Northern Hungary	58.7	65.8	26.7	59.5	50.7	14.2
Northern Great Plain	60.2	64.6	32.2	59.2	52.3	17.6
Southern Great Plain	57.2	64.6	26.1	54.5	44.7	16.2
Total	60.0	65.0	29.2	59.2	52.5	19.9

Table 5 Test results by the type of settlement (%)

Year	Type of settlement	English reading	English listening	English writing	German reading	German listening	German writing
6	Village below 2,500 inhabitants	44.7	73.5	48.7	53.7	59.6	56.4
	Village above 2,500 inhabitants	51.9	79.5	58.3	55.6	63.4	58.6
	Town below 35,000 inhabitants	57.3	84.3	61.6	47.6	60.1	55.4
	Town above 35,000 inhabitants	60.5	84.9	67.2	51.3	61.8	60.3
	Budapest	67.1	83.1	65.0	58.8	66.0	62.9
	Total	57.5	81.8	61.6	52.4	61.5	58.0
8	Village below 2,500 inhabitants	51.2	59.5	17.2	58.3	52.3	18.0
	Village above 2,500 inhabitants	55.7	61.3	23.3	62.9	56.1	19.8
	Town below 35,000 inhabitants	57.7	64.7	27.4	58.9	51.4	21.4
	Town above 35,000 inhabitants	63.3	68.3	34.3	57.4	50.1	18.0
	Budapest	68.1	68.4	38.7	55.0	57.6	29.5
	Total	59.8	64.8	28.9	59.2	52.7	19.7

The role of parental background

Table 6 Ratio of year 8 learners of English and German in relation to mothers' educational background

Mother's education	Language (%)	
	English	German
8 year primary	40.7	59.3
Vocational	41.6	58.4
School-leaving exam	48.7	51.3
3-4 year college	56.3	43.7
5-6 year university	65.8	34.2
Total	48.9	51.1

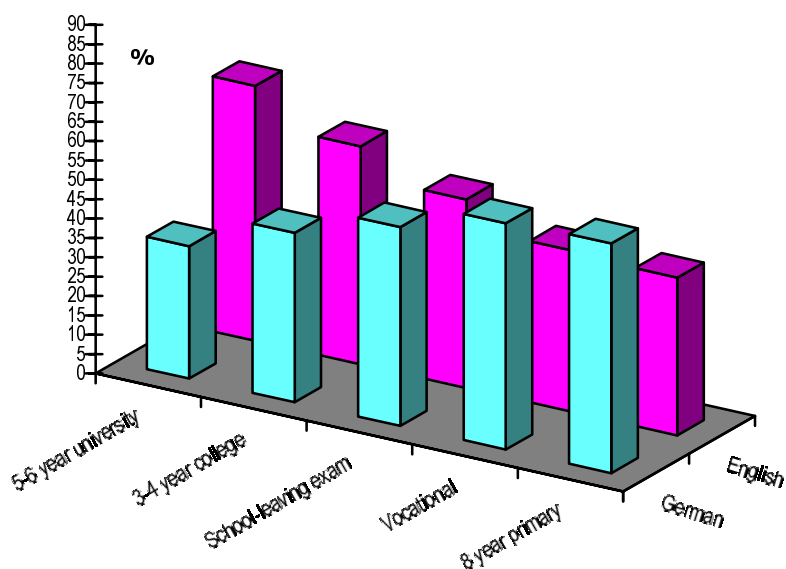


Figure 1. Ratio of year 10 learners of English and German in relation to mothers' educational background

The impact of students' general cognitive skills

Table 7 Participants' performances on inductive reasoning test by the language studied (%)

Year	English	German	None	Total
6	35.6	33.7	32.0	34.3
8	48.2	46.2	45.2	46.8
10	57.4	53.9	55.9	55.8

Students' attitudes and motivation towards language learning and classroom activities

Table 8 Students' attitudes towards learning modern languages (Likert scale 1-5)

