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Зміст

СЕВЛЕШ НОРА: Нові погляди і висновки... Лучіан Боія: <i>Переможені і переможці. Переосмислення Першої світової війни</i>	15

ПОПЕЙ АРПАД: Вибори до Союму на Закарпатті у лютому 1939 року. Штрихи до історії виборів Союму Карпатської України.....	21
ВАРГА РОБЕРТ: Шпигуни і особи, що підозрювалися в шпигунстві, на території Ужанського комітату під час воєнних дій 1914-1915 рр.	42
ПНТЕР ЗОЛТАН АРПАД: Солдати з Корцога на захисті Північної Трансильванії та Закарпаття під час Другої світової війни	63
Б. ШТЕНГЕ ЧОБО: Дерев'яний хрест над Косівською Полянкою – трагедія лейтенанта-льотчика Калмана Домбі.....	75
ІЛЛЕШФОЛВІ ПЕТЕР: „...Гармата лунала поруч...” – воєнний щоденник прапорщика у запасі др. Імре Бодора, 1944-45	85
ЧОТАРІ ЮРІЙ: З історії Угочанського комітатського архіву.....	116

КІШНЕ БЕРНГАРТ РЕНАТА, КРІГЕЛ ЖОФІЯ: Креативне тлумачення ролі у метафоричному мисленні майбутніх педагогів.....	126
ФУРЧО ЛАУРА, КІШНЕ БЕРНГАРТ РЕНАТА, МОДЬОР АГНЕСЬ, ШІНКО АННАМАРІЯ, САСКО РІТА: Ставлення педагогів до он-лайн освіти.....	137
БОКОТЕЙ ЛІАННА: Формування естетичної культури підростаючого покоління.....	154
ГУСТІ ІЛОНА: Роль рівня володіння мовою вчителями при викладанні англійської мови в закарпатських школах з угорською мовою навчання в Україні.....	162
КАЧУР АННАМАРІЯ: Рівень знань з англійської мови учнів шостих класів м. Берегова та їх ставлення до вивчення іноземних мов	173

ДУДИЧ ЛАКАТОШ КАТЕРИНА, ТОВТ ПЕТЕР: Відомості про великодобронський діалект ...	185
ДНІСТРІАНСЬКИЙ МИРОСЛАВ: Топонімія Українських Карпат як джерело дослідження процесів заселення.....	191
АБОНІ АНДРЕЯ ТІМЕЯ: Дослідження німецьких запозичень на конкретному словниковому матеріалі.....	199

Шютев Давід: Аналіз консолідованої фінансової звітності і прибутковості
угорських дисконтних магазинів та гіпермаркетів 212

Шшко Котолін: Cuius regio ejus religio? Свобода віросповідання в Туреччині 227

Брензович Маріанна: „... З одного боку жарг, з іншого – цілком серйозно”
Роберто Боланьо: „2666” 242

Tartalom

SZŐLŐSI NÓRA: Új szemlélet, új konklúziók... Lucian Boia: <i>Vesztesek és győztesek. Az első világháború újraértelmezése</i>	15
---	----

POPÉLY ÁRPÁD: Szojmvasztás Kárpátalján 1939 februárjában. Adalékok a kárpátukrán sojjm megváasztásának történetéhez.....	21
---	----

VARGA RÓBERT: Kémek és kémgyanus személyek Ung vármegye hadműveleti területén 1914–1915 között.....	42
--	----

PINTÉR ZOLTÁN ÁRPÁD: Karcagi honvédek Észak-Erdély és Kárpátalja védelmében a II. világháború idején.....	63
--	----

B. STENGE CSABA: Fakereszt a Gyil Bozsenin, Kaszómező felett – Domy Kálmán repülő főhadnagy tragédiája.....	75
--	----

ILLÉSFALVI PÉTER: „...közérlől dörgött az ágyú...” – dr. Bodor Imre tartalékos zászlós háborús naplója, 1944–1945.....	85
---	----

