POSSIBLE APPROACHES TO THE PROBLEM OF NOT HAVING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE EXAM BY THE END OF THE UNIVERSITY YEARS

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Abstract: In Hungary, a number of students are not able to acquire the required language exam by the end of the university years. It is a very actual problem in our education system, so in this study I make an attempt to reveal its reasons by finding the possible approaches to the question. I intend to gain up this problem from three possible ways. Firstly, I deal with the disadvantageous students; I try to reveal the root or origin of their drawbacks. There are numerous factors of students' socio-biology that make them different from the average. In the second part we try to understand the language learner types, which contain three categories: institutional learning, extracurricular language learning and having supportive free time activities. The last approach to the problem is from the view of language pedagogy. In this part I examine mainly the methodology, the mediation of the language content. To one part of my survey I used quantitative method and I asked students about their schooling, language lessons, residence, cultural life and parents. To the other part I used qualitative method by asking teachers about their opinion of the Hungarian education system, methodology, motivation and disadvantageous students. The results show that the people who did not manage to acquire a language exam by the end of the university years are disadvantageous in the respect of their social strata and residence.

Key words: language exam, foreign language, language learning, language teaching

1. Introduction

Governments throughout the world must make education a national priority, which has many different reasons. First of all, it is one of the basic human rights. Secondly economic growth and development are closely related to the quality of education. Then providing an important venue for socialization, schools are a fountainhead of cultural norms and values. Although the system of education should give everyone the same opportunity, for many student's equality will never become a reality because of their intelligence, social class and residence, type of school or family background. (Andor,2000) These problems can be experienced also in the field of language learning.

An actual problem of the Hungarian education system is that there are so many students who cannot receive their degrees as they do not manage to get a language exam until they finish their studies at university or college. It can have different reasons and different possible approaches. In addition, according to a new law, students need to have an intermediate (B2) language exam by the end of the secondary school.

When Hungary joined the European Union in 2004 it was necessary to transform the structure of the education. (Fazekas,2006) That was the time when the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) was introduced. As its title says it is a framework of reference. It was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency. The CEFR describes foreign language proficiency at six levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, C1 and C2. In higher education school-leavers need to have a language exam in level B1 (threshold or intermediate) or B2 (vantage or upper intermediate) to get their degree. In certain majors

at MSc/MA (master's degree) students even need a C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency or advanced) or a professional (for example in business, law or medicine) one. (Council,2001)

Table 1: Common European Framework of References for Languages

Level group	Level group name	Level	Level name
A	Basic user	A1	Breakthrough or beginner
A	Basic user	A2	Way stage or elementary
B	Independent user	B1	Threshold or intermediate
B	Independent user	B2	Vantage or upper intermediate
C	Proficient user	C1	Effective operational proficiency or advanced
C	Proficient user	C2	Mastery or proficiency

The duties of universities and colleges do not contain language teaching, it is the task of public education, but it is compulsory for graduates to take a final exam in a foreign language at the end of secondary school. So it makes us think why there are so many students who are not able to reach at least level B2 in the next few years. (Vágó,2007)

According to a research by EF Proficiency Index in 2015 Hungary was on the 21st place from 70 countries considering their language knowledge and 35% of the population can speak a foreign language. We may think this rate is low, but if we have a look at the results of the world ranking it is an average. However, we can be surprised if we take into consideration the low number of passed out degrees. So the question can emerge where the root of this problem can be found. We cannot say we start learning a language too late as in most of the primary school's parents can choose a foreign language for their kids in the first grade. Nevertheless, it is arguable whether teachers use suitable methods to acquire it in the matter of teaching both skills and pragmatics. (Balázs,Kocsis and Vágó,2010)

By the new Hungarian higher education strategy, from 2016 just those students can get into MSc or MA who has a B2 complex language exam, and from 2020 this exam will be necessary to be admitted to BSc or BA by universities and colleges. We may think it can be the solution to the problem of not having a language exam by the end of university years, but new dilemmas can also occur.