Year	6		8		10	
	E	G	E	G	E	G
1. I like this language a lot.	3.71	3.49	3.56	3.21	3.82	3.23
2. Knowing this language is useless for me.	1.52	1.63	1.46	1.67	1.33	1.52
3. My parents think it is important for me to know this language.	4.52	4.42	4.47	4.28	4.48	4.33
4. I am interested in the speakers of this language.	3.72	3.47	3.56	3.27	3.73	3.31
5. I am interested in films and popmusic in this language.	3.79	3.12	3.87	3.14	4.00	3.19
6. The language classes are terribly boring.	2.15	2.19	2.36	2.40	2.43	2.47
7. My aptitude is low, I am a hopeless language learner.	2.16	2.24	2.26	2.31	2.13	2.29
8. I learn this language with ease.	3.36	3.17	3.13	3.01	3.31	3.03
9. More hard work and willpower are necessary to be more successful.	3.73	3.92	3.89	3.96	4.07	4.13
10. I cannot perform any better at this language, no matter how hard I try.	2.04	2.22	2.09	2.17	1.92	2.08
11. I like to deal with this language in my free time.	2.77	2.58	2.50	2.27	2.67	2.24
12. I often fail to succeed in the study of this language.	2.65	2.78	2.59	2.70	2.49	2.72
13. I fear oral reports in this language.	2.64	2.76	2.53	2.67	2.32	2.43
14. We study from a bad book.	1.79	1.78	2.05	2.14	2.12	2.13
15. Our language teacher is well-prepared and enthusiastic.	4.17	4.30	4.02	4.15	3.94	4.09
16. Our language teacher is strict with us.	2.65	2.61	2.69	2.75	2.73	2.80
17. Our language teacher is just.	3.98	4.14	3.77	3.94	3.73	3.82
18. I think our language teacher does not like me.	2.08	2.01	2.09	2.07	2.07	2.04
19. I never understand the teacher's explanations.	1.93	1.90	2.01	1.96	1.91	1.87
20. The teacher keeps looking for errors.	1.79	1.76	1.79	1.75	1.78	1.74

E = English G = German

Table 9 Distribution of plans for language learning in the future by year and language studied (%)

Year	6		8		10	
	English	German	English	German	English	German
Stop ASAP	12.0	13.6	8.8	14.9	6.1	11.5
School-leaving exam	17.1	23.8	19.8	25.5	17.1	26.8
Intermediate proficiency exam	25.8	28.9	31.9	31.9	45.7	41.4
Advanced proficiency exam	24.8	20.3	28.2	20.0	22.3	14.9
College degree	7.8	6.0	4.6	4.1	4.4	3.3
University degree	12.6	7.5	6.7	3.6	4.4	2.1

Table 10 Frequency of classroom activities by year and language studied (Likert scale 1-5)

Year	6		8		10	
	Eng-lish	Ger-man	Eng-lish	Ger-man	Eng-lish	Ger-man
1. Answer questions.	3.83	3.72	3.71	3.65	3.79	3.71
2. Talk about pictures.	2.79	2.48	2.64	2.49	2.55	2.51
3. Act out dialogue or role-play.	2.54	2.55	2.38	2.34	2.49	2.42
4. Recite memorized text.	3.17	3.17	2.91	3.11	2.78	2.86
5. Talk freely.	2.42	2.37	2.61	2.57	2.75	2.68
6. Copy from board or book.	3.31	3.38	3.02	3.05	2.59	2.81
7. Write a dictation.	2.44	2.57	2.44	2.55	2.19	2.34
8. Solve grammar exercises.	3.71	3.84	3.77	3.88	3.94	4.10
9. Understand grammar explanations.	3.57	3.54	3.44	3.46	3.48	3.52
10. Write compositions.	1.97	2.02	2.18	2.24	2.28	2.18
11. Write vocabulary tests.	3.43	3.37	3.38	3.26	3.08	3.17
12. Write sentences with words.	3.39	3.52	3.20	3.42	2.99	3.28
13. Listen to taperecorder.	3.48	2.51	3.39	2.51	3.02	2.61
14. Listening comprehension tasks.	3.51	3.14	3.33	2.93	3.06	2.88
15. Watch video.	1.37	1.25	1.40	1.27	1.31	1.24
16. Translate heard texts.	3.25	3.00	2.92	2.74	2.50	2.57
17. Translate read texts.	4.12	4.11	4.06	4.04	3.94	3.95
18. Read out texts.	4.09	4.07	3.96	3.88	3.73	3.61
19. Read text to understand main message.	3.81	3.83	3.76	3.73	3.72	3.63
20. Read stories or articles.	2.70	2.29	2.82	2.51	2.93	2.54
21. Work in pairs.	2.73	2.41	2.81	2.56	3.01	2.74
22. Work in teams.	2.57	2.51	2.56	2.62	2.72	2.66
23. Work alone.	3.85	3.86	3.57	3.58	3.32	3.41
24. Play language games.	2.65	2.52	2.19	2.16	2.07	1.95
25. Write tests.	3.58	3.62	3.55	3.59	3.47	3.58

