

Foreign language success and social mobility in the Hungarian context

Adrienn Fekete

Institute of English and American Studies, University of Debrecen, Hungary

Abstract

The purpose of this study is to describe the relationship between (1) English language success certified by the two most trusted proficiency tests in Hungary, the centrally administered mandatory secondary school leaving test, and the externally managed foreign language proficiency test, and (2) upward social mobility available to graduates within the framework of the current Hungarian legislation. More specifically, we look at how the exam takers' foreign language success on the B2 level correlates with age, gender and place of birth. Data provided by the Accreditation Centre for Foreign Language Examinations (ACFLE) reveals a correspondence between the popularity of the languages and the exam takers' success. That success is measured in two contexts: according to public education regulations and in a state-accredited but market-based way, the English Level 2 (B1-B2) secondary school graduation exam results are compared to the complex, B2-level language exam results for the years between 2005 and 2015. Our results reveal significant differences in the social mobility of the subjects - indicated by higher-education attainment- of the subjects in terms of gender and place of origin.

Key words: foreign language success, social mobility, foreign language exam certificate, foreign language education policy

Introduction

Social mobility is still a crucial and relevant issue in the social sciences, especially in the area of education. In that regard, inclusion of disadvantaged students is one of the main objectives of public education in Hungary. In this study, we examine social mobility in relation to foreign language learning and proficiency in general, and English language learning and proficiency in particular. We focus our analysis on English because of its lingua franca status on the one hand, and its popularity among language exam takers on the other. We have chosen to analyze the secondary school graduation exam and B-2 level language exam data because these two exams certify foreign language proficiency in the Hungarian education system. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the value of these certificates is interpreted in a legal framework, which determines that both documents constitute an

advantage in, or a prerequisite for, the fulfillment of the requirements on the various levels of education.¹

By obtaining these certifications, examinees mark the road to their future professional lives, as success in the secondary school graduation exam (hereafter SSGE, for brevity) functions as a passport to higher education, which is regulated by the Government Decree No. 237/2006 (XI.27); moreover, the state-accredited language exam certificate functions as a passport to graduate study, as specified in the Higher Education Decree No. CCIV/2011. It is also important to note that as a consequence of the latter regulation, a large number of undergraduate students cannot finish their studies because they do not have the foreign language proficiency certificate required. In other words, not having the certification required can greatly influence the upward social mobility of undergraduates. Additionally, the value of these certifications is increased by the fact that the SSGE scoring system is closely intertwined with the higher education entrance exam scoring system, rewarding both the successful foreign language proficiency exam and the successful language exam with extra points. Furthermore, the increased value of the language exam certificate is guaranteed by the introduction of the new higher education strategy, according to which the B2-level complex language exam certificate will be a higher education admission requirement from the academic year 2020 (Government Decree No. 423/2012 (XII. 29)). It is also important to highlight that this regulation creates a gap between the minimum foreign language proficiency level (B1, defined in the Hungarian National Core Curriculum), required from students at the end of their secondary education studies, and the level (B2) required for higher education admission. Besides the relationships presented so far, the joint analysis of the two exams is justified by Amendment No. 233/2004 (VIII./6) to the Government Decree No. 100/1997 (VI.13), specifying that a 60% score on the Level 2 SSGE in foreign languages is equal to a pass on the state-accredited B2 level proficiency exam. This equivalency highlights the government policy aim to strengthen the link between public and higher education and the labor market. Consequently, this also means that Amendment No. 233/2004 (VIII.6) equates the central and mandatory SSGE certificate (being both a confirmation of secondary education completion as well as a prerequisite for admission to higher education) with the market-based, self-financed language exam certificate.

Based on what has been discussed so far, it can be stated that today's Hungarian education policy gives a high value to the Level 2 foreign language SSGE as well as to the

¹ The language requirement may vary in different higher education institutions.

state-accredited B2 level language exam certificate. Equating the two exams is undoubtedly a response to the increasing value of the documents, especially the value of the language exam, and to the pressure that this situation puts on students, parents and language teachers.

Consequently, we assume that the objective of this action might be to alleviate the financial burden on students and their families in the Hungarian public education system. If this objective is realized, after the introduction of the state-financed, two-level SSGE (from 2005 onwards), we should experience a decrease in the number of examinees taking a self-financed language exam. For these reasons, it is important that the data available on the two exams be subjected to multiple analysis. Hence, in the present study, in order to get a more detailed picture of the examinees, we are investigating correlations between their English language success—as measured by the Level 2 SSGE as well as the B2 level language exam—and both their gender and place of birth.