2. Methods

The main question of my minor research is why there are so many students who do not manage to acquire a language exam by the end of the university years. I intend to approach this problem from three possible ways. Firstly, I deal with disadvantageous students; I try to reveal the root or origin of their drawbacks. There are numerous factors of students' socio-biology (their age, gender, social strata, and residence or learning disorders) that make them different from the average. (Gardner,1985) In the second part we try to understand the language learner types, which contain three categories. The first one is institutional learning, the second includes extracurricular language learning and the third one is about learners who have supportive free time activities. The last approach to the problem is from the view of language pedagogy. In this part I examine mainly the methodology, the mediation of the language content.

I made a minor research and asked twenty people to fill in a questionnaire with fourteen questions. Each of them had the problem of not having a language exam by the end of the university years. The questionnaire contained questions about their gender, age, residence, type of primary and secondary school, whether they took part in extracurricular language lessons, the type of their first degree, if they

learnt a language during their college or university years, their learning disorders, whether they lived abroad for a longer period or the regularity they go outside Hungary. It also included questions about their parents' qualifications and language knowledge. The results were used in the examination of the first and second approach of the problem. To the third one I made qualitative interviews with five secondary school teachers and we talked about language pedagogy. The most important components of it are the language learner, the language teacher and of course the methodology, which means the mediation of the language content by teaching grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and pragmatics. The language learners have cognitive (e.g. skills, intelligence, learning strategies) and affective (e.g. motivation, confidence, language stress) characteristics. Regarding the language teacher there are also essential factors like his/her personality, process of teaching or feedback. (Hatch,1992) I tried to concentrate especially on these aspects during the discussions with the language teachers. I asked them about their opinion of the Hungarian education system, methodology, motivation and disadvantageous students.

3. Results

3.1. Disadvantageous students

According to my research people who did not manage to have a language exam by the end of the university years are disadvantageous in the respect of their social strata and residence. It is a fact that the poorest children have little chance of becoming doctors, lawyers, engineers or teachers. Unfortunately, these students with disadvantageous backgrounds usually end up in the worst schools and cannot achieve good results. (Németh,1997) As a result of it they turn their backs on a university education, because they have a fear of having debt. Many of the asked students have debt, without it they would not have been able to attend university. They just hoped they could pay it back from their future salary. This anxiety about money resulted in not having extracurricular language lessons during the university years.

Most of them attended a secondary technical school. It is interesting, because as we know in grammar school's students have to learn two languages while in a technical one the focus is mainly on learning a profession not on languages. In these school's students can learn a language on maximum four lessons per week and many times the schools have difficulties in separating the classes, which means that the teacher has to motivate around thirty people at the same time. (Imre,2007) The question can emerge whether technical schools will be able to prepare students for a B2 language exam in such circumstances, and whether those parents who want their children to attend university will choose a technical secondary school. So, they have to consider which school offers a high level of language education.

It was essential to ask the students about the qualification of their parents, because as we know we learn our values from our parents and we usually follow their example. One of the well-known statements of educational sociology is that the school results are strongly influenced by the family background, social and economic situation and cultural standards. If we want to measure it, the simplest way is to examine the parents' educational level. However, in the past fathers had higher level qualifications, many surveys show that the mother's qualification has always had a greater effect on the child's school performance. (Csapó,2001) As we can see in the diagram the results show that most of the asked people's parents have vocational qualification and less than 10% have university or college degree.
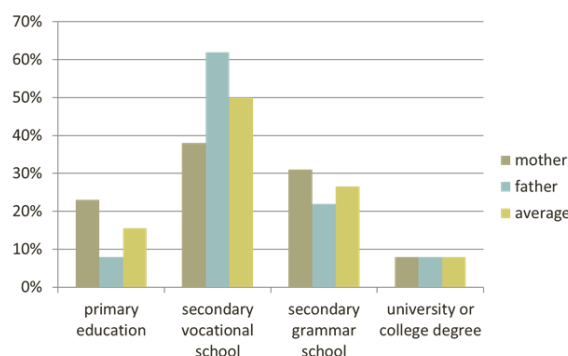
Figure 1: Qualification of the parents