CSATÁRY GYÖRGY: Ugocsa vármegye levéltárának történetéből.....	116
---	-----

KISNÉ BERNHARDT RENÁTA, KRIEGEL ZSÓFIA: Kreatív szerepértelmezés a pedagógusjelöltek metaforáiban.....	126
---	-----

FURCSA LAURA, KISNÉ BERNHARDT RENÁTA, MAGYAR ÁGNES, SINKA ANNAMÁRIA, SZASZKÓ RITA: Pedagógusok véleménye az online képzésről.....	137
--	-----

BOKOTEI LIANNA: Az esztétika kultúra kialakulása a felnövekvő generációban.....	154
--	-----

HUSZTI ILONA: A tanárok nyelvtudásának szerepe az angol nyelvtanításban a kárpátaljai magyar iskolákban.....	162
---	-----

KACSUR ANNAMÁRIA: Beregszászi hatodikosok angol nyelvtudásszintje és nyelvtanulási attitűdjei (esettanulmány).....	173
---	-----

DUDICS LAKATOS KATALIN, TÓTH PÉTER: A nagydobronyi nyelvjárásról.....	185
--	-----

DNYISZTRJANSZKIJ MIROSLAV: Az Ukrán-Kárpátok toponimiája mint a benépesülési folyamatok vizsgálataának forrása.....	191
--	-----

ABONYI ANDREA TÍMEA: Német jövevénytiszta vizsgálat egy hiánypótló szótár
tükrében199

SÜTŐ DÁVID: Magyarországi diszkontok és hipermarketek összevont pénzügyi
kimutatásainak vizsgálata és jövedelmezőségi elemzése212

SISKA KATALIN: Cujus regio ejus religio? A vallásszabadság esete Törökországgal.....227

Brenzovics Marianna: „...egyrészt vicc, másrészt teljesen komoly”
Roberto Bolaño: 2666.....242

Contents

NÓRA SZÓLÓSI: A new approach, new conclusions... Lucian Boia: <i>First World War. Controversies, paradoxes, reinterpretations</i>	15
--	----

ÁRPÁD POPÉLY: Elections to the Soim in Transcarpathia in February 1939. On the History of the Elections to the Carpatho-Ukrainian Soim.....	21
--	----

RÓBERT VARGA: Spies and Suspects in the Military Operation of Ung County between 1914 and 1915.....	42
--	----

ZOLTÁN ÁRPÁD PINTÉR: Armed Forces of Karcag in the Protection of Northern Transylvania and Transcarpathia during World War II.....	63
---	----

CSABA B. STENGE: Wooden Cross at Gyil Bozseni over Kaszómező – the Tragedy of First Lieutenant Kálmán Domby	75
--	----

PÉTER ILLÉSFALVI: "... the Cannon Thundered ..." – dr. Imre Bodor Reserve Soldier's War Record of 1944–1945.....	85
---	----

GYÖRGY CSATÁRY: From the History of the Archive of Ugocsa County.....	116
--	-----

RENÁTA KISNÉ BERNHARDT, ZSÓFIA KRIEGEL: Creative role interpretation in teacher candidates' metaphors.....	126
---	-----

LAURA FURCSA, RENÁTA KISNÉ BERNHARDT, ÁGNES MAGYAR, ANNAMÁRIA SINKA, RITA SZASZKÓ: Teachers' Beliefs on Online Education.....	137
--	-----

LIANNA BOKOTEI: The Formation of Aesthetic Culture in the Younger Generation	154
---	-----

ILONA HUSZTI: The role of teachers' language proficiency in teaching English in the Transcarpathian Hungarian schools in Ukraine.....	162
--	-----

ANNAMÁRIA KACSUR: English proficiency and language learning attitudes of Beregszász 6th graders: A case study.....	173
---	-----

KATALIN DUDICS LAKATOS, PÉTER TÓTH: About the Nagydobrony dialect.....	185
---	-----

MIROSLAV DNISTRYANSKY: Toponymy of the Ukrainian Carpathians as a Source of Settlement Processes Research	191
--	-----

TÍMEA ANDREA ABONYI: Research on German Borrowings on the Basis of one
Revised Dictionary..... 199

