

THE MULTILINGUAL NATURE OF GEOGRAPHY FINAL EXAMINATIONS IN HUNGARY – ACHIEVEMENTS AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

In Hungary, Geography final examinations can be taken in ten foreign languages within bilingual and nationality (ethnic minority) secondary education. This linguistic diversity is one of the less-studied, often neglected values of the Hungarian public education system. Around 20,000 students in more than 120 schools take part in dual language education, in which Geography is offered in Croatian, English, French, German, Italian, Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovakian or Spanish.

Since the introduction of the two-tier Matura examination system in the mid-2000s, Geography has been one of the most common choices in foreign language, showing the subject's prestige and popularity among students. Preparing students for final exams is quite challenging as it requires teachers to align subject teaching goals of the Geography curriculum with language skills development, while the contexts and pedagogical practices of foreign language Geography teaching greatly vary among the school programmes. The distribution of exams by location and language reveals not only some key demographic trends and patterns of Hungary but the nationwide success of dual language education as well.

As final exam requirements are about to change soon, it is worth reflecting on the achievements and challenges of 17 years of foreign language Geography teaching within the two-tier examination system. This paper and presentation will explore the factors influencing the practice of teaching Geography in foreign languages in Hungarian secondary schools through the geographical analysis of intermediate and advanced level exam data provided by the Educational Authority of Hungary, supported by thematic maps and the presenter's pedagogical experience.

Keywords: foreign language, Geography teaching, final examination, bilingual education, nationality education

INTRODUCTION

In Hungary, Geography is not a mandatory final exam subject, but has been a popular choice for tens of thousands of students so far – it had been the case even before the introduction of the two-tier examination system –, regardless of type of institution, region or language. However, curriculum changes over the last 15 years have left a negative mark on the image of this subject [7] [9]. As a result of the decline in the total number of lessons and recurring changes of the weekly number of lessons, covering all topics described in the curriculum has become a major challenge for teachers. With the recent transformation of the vocational school system, both Geography as an independent subject and geographical content in general have been marginalized in vocational schools,

remaining relatively intact only in vocational schools with Economics and Tourism profiles. (However, a complex science subject recently introduced in vocational schools involves various geographical content, but taking final exam from this new subject is not possible at the moment and this subject is not taught in foreign languages.)

Studying Geography in a foreign language has a wide range of benefits/advantages. This subject helps students understand the environmental, social and economic processes and interactions from global to local scale, offering synthesis between social and physical sciences [7] [8]. Compared to that of other science subjects, the terminology of Geography is relatively easy to access and digest even for students with lower level of language competence, while the topics covered in Geography lessons are closely connected to several everyday discussion topics such as transport, economy, society or environment. Studying Geography in foreign languages greatly contributes to the development of all language skills from vocabulary building to communication skills. This might be one of the reasons why Geography is a common subject choice to be taught in foreign languages in dual language programmes.

Foreign language Geography teaching has a double purpose. Teachers need to align the subject teaching goals of the Geography curriculum with language skills development, which requires methodological depth and years of teaching experience. Recent trends in content and language integrated learning (CLIL) offer a great alternative, but the application of CLIL methodologies and dissemination of its good practices in Geography teaching – and subject teaching in general – have not really been discussed in professional teacher communities [1] [12].

Geography education must follow the guidelines and requirements set in the curriculum, regardless of the language of instruction. Neither the curriculum, nor the exam requirements are available in languages other than Hungarian. Therefore, exam preparation poses a greater challenge to teachers and students alike, as different goals need to be aligned in a relatively short timeframe (due to relatively small number of lessons) to be able to take exams successfully. Topographic map requirements and the list of key expressions are provided only in Hungarian, forcing teachers to translate expressions or borrow phrases from foreign language textbooks. The public database of past examination papers and marking schemes available on the website of the Educational Authority of Hungary also contribute to exam preparation and guidance, but teachers who teach this subject in a foreign language might feel a vacuum they need to fill with individual self-developed solutions, practices and resources adapted to the situation.

In terms of printed study materials, foreign language Geography teaching has been facing challenges from the beginning. There are no textbooks available to fulfil the methodological requirements of the double purpose mentioned above. Only a narrow selection of previously translated versions of Hungarian textbooks are available for schools to buy, but as they were written for a previous curriculum, they contain expressions and topics now considered less relevant. There is no plan for revising and publishing updated editions, even though a new exam structure is about to be introduced soon [6]. Study materials are available predominantly in ethnic minority languages, but in limited numbers. Textbooks in English, for instance, need to be imported or to be made

available in online versions. However, Geography atlases have recently become available in three languages, developed with the clear purpose of supporting bilingual education.

