

Testing Hungarian as a Foreign Language ECL exam: text in focus

Hungarian as communication

I will never forget teaching Hungarian to a group of students from various countries (Japan, Germany, Finland, Poland, China) participating in different Erasmus projects in Hungary. For weeks, we were only inching along with the basics of Hungarian pronunciation, vocabulary and short everyday phrases when finally one of the students inquired ›how to order a meal in a restaurant‹. We might coin this problem as classical.

Although today, in the 21st century both teachers and researchers agree upon the necessity of the communicative approach that really meets the needs of learners of Hungarian, the *know how* of the method labelled as communicative is far from being elaborated in the field of teaching Hungarian as a Foreign Language. The agglutinative Hungarian language, with its extensive morphology, provides a great variety of abundant forms that ought to be structured in a semantic array, what is more, the pragmatic value of each form should be also tagged. Furthermore, the form–function pairs of linguistic units are expected to be arranged according to an optional methodological and pedagogical progress outlined in the given syllabus. Controversies might arise frequently. For example, imperative is a grammatical unit essential in everyday communication even on waystage level (A2) but its proper morphophonological formation incorporates a fairly complex set of various rules. Thus, on beginners' level avoiding strategies (*Tessék / szíveskedjék / Legyen szíves + infinitivus*) are to be applied.

Even in the case of such a less taught language as Hungarian, there are numerous students who intend to test their command of it. ECL (European Consortium of Attainment in Modern Languages)

is an international language exam system that provides exams in both frequently spoken and less commonly taught languages of the European Union: Bulgarian, Czech, English, French, German, Italian, Polish, Rumanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Spanish and most of all, Hungarian as a Foreign Language. I wrote »most of all Hungarian« because the international secretariat of the ECL language system, launched in 1992 in London, has been located in Pécs, Hungary, within the Foreign Language Centre, University of Pécs since 1999.

ECL is a monolingual language exam assessing candidates' knowledge of Hungarian in terms of *communicative competence*: e.g. the appropriate use of Hungarian regarding the four skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

The notion of ›communicative competence‹ was first used by Dell Hymes, who considered Chomsky's language model (based on grammatical competence) to be inadequate and argued for a holistic conception of language. As he put it: »Such a theory of competence posits ideal objects in abstraction from sociocultural features that might enter into their description«. ¹ Hymes also modelled the speech event listing its components such as the setting or the participants of it, the interlocutors' goal, the manner they have while communicating. During the first language acquisition – besides the grammatical competence – the child acquires all these components of communication as well, since first language acquisition takes place in a real social context. The child while elaborating his/her code toward well-formed utterances learns what and how to say to whom. Mothers' speech directed to their children may even disclose elements of consciousness raising and correction related to the child's socially appropriate (*comme il faut*) talk. These must be learned by foreign learners, too, and exams must check them.

¹ Hymes 1967/2001, 55.

ECL language exam of Hungarian as a Foreign Language

ECL language exam of Hungarian, provided twice a year (June, December), assesses candidates' command of the Hungarian language in written (reading test and guided composition) and oral (listening comprehension and speaking) form on levels A2, B1, B2 and C1. Candidates have the opportunity to take a partial (either oral or written) or a complete exam in the same exam-tide. The examination levels in terms of Hungarian as a Foreign Language were aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference known as CEFR throughout several years of professional work². Due to this professional work ECL tests of Hungarian are harmonized with the CEFR levels in test construction, marking procedure and analysis of test results. ECL Certificate of Hungarian is internationally accepted and also an accredited certificate within Hungary satisfying the quality control requirements prescribed by the Hungarian Accreditation Centre for Foreign Language Examinations.³

What unit of language is suitable for the assessment of communicative competence? It is text, of course, which is a natural and coherent product of human verbal and mental behaviour, even if in the »Gutenberg galaxy« of our days we are accustomed to treating it rather a unit of written language. No doubt that a brief dialogue or an official speech delivered are types of text.⁴ The descriptive notion of ›product‹ disguises the dynamic feature of the text. It is always structured in a certain way to achieve a special communicative goal, in a certain speech event with culture-dependent facets. But it can be restructured by the interlocutors while communicating as a result of which the linear progress of text parts is an essential constituent of the text's overall content. To demonstrate this let me mention just the simplest case when the same utterance is repeated twice within the same text. In spite of the identical propositional meaning the second utterance never has the same function and thus not the same meaning within the linear progress of the text.

² Szabó 2011, Hány/Husztli/Szabó 2011.

³ Dávid 2002.

⁴ Tolcsvai 2001, 7.

The approach to language highlighting language in use, speech acts and functions does not assess linguistic competence in grammatical and translation tests but by authentic texts enriched by the style and register ...⁵

ECL exams assess the four skills on the basis of well-chosen language samples of Hungarian, authentic texts. No explicit grammar test is included. Both grammatical competence and lexical knowledge are elicited as integral parts of oral or written texts either produced or received by the candidates. For teachers of Hungarian as a Foreign Language it is evident that there is no effective communication without formal accuracy, but during ECL exams formal accuracy is assessed as it is realized or perceived by the candidate in a »usage event«⁶. Markers pay special attention to the form, the register used for a given purpose, the way propositional content is organized by the candidate. ECL exam being a monolingual exam does not contain a translation task.

