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Contents

Núm. 4 (2010)

Artículos

1. Opiniones de la comunidad académica sobre la revisión de la coherencia entre el título y el contenido curricular del programa: el cumplimiento de una actividad autoreflexiva.

Claudia Lorena Chica Camacho

2. Factores que determinan la construcción de identidad de jóvenes estudiantes de colegios departamentales y su relación con la enseñanza y aprendizaje del inglés.

Tatiana Pose Ramírez

3. Learning strategies: Tracing the term

Olga Lucía Uribe Enciso

4. Developing receptive skills in two modern languages: some facilitating and hindering factors

Erzsébet Bárány, Márta Fábrián, Ilona Huszti

5. The Transformation of the Protagonist's Personality in the Tragedy of King Lear

Edwin Martínez Pulido

6. Déjame hablar sobre mis emociones y sentimientos! La comunicación de los factores afectivos en clase de alemán como lengua extranjera

Claudia Clavijo Cruz

7. ¿El alemán como lengua mundial? Anotaciones históricas acerca de un proyecto fallido

Sven Werkmeister

Developing receptive skills in two modern languages: some facilitating and hindering factors

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The present paper describes the findings concerning the receptive skills (listening and reading) in two modern languages (English and Ukrainian) of ten-year-old Hungarian children living in a minority context in Ukraine. The study was conducted in Transcarpathia (Zakarpatska oblast – Закарпатська область), an administrative region in south-western Ukraine, where about 150,000 Hungarians live in a minority context. Berehovo is a small town in the west of Transcarpathia with a population of 26,000 people. Forty-eight percent of the inhabitants are Hungarians (Molnár & Molnár, 2005). There are four Hungarian schools in the town where the first phase of our longitudinal study was conducted in the 2006/2007 school year.

Originally, we wanted to get insights into the processes and compare the outcomes of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) and teaching Ukrainian, the official state language in Ukraine, a second language (USL) to Hungarian minority children in our region. (For Hungarian learners it is compulsory to learn at least three languages in the Hungarian minority schools: Hungarian, their first language (L1), Ukrainian, a second language for them (L2/USL) and a foreign language – mostly English (EFL).) We examined the differences between the two processes of teaching EFL and teaching USL in Hungarian schools, the reasons that caused these differences, as well as the outcomes. Thus, 76 eight-year old learners' proficiency was examined in the two languages. A battery of tests was designed in which the learners' four language skills were assessed. The English test had a parallel Ukrainian version (Huszti, Fábíán & Bárány, 2009).

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Based on our experiences as teachers of English and Ukrainian, we hypothesized that the learners' knowledge of English was better than that of Ukrainian because for more than a decade Hungarian learners have been facing serious difficulties in learning the state language of the independent Ukraine (Csernicskó, 2004). This was also indicated by the results Hungarian learners achieved at the numerous English and Ukrainian local study competitions. At these competitions Hungarian learners always achieved higher scores in English than in Ukrainian. Our hypothesis was refuted by the findings of the proficiency tests, as learners performed better on the Ukrainian test than on the English one, and more importantly in the productive skills (speaking and writing). We explained this by the learners' closer and more frequent contact with Ukrainian than with English.

We found that there were differences between the EFL and USL teaching processes in that in the EFL classrooms the teaching focus was more on communication, while in the USL classrooms teaching was limited to grammar and translation and real communication needs; the language learning abilities of the learners were not taken into account during the teaching process (evidence for this comes from document analysis (Bárányné, Fábíán & Huszti, 2007) and classroom observations (Huszti, 2003).). The reason communicative skills were still better in Ukrainian than in English, despite the methods used during teaching, must have been the fact that there were bilingual children among the learner participants who used Ukrainian in their everyday lives, too. This is supported by the learners' answers provided in the questionnaire (which are not analysed in this article).

In the second phase our aim was to see whether there was an improvement in the learners' proficiency in the two languages. We also surveyed the learners' ethnic identity, motivation, and attitudes to learning the two languages, but these issues do not constitute the focus of this paper. However, we did not examine whether any kind of changes was introduced in the English and Ukrainian teaching processes during the two-year period that passed between Phase 1 and Phase 2 of our research. No variations such as the teacher or his/her methodology or materials were observed in this period.