Bilingual centres may rely on cultural institutions or previously gained experience in ordering resources, but obviously those materials do not fit the purposes and curriculum of Hungarian Geography teaching, although they show similarities along a selection of topics, mainly in physical geography. For minority education, importing materials from abroad might be easier.

AIMS AND METHODS

One way of measuring the effectiveness of subject teaching in secondary schools is the analysis of final exam results. Since the introduction of the two-tier final examination (Matura) system in the mid-2000s, examinations have been available in intermediate and advanced levels. Both examinations include a written and an oral component. Examinations can be taken during spring (May-June) and autumn (October-November) exam periods. Intermediate exams are assessed internally by teachers, while advanced level exams are assessed externally. Final exams can be taken only in subjects that were taught for at least two years – and Geography belongs to these subjects [7] [8]. Students taking foreign language subject examinations might work on their written papers (as exam time for each component is slightly extended), but in terms of the oral exam component, there is no difference between exams taken in Hungarian and in foreign languages.

The aim of this research was to build a database of foreign language Geography exam statistics. A wide range of information is available in the public databases of the Educational Authority of Hungary, including gender, result, language, county, type of institution (secondary grammar school or vocational secondary school), type of examination and level of examination [4]. The website of the authority also hosts a public inventory of past examination papers and marking schemes in all languages [5]. Both databases are updated after each examination period. During the research, the two databases were matched to identify any discrepancy among the selected data.

In addition to the analysis of statistical data, two interviews were conducted with officials supervising Geography examinations – including those in foreign languages – were concluded to support assumptions formulated on the basis of patterns and trends. (The pedagogical experience of the author of this paper in preparing and examining students is also added.) Findings of the research were processed into a variety of diagrams and maps to visualize spatial distribution and temporal change patterns of foreign language examinations over a period of 15 years and more than 30 examination periods [4] [5].

This research is relevant as no similar studies have been concluded in this field so far. Publications dealing with dual language programmes mainly cover linguistic aspects, but they rarely explore subject-specific problems, while most studies in Geography methodology do not tend to pay enough attention to the practices and achievements related to foreign language Geography education [2].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Over the last 15 years, more than 150 dual language programmes have been present in 120 different schools. The range of institutions showed minimal fluctuation (certain schools introduced, others abandoned or suspended such programmes for a variety of reasons). There are eleven languages in which bilingual or ethnic minority programmes are available in secondary education. The majority of these dual language programmes are Hungarian-English and Hungarian-German bilingual programmes. In terms of bilingual education, Geography is offered in English (dozens of schools across the country), French (ten schools, two in Budapest and eight outside the capital), Spanish (seven schools, one in Budapest and six in major towns) and Italian (two in Budapest, one in Debrecen and one in Pécs) [3].

In terms of languages falling under the ethnic minority language provisions set by the government, Slovakian (one school in Budapest, one in Békéscsaba), Croatian (one school in Budapest, one in Pécs), Russian (two schools in Budapest), Serbian (one school in Budapest) and Romanian (one school in the border town of Gyula) bilingual education has also been present for years. Hungarian-German dual language programmes are available in both bilingual and nationality education, adding up to around 50 schools. (In addition to these, Chinese – as an eleventh language – is also present in two schools in Budapest, but neither of them offer Geography, therefore no such final examination has been held so far.) It is important to note that English and German language programmes and most of the minority language programmes can rely on students coming from primary schools with similar profiles, while in the case of Spanish, French and Italian, dual language primary school education is not present at the moment.

