ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING IN THE HUNGARIAN EDUCATION SYSTEM WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON LANGUAGE TEACHERS' VIEWS AND PRACTICES

Katalin Hubai and Ildikó Lázár

Eötvös Loránd University Apáczai Secondary Practice School and
School of English American Studies, Eötvös Loránd University Budapest
catuska@gmail.com, lazar.ildiko@btk.elte.hu

Abstract:
This article aims to discuss some of the most important aspects of assessment of and for learning in Hungarian public education. The first research focus is on analyzing the current National Core Curriculum and the education act as well as other important governmental and ministerial decrees, including the requirements of a teaching degree and those of teacher promotion as these also influence teachers' attitudes to and practices of assessment. The second research focus is a review of empirical studies on teachers' views and practices of classroom assessment in Hungary with a special focus on language teachers. Results seem to indicate that although the official documents regulating assessment of student learning follow recent educational trends in Europe, most subject teachers tend to insist on the traditional "teach-to-the-test and then give a written or oral exam" approach. On the other hand, the reviewed studies also show that language teachers feel the need to experiment more and more often with new assessment tools in their classroom.

Key words: classroom assessment, document analysis, review of research

1 Introduction

The present article attempts to give an overview of the most important aspects of assessment of and for learning in Hungarian public schools. The research focus addressed in the first section of the article is an analysis of the current National Core Curriculum and the education act as well as related governmental and ministerial decrees. There is a wide range of rules and regulations of student assessment from learners' enrolment in educational establishments up to their language exams and school leaving exams at the age of 18 or 19. Documents describing the requirements of a teaching degree and those of teacher promotion are also reviewed as they play important roles in teachers' attitudes to and practices of assessment.

The research focus of the second part of the article is on teachers' views and practices of classroom assessment in Hungary, with a special focus on language teachers. It examines what references to Hungary OECD reports include and reviews research results from 2006 on teachers' preferences, a 2011 article on the effects of competence-development packages on assessment practices and a 2016 study based on interviews with teachers, primarily language teachers, to get to know their views of alternative approaches to classroom assessment.

1.1 Student assessment – An overview of rules and regulations

The most important aspects of student assessment in the Hungarian education system concern their enrolment in different educational establishments at the primary and secondary level, the assessment system in general and grading in particular during their education in those establishments and also the school leaving exams (also called the Matura Exam) that students take, for example, in order to apply to institutions of higher education. The regulations of student assessment are described in the current Act on National Public Education (Act CXC, 2011), while additional requirements and principles are detailed in various decrees issued by the government or the ministry of education (currently called the Ministry of Human Resources).

1.2 Student enrolment

There is a significant difference between primary and secondary schools in terms of student enrolment. According to Section 50 of the current act on education, "the primary school is obliged to take over school-age students if their residence, or in its absence, their temporary residence is in its area" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 34). If the school has a larger capacity than that, their enrolment policy has to favour children living with multiple disadvantages first, and then follow the guidelines of what is referred to as their pedagogical program, a document that every school issues on their own.

At the same time, secondary establishments (8-year, 6-year and 4-year ones alike) are allowed to opt for organizing an entrance exam, which consists of a centralized and standardized written exam in the school subjects of Hungarian Language and Mathematics. The Ministerial Decree 20/2012 (Ministry of Human Resources, 2012) details all state regulations concerning the enrolment procedure for all elementary and secondary school types. This document allows secondary institutions to base their decision on a combination of any of the following: the students' primary school academic record, the results of the centralized written exam and an oral exam organized by the school itself.

Such regulations introduce a rather selective enrolment system, which is in line with what the OECD (2013a) research concluded concerning Hungary:

> In 10 of the 34 OECD countries, more than half of all 15-year-old students attend schools that always consider recommendations from feeder schools or academic transcripts when making admission decisions. Of these countries, in the Netherlands, Japan and Hungary, according to information provided by principals at the lower secondary level surveyed in PISA, more than 85 percent of students are selected for schools on the basis of academic records or recommendations (p. 210).

