



# UPRT 2010

Empirical Studies in English Applied Linguistics

Edited by

Magdolna Lehmann, Réka Lugossy and József Horváth

Lingua Franca Csoport



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# Introduction

Like our earlier volumes, *UPRT 2010*, too, brings together papers focusing on various aspects of research on language and language education. The fourteen chapters present empirical studies written by sixteen authors, discussing a wide range of questions – related to language acquisition at a young age, high-school and university program evaluations, and intercultural communication. We are always pleased to be able to share an international perspective. In the current edition, we again can publish the findings of Croatian and Italian colleagues' projects, next to reports by Hungarian professionals. And we can assure you that we will continue to do so in *UPRT 2011* and beyond.

Finally, some recent statistics about the range of readership our four books have attracted, beginning with *UPRT 2006* and all the way to this volume.

The main access points for UPRT books are the Hungarian Electronic Library and Google Books. As of today, November 15, 2011, over seven thousand visits have been registered on the former, and almost four thousand on the latter. These figures include one-stop visits by people who have found us accidentally, but also return visits by students and colleagues from around the world who came to these sites to look up pages and download the full content for themselves.

Wherever you are from, we would like you to know how pleased we are that you have discovered the work of the authors who appear in this collection.

Very.

*The editors*

# “YILL class, YILL problems” Teachers’ and Students’ Views on the Year of Intensive Language Learning

Zsófia Menyhei

University of Pécs, Hungary  
menyhei@yahoo.com

## Introduction

A number of studies and national surveys underline the problem that today, two decades after the changes in 1989, it is still only a minority of the Hungarian population that speaks foreign languages (Medgyes, 2005; Medgyes & Miklósy, 2005). As this bears serious consequences for the competitiveness of the country in the European arena, the Hungarian Ministry of Education launched the World-Language (WL) foreign language program to initiate a new national strategy regarding foreign language education (Medgyes, 2005). As an integral part of the WL framework, 407 Hungarian secondary schools, both grammar and vocational, launched the Year of Intensive Language Learning (YILL) program in 2004. Students taking part in this program commence their studies in secondary school with a preliminary year of language learning, and thus finish a year later than their peers. The purpose of this intensive year is to provide students with the opportunity to attain a high level of knowledge of a foreign language. Other main aims of the YILL initiative include the following: creating a favourable attitude and motivation toward learning languages in students; bridging the ever-widening gap between those who come from disadvantaged backgrounds and other students; preparing students for the advanced-level school-leaving exam; and developing students’ learning strategies so that they would be able to sustain and develop their foreign language skills even after leaving school (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009).

The present paper reports on the findings of a qualitative inquiry into how students and teachers relate to the YILL program in a secondary school

in Budapest, five years after the launch of the first YILL classes. It discusses the specific benefits and problems related to YILL as voiced by both stakeholders and reflects on their beliefs about language learning and language teaching in this particular context.

## Background to the study

Two studies have examined the pilot year 2004/2005 in 64 schools, in an effort to give an account of the initial experiences of the YILL (Nikolov & Ottó, 2005a, 2005b; Nikolov & Ottó, 2006). The results revealed development in students' command of languages, although individual differences were found to be alarmingly great. In the spring of 2009, a final comprehensive study was conducted, assessing the extent to which the original aims of YILL have been realized in the five-year process (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009). The research consisted of two phases. In the first, the directorate of 267 secondary institutions filled in an internet-based questionnaire; in the second involving 62 schools, language teachers, students and parents were asked to share their reflections on the intensive year and the following four years.

The findings confirmed that most students who took part in the program were more motivated regarding language learning, and achieved better results on various foreign language examinations compared to other pupils. However, a number of secondary institutions described their YILL students as less able and less motivated than others. While some students and teachers defined the program as a 'fast lane', others referred to it as a 'pit stop'. Bridging the gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and others, as well as differentiated instruction proved to be great problems in several schools, as numerous teachers voiced their concerns about the difficulty of coping with pupils of different abilities and backgrounds in the same classroom. Many parents and students reported that the intensive year fulfilled their expectations, but regarded the following four years considerably more difficult in terms of re-adjustment to the traditional system after a whole year of learning languages almost exclusively. Of all students from senior classes, 51% maintained that if they could decide at present, they would not choose to enter the YILL program. Results also revealed that, for the most part, schools only offered instruction in one foreign language, whereas the majority of student respondents claimed they would have liked to learn two or more languages. Finally, according to the findings, YILL students most typically opted for the intermediate-level school-leaving examination supplemented by a language examination, instead of aiming for the advanced level, as this stra-

tegy typically earned them more points for university entrance. Their performance on the intermediate-level school-leaving exam exceeded others' performance by 3-13%, but they had no advantage on the advanced level (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, pp. 156-161).