According to the asked teachers our education system is not adequate in the respect of language teaching. Unfortunately, many parents think if their children get good grades their knowledge is improving, and their oral skills are getting better. Many students learn the new vocabulary and grammatical rules for a test, they get good marks and they forget it soon. Simply it is not built into their knowledge, because the lessons are not speech and practice but theory and quantity centred. Of course, it does not mean that grades are not important, but it is indispensable for parents to clarify that knowledge is more essential than grades. Although it seems simple, those parents who do not speak a language usually do not know how important it is to learn, how to support their child and which the most effective ways to improve their skills are. (Fekete, Major and Nikolov,1999) The effects can be seen if at least one parent can speak a foreign language, but naturally it also matters whether he/she speaks and uses it or "just" has an exam. Unfortunately, there is just a narrow stratum of parents who consider language learning essential and is able to promote their children in learning it. As we can see in the result of my research 76% of the parents cannot speak any foreign languages.
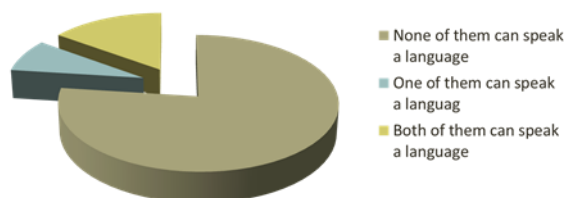

Figure 2: Language knowledge of the parents

3.2. Language learner types

The second approach to the problem is language learner types. First, we can talk about the institutional learner type who learns the language just at school. Then there is extracurricular learning, which type contains those students who have extra lessons outside school, and the third type includes those who have supportive free time activities like reading or watching films in the original language. (Bárdos,2000)

The questionnaire included questions also about the students' extracurricular lessons and the results show that most of them did not have any. As I mentioned above it has mainly financial reasons. Many teachers emphasized that it is difficult to say whether public education can prepare students for the B2 language exam. As for its reason, it is not difficult to explain. Language exams do not measure just the performance of the schools, a great part of the students attend language schools or have a private teacher. So it is almost impossible to determine how the role and responsibility of public and private education is shared in successful exams. Since paying a private teacher is not affordable for everyone, the financial background of the parents can play a major role in having a language exam. (Szálkáné

and Lukács,1998) Another interesting result of the research is that 62% did not learn any languages during higher education.
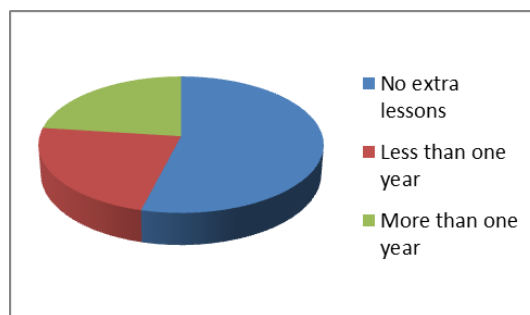

Figure 3: Extracurricular lessons

Nowadays we can find ICT (information and communication technology) devices in many schools supporting new and creative ways of learning. Computers play a significant role in the learning process especially in learning languages. It is a fact that any kinds of application that we use in the classroom or at home enhance the better learning. The computer assisted language learning is flexible, rich, interactive and effective. Besides other supportive free time activities like reading or watching films in the original language play an important role in improving our skills. 40% of the asked people usually read the news on the internet in English or play computer games, but just 20% of them have ever tried to watch a film or read a book in original. The rest 40% has never done any of these activities.