We have compared the curriculum requirements in English and Ukrainian, and the number of lessons per week in both subjects. We have also looked at textbooks with special attention to the tasks and texts aimed at developing the examined (receptive) skills (Ivasiuk, Gujvaniuk, & Buzynska, 2005; Karpiuk, 2006; Rozumik, Laver, Penzova, Pynzenyk, & Chudak, 2005).

2. BRIEF REVIEW OF RECEPTIVE SKILLS

Alderson (2000, p. 13) claims that "reading involves perceiving the written form of language either visually or kinaesthetically—using Braille", i.e. the readers' ultimate goal is comprehension.

Transcarpathian Hungarian learners' reading skills were the focus of a study by Huszti (2009). She conducted research in seven Hungarian schools with the aim of finding a satisfactory explanation as to why reading aloud as a classroom reading technique was widely used in the school with twelve-year-old children in the English lessons. Through analysing learners' reading miscues, the relationship between reading aloud and reading comprehension was established. The findings proved that learners were not expected to understand the text they read. They were asked to translate passages from their textbooks with the help of bilingual vocabulary lists provided by the teacher. Very few of the 44 learners participating in the study used one or more cueing systems (Goodman, 1969) when decoding the message of the print. However, some learners used semantic cues and others used graphical ones to arrive at meaning.

A comprehension test of eight questions was also applied to the learners. An equal number of them scored above and below the mean score which indicated that learners achieved a balanced score and on the whole, did quite well.

Listening as a receptive skill has been discussed in various sources (cf. Buck, 2000; Rost, 2002). In Transcarpathia, Hungarian learners' listening skills have not been researched yet. Neither is there any academic literature published on the topic. Therefore, we cannot provide any relevant review on the listening skills in English or in Ukrainian of Transcarpathian Hungarian learners. This is a gap that needs to be filled in the future.

3. THE PRESENT STUDY

3.1 Aims

We first aimed to point out the differences between learners' EFL and USL receptive skills, and then compare the findings with those of the receptive skills obtained in the first phase of our study. We also intended to discover how the learners' listening and reading skills in EFL and USL changed during the two years between the two phases of the study.

3.2 Participants

Eighty-six fifth-graders aged 10 and 11 participated in the present study (36 boys – 42% and 50 girls – 58%). These learners were basically the same pupils who participated in the first phase (Huszti, Fábíán, & Bárányné Komári, 2009). The learners had been studying English for four years (as EFL teaching starts in Grade 2 – Schools A, B, & D), except for one school where the pupils started studying English in Grade 1 (School C). USL teaching in Hungarian schools starts in Grade 1, so the pupils had been studying the state language for five years. The number of lessons per week in EFL and in USL is given in Table 1. In Grades 3 and 4 the Ukrainian lessons include two lessons of language and two lessons of reading; in Grade 5, learners have three lessons of language

and two lessons of Ukrainian literature. The first phase was carried out with basically the same pupils at the end of Grade 3.

Table 1. Number of lessons per week in EFL and USL in Grades 1 to 5
(1 lesson = 45 minutes)

School	Grade 1		Grade 2		Grade 3		Grade 4		Grade 5	
	EFL	USL	EFL	USL	EFL	USL	EFL	USL	EFL	USL
A, B, D	0	2	1	3	2	4	2	4	2/3	5
C	1	2	2	3	2	4	2	4	3	5

3.2 Instruments

The learners took two tests measuring their receptive skills in English and Ukrainian. The tests were parallel in structure, but not in content i.e. one was not the translated version of the other. Both tests consisted of two sections. The first one contained a listening test in which the learners had to complete two tasks. First, they had to fill in a table with data from the text they heard, then answer multiple choice questions in the target languages based on the text. The second section of the test measured the learners' reading comprehension. They had to read a text and then answer comprehension questions in the L1 (Hungarian) in a written form. As we did not want to measure the learners' writing skills with this test item, we did not expect them to write and express meaning in English. Therefore, we asked the learners to answer the comprehension questions in the mother tongue, a common practice in language pedagogy research (Seliger & Shohamy, 1990). The material of the test was carefully selected taking into consideration the language content the learners covered prior to being tested, in Grades 2-4. (The English test can be found in the Appendix.) The instrument used in Phase 1 was a similar test aimed at measuring the language skills based on the material of Grades 1-3.

