

## A cutting-edge Hungarian skill-builder for reading comprehension

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A genuinely cutting-edge practice book, Tamás Eitler's *Hatékony szövegértés* (Effective Reading Comprehension) teaches the skills of reading comprehension to students taking the 'érettségi' school leaving exam or wishing to develop in the area of understanding the written word. As additional target groups, learners of Hungarian as a foreign language and their teachers may also find the exercises and their vocabulary useful. As the first Hungarian skill builder in the local market, the book fills a gap in Hungarian educational publishing.

What does the volume contain? There are 25 units, built on authentic readings from a wide range of sources, including daily (*Népszabadság, Magyar Hírlap, Új Szó*), and weekly publications (*HVG, Figyelő, Világgazdaság*), as well as Internet portals ([origo.hu](http://origo.hu), [pto.hu](http://pto.hu), [novartis.hu](http://novartis.hu) and [magazin.go.hu](http://magazin.go.hu)). The texts deal with topics that are likely to be of interest to young people: exotic places and cultures (e.g. units 8, 9, 10,11, 23), the market and manifestations of consumerism (e.g. units 2, 12, 18, 19,25), the job market (e.g. units 20, 21, 22), issues of psychology and wellbeing (e.g. units 3, 4, 5, 6, 13, 14, 15), and Hungary as seen by the visitor (unit 17).

In addition to the wide variety of topics, there is also a range of genres and degrees of formality. Among the informal pieces, we have reader's letters, agony aunt columns, interviews and guide book sections, where trendy slang, teenage lingo, humorous coinages, as well as short sentences and short paragraphs are fairly common. More formal writing is represented by research reports, analyses of social trends and articles taken from quality papers, where specialised vocabulary is coupled with longer sentences, coherent paragraphs and strict overall structure. A comparison of the different texts opens students' eyes to the fact that criteria for good writing are dependent on context, audience and genre. For example, the block of units 3 to 5 deals with psychological problems. Unit 3 is a research report on the curative effects of laughter, unit 4 ("Oh my god, it's class reunion time!") is a semi-serious analysis in a women's webpage on meeting old school friends, and in unit 5 the psychologist gives answers to readers' problems. The three styles are markedly different because of the different contexts, the relationships between the writer and the reader, and finally because of genre conventions. Eitler helps learners appreciate stylistic diversity by repeatedly inserting a note about style, for example offering 'intimate and friendly', 'informative', 'academic' or 'romantic' as the options to qualify the description of Shanghai (unit 8).

Typically, each reading text is preceded by two and followed by five or six tasks. It is highly appropriate that the pre-reading tasks draw special attention to the title and encourage

guesses at the expected content of the piece. This previewing and overviewing, as emphasised by Eitler's various tasks, are usually the most often neglected elements of teaching effective reading, although without them the strategies of fast reading, skimming and scanning cannot be applied. Unit 17 is a good example of successfully sensitizing readers to the topic and then asking them to skim read. The title says "[w]e were *'foreign' tourists, but regretted it.*" The first question in the unit is what the title might suggest and why it uses inverted commas. Then we are asked to read the introduction. Based on a careful look at the title and the first paragraph, it becomes clear that the article talks about the ordeals foreigners sometimes undergo in Budapest. Once we know this, the rest of the article can be quickly skimmed, as it is a safe prediction that what follows is a list of hardships.

The post-reading tasks show great variety. What they share, however, is that they always include questions about the macro understanding of the text, as well as micro-level issues related to vocabulary, cohesive devices and punctuation. General comprehension is tested in many different ways: using true/false statements, matching illustrations to the words, requesting to place headings or sentences into the text and getting the reader to choose the best summary or the main message of the article. These techniques, widely used in EFL teaching and testing, are applied successfully to Hungarian reading comprehension.

One of the main strengths of the book is the consistent effort put into improving users' vocabulary, which is probably very much needed both for native speakers and foreign students of Hungarian. It is a welcome feature of the volume that there is at least one vocabulary building exercise following each unit. Based on the reading, rare words are to be defined, positive and negative connotations are to be decided on, synonyms and antonyms are to be found, collocations are to be identified, and shades of meaning are to be captured. The exercises raising our awareness of text cohesion are equally valuable: they ask for specifying the meaning of words like 'here,' 'it,' 'this,' 'that' and 'they' in the given context. Finally, punctuation exercises are vital today when we often learn the hard way that the computer's spell checker is very far from perfect. Breaking away from the reading text, the last exercise is frequently a follow-up project where students are asked to produce their own poster, article or presentation.

The book is suitable for use in small groups as well as for self-study, since there is a key at the back. As the introduction tells us, one of the author's aims was to create activities that can be done in groupwork and pairwork rather than using frontal classroom techniques exclusively, and in a cooperative rather than a competitive atmosphere. The proportion of strictly controlled, semi-controlled and free activities is ideal.

Unfortunately, there are a few disturbing factors that cannot be left unnoticed. I find it unfortunate that a number of texts taken from some of the media sources are translated from English into Hungarian, which is apparent from their foreign sounding sentence structure and wording. Some of the instructions also reflect a strong Anglo-Saxon influence. For example, it is unnatural to have 'Feladat 1' rather than '1. feladat' or, even better, 'Első feladat' in a Hungarian workbook. Despite these minor criticisms, Tamás Eitler's book offers excellent content and novel approaches to teaching reading comprehension in Hungarian. Let us hope that it will find its place on Hungarian teachers' and learners' bookshelves.