Table 1. Intermediate (green boxes) and advanced (red marker) Geography final exams by exam period and foreign language (2005-21), based on the public database of the Educational Authority of Hungary [4] [5].

exam periods		foreign languages									
		Eng	Fre	Cro	Ger	Ita	Rus	Rom	Spa	Ser	Slo
2005	spring										
	autumn										
2006	spring	◆									
	autumn	◆									
2007	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn				◆						
2008	spring	◆									
	autumn										
2009	spring	◆		◆							
	autumn										
2010	spring										
	autumn	◆						◆			
2011	spring				◆						
	autumn	◆									
2012	spring				◆						
	autumn				◆						
2013	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn				◆						
2014	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn										
2015	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn										
2016	spring				◆						
	autumn										
2017	spring				◆						
	autumn										
2018	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn										
2019	spring			◆							
	autumn										
2020	spring	◆			◆						
	autumn										
2021	spring	◆									
	autumn				◆						
exam periods		29	26	19	30	26	5	3	22	3	6

According to public data, more than 7,100 intermediate level Geography final exams have been taken in a foreign language between 2006 and 2021, constituting 3.5% of all intermediate level exams. Since the introduction of the two-tier system, 34 exam periods have been held (two per year). There were three exam periods in which students selected Geography in eight different foreign language – a similar range of language use was observable only in the case of Mathematics and History, two mandatory final exam subjects. Nearly all exam periods have had at least one exam taken in foreign language

(Table 1). Based on the data, it can be clearly stated that Geography has been the most popular and most common choice for an optional science subject to take in foreign languages.

Table 2. The number of intermediate and advanced level examinations in Hungarian and in foreign languages respectively, 2006-2021. (Source of data: the public database of Educational Authority of Hungary.) [4]

Year <i>(spring and autumn exam periods are combined)</i>	Intermediate level		Advanced level	
	<i>the number of exams taken in Hungarian</i>	<i>the number of exams taken in foreign languages</i>	<i>the number of exams taken in Hungarian</i>	<i>the number of exams taken in foreign languages</i>
2006	22,024	not specified	569	3
2007	21,040	692	677	4
2008	19,710	641	452	3
2009	19,012	621	296	2
2010	14,386	740	270	3
2011	16,233	776	414	3
2012	15,260	750	516	2
2013	17,361	953	509	5
2014	8,031	137	320	5
2015	9,913	224	254	2
2016	9,068	292	328	6
2017	6,497	227	207	2
2018	5,772	191	174	6
2019	5,124	187	219	1
2020	4,801	218	827	5
2021	6,207	217	1,221	6

The impact of exam regulation changes – like the suspension and reintroduction of early examination (held before the final year of secondary education) – has been observable in the fluctuations of exam numbers both in Hungarian and foreign languages [10]. Peak exam numbers of the late 2000s and the early 2010s were followed by a decline, which was also visible in the falling number of exams in foreign languages (Table 2). While total intermediate exam numbers reached a low point in 2020, foreign language exam numbers stabilised at around 200 exams per year.

The gradual decline of advanced level exams stopped a few years earlier, showing unprecedented record-breaking numbers recently, mainly due to the recognition of Geography as a potential advanced exam subject at a wider range of universities, including faculties of Economics [10] [11]. However, the majority of candidates studying Geography in foreign languages choose this subject at intermediate level. Advanced level foreign language Geography exams are still very rare and occasional (exam numbers per year never exceeded 6).

Considering languages, German and English are outstanding in terms of both exam numbers and exam periods. 82.5% of all intermediate exams have been taken in German and English. Ethnic minority languages (excluding German) add up to only 2% of all foreign language exams, with Croatian being significantly more often selected than Romanian, Russian, Serbian, Slovakian combined. Exam numbers taken in minority languages are proportionate to the number of programmes of the given language.

By geographical distribution, almost 30% of all foreign language intermediate exams were taken in Budapest. It is not surprising as the capital city has the most multicultural population and the most colourful range of dual language programmes, with all of the above listed languages except for Romanian.