3.4 Procedure

The study was conducted in four Hungarian schools in Berehovo. They were assigned codes A, B, C, and D. The tests were completed by the learners between September and December 2008, with a period of three weeks between the two tests to avoid the practice effect (Nunan, 1992). This period of time is enough to forget the structure and the task types of the previous test. The data were analysed quantitatively, significance and descriptive statistics were calculated during January and May, 2009.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 Findings of Phase 2: Test Results

The results of the tests administered in Grade 5 are summarised in Table 2. As the score of the two listening tests was different, the results are given in percentages.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the proficiency test taken by fifth grade learners (n=85)
 (results are given in %)

Skills	English		Ukrainian	
	Means	Standard deviations	Means	Standard deviations
Reading	28.46	20.30	30.23	20.02
Listening	59.9	14.72	64.45	20.68

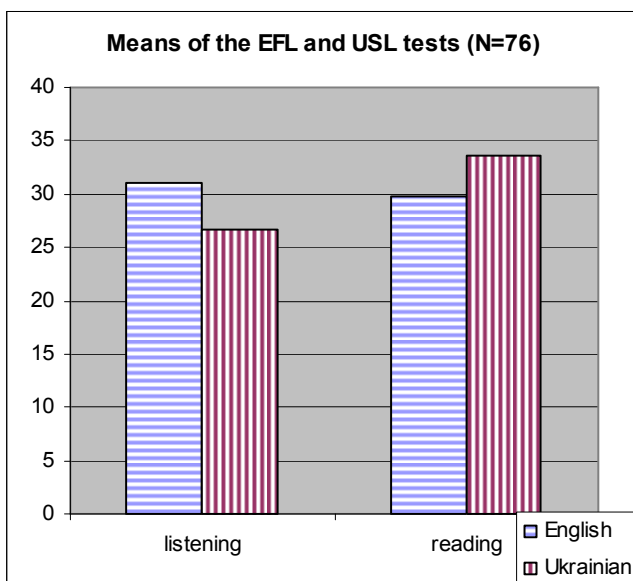
Judging from the figures, we can state that the means are higher in Ukrainian in both skills though not significantly ($p > 0.05$, $t = 0.24$). Taking into account the fact that the state language is taught from age 6 while English is taught from age 7 and that the number of lessons is higher in Ukrainian, we can state that in spite of the higher scores the findings should have been much better in USL. A previous investigation proves that the earlier the starting age, even if the difference is only one year, results in better developed language skills (Husztí, Fábíán & Bárány, 2009). In addition, the number of lessons per week in Grade 5 is two/three lessons in EFL (depending on the choice of the school) and five (3 language lessons and 2 literature lessons) in USL. Theoretically, this should lead to better knowledge of USL. As referred to before, the average number of lessons per week spent on learning the two languages during the years of study is higher in the state language. Thus, the time spent on learning it and the results achieved on the proficiency test lack proportion as in English nearly the same results were reached in a shorter period of time.

4.2 Comparison of Phase 1 and Phase 2 Findings

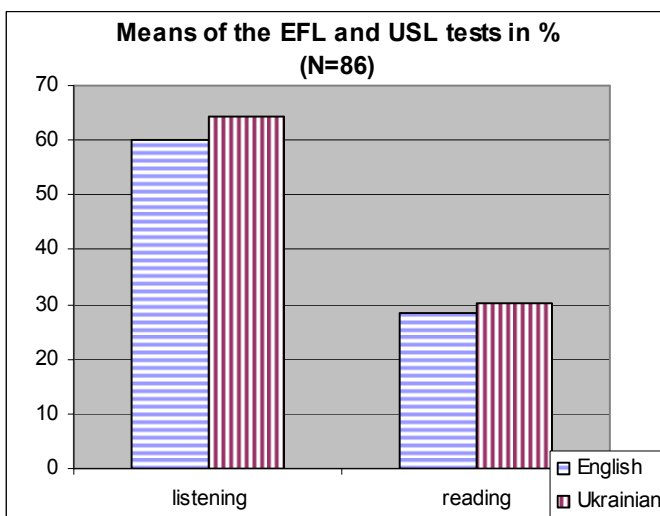
The findings of Phase 1 show that listening comprehension was significantly better in English than in Ukrainian ($p < 0.05$, $t = 0.0018$). We explained this finding by the fact that the English textbook contained well-designed exercises and tasks to develop learners' listening skills, while the Ukrainian textbooks did not provide such materials. Moreover, our document analysis in Phase 1 proved that with the help of Grade 2 and 3 Ukrainian textbooks it was impossible to develop learners' listening skills (Husztí, Fábíán, & Bárányné Komári, 2009). In Phase 2 listening proved to be better in Ukrainian but not significantly. The results in reading are nearly the same as two years ago: they are better in USL but not significantly. (Phase 1: $t = 0.37$, $p > 0.05$, Phase 2: $t = 0.08$, $p < 0.05$). Figure 1 shows the results of the two phases parallel to each other.