Based on the data provided by the Accreditation Centre for Foreign Language Examinations (ACFLE) on examinees between 2000 and 2015, the aim of our study is to: (1) describe the popularity of the target languages offered and the success of the examinees; and (2) analyze the examinees taking B2-level language exams in terms of the following four variables: age, gender, place of birth and exam success. In addition, our goal is also (3) to compare data on the Level 2 SSGE with the B2-level exam in English. First, however, we look at different interpretations and findings on the topic of social mobility with a special focus on gender and place of birth.

Approaches to social mobility

The theoretical framework of social mobility is based on Bourdieu's (1973, 1986), DiMaggio's (1982) and Robert's (1985) theories. Bourdieu explains the relationship between cultural capital and achieved social status by applying the cultural reproduction theory: namely, that cultural and material capital—which are closely related to parents' social background—have a strong effect on children's prevailing social position. This capital, moreover, is inherited from generation to generation. Based on this, Bourdieu claims that social mobility is significantly less available to students coming from lower-status families. In contrast, DiMaggio (1982) argues that for those having a less favorable family background, the possibility of reaching a higher class is provided by cultural resources. In this context, Róbert (1986) studied the Hungarian data on social mobility, focusing on the variables of occupation, financial situation, cultural resources and place of residence. Róbert's results show the impact of cultural capital

on education and occupation. Fényes (2012) took the approach of Róbert as the basis for her study of the mobility of students in higher education. In her analysis, the emphasis is on the dimension of material and cultural capital, in the context of gender. Her results confirm previous research results (see Buchmann and DiPerete 2006), according to which women studying in higher education have poorer material and cultural backgrounds but greater school mobility, while the economic and cultural backgrounds of men are more favorable, but their school mobility is lower. Fényes' results also support the fact that for the majority of women, labor market success means having their qualifications certified, in other words, having a degree. Miller and Roby (1974) describe this phenomenon as "credentialism," or "document disease." At the same time, the primary aim of men is "status pursuit" and "status access" (see Buss 2008). They seek the labor market for success and money-making opportunities as soon as possible, the key to which, from their perspective, is not in multiplying their formal qualifications. From her results (2010, 2012), Fényes concludes that men with more favorable family backgrounds are more likely to continue their studies, whereas men with lower status typically do not pursue higher education. Women, on the other hand, choose further education despite their unfavorable family backgrounds, as they see the possibility of achieving higher social status in obtaining a degree. Fényes' results show that women studying in higher education are characterized by mobility, while men are culturally reproductive in a Bourdieuan sense.

The relationship between place of birth and social mobility is discussed in the theoretical context that takes the countryside as a geographical periphery (Süli-Zakar and Lenkey 2014). In this context, three different types of origin can be distinguished in Hungary: centrally located areas, peripheral settlements and impoverished settlements (Figure 1). Geographic differences clearly impact on social mobility: in most cases, the quality of education in public institutions in rural, small-town and peripheral areas is lower than those in major cities, county seats, regional centers, and capital cities. Location and the costs of education also point to the tendency of children of poorer, low-educated parents to attend mainly peripheral institutions, which greatly impedes their social mobility. It can be seen in Figure 1 that these peripheral areas are predominantly located in the eastern part of Hungary.