DÁVID SÜTŐ: Investigation of the Consolidated Financial Statements and Profitability
Analysis of Hungarian Discounts and Hypermarkets.....212

KATALIN SISKA: Cujus regio ejus religio? The case of freedom of religion in Turkey....227

MARIANNA BRENZOVICS: "... Mocking and Serious at the Same Time"
Roberto Bolaño: 2666.....242

English proficiency and language learning attitudes of Beregszász 6th graders: A case study

Rezümé. Jelen esettanulmányunk fő célja volt, hogy megtudjuk, milyen a hozzáállása a beregszászi magyar hatodikosoknak az angol és az ukrán nyelv tanulásához, illetve milyen nyelvi tudásszinttel rendelkeznek angolból. A kérdőívek döntő többségéből az derült ki, hogy a gyerekek a jövőjüket külföldön képzelik el, ahol viszont elengedhetetlen az angoltudás, így már most szorgalmasan tanulják a nyelvet. A nyelvtudásszintmérő teszt eredményei azonban arra hívják fel a figyelmet, hogy mind a tanulóknak, mind a tanároknak sok még a teendőjük a pozitív, kielégítő eredményekhez vezető úton.

Kulcsszavak: angol nyelvtudás, nyelvtanulási attitűdök, beregszászi magyar hatodikosok.

Резюме. Основною метою цього дослідження було з'ясувати, як ставляться учні шостих класів шкіл м. Берегово з угорською мовою навчання до вивчення англійської та української мов, а також, на якому рівні володіють учні англійською мовою. Результати анкетного опитування показали, що своє майбутнє учні уявляють за кордоном, де знання англійської мови має важливе значення, тому тепер вони старанно вивчають мову. Проте результати тесту на знання мови засвідчують, що і учні, і викладачі повинні прикласти багато зусиль для того, щоб досягти позитивних результатів.

Ключові слова: англійська мова, ставлення до вивчення мови, учні шостих класів шкіл м. Берегово з угорською мовою навчання.

Abstract. The case study described in this article aimed at surveying the English and Ukrainian language learning attitudes of Beregszász sixth graders, as well as getting insights into their English language learning proficiency. Data from a decisive majority of questionnaires prove that the children imagine their future abroad where English language knowledge is essential, therefore they study English diligently. However, the findings of the proficiency test highlight the fact that both teachers and students need to do further hard work in order to achieve positive and successful results in language learning.

Keywords: English proficiency, language learning attitudes, Beregszász Hungarian sixth graders.

1. Introduction

Scholars have been studying the English language teaching in Hungarian schools in Transcarpathia ever since the education policy in Ukraine gave priority to this subject in schools. Not only has the education policy changed significantly but also the entire country. Ukrainian foreign policy's attention turned to Western Europe. This defines the role of the English language as well as the tuition of the language. Besides political factors, the economic state of the country may have a great impact on language teaching. Pupils are aware of the fact that knowing English is an indispensable term of having a well-paid job. Another motivation factor may be the employment in a foreign country.

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Numerous studies were made in the past, basing on the opinion and experiences of the teachers. But who could tell the researcher more about the English teaching process than the pupils themselves. Thus one of the main buttresses during the creation of the present research was gathering information directly from the pupils.

In order to get the required information, a questionnaire and a test paper were used. To gain the data, research devices were the same as the ones used in a study in 2009 [1]. The test paper was designed to assess learners' levels of knowledge of English, i.e. their proficiency in English. The test contained three sections focusing on three knowledge fields which were chosen by the author of this paper: writing skills, grammar and vocabulary. This is in accordance with the requirements of the English Independent Testing in Ukraine.

The original hypothesis was that there has been a significant change between the results of the 2009 study [1] and the present study of 2017. Then children were more motivated to study Ukrainian so that they were able to pass the advanced level school-leaving examination in Ukrainian language and literature. It is hypothesized that by now this interest in learning the state language has faded. The reason for this might be the instable economic status of the country: most children imagine their future abroad and therefore they have a very firm goal, namely, to learn English as a lingua franca.