Figure 1. Comparison of the results of the proficiency tests on receptive skills in English and Ukrainian (%)
 (highest score in English: 20 = 100%; in Ukrainian: 22 = 100%)

Phase 1



Phase 2



The reason for the better results in listening comprehension can be explained by the fact that learners are exposed to a great deal of listening as in most schools the teachers of Ukrainian are native speakers of the state language and have poor or no knowledge of the learners' mother tongue, so the learners are forced by the situation to use the target language when addressing their teachers. We presume the slightly better results in Ukrainian reading are due to the fact that the learners have separate lessons for Ukrainian literature besides the language lessons, where the learners are expected to do more reading than in the English lessons. Thus they have more practice opportunities. However, despite these extra classes in Ukrainian reading, the test results are not in line with the amount of practice opportunities. This is because the difficulty level of the Ukrainian texts in the textbooks does

not correspond to the learners' knowledge level, i.e. the texts are too difficult for them to comprehend. To put it differently, the learners do not understand the message of the texts because the comprehensible input level (Krashen, 1985) is too high in the texts.

Real communication needs can speed up both language learning and language acquisition (Navracscics, 2007). However, the situation with the teachers of English is quite the opposite of the situation with Ukrainian teachers: because Ukrainian is the environmental language in the context where the children live, they have more frequent contact with it than with English. In addition, in their everyday life learners feel the real need for Ukrainian whenever they go to a shop to buy so simple an item as an ice cream. Meanwhile, they do not feel this same need concerning English.

The present research shows that within two years the listening skills of the same learners improved by 37.69% in the language requiring real understanding (USL) and only by 28.93% in the language (EFL) with which they have no direct contact (e.g. communication with native speakers, listening to and watching radio and TV programs, etc.).

The slow development of reading skills in Ukrainian can be explained by the quality of reading comprehension exercises in the textbooks. In the first phase Ukrainian outscored English by 3.95% while in the second phase it was only 1.77 % better, so the development of this skill in Ukrainian was slower than in English in spite of the fact that much more time was spent on learning USL (see Figure 1 and Table 1). This might prove that the grammar-translation method used for decades during the Soviet era in Transcarpathia still has quite a strong impact on language teaching in the area.

Thus, we see that the most rapid development took place in listening comprehension of USL followed by the same skill in EFL. Real-life listening and real communication needs play a great role in developing learners' listening skills. Reading comprehension was found to be a more slowly developing element of both languages due to the fact, we believe, that reading aloud is paid more attention to than silent reading aimed at understanding the content in EFL and that elements of the grammar-translation method prevail in USL. Due to these facts reading developed more slowly in Ukrainian than in English, while the listening skills show the opposite tendency.

5. INTERPRETATION OF THE FINDINGS

The curriculum, the textbooks and the methods used in language teaching serve as a basis and main guidelines for the teacher and thus determine its outcome. While the new National Curriculum for Foreign Languages (Red'ko et al., 2005) is based on the standards advocated in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (2001), the Ukrainian Curriculum, however, pays attention to developing the language skills and is

still more grammar-centred than communication-oriented. The Ukrainian textbooks are mainly based on grammar but also contain special sections aimed at developing the speaking skills. They do not contain special guidelines for the teacher to teach the receptive skills; texts for reading and listening are usually related to a grammar issue or a conversational topic. The textbook in Ukrainian Literature contains a combination of a textbook and a collection of long, unabridged literary texts followed mainly by reproductive questions to be answered. The method used in the teaching process has the features of the grammar-translation method with some elements of communicative language teaching. In spite of the fact that a lot of positive changes took place in the methods of teaching Ukrainian to minorities, it is still not based on the theory and practice of the prevailing language teaching method at the turn of the millennium – communicative language teaching. This is a crucial issue to emphasise in the comparison detailed in this paper.