The present study is part of a set of similar qualitative inquiries into students' and teachers' views on the YILL program in their schools. It is based on the findings of the comprehensive study on the first 5 years of the YILL (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009) and aims at providing a more in-depth understanding of YILL students' and teachers' points of view about the status of the intensive language program in their own school. I conducted the study in a vocational school offering specialized training in telecommunications and IT. The school was involved in the study in late November 2009 because it was one of those secondary institutions that took part in the comprehensive study and were willing to participate in subsequent research.

## The study

### Research questions

- To what extent are the findings of the 2009 report on the YILL reflected in the context of the observed school in Budapest?
- What specific benefits and problems do students and teachers perceive in relation to the YILL and how do they explain them?
- What suggestions do they have concerning the improvement of the program?
- What beliefs do students and teachers hold about language learning and language teaching in general?

### Participants

There were two teachers of English (one female and one male; hereafter referred to as T1 and T2), and eight students (seven males and one female) in the study. Of the two teachers one was a form teacher in a YILL class, and the other participant was teaching in a YILL class at the time of the study. Three of the student participants I interviewed were doing their intensive year at the time of the study, whereas five students were in higher grades.

### Data collection instruments and procedures

In collecting data I relied on an interview with teachers, and two think-aloud activities as well as a subsequent focus group interview with students. The two groups of participants were interviewed separately. The interviews and think-aloud activities were conducted in Hungarian and were tape-recorded. The English translation of both teachers' and students' interview questions can be found in the Appendix.

The interview conducted with teachers lasted approximately 25 minutes and consisted of 8 questions, the majority of which enquired into teachers' opinion about some key aspects of the 2009 report on the YILL program, in terms of how the findings did, or did not reflect their own views, experiences and practices. Teachers were also invited to raise further topics they found important, which had previously not been touched upon. Both participants answered all questions readily, although some issues appeared to elicit considerably more passionate, as well as more detailed responses than others. The last question in particular brought forth topics that teachers seemed especially keen on sharing with me.

Students were asked to do two think-aloud activities, to which I devoted 10 minutes each. The idea behind this data collection method was to gather information about students' views as well as needs in relation to the YILL program, and at the same time, to gain insights into how they come up with their ideas together. The instructions for the two tasks were worded as follows:

Students' think-aloud activity 1: Please form two groups. 9th graders should be in one group, and 13th graders in the other. Please plan a leaflet together on the sheet of paper that I have handed out. Suppose that the student council of your school will send it to primary schools, so that many 8th graders choose the YILL in your school. List 5-6 reasons why they should choose your school. You can take notes. You have 10 minutes to complete the leaflet.

Students' think-aloud activity 2: Suppose that the ministry is launching a website, where they would like to receive questions and suggestions from secondary school students in the YILL program. They promise that they will take everybody's opinion into consideration. Please write at least 6-8 ideas on the new sheet of paper, which you would send on behalf of your class. It should include questions as well as suggestions.

As a final means of data collection, I conducted a focus group interview with students in the remaining 25 minutes. The five interview questions were very similar to the questions raised to teachers. Similarly to teachers, students were

also cooperative throughout the interview, yet some, especially the 9th graders, appeared to be more timid than others in expressing their opinion.

## Findings

After transcribing the recorded data, I analyzed the similarities and differences between teachers' and students' views and experiences along the lines of the 6 main areas presented below. Several patterns of participants' beliefs about language teaching and language learning also emerged, which are all included in the following discussion. Note that passages of quotations from teachers and students, as well as data derived from students' leaflets, questions and suggestions are all presented in English, but were originally articulated and written down in Hungarian.

### The YILL program in general terms

Teachers and students taking part in the study pointed out that they found the intensive year beneficial in terms of students' rapid development of their foreign language skills. One student, for instance, claimed *It's really worth it in the respect that in the first year it's intensive, and then that knowledge is preserved*. Both groups of participants repeatedly referred to the exceptionally high number of foreign language lessons throughout the intensive year as the explanation to many advantages of the program. For instance, *high number of English lessons* appeared as the very first benefit of the YILL program on the prepared leaflets of both groups of students. This is in line with the findings of the comprehensive study of the YILL program, in which several teachers began their positive statements about the program with the phrase *there is enough time for...* (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 52). Yet, drawing on Medgyes (2005), the belief shared by many teachers in Hungary that foreign language development is essentially determined by the number of lessons tends to overlook the importance of quality assurance.