Whereas less than 10 percent attend academically selective schools in many other European countries, Hungarian learners at the age of 10, 12, and/or 14 go through a rather stressful selection process and many do not end up attending the school of their choice.

1.3 Student assessment at school: rules and practices

As described within the main goals and principles of the current act on education in Section 1(3), educational establishments are expected to provide "comprehensive evaluation adjusted to the requirements and ensuring the development of children/students" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 1). Certain specifics of student assessment are referred to in Sections 54 and 62 under "Fulfilment of Student Obligations" and "Obligations and Rights of the Teacher" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 36 and pp. 40–42). The former focuses on the grading system, while the latter offers guidelines for what is expected from teachers.

The English version of the act distinguishes between grades used in order to "evaluate the student's performance and progress" during the school year and those given "at the end of the term and the teaching year" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 36) based on the grades received during the year. Section 54 of the act also details the grading system as follows: "evaluation and assessment of the student's knowledge: excellent (5), good (4), average (3), satisfactory (2), unsatisfactory (1)." Student conduct and diligence are also assessed: "evaluation and assessment of the student's conduct: exemplary (5), good (4), variable (3), bad (2)", "evaluation and assessment of the student's diligence: exemplary (5), good (4), variable (3), negligent (2)" (p. 36). It is the head teacher of a given class that assigns these grades of behaviour and diligence "in consultation with the teachers of the class" (p. 36). All of the above shows that the education act mostly focuses on grades. As the OECD report claims, Hungary, along with many other European countries, relies primarily on numerical marks for formal reporting" (2013a, p. 204). Although it is mentioned that grades during and at the end of the year are to be followed by oral or written feedback, there are no guidelines or examples provided for how this should be done, and therefore there is no formal rule teachers are supposed to follow to explain the grades given to students.

The only exceptions where students are not assessed with grades are the end of their very first term and their very first school year as well as the end of the first term of their second year. In these cases, according to Section 54 "a written assessment shall be used to express if the student performed excellently, well, sufficiently or if he/she needs support in the form of coaching" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 36). If a school would like to adopt any further alterations to the rules of assessment, they can only do so with the permission of the minister in charge and they are expected to refer to those criteria in their pedagogical program. Still, if any student needs grades because they are changing schools or for any other reason, the school has to be able to convert student achievements into grades. The current regulations of providing assessment in a written form instead of numbers only in the first three terms of students' school life mean a significant difference from the previous version of the Act on Public Education (Act LXXIX, 1993), where this form of verbal assessment was possible at the end of the first seven terms up to the end of the first term of year four in primary school. The current system with more grades and fewer opportunities for teacher comments as described in this paragraph was introduced in 2010.

The OECD (2013a) reports another crucial point of the act. At the end of each year grades are discussed by the teaching staff at the assessment meeting, where there is a possibility to alter grades based on consensus. If the proposed end-of-year grades significantly differ from the average of the grades received throughout the school year to the disadvantage of the student, the teaching staff calls on the teacher concerned to provide information on the reasons and, if justified, to alter his/her decision. Should the teacher not change the decision and the teaching staff disagrees with the justifications, the grade shall be amended based on the grades the

student was given during the year to the advantage of the student. In addition, as is the case in some other countries, there are central requirements for teachers to hold formal summative feedback meetings with students and also separately with their parents. The most common periodicity for such meetings is twice a year, but there are variations across school types and parents can usually request additional meetings beyond the mandatory parent-teacher conferences (OECD, 2013a, pp. 204-206).

Besides grades, there are several exam types referred to in the act on education and detailed in the decree on the operation of educational establishments. Corrective exams are to be taken if students fail certain subjects or if they did not manage to sit for some other exam. Students can also be provided with the opportunity to take an equivalency exam to prove that they have acquired the necessary knowledge and skills in a subject if they have been absent for a longer period of time, would like to take the school leaving exam in foreign languages earlier than the end of their last year, or for any other specific reason.