Better results in Ukrainian, besides the higher number of lessons, can be explained first of all by the real communication needs of the learners living in an area where one of the examined languages is the state language. Some of the learners need to communicate in their everyday life with friends, family members, neighbours, etc. and are exposed to more input in USL than in EFL. In English the learners have only anticipatory communication needs: they know that they might need the language for some reasons in the future but do not have to use it in real-life communicative situations. They get only a little language input outside the schools, mainly through listening to music, advertisements and in a few cases through the Internet. So, while in EFL we cannot really speak about language acquisition, in USL we can speak about language learning and language acquisition as parallel processes due to the language environment of the learners. The terms ‘language acquisition’ and ‘language learning’ mean the notions explained by Krashen (1982).

Poor results in reading might have two reasons. The first is connected to more emphasis on reading aloud than on reading comprehension in both languages. Reading aloud is a widely used technique in most schools, though comprehension is rarely expected from the learners as teachers translate everything for them instead of teaching them how to deduce meaning from print (Goodman, 1979; Huszti, 2009). The second reason lies in the nature and the quality of the reading tasks. The English textbook contains a lot of different tasks for developing reading comprehension while the tasks in the texts for reading in the Ukrainian textbook are mainly confined to answering questions, retelling the text, making a dialogue on the basis of the text, or are connected with grammar. The textbook in Ukrainian literature contains comprehension questions about the texts, but the texts are not simplified and not adjusted to the learners’ level of knowledge. They are meant for extensive reading i.e. reading a long passage of printed text (e.g. short stories or parts or entire novels) for pleasure (Fernandez de Morgado, 2009). (However, children find these texts too difficult to understand so they cannot read them for pleasure. This way the purpose of the texts is lost.) The listening tasks are usually aimed at understanding the content of the text in both languages. Thus, we see that much should be changed both in the methods and approach of developing the receptive skills in teaching USL as well as in teaching EFL. We mention these changes in the Implications Section of our paper.

Finally, if we approach the findings in the receptive skills in both languages from a different perspective, we meet an attention-grabbing phenomenon: English teaching focuses more on developing the learners' communicative skills, while Ukrainian teachers give more emphasis to the teaching of grammar and developing the learners' receptive skills. This claim is also supported by the findings of the learner tests (better receptive skills results in Ukrainian than in English).

6. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we have tried to present and analyse by comparing and contrasting the findings of a study about the receptive skills in two modern languages: English and Ukrainian. The participants of the study were Hungarian children living in south-western Ukraine as members of the Hungarian minority in the country.

The aim of a nation or part of a nation living as a minority is additive balanced bilingualism in the development of which the educational system plays a crucial role. In Spolsky's view (1992), balanced bilingualism refers to a very strong, almost equal, command of two languages, usually the mother tongue and a second language. 'Additive' means that learners, when acquiring a second language, do not lose their mother tongue knowledge and use, but add a second language to it, so that the two languages can exist parallel in the learner's mind. From the research we can conclude that by providing a sufficient number of lessons of Ukrainian in minority schools, the state strives to reach this aim. The findings, though, show that teaching the state language is not as effective as it should be. Probably, the reason lies in the method of teaching, an issue to be researched in the future. Taking into account the time spent on teaching and learning the two languages, we can conclude that though the results are better in USL, the development is more rapid in EFL. The listening skills of the learners have developed considerably in USL while in EFL the scores were not as high as in Ukrainian, but progress was evident. Reading comprehension, a skill which is taught rather than acquired, is not paid enough attention to, so the learners' reading skills do not develop in the proper way. Therefore, based on our research findings we can state that the receptive skills develop differently in USL and in EFL: the listening skill is developed more rapidly in both languages than the reading skill.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

1. More attention should be paid to developing the receptive skills in both languages and qualitative changes should be encouraged. Both English and Ukrainian teachers should change their attitudes to teaching the receptive skills and create situations in the lessons and beyond them which provide ample opportunity to practise both reading and listening comprehension of the learners more effectively.
2. As to EFL, more attention should be paid to understanding the content of the texts, or reading comprehension, not only translating the texts for understanding as was observed in English classrooms in

seven schools by Huszti (2009). In the case of USL, first of all the texts for reading should undergo numerous methodological changes: the length and topics of the texts should be made appropriate for the age group, word frequency; furthermore, lexical distribution should be taken into account and more exercises for developing and checking comprehension should follow the texts.