Whereas one of the interviewed teachers asserted he found the program positive, and thought neither 'fast lane', nor 'pit stop' was an appropriate term to describe the complexity of the intensive year, the other teacher expressed some concerns right from the beginning of the interview. She explained that, according to her experiences, YILL students do not know exactly what to do and in many cases do not make as much use of the intensive year as they should.

In the interview and in their assignments, students clearly expressed that they thought one of the biggest drawbacks of the YILL program was the difficulty of re-adjusting to the traditional system after the intensive year. This problem was voiced by 22% of students, and 27% of parents in the comprehensive study of the YILL program (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009). In their project for the second think-aloud task, for instance, older students put down the following question: *Why was the teaching of history excluded in grade 0? (Even in English)*; and the following suggestion: *Incorporating humanities into the syllabus in grade 0 (not just review of previous material and maintenance of knowledge)*. All students agreed that the YILL program could be described with the term ‘fast lane’ as well as ‘pit stop’: the first because they felt they had made progress in English, and the second because *the rest is like, divided up, and then you can hardly learn anything from it*.

### Explaining the difficulties

Both teachers claimed that, based on feedback from most students and their parents, the finding of the comprehensive study that YILL students would choose not to take part in the program again does not reflect the experiences in their own school. T1 added: *On the other hand, [...] what respondents said, it's probably the basic attitude of the student, that one has to study much more here than in a normal language program. So it's probably their own laziness that hinders them in really exploiting this opportunity*. In relation to the issue that the first YILL graduates only had a slight advantage over others on the school-leaving examination, teachers agreed that the benefits of the intensive program may only come forth years after the students had graduated. They supported their point of view by describing language learning as a long process, and suggested that 14-15 year-olds were still very young to understand its importance.

I received a number of different answers to the question what reasons students thought lay behind the finding that many of the first YILL graduates would not opt for the program again. Whereas some students claimed it was because of laziness, others felt that the reason was the extra year spent at secondary school and starting work or college a year later than other pupils. Two students stressed the difficulty encountered after the intensive year, while others asserted it depended on teachers:

S1: A lot depends on getting a good teacher [...] for example we have a teacher who is really decent, and after all (s)he is our form teacher, so

I'm sure that's also part of it, but... (S)he also teaches Anna's [pseudonym] group and I think (s)he's also quite decent with them...

S2 [Anna]: So it's this same activeness... like how informed (s)he is [...] about cultural things. How active they are. Perhaps new slangs, because, of course, the language also changes, to what extent (s)he is aware of all these is very important.

It is already apparent at this stage that participants explain some of the difficulties encountered in the program with students' negative attitudes and laziness. Additionally, there appear to be indications that not all students are pleased with the quality of the material they are exposed to. This issue will be discussed in more detail in the section entitled 'Motivation'. Teachers also seem to share the belief that secondary school students are too young to value what the intensive year has to offer. As will be seen in the next section, this presumption is not supported by data derived from the interview conducted with students.

IT studies in English?

When I asked teachers whether they supported the suggestion that students should study a school subject in a foreign language, their first reaction was that they did not find it a good idea in the intensive year. They claimed they could not imagine how they could provide students with sufficient knowledge of a school subject in a language 9<sup>th</sup> graders do not know well enough when they arrive at secondary school. T1 also pointed out that it would be difficult to find teachers who have a high command of a foreign language and at the same time teach a different school subject. T2, however, responded that he thought it could perhaps work with the subject of IT studies, as *everything is in English in this subject anyway; so maybe this would not be such a big problem*.

Some students expressed doubts about studying such school subjects as history in a foreign language. However, in the form of a question in the second think-aloud activity, students specifically pointed out their need for IT studies, their area of specialization, to be taught in English: *Is the teaching of professional English in the informatics and electronics specialization possible in grade 0?* This corresponds with the findings of classroom observations carried out in Hungarian vocational schools, which revealed that students would be particularly motivated to learn about their vocation on foreign language lessons, but their teachers have doubts (Dombi, Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009). Stu-

dents also emphasized in the interview that the opportunity to learn professional English would be most important for them, as this way, they could find jobs abroad more easily. This finding demonstrates that, contrary to teachers' assumption, students are in fact conscious of their language needs, and are aware of the possibility that the program could facilitate them in reaching their aims.