ECL examinations make a distinction between productive (speaking and writing) and receptive skills (reading and listening) by the evaluation method of the tasks applied. Though the testing of each skill includes two tasks, listening and reading comprehension tasks are assessed by objective, discrete point tasks with 10 items in each. Performance of productive skills is evaluated by the examiners (during speaking exam) or markers (written communication) according to the standardized criteria of oral and written communication.

Levels and requirements

According to the CEFR there are six levels describing learner proficiency:

- Basic user: A1 (»breakthrough«) and A2 (»waystage«)
- Independent user: B1 (»threshold«) and B2 (»vantage«)
- Proficient user: C1 (»effective operational proficiency«) and C2 (»mastery«).

⁵ Huszti 2002, 166.

⁶ Langacker 1987, 66.

ECL	CEFR
	C2
LEVEL C1	C1
LEVEL B2	B2
LEVEL B1	B1
LEVEL A2	A2
	A1

As for the practical use of Hungarian, after successfully achieving level A2 (beginner level) the learner of Hungarian can get by as a tourist in Hungary (is able to ask questions, understand the simpler answers, go shopping etc.). After achieving level B1 the learner can look for a job in Hungary and work among Hungarian colleagues; (s)he starts understanding newspaper and radio news, TV programmes and can even try going to the cinema or theatre. Competence of level B2 (officially recognised as intermediate level in Hungary) enables the speaker to start studies in Hungarian secondary schools, colleges and universities. Successful learner of Hungarian on level C1 (officially recognised as advanced level in Hungary) becomes an equal partner of the native Hungarian speakers, writes, reads and speaks like they do, can study, work and do research among them. With competence C1 the learner can also continue expanding his /her knowledge of the Hungarian culture, literature and history.

How to choose the level of ECL exam? Level B1 is for learners who are already able to communicate with basic linguistic means in simple everyday situations and can understand, talk and write about familiar topics. Level B2 incorporates linguistic competence relying on more complex topics formulated in a sophisticated way. On this level comprehension of key issues of communication betw-

een native speakers is also expected from the candidate. Competence on level C1 covers formally excellent and appropriate verbal behaviour related to all kinds of fairly complex, unknown topics, expression and understanding ideas and opinion in a highly elaborated way.

The majority of the topics (fields of communication) might be familiar for the candidates from textbooks and can be found on the website of ECL (www.ecl.hu): they range from the ›individual‹ and ›place of living‹ to ›hobbies‹ or ›health and illnesses‹ etc. Naturally, special topics such as the ›protection of environment‹, ›globalisation‹ or the ›European Union‹ belong to higher language levels because of the complex ideas and vocabulary involved. But even in the case of topics common for most levels the communicative goals, the speech acts, the required linguistic forms by which they can be elaborated are not identical. While for example the topic of ›illness‹ on level B1 implores basic verbal behaviour needed on going to the GP (speech intentions in this formal situation: description of symptoms, asking for advice; specific lexical items), on level C1 the same topic has to be taken in its wider context covering such fields as ›medical research‹ or ›personal beliefs related to alternative methods of healing‹ – just to give a few examples.

As well as the various topics appear on all levels (including related speech acts that differ in their variety and lexical precision), the expected morphology and syntax are also graded level by level.

For instance level B2 includes an ability of the speaker to express verbally a wide range of emotions from disappointment to complaining, passing information in an indirect way or giving advice with precise argumentation. As for grammatical forms a candidate on level B2 is expected to compile all kinds of subordinate and coordinate compound sentences containing participles with complements. The knowledge of all Hungarian case suffixes, moods and tenses is a must. (S)he has to be a competent user of both regular and irregular nominal and verbal paradigmatic forms (in speech and in composition) and – let me demonstrate the special challenges of Hungarian – aware of even the slightest alternation of word order and different meaning of co-verbs (verbal prefixes).

To achieve all these goals competently the candidate should know a substantial variety of written and oral Hungarian texts of formal and informal register: newspaper articles, scientific reports,

radio interviews, authentic conversation between native speakers. What is more, substandard dialects and regional accents as well as background noises are to be handled on level C1 in listening comprehension tasks.

Reading and listening (receptive skills)

Each skill's test consists of two tasks. The two tasks offer two samples of Hungarian language and they preferably cover different topics. Optimally the two texts belonging to the task differ even in their fundamental communicative functions (descriptive, narrative, interaction, argumentation, expression of emotions etc.). Specific and characteristic linguistic forms co-occur with certain functions of language⁷ that is why it is preferable to have texts with varying functions in the two tasks (or more functions within the same text). This way the language sample is an appropriate representation of language ensuring balanced assessment.

In the tests (assessing reading and listening skills) candidates can always find an introductory line that helps them get prepared for the special content of the oncoming text. It is a brief but helpful meta-explanation of what topic, area of life is to be involved in the text. For the elaboration of the texts of the reading comprehension candidates are provided a set amount of time. In the listening comprehension tasks the text is played in real-time.