The practical importance of the research lies in that it provides valuable insights into Beregszász sixth graders' English language proficiency and their attitudes towards English as a foreign language and also Ukrainian as the state language. Based on the research findings, some pedagogical implications are presented worth considering for English and Ukrainian teachers.

2.1 A brief overview of English teaching in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools

Four foreign languages are taught in the Ukrainian schools: English, German, French and Spanish. Until the early 2000s, the compulsory foreign language instruction in the general schools began in the 4th / 5th grade. At present, after the reform of foreign language teaching in Ukraine, learning of the first compulsory foreign language begins in the 2nd grade. Exceptions are the schools specialising in foreign languages (specialized schools), where compulsory foreign language learning begins in the 1st grade and a second foreign language is introduced in the 5th grade. The most often taught foreign language is English. Currently, nearly 90 % of all school children study English followed by German, French and Spanish. [2]

Recently there has been an increase of interest in learning and teaching English language. A study written by István Csernicsekó highlights the fact that pupils are interested in learning English because in many cases it is the only opportunity to escape from their environment and start a better life in Western Europe.

It can be also read in the study that pupils are motivated not because of the strained education policy of the government, but because they recognise the importance of this language. [3]

There were 104 Hungarian schools in 2005: 33 secondary, 48 primary, 13 elementary, 5 vocational, 4 lyceums and 1 8-year grammar school. In 67 of them English was taught as foreign language. Many of the English teachers who taught in these schools had to face several problems during their work:

1. Lack of audio materials.
2. The Plakhotnyk-books were not for Hungarian schools.
3. The 12-point scale of evaluating learner's knowledge.
4. Low number of lessons per week.
5. Heterogeneous classes with too many learners. [2]

At the same time teachers had solutions in their mind:

1. More lessons per week.
2. Appropriate textbook for Hungarian schoolchildren.
3. Creating specialized classrooms.
4. Dividing learners into groups at a lower class size. (According to the regulation in Ukraine, the class with less than 28 children can not be divided into groups.) [2]

The Transcarpathian Hungarian Pedagogical Association has a significant role in solving the teachers' problems. Several textbooks were published by them; for example, *English with you and me* [4]. The Association organizes English language competitions and camps annually. The Ferenc Rákóczi II Transcarpathian Hungarian Institute solved another question: the problem of the lack of English teachers. Since 2002 the institute has given dozens of English teachers to the Transcarpathian Hungarian schools.

As it was mentioned, one of the biggest problems in Hungarian schools was the lack of appropriate textbooks. The most widely used textbooks are the Karpiuk-books. [5; 6] They focus on the abilities and the interests of the learners. The sequence of skills development within one unit is the following: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They have varied exercises: matching, gap-filling tasks, sentence construction, etc. The books contain tasks which expect learners to work in groups. Many texts and tasks can be found about the British culture. The drawback of the book is that it contains only English-Ukrainian vocabulary and the instructions are in Ukrainian too.

A reading task in English includes reading the text in chorus followed by individual reading and a simple reading comprehension task. Most teachers focus on sounds and phonetic transcription. According to their experiences, gifted learners acquire them with ease, while others need more practice; their general opinion is that learners at this age have no difficulty in learning the transcription signs and in pronouncing the sounds represented by them. Teachers consider reading aloud

essential at this age, and they seem to prefer the phonics approach to teaching reading.

Teachers gave an account of how they practice writing: copying crosswords and filling in missing letters into gapped words. In general, learners enjoy writing tasks, especially crosswords. Wordsearch was mentioned as the most popular type of crossword.

Another difficulty is the low amount of lessons per week. In 2011 the division of the English lessons was the following:

1. Form 2-4.: 2 lessons per week
2. Form 5-6.: 3 lessons per week
3. Form 7-11.: 2 lessons per week
4. Form 10-11 (with specialization): 3-6 lessons per week.

