

LSP Proficiency Examinations: "Euro-conformity" and "Hungarianness"

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Abstract

This paper opens with some thoughts in connection with the much-used catchword "Euro-conformity" referred to in the title. Then it moves on to describe the Language for Specific/ Specifiable Purposes (LSP) teaching practice in the Hungarian tertiary sector underlying LSP teachers' competence in providing LSP examinations. Finally, it describes an effort to standardise LSP examinations given by 15 universities and colleges in order to make them transparent and more comparable.

1 Background

Recent years have seen the emergence of testing as an important field within language teaching. This process is directly linked to the 1997 government decree concerning nationally recognised language examinations in Hungary. The decree sets out the updating of the system of national recognition, as well as the accreditation of new examination systems, and aims at advancing towards the European Union requirements for levels of foreign language competence.

2 "Euro-conform" examinations

The free movement of people and information within the European Union and increasing co-operation with non-member states necessitates the comparability of foreign language competence. With this aim in mind the Council of Europe decided to develop a Common European Framework of Reference for Language Learning and Teaching (henceforth Framework), which is an open-ended and dynamic system for the comprehensive, coherent and transparent description of objectives, methods and skills. Although the descriptions are not fully completed there are attempts throughout Europe to develop new examinations reflecting skills and abilities described in the Framework as well as to relate already-existing examinations to its proficiency levels.

Hungarian testing experts and applied linguists have already expressed their aversion to the uncritical adoption (or even adaptation) of language examinations developed by international language testing bodies. They seem to think that these examinations threaten the existence of well-established Hungarian bilingual examinations, which take Hungarian needs and interests more into account. Thus they defend the heavily translation-oriented, and until now solely recognised, examination offered by the Hungarian State Foreign Languages Examination Board (SFLEB). (cf. Bárdos, 1994 and Kontra, 1997) There is no reason not to protect our achievements in our proficiency tests and retain their (soundly) distinctive features, however, we need to be certain that what we are protecting measures the most-needed skills and sub-skills, and measures them well.

The situation is controversial: students aspiring to study abroad have to take international examinations, be it Cambridge, Goethe or TOEFL, regardless of having previously passed the Hungarian State Language Examination. On the other hand, students, having passed these internationally recognised examinations, have to go to "Rigó street" (SFLEB) to "nationalise" the examination. That is, to write the translation tasks so that they fulfil tertiary educational exit requirements or to get a salary supplement if they find work in the public sector.

Obviously, what we need is a compromise: the newly-developed language examinations should consider the recommendations formulated in the Framework as well as Hungarian needs, which should be identified by means of

needs analyses rather than intelligent guesswork or political considerations. The survey carried out by West and Crighton (forthcoming) reveals that several countries of the former Eastern bloc are making efforts to improve their testing systems, not exclusively in the field of language testing. It gives evidence that these processes involve the establishment and protection of national standards, as well as the shift from knowledge-based to competence-based assessment. The new Year 10 and Year 12 school-leaving language examinations being developed for the National Core Curriculum reflect not only the preferences of the Framework but also the results of international co-operation.

3 LSP teaching in the tertiary sector

The abolition of Russian as a compulsory language in the late 1980's resulted in Russian for Specific Purposes (RSP) teaching falling into the background and giving way to the teaching of foreign languages in institutions of higher education, in many cases at the basic or lower-intermediate level. However, since the middle of the 1990's LSP teaching has been gaining ground with revised objectives, content and teaching techniques, as distinct from former RSP teaching mostly aiming at equipping students with specialist terminology.

The need for LSP teaching is clearly justified by several needs analyses carried out among university students and in-work professionals (Fister, 1994, Koster-Radnai, 1997). A most comprehensive language audit carried out by Teemant, Varga and Heltai indicated that students are motivated to study the Russian, Italian and Spanish languages mostly for the general purpose of everyday communication whereas they consider the learning of English, German, French and Latin as important from the point of view of their future career (Teemant et. al: 1993, 91-99).

LSP teaching aims to satisfy these pre-work and in-work needs. Let me remark it here, that the "professional language" term we use in Hungarian, tends to refer exclusively to vocationally-oriented language learning and teaching whereas the English term ESP includes the former as well as academic purposes. The above-quoted needs analysis also suggests (as does common sense) that "professional language" teaching in the tertiary sector, most of all at universities, should cover the skills needed to conduct studies or to do scientific research in a foreign language (e.g. note-taking or research article writing skills) as well as skills needed to function effectively in the workplace.

In an ideal case, students can acquire these skills while using the terminology of their specialist area. However, the nation-wide reduction of language contact lessons (and the staff of language departments), together with the broadening of training areas and increasing number of courses offered by colleges and universities, makes it impossible for a language teacher to specialise in one subject area.

Our task is to identify the areas which students of diverse specialist fields can benefit from. One possible solution is to integrate different fields into specific purposes language teaching for engineering students, law students etc. which is an already-existing practice, or an even broader integration under the umbrella term of business communication. These processes can be justified by the trends of knowledge relativisation and the transformation of traditional professional training in order to train "convertible experts" who can easily move between specialist areas.