Each task contains ten items. In foreign language tests an item is a unit of the test that elicits responses which can be scored separately and related to the skill which the test measures as a whole. The most well-known and used item type for learners and teachers alike is a question. The questions (which can never be polar in ECL tests) elicit answers based on the text. Answering a given item (a question) the candidate gives a language sample that can be evaluated semi-objectively. Other task types (e.g. gap-filling, matching, multiple-choice task) are constructed in such a way so that the candidates' response could be evaluated objectively.

⁷ Jakobson 1960/1969.

Each test item has a background domain in the basic test. On lower levels candidates are expected to get the gist of a paragraph in order to be able to scan for specific information (e.g. in public notices, short travel brochures, simple forms, short news items, timetables etc.). On higher levels items may be more global. On level B2 or C1 the candidate has to be able to understand inferences of the text which can be deduced from the logical arrangement of the utterances, from its cohesive devices, contrasts or juxtapositions of the propositional content, that is, from the way the ideas are related to one another. On other occasions lexical connotations convey implications to be understood in the same way as various means of expression of the authorial intention have to be identified by the candidate.

In the listening comprehension tasks it is taken into consideration that the textual input is perceived in real-time. But proficient candidates of Hungarian must demonstrate the ability to extract information and implications from the text (recorded on a CD) that may include topics unfamiliar to them and may involve several speakers communicating at the same time.

In listening comprehension tasks the textual input is an audio-material that can be listened to twice. The length of the input texts in both reading and listening tasks can be found on the website of ECL exams.

Writing and speaking (productive skills)

In the case of productive skill tests the foreign learners are provided two tasks in which they have to produce language samples along the prompts specified. These language samples (guided compositions) are evaluated by the markers (evaluation criteria are also enlisted on the homepage of ECL). In writing tasks candidates are frequently required to write e-mails, letters, blog posts, essays as typical genres of written communication related to the communicative event specified in the task description and the level-dependent topic. The elicited language sample produced by the candidate must meet the length specification of the level. Each writing task is assessed according to the same criteria: morphological and syntactical

accuracy, spelling and composing, vocabulary, style and the effectiveness of task completion.

On levels B2 and C1 candidates have to cope with a wide range of specific topics. A competent writer – besides activating the relevant vocabulary – must demonstrate his/her capability of using descriptive, narrative and argumentative compositional techniques in order to make a coherent piece of composition satisfying the prompts of the task specifications.

The oral part of the ECL exam deserves special attention. ECL candidates are interviewed in pairs and odd numbers of candidates are interviewed in threes. The oral exam (which is recorded for future purposes) consists of two assessed parts (just as all the other skills) but they are preceded by an introductory warming-up conversation between the candidates. (Candidates may apply for taking the oral exam of the same level with a candidate they already know: friends, classmates, acquaintances.) They are asked to introduce one another (if they are acquaintances) or to ask questions from each other so that they get acquainted a bit. The function of this 3–5 minute-long conversation is to help the candidate get accustomed to the exam situation. The other two exam parts (each lasts for 5–8 minutes) are assessed by both examiners only one of which is in interaction with the candidates (asks questions, moderates, guides the dialogues, ensures equal chances for speaking for each candidate). First, each pair an accidentally chosen topic is given which the candidates have to talk about (in the form of a dialogue). It is the examiner's task to create a quasi real-life situation for the interlocutors by providing an ›information gap‹ related to the topic. The next part of the oral exam is done separately by each candidate: using visual stimulus (picture or set of pictures) they have to deliver a short speech (in the form of a monologue) on a certain topic that may range from descriptive elements to expressing opinion and argumentation.

Skills assessed and points allocated

Each skill is allocated 25 points each, that is the total score to be achieved at the ECL exam is 100. The exam is successful if the candidate reaches at least 40% of the total score in each skill, and a minimum of 60% in each partial exam (Oral exam: Speaking and Listening; Written exam: Reading and Writing).

- Listening comprehension: 25 points
- Reading comprehension: 25 points
- Written communication: 25 points
- Oral communication: 25 points
- Maximum total: 100 points
- Minimum pass level for a complete exam: 60 points
- Pass level per skill for a partial exam: 10 points

General remarks

ECL tests are constructed in the target country: i.e. Hungarian tests are constructed by native Hungarians. Due to this fact authentic texts are used which may carry intercultural issues for the candidates. However, tests are constructed in a special way so that no encyclopaedic knowledge could play any role in solving the tasks: interpretative background and all the operations necessary for the candidate to give good responses are either in the text or in the task description.

Candidates may find other exams of Hungarian as a Foreign Language.⁸ The learner needs to estimate his/her linguistic competence which language exam to choose. Some learners while communicating in Hungarian (in an inner mental procedure) always translate from their first language, some others rely on grammatical constructions in order to formulate their utterances.

Those students of Hungarian who wish to take the ECL exam can find sample tests on its website. The text-centred tasks of ECL

⁸ Hegedűs 2003.

lead the learners and candidates to Hungarian language as it is: language in use, language as a means communication.

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