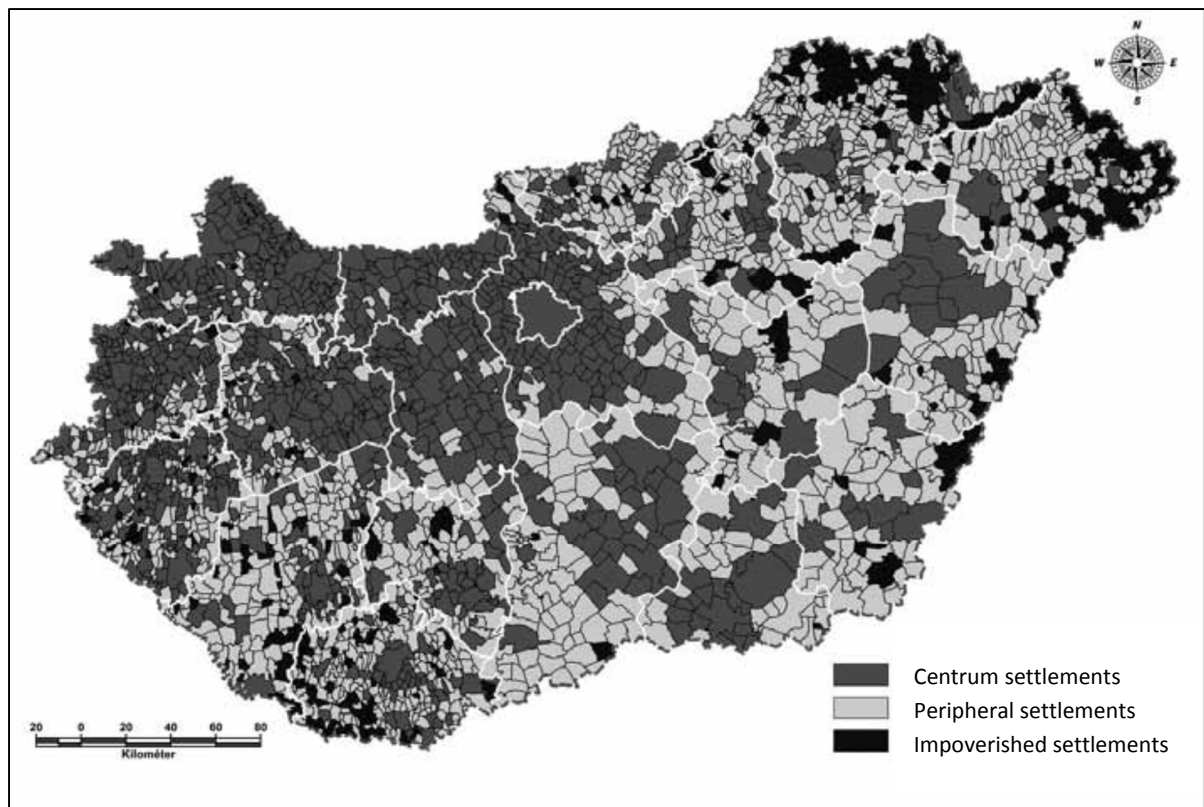


Figure 1. The social geographic types of Hungarian settlements. Source: Süli-Zakar és Lenkey (2014:378)

The hypothetical relationship between foreign language success and mobility

It can be stated that a B2-level language exam certificate can significantly influence social mobility, given the exams' high value and weight in current Hungarian education policy. As indicated above, we posit that the education policy measure equating a 60% achievement on the Level 2 SSGE in foreign languages and the B2-level foreign language exam certificate was introduced with the aim of reducing the burdens on students as well as increasing their chances to achieve upward mobility. Therefore, according to our first hypothesis:

- H1 After the introduction of the 233/2004 (VIII.6) Amendment to the Government Decree No. 100/1997 (VI.13), the popularity of the B2-level English exam should decrease among 14 to 19-year-olds.

Furthermore, we have formed the following hypotheses, based on the relevant social mobility literature and theories.

- H2 B2 level English exams are taken by more women than men, but men are more successful in language exams than women.

- H3 Examinees coming from peripheral areas of the eastern part of Hungary are less successful in passing the B2-level English language exam than those coming from the western part of the country and from Budapest.

Data and Methods

Data on the examinees was provided by the Accreditation Centre for Foreign Language Examinations and the Hungarian Equivalence and Information Center (HEIC). The data used in our study applies to B2-level language exams taken between 2000 and 2015, selected to factor in the following variables: age, social circumstances, gender, place of birth and success. The data applying to the Level 2 SSGE taken between 2005 and 2015 were compared to the B2-level exam by the years the exams were taken and success therein. In terms of gender and place of birth, data has not been compared yet because data is not available on gender in the school-leaving exam database; moreover, the two databases use a different territorial division. Since the purpose of our study is to present the trends related to the subject, we performed descriptive-statistical calculations in our analysis.

Results

With the spread of globalization, multiculturalism and interculturalism, the importance of English language proficiency is no longer at issue. Furthermore, the close relationship between English language proficiency and social mobility (Pusztai 2009, Pusztai and Nagy 2005, Hrubos 2012, Veroszta 2010) is evident. The popularity and the necessity of English language proficiency is also reflected in the choice of languages on B2-level exams as well. In Figures 2 and 3, we provide information about the language preference and success of language examinees between 2000 and 2015. Although it is possible to take accredited language exams in 37 languages in Hungary, we only deal with the 15 most popular languages in our analysis.