It is well-known that the teacher can teach relatively little for a pupil who is not motivated. The motivation may originate from parents, from desire of communicating with others and from having concrete goals. In this case concrete goals mean that the pupil is aware of what he wants to be. Typically pupils clarify their goals in the 10th or 11th form. Their goals give reasons why they should learn the English language. The reasons can be different:

1. English is the dominant business language and it has become almost a necessity for people to speak English if they are to enter a global workforce, research from all over the world shows that cross-border business communication is most often conducted in English.
2. English may not be the most spoken language in the world, but it is the official language in a large number of countries. It is estimated that the number of people in the world that use in English to communicate on a regular basis is 2 billion. that pupil, which imagines his future abroad, needs to be aware of the languages importance. [7]

According to Bárány, Huszti and Fábíán, the mostly used activities are [2]:

1. practising vocabulary and proper English pronunciation – for teachers it is more important how learners pronounce words than how well they understand and use them.
2. reading aloud in English from the textbook
3. translating from English into Hungarian

The least frequent activity types are:

1. silent reading – it can be evaluated as a mistake from teachers, because it is proven that it helps comprehension most.
2. skimming

The opinion of the pupils cannot be omitted:

1. popular activities: writing, listening and playing several skill-developer games
2. non-preferred occupations: learning rules or poems, using dictionaries, reciting.

2.2 Teaching the four language skills

There are four language skills: writing, speaking, listening and reading. They are all vital parts of the language as well as a research which deals with language-teaching issues.

The following research is inspired to measure the pupils' writing skills, their grammatical and vocabulary knowledge. Nevertheless, it is important to note the other three skills too, because they affect or they are affected by grammar and vocabulary.

Since the accent is on the writing skill, it is genial to start with this topic. The reasons for teaching writing to students of English as a foreign language include reinforcement, language development and learning style. Writing skill is a reinforcement device because most of the students benefit from seeing the language written down. The visual demonstration of language construction may help to understand how it all fits together as well as creating new sentences using the already acquired material. Writing is appropriate for slower learners. It is a quiet reflective activity instead of the rush of face-to-face communication. Still, the most important reason for teaching writing is that it is a basic language skill. However, the teacher needs to be careful during choosing the writing task. The type of writing the teacher gets students to do depends on their interests, age and level. The teacher needs to make sure that students have enough language to complete the task. It is important to get students writing in a number of common everyday styles: writing postcards letters of various kinds, narrative compositions, reports and newspaper articles. Pupils are also expected to write poems or dialogues. All these types of writing serve one aim – to activate the knowledge. [8]

Speaking is the other productive skill. It gives pupils a chance to rehearse having discussions outside the classroom. It can help the teacher in getting feedback. Using speaking tasks the teacher can see what language problems the class is having. Moreover, pupils can see what they need to improve. It is important for teachers to correct mistakes, but he needs to know when the right time for interrupting is. Constant interruption from the teacher may destroy the purpose of the speaking activity. Also, it is important not to single students out for particular criticism. Another main rule for teachers is not to get involved too much during a speaking activity. It is better to stand back and listen what is going on. [2]

Listening also has its own rules. Listening tasks expose students to different varieties of English. Besides completing the main aim teachers need to consider the levels, interests and needs of students. During listening task teacher may face technical problems. The teacher needs to find the right place for the tape recorder so it can be heard all around the classroom. Another feature is a tape counter that is easy to see. It is important to find the right place on the tape and to find the way back for playing the record for the second time – there are almost no occasions when the teacher will play a tape only once; students will want to hear it again to pick up the things they missed.. Using a better machine is also needs to be

considered. Teachers need to prepare for the listening task before the lesson. They need to listen to the tape before they take it into class. It helps them being prepared for any problems. A good teacher prepares extra questions to the listening task so he can measure what impression it made on the pupils. [8]

Getting pupils to read English texts is an important part of the teachers job. Reading is useful because some of the language sticks in the pupil's mind. Reading texts provide opportunities to study grammar, punctuation, vocabulary and the way to construct texts. For some pupils it also can be the resource of pleasure. The level of knowledge defines the level of the text. One of the teacher's main functions is to match the task to the topic. Imaginative and challenging tasks may make exciting even a boring topic. A good teacher integrates the reading text into class sequences, using the topic for discussion and further tasks. [8]

2.3 Teaching vocabulary and grammar

After mentioning the four skills, the grammar and vocabulary teaching have to take place. According to Michael Swan [9], these are the golden rules for successful grammar teaching:

1) Learning the theory depends on the pupils and on the teacher.