While the education act predominantly is concerned with grading-related issues, the current version of the National Core Curriculum (NCC, 2012), which was published as Government Decree 110/2012, focuses on the basic concepts of differentiation and uniformity. It claims that differentiation should become a fundamental principle in helping, checking and assessing student performance. The document also requires that "the situations of teaching and learning, the methods of learning organisation and the assessment procedures must fall in line with the development needs of *talented students*" (NCC, 2012, p. 13). At the same time, effective learning should also mean that "the use of learning requirements and methods of checking and assessment" (p. 14) are realized on unified grounds. However, there is no direct guideline or practical advice presented in the decree on what schools are supposed to do to succeed in terms of differentiation and uniformity at the same time. Similarly, the Framework Curriculum, the role of which is to link the main principles of the National Core Curriculum and the system of school subjects as well as to provide guidelines for the local curricula of the different schools, emphasizes the importance of self- and peer-assessment without going into details about the ways those are supposed to be carried out. In certain new school subjects like Ethics, where there is no specific grading requirement, the Framework Curriculum suggests adopting alternative methods of assessment like a student portfolio or peer assessment, also without further explanation.

The National Core Curriculum (2012) describes in detail the components of the "educational program", which expression probably refers to the document known as the pedagogical program that all schools have to design for and by themselves. According to Section 4 of the National Core Curriculum (2012), assessment methods and tools should be part of the educational program and they are expected to be in line with the pedagogical concept as well as with the purposes, requirements, contents, and timeframes of the planned teaching and learning processes. Without elaborating on this any further, the passage emphasizes that these assessment methods and tools will help to control and assess students' knowledge, achievement and development.

As mentioned above, Section 62 of the current act on education also refers to assessment among the specific obligations of the teacher, as it is the teacher's "responsibility to assess the students' work pursuant to the stipulations of the general curriculum and the pedagogical programme through grades or in a written assessment, in a versatile manner and in line with the requirements" (Act CXC, 2011, p. 41). The pedagogical program defines the institution's local

curriculum, which is expected to contain the two following assessment-related points according to 7.§ (1) bi of Ministerial Decree 20/2012:

> "written, spoken or practice-based methods of controlling and assessing the student's academic work, in diagnostic, summative and formative ways, and the principles of evaluating behaviour and diligence" as well as "principles related to rewarding the student and assessing, evaluating their behaviour and diligence" (Ministry of Human Resources, 2012).

Based on these points it can be seen that schools are relatively free in establishing their own assessment policies and besides the guidelines the law and the national curricula provide, there is no specific explanation to be found on what assessment-related details institutions are expected to include in their local documents. As schools are all expected to give access to their pedagogical program for the public, one can find information on different types of tests, what the minimum number of grades should be in a term, what exams the given school should offer and possibly rules on how many days are given to the teacher to grade tests and papers.

Nevertheless, recent documents for teacher training at institutions of higher education contain more elaborate assessment-related requirements than earlier ones. The ministerial decree on what student teachers are required to have acquired during their studies (Ministry of Human Resources, 2013) presents assessment-based expectations within the structure of the three components of competences: knowledge, skills and attitudes. The document expects professionals with a teaching degree to be aware of functions, processes, forms and tools of assessment, use those accurately for different purposes and be conscious about their effects, while also developing the self-assessment skills and self-esteem of students, focusing on differentiation and formative assessment. This description includes a wider terminology of assessment than other regulations mentioned earlier.

New documents of teacher promotion integrate assessment to a greater extent. The Government Decree 326/2013 (Hungarian Government, 2013) introduces a list of competences teachers are expected to show in their work in order to be promoted and there is a detailed list of indicators teachers are expected to keep themselves to. Many of these competences indicate assessment-related matters, like that of supporting learning, promoting equal treatment or the continuous assessment and analysis of pedagogical processes and students' personal development. Teachers also have to create an e-portfolio to prove they have adopted these competences through a wide variety of documents. For instance, one assessment-related option is to upload a document to exemplify personalized student assessment and reflect on it in detail. Teachers may face difficulties satisfying all these requirements, since although most pre-service and many in-service teacher training courses put more emphasis on training teachers to use formative assessment methods, these are not very widespread yet.