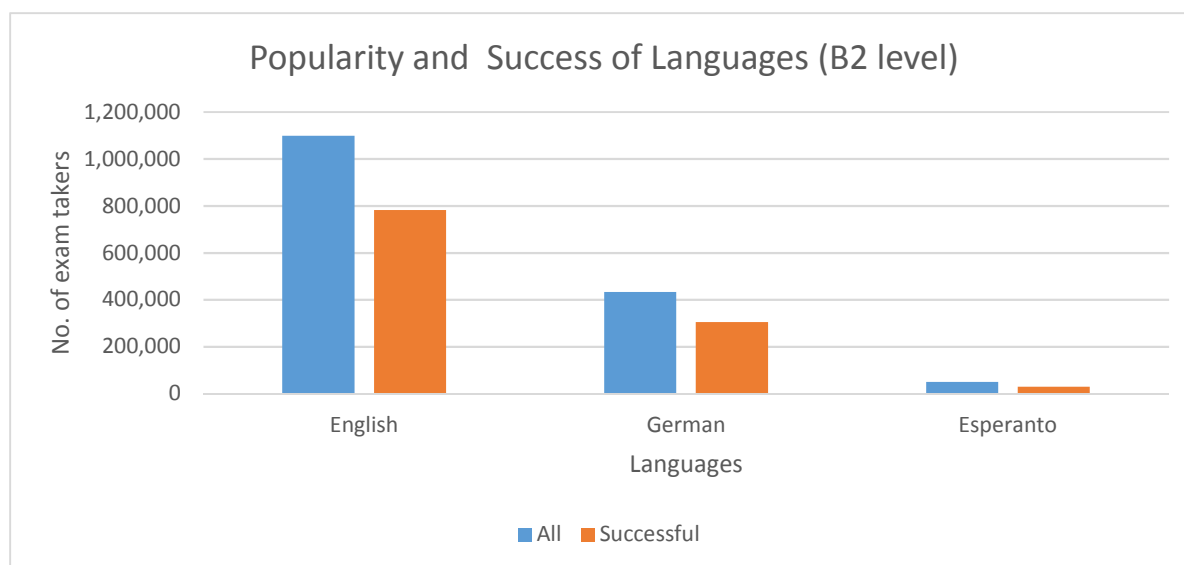


Figure 2. The no. of successful examinees compared to the total no. of examinees on B2-level in a descending order based on popularity of the languages. The period studied is between 2000 and 2015. Source: ACFLE database.

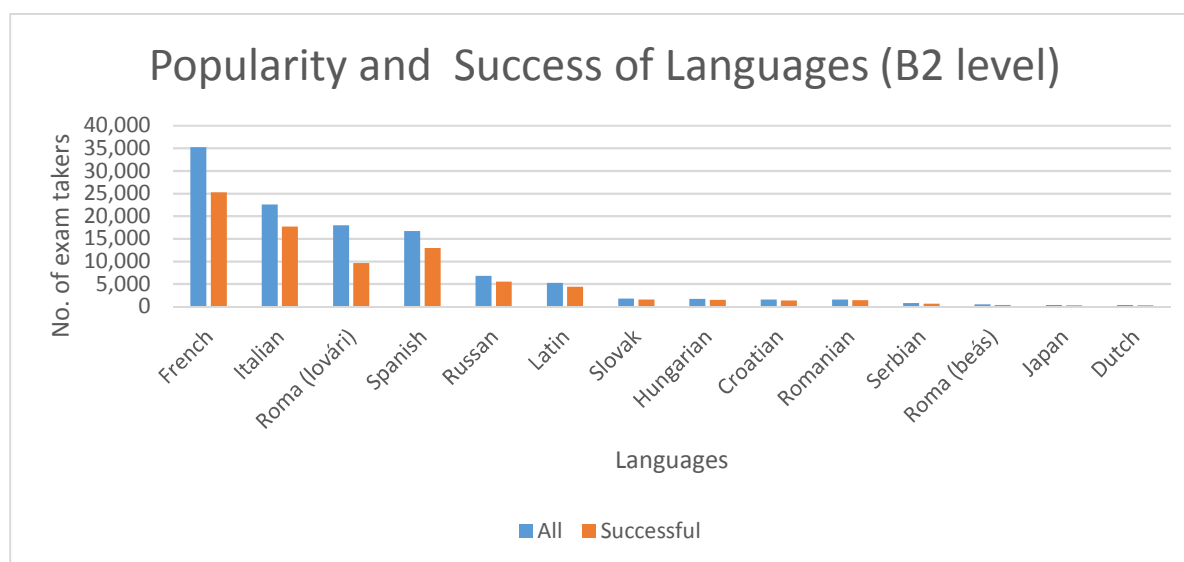


Figure 3. The no. of successful examinees compared to the total no. of examinees on B2-level in a descending order based on popularity of the languages. The period studied is between 2000 and 2015. Source: ACFLE database.