Theory part can be valuable, but there are pupils who are unable to take in. Learners also may vary in their response to grammar teaching. Learning contexts and purposes also vary greatly.

2) Explanation

'Explanations of how things work are often useful. They do need to be clear and simple, though: the whole truth can be counterproductive, in language as in life.... They should be in the mother tongue if possible.'

3) Examples

'Good realistic examples are vital, but they don't replace explanations..... Suitably chosen authentic material – advertisements, cartoons, songs, poems, etc – can make examples memorable and fix them in students' minds.'

4) Exercises

'Variety is really the key.....it's important to move on to activities where the structure is used in more interesting and realistic ways. I like structure-oriented problem-solving activities and quizzes, games, picture-based work, text-based work, role-play, exercises that get students using the structure to talk about themselves and their ideas, exercises that combine grammar practice with vocabulary learning, and internet-exploration activities'.

Concerning teaching vocabulary teachers may find new and old methods alike. Hereinafter, a representative of each group will be mentioned:

1) Keeping a lexical notebook

To record new language in a way that is memorable has great importance. Lexical notebook is an excellent way of recording new words. It helps pupils to organize new lexis in a way that would closely resemble the way it occurs in the

real language. Pupils are encouraged to record the full sentence. New words in a text are also written down together with their lexical partners and in grammatical patterns they occur in. These notebooks should be organised by topics. [10]

2) Learning vocabulary through reading

'The idea here is that learners are encouraged to read around the same topic for a while, thus increasing their chances of coming across the same, topic-related, lexical items again and again.' There are several rules concerning learning new vocabulary through reading [11]

1. First, teacher selects the new words into two groups: students are likely to want use, or whether it is enough for them to understand what it means. It can be useful letting students to make the selection themselves.
2. Students have to investigate the words using dictionaries or other devices.
3. Then they create different exercises with these words. Getting students to make up sentences is also a good idea.
4. Another text is given on the same topic. Students need to find any words and phrases in the text which they looked at in the previous text.
5. After reading several texts, the students should be ready to start writing more complex texts about the topic.

3 Methodology of research

3.1 Participants

Before writing the test paper pupils were asked to fill a questionnaire which concerned personal information. According to the questionnaire data, the number of male and female participants was equal: 13-13. By age the participants were different: fifteen of them were eleven years old, ten were twelve and one was thirteen years old. Most of them live in Beregszász, only eight pupils commute from the surrounding villages.

3.2 Research instruments

Before starting the research, the methods of the research had to be identified. Considering the aim of the study and the consumable potentials, the quantitative research method with elements of qualitative research methodology was chosen.

In the research detailed in this paper a questionnaire and an English proficiency test have been used:

1. The questionnaire contains open- and closed-ended questions, aiming to survey the general opinion about the English language and the rate of the participants' motivation, as well as their attitudes to English as a foreign language and Ukrainian as a state language. In addition, the learners were requested to provide information on their favourite school subjects and favourite activities in the language lessons.

2. The proficiency test contains tasks which measures the pupils' skills in writing and surveys their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

The test paper was designed to assess learners' levels of knowledge of English. The test contained three sections focusing on three knowledge fields which were chosen by the author of the research: writing, grammar and vocabulary. Every correct answer scored one point. The total sum was 45 points.

3.3 Results of the research

From the aspect of language learning, the status of the language 'in the pupil's heart' is non-negligible: is it beloved or unloved? Twenty-three (88%) pupils considered the English language as a fancied one, while two (8%) of them mentioned the Ukrainian language as a favourite one. Pupils were asked to write down their answers and the reason why they chose that language. The two types of justification were the following: the chosen language can be acquired more easily or because it can be more useful in their future. One pupil's mother tongue was Ukrainian, so he implicitly chose the Ukrainian language.

Another determining factor is how easily the target language can be acquired. Twenty pupils (77%) claimed that the learning of the English language was easy for them. Sixty percent of them stated that the reason of their answer was that English language showed more resemblance with the Hungarian language than the Ukrainian for instance. By resemblance they meant similarity in the alphabet. It can be claimed that the languages which use the Latin script can be used more easily by Hungarian learners than those which use the Cyrillic alphabet.