#### Differentiated instruction and bridging the gap

In articulating her opinion about bridging the gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and others as part of the YILL program in her school, T1 explained: *I don't think it differs in any way from bridging the gap in a normal school program [...] It's ability-dependent and diligence-dependent and it makes absolutely no difference whether he is attending the YILL or not. So if a disadvantaged student wants to learn, then he will learn: he will also learn in the normal classes [...] If he doesn't, then it certainly doesn't matter how many hundreds of lessons we give him.* Here once more, the success of the teaching process is portrayed as determined by quantitative measures, while students' abilities and diligence are described as static variables. T1's words also imply that the endeavour of bridging the gap between students is not seen as a practice that receives special attention within the YILL program in her school, compared to the traditional 4-year program.

T2, on the other hand, maintained that there would always be differences within a group, but he felt weaker students in his school did make progress if they were exposed to more diverse language material in a higher number of lessons. As regards differentiated instruction, teachers agreed that the YILL program was ideal in providing grounds for it. T2 stressed that the intensive program allowed time for stronger pupils to help the weaker ones, and for students to form small groups and learn from one another.

When I asked students about how they thought the weakest ones could catch up with others in foreign language classes, they described that students at their school were divided into two groups based on a test at the beginning of the intensive year. They were all of the opinion that this was a good solution, and both groups included this detail on their leaflets popularizing the program.

## Advanced-level school-leaving examination and language exams

The question on what needed to be changed in order that more YILL students would opt for the advanced-level school-leaving examination elicited eager and elaborate responses from both teachers and students. After declaring that they could talk about this issue for hours, teachers claimed many things were determined by the type of secondary school. What T1 stated she meant by this was that students were of lower abilities in vocational schools, such as the one she was a teacher in. She also emphasized the role that students' social backgrounds played in their development. T2 added that the students in his school did not aim for the advanced-level as most of them did not plan to apply to universities: *Only taking the advanced-level school-leaving examination... out of prestige, and at the same time the child does not want to carry on with his studies, I think there is no point in that.*

Instead of abilities, students referred to *attitudes*, *more practice* and *willpower* as factors leading to the advanced level. When I asked them where they stood in developing their foreign language skills in these terms, one student said, *It's difficult to bring ourselves to do it [studying]. That's a fact.* Again, this points to students' lack of motivation. Students also revealed that taking the intermediate level was a safer choice, as a successful intermediate-level school-leaving exam complemented by a language exam could earn them more points compared to an unsuccessful advanced-level one. As one student pointed out: *I might settle for the intermediate level [school-leaving exam], but for the language exam, definitely as high a level as possible.*

Interestingly, it became apparent throughout different phases of data collection that it is language exams that get primary attention at the school I visited. The list of questions and suggestions written by 9th graders were filled with allusions to the language exam, while the following could be heard from the group of older students as they were completing their leaflet: *The school provides the possibility of language examination to every student in the 11th grade; Active preparation for the language exam.* This is in line with the finding of the comprehensive study that most institutions determine the success of their YILL program in terms of the number and level of language exams taken by students (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009, p. 29).

## Motivation

Throughout the interviews, the words *laziness*, *abilities*, and *attitudes* were repeatedly articulated by both groups of participants, yet the concept of motivation was never mentioned explicitly. However, in talking about additional topics that they found important, teachers implicitly remarked on students' lack of motivation, and set forth suggestions as to how the situation could be improved. Consider the following passage:

T1: They sink back, and there's the "ah, we have to study again" and "ah, there's so much vocabulary again" [...] "wow, for how long are there going to be so many lessons?" [...] So I don't really know what should be changed so that this would be much more playful, that they would not feel the weight of this and still make progress.

Teachers stressed that while they fully understood the importance of the intensive year, students were not quite as aware of this great opportunity. They agreed that the situation could be resolved if an informative propaganda was launched by the Ministry of Education, the Educational Authority, or other institutions. They proposed that large-scale events, presentations, or exhibitions could be organized, where students could be made aware of what the YILL program was about. Yet neither of them mentioned their own roles within this process. What they phrased as students' 'lack of understanding' as regards the benefits of the intensive year appeared to refer typically to pupils' lack of motivation. Although it was never specifically stated, the concept of motivation appeared in teachers' answers either as a static attribute of students, or as a variable that could only be influenced by something or someone other than teachers themselves. Most teachers' responses reflected a very similar approach to motivation in the comprehensive study (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009).