Data in Figures 2 and 3 confirm the results of studies on the popularity of English and German among Hungarian foreign language learners (Sebestyén 2014). The popularity of English is clearly evident; English is followed by German, then by Esperanto, French and Italian. The two figures show the following pattern: foreign languages available in public education, languages of neighboring countries, and Esperanto (an artificial language) ranked third. It may seem contradictory that after English (with lingua franca status) and German, Esperanto, an artificial language with no links to a group of people or culture emerged in third place. Our conclusion is that the motivation of Esperanto learners is not successful interaction with other cultures, which is expressed as a primary objective of foreign language learning in

the basic documents defining Hungarian (language) education - the National Core Curriculum and the Common European Framework of References - but rather something else. To understand the popularity and success rate of the B2-level Esperanto language exam, it is important to note that this exam is the most popular among 25 to 39 year-olds, the age group most typically attending higher education (Figure 5). When analyzing the relevant data, the year 2006 was taken as a reference point, given that the two-cycle degree system (BA and MA) in higher education was introduced in September of that year; the relevant Decree 15/2006. (IV.3) stipulates that it is required to obtain either a B2-level, complex language exam certificate in at least one living foreign language or an equivalent SSGE certificate. Consequently, our understanding of the popularity and special status of Esperanto is that exam takers are primarily motivated to acquire a "paper" certification, reflecting the increased value and weight of the language exam certificate in higher education mobility. We explain the popularity of the languages of the neighboring countries on the same lines: since some parts of Hungarian higher education have cross-border links (Pusztai 2009), it is obvious that students coming from neighboring countries would take the language exams required for their degree in their national or mother tongue. We assume that this tendency can also be interpreted as a reaction to the increased value of the language exam certificate, as these examinees seek the fastest and most convenient way to fulfill their graduation requirements.

Figure 4 confirms these conclusions. This figure shows the relative popularity of languages taken and success in the exams. It can be seen that the national languages of the neighboring countries (Romanian, Slovak, Serbian, and Croatian) draw the most candidates, followed by the moderately popular other foreign languages taught in public education. The most popular languages, on the other hand—English, German and Esperanto—are at the end of the rank order in terms of the percentage of successful examinees.

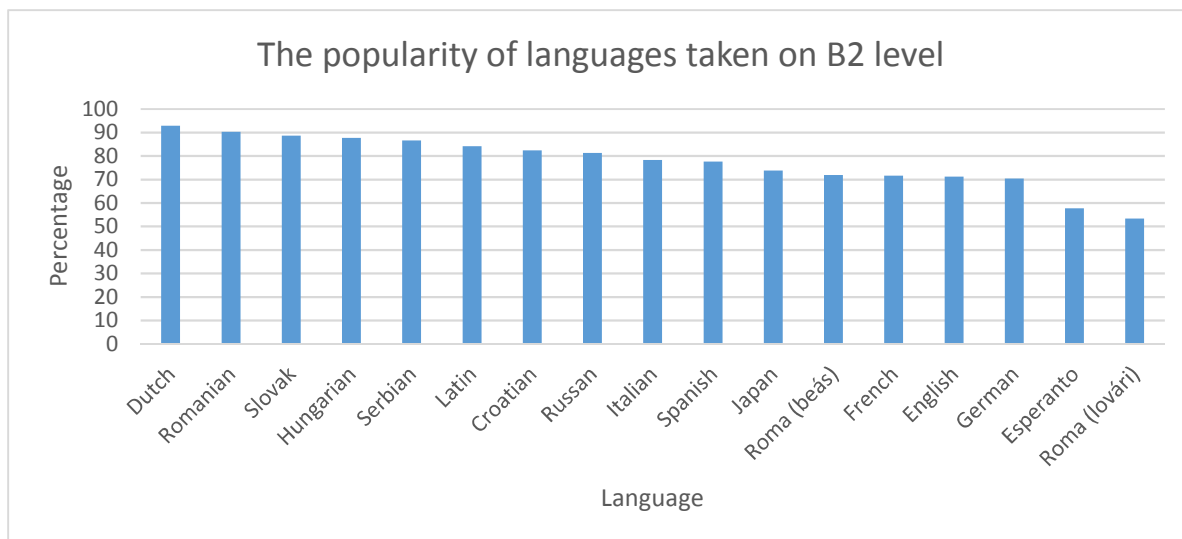


Figure 4. The proportion of successful language exam takers on B2-level in a descending order by languages. The period studied is between 2000 and 2015. Source: ACFLE database.

It is quite clear that the B2 level Esperanto language exam is most popular among the 30 to 34-year-olds, followed by the 25-29 and 35-39 cohorts, as presented in Figure 5. In addition, it can be seen that, unlike in 2005, in 2006 and 2007 the number of exam takers in the so-called 'artificial language' shows an increase in the 25-39-year-old group. It can thus be assumed that most of the examinees were motivated to take the exam in that particular language primarily to obtain their degree.