A further aim was to elicit what the main motivation factors are for a pupil who learns a foreign language. Another question was about who motivates them. Only three pupils stated that they were not motivated by others, and twenty-three pupils answered that they were motivated by their parents. Pupils added that besides their parents' motivation they have their own external motivation. They were aware of the fact that knowing English was an indispensable term of having a well-paid job.

Participants were asked to choose their three beloved and three unloved subjects. The goal was to measure the pupils' attitude to the English language as a subject. The language's place among the three subjects was also taken into account.

Table 1. Beloved subjects

	English language
1. place	2 (8%)
2. place	4 (15%)
3. place	3 (12%)

According to the results, only 35% of the pupils mentioned English as their favourite language. An interesting fact is that 50% of the children indicated Physical Training as their beloved subject.

Table 2 shows the place of the English language as an unloved subject among pupils.

Table 2. Unloved subjects

	English language
1 st place	-
2 nd place	3 (12%)

The comparison of the English language as a beloved (35%) and unloved (16%) subject shows that pupils cherish this language more than detest it. It is worthy of mention that 54% of the pupils marked Ukrainian language or literature as an unloved subject.

One of the hypotheses was that the ground of the high level of motivation in English learning can be related to the nature of the school lessons. In order to prove or reject this, pupils were requested to mention their beloved and unloved activities during the English lesson. Table 3 summarizes the activities which are liked by the pupils.

Table 3. Beloved activities

English language	Number of students
Reading	10
Writing	5
Speaking	4
Project work	4
Recitation	3

The data in Table 3 show that reading is the most beloved activity. Unfortunately, the participants did not name the cause of their choice. The two productive skills were also mentioned among the beloved activities. It can be interpreted as a result of the education policy in Ukraine which gives priority to the productive skills, primarily to the communicative skill. The following activity in Table 3 is likewise the outcome of the new education policy. Project work has become rife in the past few years. Pupils have a high regard for this kind of activity because it gives them freedom in learning about their favourite topic. It also gives them an opportunity to work with that amount of data which can be easily assimilated by them. Another preferred activity is the recitation. This may mean that the pupils are self-assured in using the English language.

The questionnaire contained a query which asked the pupils to specify their unloved activities, too.

Table 4. Unloved activities

Activity	Number of students
There is no such activity	14
Writing a test paper	5
Writing in general	3
Learning new words	3
No data	1

Comparing the data of Tables 3 and 4, it can be established that pupils had a positive attitude to the majority of the activities. 54% of the participants did not have problems with any of the aforesaid activities. Learning new words naturally can be difficult for the pupils who cannot be considered as excessive. Also, writing a test paper certainly cannot be considered as one of the pupils' beloved activities.

However, from the viewpoint of language learning, liking different kinds of activities is not enough. The pupils and their parents need to measure the activities' effectiveness. In case of a negative result, parents may take a tutorial into account. Table 5 summarizes the answers which were given to the question: 'Do you learn English in tutorial lessons?'

Table 5. Learning out-of-school

Has tutorials	12 (46%)
Doesn't have tutorials	14 (54%)

The interpretation of these data can be the fact that pupils' main goal is to successfully pass their English language exam before their school leaving since an English language certificate is substantial for learning at a Hungarian university in case the children have the perspective of continuing their studies after leaving the secondary school in Hungary.