Apart from articulating in the interview that they preferred *activeness* on the part of the teacher, students made numerous implications in the think-aloud activities to what truly motivates them. The suggestions they had written down for the second task included the following: *Cultural programs in English (e.g. visiting museums)*; *Translating English texts (music)*, *watching films in English with subtitles (interactive sessions)*"; *more current English texts*; *Field trip to England at the end of the year*. Additionally, while they were working on the task with the rest of the group, two students discussed recent films they had watched entirely in English, and expressed their pride in understanding them without subtitles.

## Conclusion

The findings of the study bear similarities with the findings of the comprehensive study on the first 5 years of the YILL (Nikolov, Ottó & Öveges, 2009) in many respects. Both groups of participants expressed that YILL students in the observed school have made progress regarding their foreign language knowledge. Yet while they claimed the program was beneficial, they also talked about a number of problems and challenges. Students pointed out that after the intensive year they found it difficult to re-adjust to the traditional system, and suggested that humanities should be included among school subjects in the first year. However, while some raised the idea that these subjects could be taught in English, others expressed concerns as to how this would affect their knowledge of the related topics in Hungarian. Teachers perceived that their students did not take advantage of the program as much as they could have, and explained this with students' laziness, low abilities, negative attitudes, age, social backgrounds, as well as their lack of understanding about the importance of the YILL.

Teachers initially opposed the idea of offering students a school subject in the target language, and mentioned the shortage of suitable teachers for this enterprise. Yet after a short discussion they concluded that teaching IT studies in English could be feasible at their school. As it turned out, studying informatics in English is a particularly important need on the part of students, as this is their main area of specialization.

Students told me that, as regards foreign language classes, they had been divided into two groups at the beginning of their secondary school studies, and stressed that they found this a good solution in order that the weakest students could catch up with others. While T1 made clear that she did not consider bridging the gap between students in the YILL program any different to doing so in a traditional program, T2 made allusions to aspects of differentiated instruction as yielded by the exceptionally high number of foreign language lessons in the intensive year.

Teachers' and students' focus on external proficiency exams instead of the school-leaving exam in foreign languages was evident. Teachers asserted that the advanced-level school-leaving examination was difficult to attain for vocational school students, and was not among their aims. On the other hand, most students gave strategic reasons for only planning to take the intermediate-level school-leaving exam, and emphasized that they found preparing for language exams significantly more important and worthwhile.

As they expressed their opinion on several matters related to the YILL program, participants also articulated many of their beliefs about language

teaching and learning in general. Both teachers and students seemed to assume that success in acquiring a foreign language was dependent on the number of contact hours in which the language was taught, as well as on students' ability to 'fight' their laziness. The concept of motivation was never mentioned, but students clearly indicated their need for more current, more appropriate and intrinsically motivating language material. Yet teachers appeared to regard motivation as static, or as a variable that they had no way of influencing. Therefore, they suggested that large-scale events should be organized in order to raise students' awareness about the importance of the YILL program, but did not see themselves as key actors in this process.

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# Appendix

## Teachers' interview questions

1. Some students and teachers of the YILL program that was launched in the autumn of 2004 described the program as a 'fast lane', others referred to it as a 'pit stop'. Which one do you think is true and why?
2. If they were to decide today, half of the YILL graduates would choose not to take part in the YILL program. Why do you think this is? What can the proportion be in this school?
3. Results of the school-leaving exam present that, on national average, YILL students have a mere 3-13% advantage at intermediate level, and have no advantage at advanced level over others. What is your opinion about this?
4. To what extent do you support the suggestion that students should study a school subject in a foreign language? What benefits and drawbacks would this have?
5. According to the survey, bridging the gap between students from disadvantaged backgrounds and others is successful in only a small number of schools. What is the situation in this school and why?
6. Differentiated instruction in foreign language classes is a serious problem in many schools. What are the experiences in this school?
7. In your opinion what needs to be changed and how, so that more students would take the advanced-level school-leaving examination? What do you consider a good solution?
8. Apart from the issues we have already discussed, what other topics do you find important?

## Students' focus group interview questions

1. Many students in the first YILL classes described the program as a 'fast lane', others referred to it as a 'pit stop'. Which one do you think is true and why?
2. If they were to decide today, half of the YILL students would choose not to take part in the YILL program. Why do you think this is?
3. Would you like to study a school subject in the foreign language that you are best at? In your opinion what benefits and drawbacks would this have?
4. In your opinion how can the weakest students catch up with the others?
5. What needs to be changed and how, so that more students would take the advanced-level school-leaving examination in the foreign language they studied?