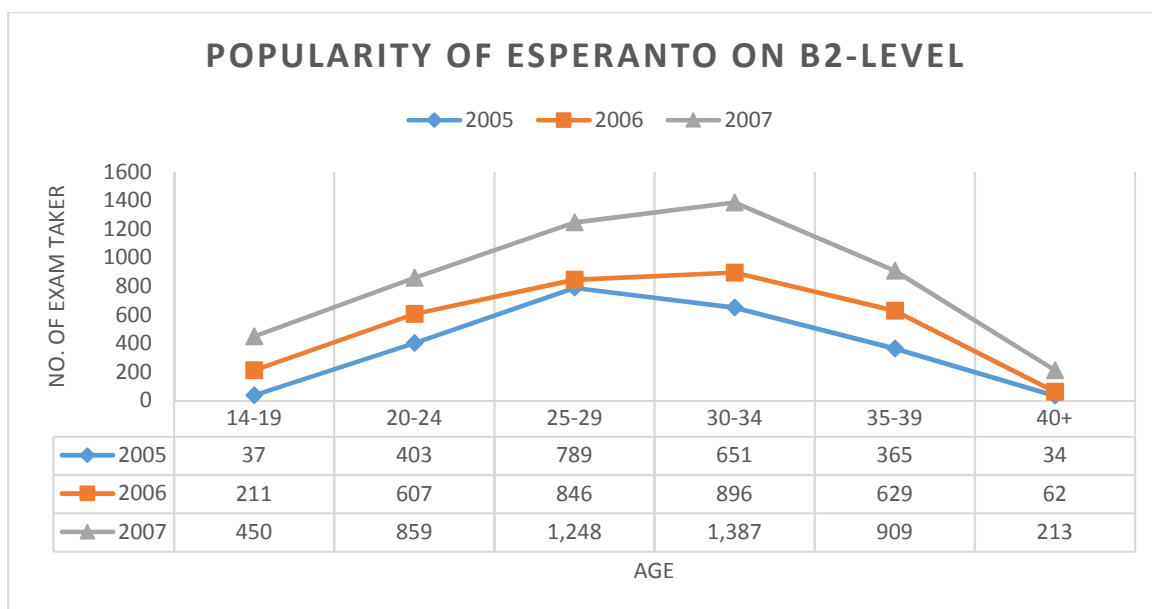


Figure 5. The popularity of B2-level language exam in Esperanto between the age of 14 and 40+. The period studied is between 2005 and 2007. Source: ACFLE database.

In light of the equal status (from an education policy point of view) of the B2 level language exam and the Level 2 SSGE in English, we compare the success of examinees taking the B2 level English exam and examinees achieving at least 60% on Level 2 SSGE.

Figure 6 shows that the number of examinees sitting for the B2 level exams decreased from 2005 to 2007 and rose again in the subsequent years. We assume that after the introduction of the government decree equating the two exams (2004), the popularity of the English language B2-level exam decreased. The more interesting question is why, after 2007, the popularity of language exams returned to its 2005 level. This trend may be explained by the fact that a language exam certificate is also valuable when it comes to calculating the priority of candidates for admission to higher education, which can also encourage students to take an external language exam instead of a Level 2 SSGE (Nikolov 2011). Nikolov, Ottó and Öveges (2009) find, based on verbal accounts of language teachers, that students make a strategic decision when choosing an exam: students prefer taking a Level 1 SSGE in a foreign language and then try to obtain extra points by taking an external language proficiency exam instead of the Level 2 SSGE.