1.4 Final exams

The current act on education defines the most important points of the secondary school leaving final exams. These exams are to be organized based on centralized criteria and there is a separate decree (Ministry of Education, 2002) specifying all the requirements of the written and oral parts of each subject students are obliged to or have the possibility to take. The exam certificate to be obtained allows students to continue their studies in institutions of higher education as well as providing them with better employment opportunities.

The main rules of taking these exams are the following. Students are required to take an exam in Hungarian Language and Literature, History, Mathematics, one foreign language and one more subject that they are free to select on their own. They are also free to take any other subjects as extra. Establishments of higher education publish a list of exam subjects students can receive points for when applying for their majors, which means that students take these requirements into consideration too when choosing the optional subjects to take.

Almost all exams can be taken at either an intermediate or an advanced level. Intermediate-level exams have a centralized written part, while the oral part is organized by the student's own school. Advanced-level exams also have a centralized written part, but students participate in the oral exam in front of an independent committee of teachers selected by central educational authorities. Advanced-level exams provide extra points for the students when applying for particular majors, and certain higher education institutions even require one or two exams taken at the advanced level. (For example, medical schools expect applicants to take one advanced exam in Biology and one in either Chemistry or Physics.)

In the exam certificate the percentage reached is marked for each exam taken, and besides students' final grades, these percentages are taken into consideration during the application process for higher education. This also means that in this case exact percentages are just as relevant for the future of students as grades themselves, if not more.

2 Review of research results on teachers' views and practices of classroom assessment

This section reviews recent research results on practices of classroom assessment and on how teachers view the strengths and weaknesses of available assessment methods and tools.

2.1 OECD recommendations and an overview of main trends in Hungary

According to the OECD's international review on evaluation and assessment (2013b), the fundamental purpose of evaluation and assessment is to support and improve student learning, which also means that

> students should be placed at the centre. They should be fully engaged with their learning and empowered to assess their own progress (which is also a key skill for lifelong learning). It is important, too, to monitor broader learning outcomes, including the development of critical thinking, social competencies, engagement with learning and overall well-being. (OECD, 2013b, p. 3)

The National Core Curriculum and the Hungarian education acts mirror these purposes but, as shown earlier, they do not provide explicit guidelines as to how versatile assessment methods can be carried out in practice.

In line with the above recommendations, the OECD report also suggests that areas for improvement might be

developing teachers' capacity to assess against student learning objectives; improving the skills of teachers for formative assessment; improving the data handling skills of school agents; or developing expertise for teacher appraisal and school evaluation, including ensuring that designated evaluators are qualified for their role. Capacity building through adequate provision of initial teacher education and professional development should be a priority making sure provision is well aligned with the national education agenda. This should go alongside the development of training and competency descriptions for key people within the evaluation and assessment framework. (OECD, 2013b, p. 14)

This is not regulated by Hungarian laws and decrees.

According to the OECD report, the comprehensiveness and degree of structure of evaluation and assessment frameworks in Hungary was low to moderate in 2012 compared to other European countries (OECD, 2013a, p. 89). Many OECD systems introduced central standardized assessments in core subjects in recent years, reflecting an impressive expansion of instruments to measure student outcomes. In Hungary this happened in 2001 (OECD, 2013a, p. 39). The same report claims that although elements of formative assessment, such as verbal assessment and differentiated assessment methods are mentioned in legal regulations and the National Core Curriculum, schools do not have specific regulations or documents promoting formative assessment (OECD, 2013a, pp. 156-157).