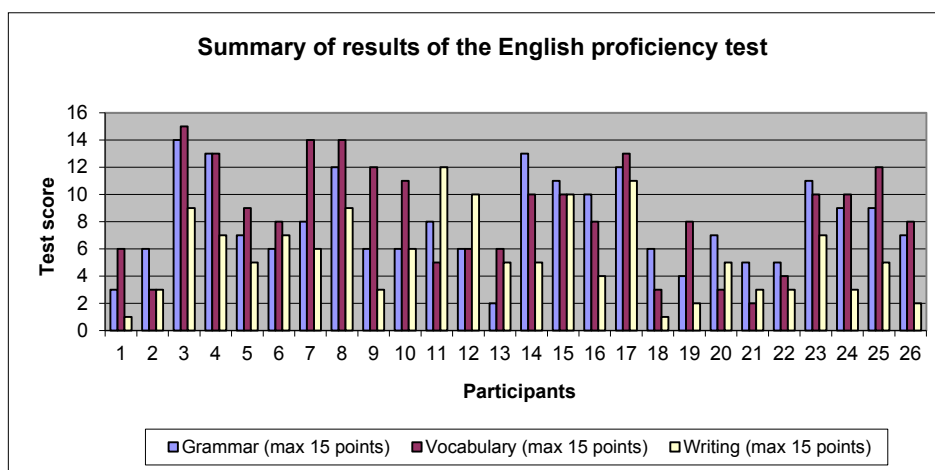
As reported previously, participants wrote a test paper. The analysis did not show any significant differences between vocabulary and grammar, but there was a great margin between these two aspects and the writing results. Tests revealed that while pupils were good at grammar and had a comparatively good knowledge of vocabulary, they were unable to use their knowledge in practice and make up sentences.

The most remarkable result to emerge from the data is that even the most successful pupil's (Participant No3) score showed notable deviation. That pupil was the only one who got maximum point for a task. Unfortunately, they could not manage to use the existing knowledge in the writing task and got six points less than the maximum.

Though pupils got all the support that was possible, it is plausible that a number of limitations might have influenced the results obtained. One of these limitations could be the cultural difference between pupils who were raised in Hungarian or Ukrainian environment. For example, the participant who came

from a Ukrainian family could not imagine who Süsü, the famous dragon, a Hungarian cartoon hero, was. Despite the fact that a picture of Süsü was used during the research, and a detailed explanation was given, there was a great information gap between participants from the two nationalities.

Diagram 1. Proficiency test results



From Diagram 1 we can note that only one participant achieved the maximum of 15 points, though only in one kind of task. Other eight pupils got points between twelve and fourteen for the vocabulary and grammar tasks. One child could achieve twelve points in the writing task. Six pupils got two or one point for their answer considering all types of tests. Table 6 presents the descriptive statistics for the proficiency test.

Table 6. Descriptive statistics

Grammar mean	7.9230769	SD	3.2486684
Vocabulary mean	8.5769231	SD	3.8384692
Writing mean	5.5384615	SD	3.1270532

The data prove that the task measuring the participants' vocabulary was the most successful and strongest aspect of the pupils' English language knowledge (mean = 8.5, SD = 3.8), while writing was the least successful or the weakest one with considerably lower points (mean = 5.5, SD = 3.1).

4 Conclusions

This paper has highlighted the importance of acquiring and practicing productive skills.

Although performance was not ideal, it is nevertheless believed that in this age problematic questions can be solved by correct teaching methods and with pupils' diligence.

Concerning the hypothesis that triggered the present study, it was totally proven. The research data clearly showed that the aims of children of the age group under analysis have changed in the past few years. The strong motivation for learning Ukrainian has almost disappeared, or it has been replaced by the strong motivation to learn English as a foreign language. Children at this young age already realize that there is more perspective in learning English than Ukrainian for their future existence.

The findings of the proficiency test point to some urgent pedagogical implications for the English teachers. The first one relates to the children's writing skills. This is an underdeveloped skill of the participants of the research; therefore, it is of utmost importance that this skill should be practiced all the time in the lessons. The second important implication is that the teachers should pay more attention to the favourite and least beloved activities in the English lessons, and try to apply the ones that the learners do with ease and also willingly. It is common knowledge that when children do something for their own sake, they can achieve far better results.

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Наукове видання

ACTA ACADEMIAE BEREKSASIENSIS

НАУКОВИЙ ВІСНИК

Том XVI

Друкується в авторській редакції з оригінал-макетів авторів

Матеріали подані мовою оригіналу

Автори опублікованих матеріалів несуть повну відповідальність за підбір, точність наведених фактів, цитат, економіко-статистичних даних, власних імен та інших відомостей.

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