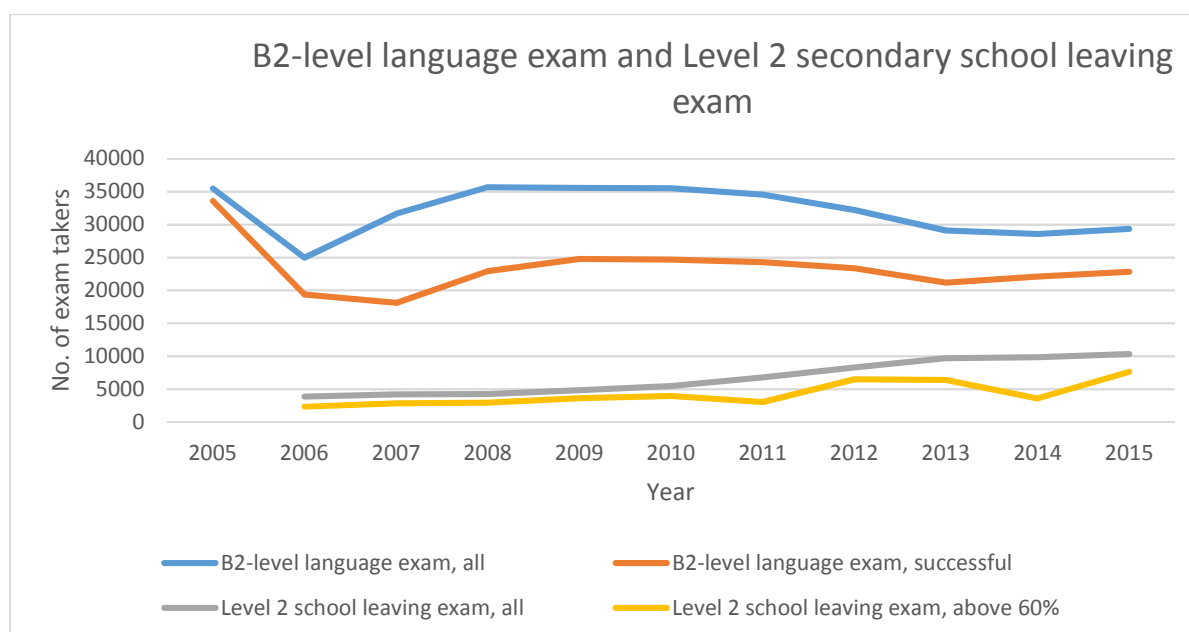


Figure 6. The comparison of the number of B2 level language exam takers with Level 2 school leaving exam takers along language success. The period studied is between 2005 and 2007. Source: ACFL database and HEIC.

It can also be noted that, although the number of Level 2 SSGE exam-takers increased steadily between 2006 and 2015, the proportion of examinees taking an external language exam remained nearly three times as high.

These trends suggest that the majority of the relevant age group does not take advantage of the equality of the two certificates, namely that students can obtain a state-financed B2-level

proficiency certification merely by taking and passing the central Level 2 SSGE. The explanation of this can be related to the number of exam possibilities, as the number of language exams is limited only by the financial resources of the examinees, whereas the SSGE is only available twice a year, and only one attempt is free of charge. It follows that the educational policy aiming to reduce the financial burden on students was only partly realized.

In the following, we analyze the B2-level English exam data in terms of age, gender, place of origin, and success in the exam (Figure 7). It can be seen that the B2-level exam in English is the most popular among women between the ages of 14 and 24.

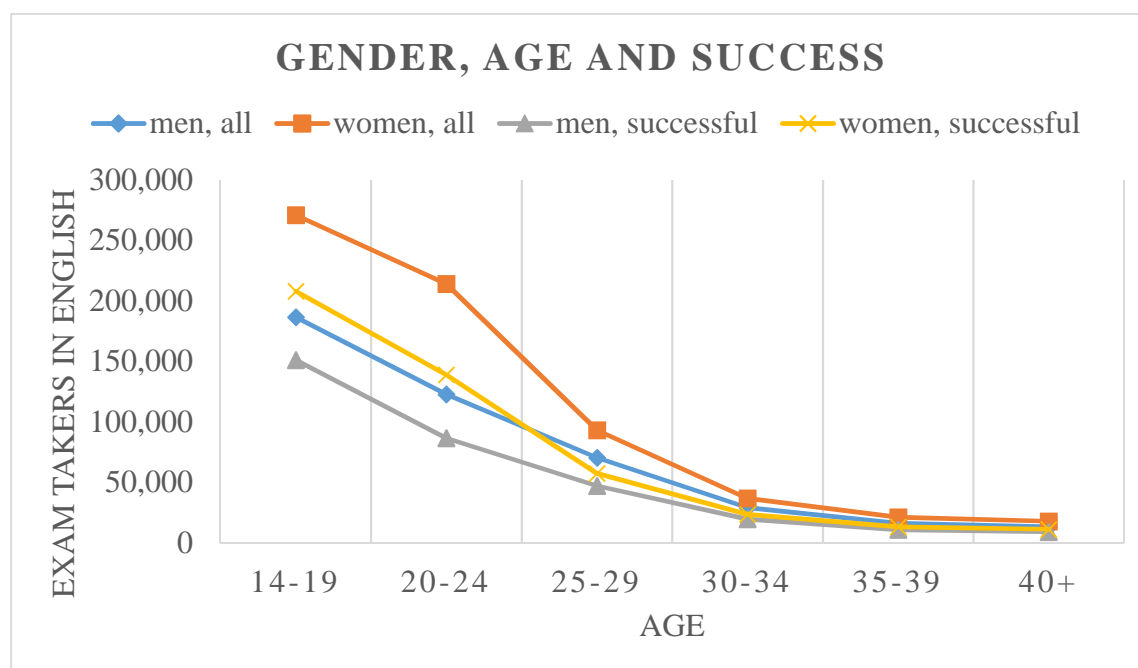


Figure 7. The comparison of exam takers in English on B2 level along their gender, age and language success.