Table 11 The popularity of classroom activities among year 6 students (Likert scale 1-5)

Year	6		8		10	
	Eng-lish	Ger-man	Eng-lish	Ger-man	Eng-lish	Ger-man
1. Answering questions.	3.17	3.13	2.91	2.87	3.05	2.95
2. Talking about pictures.	3.29	3.10	2.99	2.88	3.06	2.94
3. Acting out dialogue or roleplay.	3.38	3.32	3.01	2.92	2.98	2.86
4. Reciting memorised text.	2.95	2.94	2.76	2.85	2.76	2.87
5. Talking freely.	3.65	3.55	3.47	3.40	3.51	3.39
6. Copying from board or book.	3.14	3.32	3.05	3.16	2.79	3.02
7. Writing a dictation.	2.50	2.59	2.54	2.62	2.58	2.70
8. Solving grammar exercises.	3.06	3.05	2.84	2.78	3.01	2.91
9. Understanding grammar explanations.	3.15	3.10	2.92	2.83	3.05	2.92
10. Writing compositions.	2.51	2.45	2.48	2.43	2.71	2.53
11. Writing vocabulary tests.	2.85	2.70	2.65	2.53	2.73	2.67

Table 11 (continued)

12. Writing sentences with words.	3.26	3.26	3.01	3.02	3.05	3.01
13. Listening to taperecorder.	4.27	4.02	3.81	3.62	3.55	3.50
14. Doing listening comprehension tasks.	3.39	3.24	3.17	2.97	3.22	3.08
15. Watching video.	4.17	4.06	4.03	3.92	4.02	3.89
16. Translating heard texts.	3.11	2.94	2.89	2.77	2.99	2.90
17. Translating read texts.	3.42	3.31	3.30	3.15	3.46	3.36
18. Reading out texts.	3.60	3.64	3.35	3.33	3.36	3.31
19. Reading texts to understand main message.	3.39	3.30	3.26	3.13	3.41	3.26
20. Reading stories or articles.	3.38	3.17	3.30	3.08	3.49	3.26
21. Working in pairs.	3.88	3.82	3.74	3.66	3.64	3.63
22. Working in teams.	3.77	3.76	3.67	3.66	3.58	3.59
23. Working alone.	3.19	3.10	2.86	2.80	2.90	2.77
24. Playing language games.	3.93	3.77	3.44	3.26	3.40	3.23
25. Writing tests.	2.66	2.60	2.33	2.27	2.39	2.31

Discussion

Empirical data reflect what has been suggested in a variety of sources and by teachers, and by folk wisdom. A variety of levels characterize Hungarian students in state schools. Students' receptive skills are stronger than their writing skill. Overall performances on English tests are outscore achievements in German.

English is winning over German, not because of learners' integrative orientations, but because it is perceived in Hungarian society as the language of international communication and a means of achieving socio-economic advantage. Social trends are not counterbalanced but further strengthened in state education.

Regional factors do play an important role in language choice and test results. German achievements are higher in traditionally ethnic areas and closer to Austria, whereas bigger settlements seem to ensure better results at English.

The most frequent classroom activities are the more traditional ones focusing on language form, reading and translation. This is a somewhat stronger tendency for German than for English. Students tend to dislike form-focused tasks more than meaning-based activities.

Areas for further research

Testing speaking is a must in the long run. More external control should be applied when administering booklets, and this should become a routine not a threat. Appropriate scheduling, training and standardization are necessary on a large scale. Infrastructure must be improved, and such studies should become regular (annual) practice for all stakeholders. A bank of piloted and calibrated tasks is necessary. Classroom observation should also be applied for triangulation purposes and teachers should be made aware of the results and responsible for the implementation of ongoing projects. Finally, other foreign languages are also to be included, and comparative international studies should be conducted for Hungarians to know where we are and what we can aim for.