Similarly, although the chapter of a very recent OECD publication (2015) entitled "Policies, practices and assessments that enhance social and emotional skills" claims that in Hungary there are official guidelines for the assessment of social and emotional skills and these are included in typical report cards, this is not supported by the legal documents and the studies reviewed in this chapter. The OECD publication (2015) probably refers to the grades students receive on conduct and diligence at the end of the first and second terms of each school year or perhaps the two-word assessment they receive in Ethics in 7th and 8th grades. Nevertheless, how a teacher, a student or a parent would translate, for example, a 4 on conduct, a 3 on diligence and a "performed sufficiently" in Ethics into a description of the student's development of social and emotional skills remains unclear.

2.2 Results of a study on teachers' preferences in teaching and assessment practices

A study conducted in Hungary about ten years ago had 2,000 teachers fill in a questionnaire on their teaching and assessment practices (Radnóti, 2006). Before presenting her own research results, the author refers to an earlier study, where the author claims that the most frequent teaching methods and techniques used by 90 percent of the participating teachers were lecturing, frontal explanations and demonstrations, individual work and whole class discussion, which basically means a question-and-answer session to check learning/understanding (Falus, 2001, as cited by Radnóti, 2006). Relatively new methods such as cooperative group work, project based learning, ICT or multimedia were only rarely present and only in the practice of about 50 percent of the teachers. Not surprisingly, the most common assessment practices consisted of written and oral tests for which students were awarded grades on the 1 to 5 scale. Project work, computer-based tasks and results or products of more practice-oriented classroom activities were rarely assessed (Falus, 2001, as cited by Radnóti, 2006).

In her own research conducted and presented by Radnóti (2006), the majority of the participating 2,000 teachers, in addition to giving grades, claim to often give oral feedback, keep track of continuous learning, assess homework assignments and pay attention to students' work during lessons. Although the frequency of competitive teaching methods is claimed to be relatively low, teachers probably do not realize that what they do in the classroom actually promotes competition. The few students who can usually answer the teacher's questions will be the ones whose work during lessons will be considered positively.

In the same study (Radnóti, 2006), the participating teachers claimed to sometimes consider students' self-assessment, peer-assessment and their own notes about the learning process. Portfolios and tests constructed by outside bodies of experts were reportedly very rarely used. The frequency of learning diaries or narrative reports was even lower. Concerning the assessment of learners' performance and results, individual differences were taken into consideration "to some extent" especially by teachers of more heterogeneous primary school classes but the most common assessment methods were written and oral exams in secondary schools (Radnóti, 2006, p. 140). On the basis of her research results Radnóti (2006) claims that "few teachers like innovations or anything that upsets the traditional routine and the orderly nature of school life" (p. 144).

The study also revealed that teachers of different subject areas practically never meet to discuss and work out assessment tools together, which is done somewhat more frequently by teachers teaching the same subject.

2.3 Results of a study on the impact of competence-development packages on teaching methods and assessment practices

A study conducted in 2010 aimed to explore the impact of competence-development resources and program packages that had been introduced in 321 schools in Hungary in the previous years (Havas & Kerber, 2011). Some of the 321 schools dropped out of the program and some refused to fill in the questionnaires. Nevertheless, responses came from 275 schools altogether: the respondents were 264 principals, 260 teachers of Hungarian Language and Literature, 260 teachers of Mathematics and 127 teachers responding to the social competences questionnaire. The student questionnaires were filled in by 4,300 students. The questionnaires consisted of several general and subject-specific closed and open-ended questions. This survey was followed by interviews and case studies in ten of the participating schools.

Havas and Kerber (2011) found that new teaching methods were favorably received in the targeted schools: the dominance of frontal teaching seemed to have been broken, pair work, group work and cooperative structures became significantly more widespread and learner motivation increased (pp. 3–4). The study also reports changes in classroom assessment practices in the examined schools. The competence-development packages contained self- and peer-assessment tools that the participating teachers used with increasing frequency to promote reflection, self-assessment and formative assessment in general (Havas & Kerber, 2011, p. 22). It is important to note, however, that these changes took place in schools where a lot of funding and professional assistance had paved the way for a renewal of teaching and assessment practices. It would also be interesting to collect data in schools that did not receive the competence-development program packages.