3. Skills development in USL should be based on the theory and practice of communicative language teaching.
4. Learners should be encouraged by teachers to find possibilities for real-life communication (e.g. through the Internet – exchanging e-mails, online chatting, etc.). Anyway, these learners already have their friends who are members in different online communities.
5. Learners should be encouraged to undertake extensive listening and reading through which they can practise their skills in comprehension.
6. Hungarians live in a linguistic minority and their aim is to achieve additive balanced bilingualism i.e. to know their mother tongue at a high level and have a good command of the state language, as well. Besides, their need is the knowledge of a foreign language, English (Beregszászi, 2004). For these reasons, the stakeholders should make decisions and language teachers in Transcarpathian Hungarian schools should adopt even more effective methods so that learners will be able to achieve their linguistic goals.

As a limitation of our study design we should admit that due to certain conditions we had no possibility to find out if there were Hungarian-Ukrainian bilingual learners among the test-takers. However, there are hints on this issue in the learner questionnaires. They indicate that a lot of children use both Hungarian and Ukrainian within their families.

With respect to further research, we intend to carry out classroom observations in Phase 3 of our project to collect empirical data to support or refute our findings so far.

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Appendix

ENGLISH TEST FOR FORM 5 PUPILS

1. Listening

Listen to a story that happened to three friends and do the tasks.

a) Fill in the table

NAME	Kate	Liz	Monica
AGE			
TOWN			

b) Choose the correct answer.

1. What happened first?
 - a) Liz called the girls.
 - b) Liz found a bottle.
 - c) Monika and Kate went to swim.
2. Monika and Kate swam to the shore because...
 - a) they wanted to sunbathe with Liz .
 - b) Liz found something interesting.
 - c) Liz had a green glass.
3. In the bottle there was...
 - a) a message.
 - b) a present.
 - c) some paper.
4. The sentence: "When we at last took **it** out of the bottle" means
 - a) they took the present out of the bottle.
 - b) they took the message out of the bottle.
 - c) they took the newspaper out of the bottle.
5. The girls read that...
 - a) there is a house and a swimming pool on the beach.
 - b) Lawrence McLeod lives at 10 Sesame Street.
 - c) they can get a birthday present.
6. Three girls were unhappy because...
 - a) they went to the library.

- b) it all was a joke.
- c) it was a mystery.

The story that learners listened to:

Message in a bottle

This story happened to three girls one summer. The girls were on a summer holiday in England. Kate lives in Budapest and is 12 years old. Liz is from London and celebrated her 14th birthday the week the story happened. Monica, Kate's cousin is from New York and is only 13.

It was a hot summer day, so my friends and I went to the beach. When we arrived, Monica and I went for a swim but Liz decided to stay on the beach and sunbathe for a while.

Suddenly, Liz called us “Monica, Kate, come quickly! I’ve found something.” We swam back to the shore. She had a green glass bottle in her hand. “I found this on the beach,” she said. We looked at the bottle and then opened it. To our surprise, there was a piece of paper in the bottle. When we at last took it out of the bottle we saw a message and read: *Who finds this piece of paper, gets a new big house with a swimming pool as a Christmas present for his or her birthday at 10, Sesame Street, London. Lawrence McLeod, 1st April 1924.*” We couldn’t believe our eyes! A new house and a swimming pool for us!

Later that afternoon, we all went to the library to find out about 10, Sesame Street. Unfortunately, there was no Sesame Street in London or a Lawrence McLeod. We were unhappy! Then Vanessa said, “Look at the date! It says 1st April!” So, it was not a mystery any more. It was just an April fool’s joke!

2. Reading

Read the letter and answer the questions in Hungarian.

Dear Ann,

I’m having a fantastic holiday in London with my Mum and Dad. It’s just great! There are so many beautiful places to see and Mum buys an ice-cream for me every day.

Yesterday we went to Buckingham Palace in the centre of London. It’s a nice grey building with lovely parks near it. It has got 600 rooms and big windows. The Queen and her family live there. There is a flag on the Palace when the Queen is at home.

Today we were in the Tower of London. Now it is a museum but in the past the Kings and Queens of England lived there. It’s near the River Thames. Tower Bridge over the Thames is just beautiful.

Tomorrow we’re going to the Houses of Parliament and Big Ben. You know, the tall clock we saw in the picture in our textbook.

At home I’ll show you the photos.

See you soon.

Yours,

Kati

1. Who does Kati write her letter to? _____
2. Who is she in London with? _____
3. Who lives in Buckingham Palace? _____
4. What can one see at the top of the palace? _____
5. Near which river is the Tower of London? _____
6. What are they going to visit the next day? _____
7. What picture did the children see in their textbook? _____
8. Did Kati take photos? _____

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