4 LSP proficiency testing: opportunities and threats

LSP testing differs from more general purpose language testing in two important aspects: it is characterised by (situational and interactional) authenticity of task and the interaction between language knowledge and specific purpose content (background) knowledge. (Douglas, 1997) LSP examinations face serious problems in terms of content and face validity (if their specificity level is low), practicality (separate tests for each target discipline) and reliability (subjective scoring of authentic tasks, comparability of parallel tests). In recent years, several public ESP proficiency tests have been withdrawn (TEEP and PLAB) or their specificity reduced (IELTS) (West, 1998). Keeping LSP examinations at the institutional level is one possible solution. (Szépe, 1994) However, the decree seems to have put an end to the existence of in-house examinations as exit language requirements, which is a development with regard to test quality and comparability.

In terms of testing expertise we can say that a number of tertiary language teachers have taken part in LSP training courses in Hungary and abroad, partly in the framework of the Ministry of Education and World Bank funding programmes or, in the case of the English language, British Council ESP projects, where they have got acquainted with the techniques employed in LSP testing. This expertise should be put together in order to devise a comprehensive LSP proficiency examination, rather than letting those outside everyday LSP teaching practice do so.

Although description and evaluation of the State LSP Examination falls outside the scope of this paper, I would like to note here that the "Special language examinations /supplemented with professional terminology" (Bárdos, 1986: 59) that SFLEB offers, as even their name suggests, concentrate mainly on specialist terminology rather than professional language use in a variety of situations.

5 An attempt to develop a comprehensive LSP proficiency examination

The role of the British Council in enhancing ESP teaching expertise has already been indicated. The Service English Project (SEP in short) was launched as early as 1991 in response to ESP needs in the tertiary sector. Since then they organise and sponsor workshops, in-country training courses and short and longer courses abroad, as well as conference participation in order to equip teachers with sound professional knowledge to meet the ESP challenge. More than 60 teachers of its member institutions have participated in the 3-month Edinburgh course where not only did they receive thorough ESP training but also worked on their individual projects.

In the past few years almost half of the individual projects dealt with some aspect of LSP proficiency testing. In addition, at in-country workshops the need and will to harmonise institutional examinations was often expressed, which was further fuelled by the government decree. In response to this, in 1997 the SEP launched its testing sub-project with the threefold aim of enhancing testing expertise, harmonising the ESP testing practices of member institutions and developing a modular framework for an ESP examination which the participating institutions can adapt to their own purposes. Richard West, a well known testing expert, acts as project consultant and helps us with his invaluable ideas, most of all in order to enhance the validity and reliability of the examination and ensure that it conforms to international standards.

So far we have developed and revised the generic specifications and set the levels (basic, intermediate and advanced) relating them to those of the Framework. It is a widely-held view in Hungary that LSP proficiency examinations are "more difficult" (that is, their level is higher) than general language proficiency examinations and also that the latter can be easily converted into the former by adding specialist terminology. Level-setting is also important from the point of view of dissolving this myth: it is not a higher proficiency level that is required but using specific input to test different sub-skills, using different testing techniques.

Having set the levels, we designed skill-specific descriptors and rating scales, and drew up a code of practice to ensure that the examinations are administered the same way in each institution.. Certainly, all these had been preceded by much discussion thus the workshops have become real professional forums. In the "practical" phase of the project, we designed and piloted specific and generic tasks and started training the markers and analysing pilot items. The project itself represents quite a few novel features as yet unfamiliar to Hungarian LSP proficiency testing practice and it is an invaluable experience to take part in designing a large-scale proficiency test. Obviously, what has been described is a work in progress but I am strongly convinced that it will achieve its aims regardless of whether the exam is accredited, and will have a positive washback effect on LSP teaching. On the other hand, the framework can be implemented and fully made use of, only if it is a recognised examination.

6 Conclusion

The paper stated that the 1997 government decree paved the way for high- quality, standardised and transparent LSP proficiency examinations. On the other hand, large-scale LSP proficiency tests face inherent problems in terms of validity, reliability and practicality. It has been argued that practising LSP teachers have the expertise to cope with the task of designing a comprehensive LSP examination. They are attempting to create a flexible framework allowing comparability of exit LSP tests offered by higher educational institutions, as described.

It has been claimed that newly-developed examinations should be in line with international standards, but at the same time they must be designed so that they meet Hungarian needs. The above-discussed examination meets international standards, since its levels have been related to those of the Council of Europe, and conforms to international examinations in terms of task types and objective scoring with regard to receptive skills, thus enhancing reliability. At the same time, the skills and genres to be tested have been established on the basis of needs analyses carried out in Hungary. The examination framework allows institutions to supplement it with a grammar and vocabulary test, as well as with translation items where they are considered appropriate. All of these show that it also caters for national needs.

However, further research should be carried out in the field of language proficiency testing so that the accredited examinations can justifiably be termed both "Euro-conforming" and "Hungarian".

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