2.4 Language teachers' perspectives and assessment practices

A recent study based on qualitative data collected with the help of semi-structured interviews with 14 teachers in Hungary found that teachers' views on assessment are most influenced by the inflexibility of the five-point grading scale, their time management skills and the educational culture of the given establishment (Hubai, 2016). According to the ten language teachers participating in the research, grades do not have the capacity to provide enough information about student performance, while they clearly "stigmatize students" (Hubai, 2016, p. 44). With the growing influence of competence-based education, the need to be able to assess skills and attitudes in addition to knowledge is legitimate and leads teachers to adopt alternative approaches to assessment. Some of the participating language teachers in Hubai's research (2016) claimed to apply game elements in teaching, while others pay increasing attention to elaborately assessing group work. Some of the respondents, especially from elite practice schools, try other "alternative methods to motivate their students to take charge of their own development" (p. 46). Several interviewees claimed to have been experimenting with gamification in assessment, yet others use percentages instead of points or grades as they find those more informative and helpful for the students.

When the ten language teachers were asked about the extent to which their views on grading and different assessment practices were changing with time, many mentioned "not giving students grades at a quick glance anymore", while some of them discussed realizing the benefits of elaborate oral and written feedback (Hubai, 2016, p. 47). Others in the same study appreciated newly acquired knowledge and the freedom to experiment with new methods of assessment as a result of their participation in face-to-face or online professional development courses.

According to Hubai's study (2016), language teachers are particularly concerned about making assessment criteria transparent and having a clearly laid out system of expectations. Language teachers involve self-assessment and peer-assessment in the process, and think of homework and optional assignments as opportunities for students to improve their grades and definitely not as something punishable and demotivating when missing or not up to standard.

The discussion of group work played an important role in the interviews conducted by Hubai (2016) and potentially gave an opportunity for teachers "to explore what general issues of assessment they are working out for themselves at the moment" (p. 47). Some of the participating language teachers never convert the assessment of group work into grades, others claimed that they do not feel bad about giving the same number of points to every group member at the end of a group work activity, emphasizing that they all benefit the same way from their cooperation. Several language teachers highlighted the view that every small instance of oral feedback during classes, whether in group work or individual work, influences the students' motivation.

Some of the interviewed mentor teachers (school-based language teacher trainers) emphasized that the tension was often tangible in student teachers since there is a gap between the kind of knowledge and encouragement they receive at university concerning what to do when it comes to classroom assessment and the role/atmosphere they probably find most comfortable in the classroom. The paper suggests that a proportionate amount of time and energy should be devoted to discussing assessment issues during the teaching practice of student teachers, "so that they will start developing their own personalized framework and competences related to assessment", while also working on bringing theory and practice closer

to each other (Hubai, 2016, p. 50). Similar exchanges and reflections about the aims and tools of assessment would probably be just as beneficial for experienced language teachers.

3. Conclusion

Despite the fact that most of the official documents regulating the work of teachers and educational establishments regarding the assessment of student learning are in line with the most recent educational trends in Europe, the majority of teachers seem to follow the traditional "teach-to-the-test and then give a written or oral exam" approach when it comes to feedback and assessment in practice. The Hungarian National Core Curriculum (2012) and our education act (Act CXC, 2011) mirror the values and purposes of assessment described in many recent European policy papers but they do not provide guidelines as to how these values and purposes should be integrated in teachers' practice. In addition to the lack of explicit guidelines, another problem seems to be that the assessment literacy of teachers is far from ideal. In a large-scale European study, over 70 percent of the participating teachers claimed to have received no or very little training in what the purposes of assessment are, how to give grades, how to use formative assessment tools and what kind of meaningful feedback promotes learning (Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). Considering all of the above, the tendency to use traditional assessment methods is not surprising and it is refreshing to read empirical research about language teachers experimenting with alternative approaches to assessment in order to provide support to the fully engaged, empowered, motivated and autonomous learners that teachers, education experts and policy makers expect to see in our educational establishments.

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