3.3 Language pedagogy

The third possible approach to the problem is language pedagogy. To this approach I made qualitative interviews with secondary school teachers. We talked about their opinion of the Hungarian education system, methodology, motivation and disadvantageous students. And the question emerged whether it is possible for every student to get a B2 language exam by the end of secondary school as the new Hungarian higher education strategy requires. I asked their opinion whether institutional education enough. Although it sounds incredible and according to language teachers there are not enough lessons, statistics say that Hungary is in the first place in Europe in the respect of the numbers of the language lessons. It means that a Hungarian student in an average secondary school gets twice as many lessons as an Austrian one. (Kontra and Bartha,2010) And of course those who attend a bilingual or language preparatory classes get even more. According to the estimation of one of the asked teachers, students in a bilingual class have as many lessons in just the first year as the non-bilinguals have in four years. There is one more significant difference: in Hungary classes are separated into two groups for language lessons not like in other countries. Being aware of these facts we would expect high results, but we are not at the forefront in the statistics. That is why the question can emerge what level of language knowledge students can reach by the end of secondary school. Naturally for children in bilingual classes it is not a complicated task, but not all students from preparatory classes can acquire a B2 exam. In these classes there are 13 language lessons per week in the first year and 5 in the following ones, so all together they get more than one thousand in five years. (Nikolov and Ottó,2006)

No doubt that the time spent in school could be used in a more effective way. By the asked teachers the knowledge of the students should be at least at level A2 by the end of primary school. Nonetheless many of them get to the starter group at the beginning of secondary school, so practically these students start learning the language again and the previous five years is worth nothing.

However, many students are aware of the importance of learning a language, they invest more energy in literature, mathematics or history, because there is greater pressure from those subjects. Unfortunately, there are also language teachers who make the pupils learn by heart without understanding, and it can work for a short time, but they are not able to put it into practice and they forget it soon.

Motivation is an interesting factor according to the teachers, because from one side language lessons are more interesting for the learners than other ones, because they are more active, there are discussions, listening exercises, drills and games. If they have to work in pairs or download something from the internet or work on it in groups, children become undisciplined easily. So, this is the reason why they do not take it seriously. But from the other side there is a pressure from the parents and the society that it is necessary to speak a language and of course they want to understand their favourite songs and films. In second language learning (as in every field of learning) motivation is the crucial force, which determines how much energy the learner devotes to it. As it is a complex phenomenon it includes the individual's drive, need for achievement, and desire for stimulation or curiosity. (Dörnyei,2001) By the asked teachers basically we can make difference between two types of language learners. The first type contains those students who have genuine interest in the second language and want to speak it to be able to communicate and gain closer contact with the culture. And the second type includes students with instrumental motivation who are more interested in how the language exam can be a useful instrument to achieve their further goals like getting a qualification.

In our education system students do not have much opportunity to practice speaking at school. Although classes are separated into two groups on language lessons, there are about fifteen students in a group. As it is one of the most necessary skills, without extracurricular lessons students do not have much chance to practice it in class and pass the oral exam. A language is not just a subject, but a communicational form, so we should learn by using it. Learners should have many positive feedbacks about his/her language knowledge, for example by taking part in exchange students' programs.

Learning a language is quite difficult and requires great concentration, and it can be effective just if the student has an exact aim with it. That is why the teacher has to give enough information and explain how the world opens for them if they can speak a foreign language. She/he also has to demonstrate how they have to learn, how often they have to repeat or what methods can be used for developing our memory. (Brown and Englewood,1987) According to the asked teachers, pupils do not really like following instructions like using dictionaries instead of online translation programs, or concentrating on learning minimum 45 minutes without having any breaks and having a look at their mobiles. These activities can disturb concentrating on the topic and it will not be successful. The so called 'multitasking' (a method which is used for doing different things at the same time) is not working in language learning. It is not so difficult to be absolved from having language lessons, being rated or taking exams, but the simplest way is not necessarily the best one. Nowadays, when speaking a foreign language is crucial, it is necessary for students with learning difficulties to be able to take part in language education. There is much proof that students with dyslexia can also learn a foreign language successfully.

4. Discussion

From the results we can conclude that the success of being able to pass a B2 level of language exam by the end of the university years mainly depends on the students' social strata, residence, the type of the secondary school they attend, the motivation and the extracurricular education. Besides the Hungarian education system also has some drawbacks which pull the appropriate pace of language learning back. Moreover, there is not much possibility for learners to practice speaking at school. Out of bilingual and preparatory classes, it is almost impossible for students to reach a B2 level of language exam without extracurricular lessons.

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