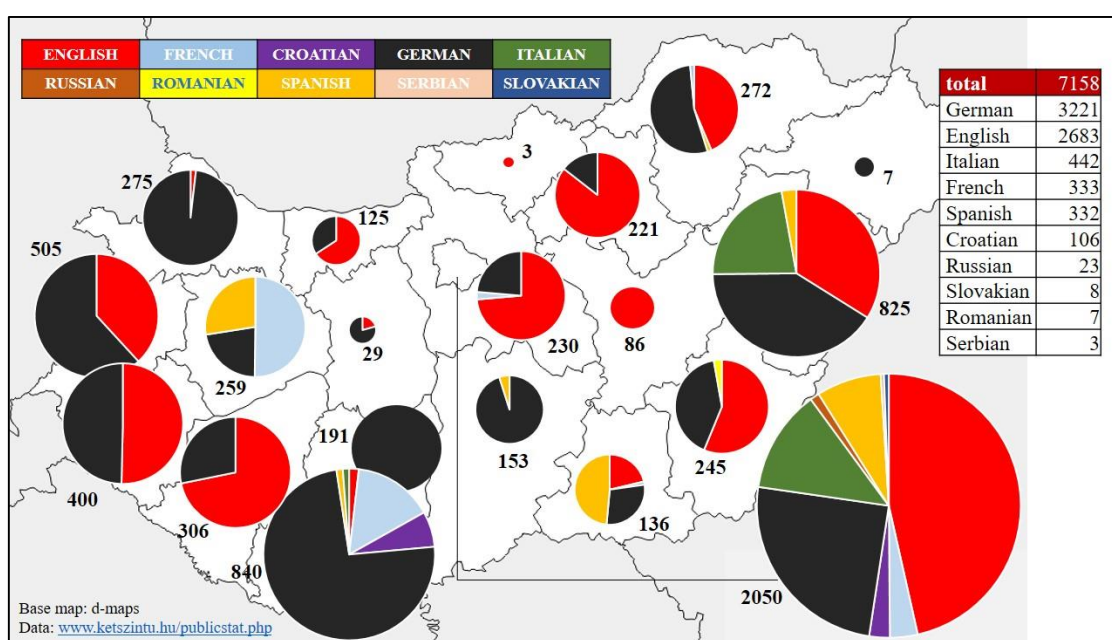


Figure 1. The distribution of foreign language intermediate exams in Geography by county and language (2007-2021), based on the public database of the Educational Authority of Hungary

Geography exams were taken in at least one foreign language in every county. (Figure 1.). While Budapest, Pest county and counties with major educational centres (for instance, Baranya, Hajdú-Bihar, Csongrád, Veszprém or Borsod-Abaúj-Zemplén) have a much wider diversity of languages in which Geography exams were held, certain counties (Nógrád, Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg, Jász-Nagykun-Szolnok, Tolna) had exams in only one foreign language and in significantly lower numbers. This can be justified by the lower number of institutions – and an even lower number of schools offering Geography in that particular foreign language.

Exams in German have been held in Budapest and 17 counties, while exams in English have been held in Budapest and 15 counties, which explains the greater share of German language examinations. Around 20% of all German-language exams were taken in Baranya county, which in general shows a great linguistic diversity with five other

language options (of which, English was the least common choice). Transdanubia has a slightly higher number of Geography exams in German, mainly due to significantly high exam numbers in Baranya and Tolna (home to a larger number of inhabitants of German ethnicity) and counties along the Austrian border.

Baranya and Hajdú-Bihar counties (with Pécs and Debrecen as county seats and university towns with very diverse educational profiles) represent around two-thirds of total foreign language examination numbers. Exams taken in French, Italian and Spanish have similar numbers, slightly exceeding 1,100 combined. Budapest is the only place with exams in Russian and Serbian, but no exams in these languages have been held since 2013. In Romanian, only one school in Békés county has organized Geography examinations, but only since 2015 [4].

CONCLUSION

Students across the country have an opportunity to join dual language programmes and study Geography (among other subjects) in a multitude of languages. This linguistic diversity of secondary schools is a very valuable and peculiar feature of the Hungarian public education – and the result of various demographic and socioeconomic factors. The location of schools with dual language programmes greatly determines the distribution patterns of foreign language examinations, while exam numbers follow the fluctuations caused by changing regulations and the steadily narrowing space of Geography education.

Even with declining exam numbers, marginalized treatment, lack of relevant resources and relative loss of subject prestige, these dual language programmes have managed to prove the success of Geography teaching and contribute to the popularity of this subject as a final exam subject choice. Although foreign language exams make up only a tiny segment of total exam numbers, they represent a network of educational programmes in which Geography teaching is combined with the goals and practices of language teaching – and in which thousands of students are enrolled year after year. Behind these exam achievements, there are well-prepared students, experienced and dedicated teachers and well-developed school practices, which would be worth studying further to explore differences in exam preparation methods and disseminate the most effective teaching practices.

As more than 15 years have passed since the introduction of the two-tier final exam system, this analysis might be timely as exam requirements (e.g. content and exam structure) are about to change from May 2024, including the introduction of project assignment as a potential alternative to the present oral exam component [6]. Currently, these changes seem to be beneficial for students of dual language programmes as they provide more freedom and more room for creativity than present-day exam requirements, but schools and teaching communities need to revise their strategies for exam preparation both language-wise and content-wise to maintain the success of foreign language examinations.

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