In addition, we can observe that more women take the exams, but they prove to be less successful than men, which supports our second hypothesis and the results of Fényes (2010). Based on our results and the relevant literature, we can assume that women taking a language exam in English are more likely to be motivated by “credentialism” than men: that is, unlike men, they put the emphasis on certificates as evidence of their qualifications, to attain social status. Men, in contrast, do not see their success in terms of having certificates of qualification; they seem to assess their skills more rationally. However, further studies are needed to verify these assumptions.

For the geographic variable, data is differentiated by three regions in the database of the *ACFLE*; we analyzed the data accordingly. The three regions are East Hungary, West Hungary and Budapest. The basis of the analysis was the place of birth of the examinees.

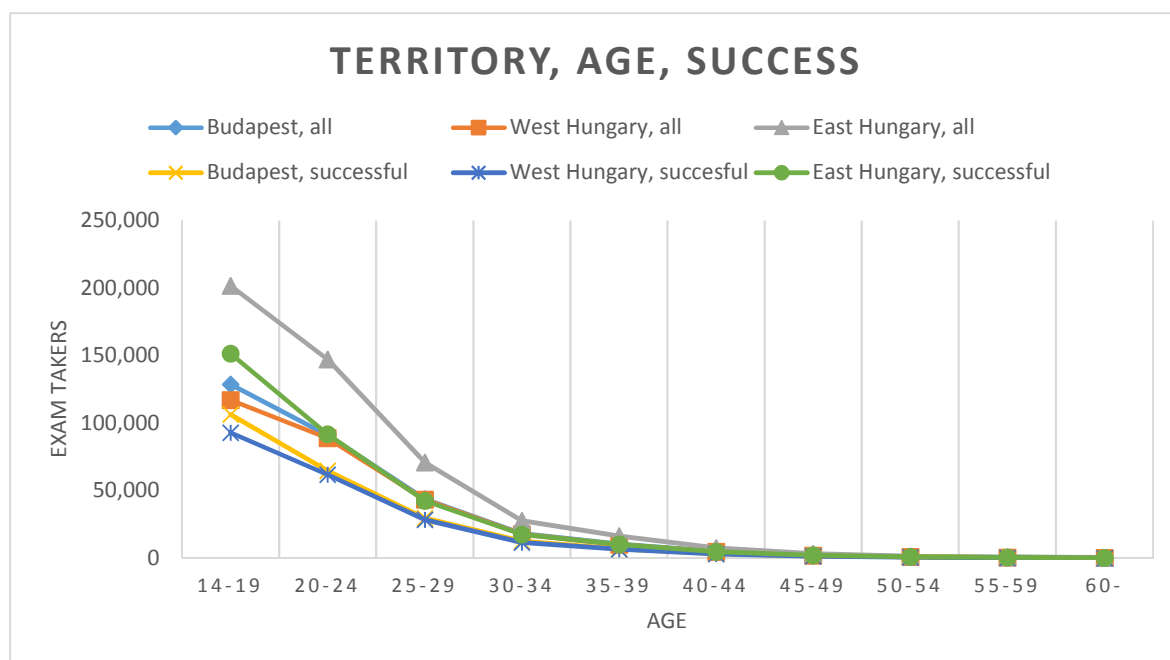


Figure 8. The comparison of exam takers in English on B2 level along their birthplace, age and language success.

Figure 8 shows that the B2-level language exam is the most popular among examinees coming from the eastern part of the country; however, they have the lowest levels of success. This result supports Süli-Zakar and Lenkey (2014), who claim that examinees born in the peripheral regions of Hungary find it very difficult to overcome their socio-cultural disadvantage compared to those from the western part of the country, or from Budapest. It is worth pointing out that the language success of examinees between the ages of 20 and 24, representing the average age of undergraduate students, does not correlate with place of birth; this suggests that the added value of higher education can be interpreted in relation to overcoming socio-cultural disadvantages. To justify this, further and more comprehensive research is needed.

In addition, the comparison of the B2-level English language exam and the Level 2 SSGE in English shows that the effect of equating the two exams can only be observed in the two years after the introduction of the relevant Government Decree, as in these years the number of exam takers on the B2-level was noticeably lower; since then, the number has returned to the pre-2005 level. Thus, the educational policy aimed at reducing the burden on students and parents (the graduation exam is free of charge for public education participants) has only partially lived up to expectations.

Conclusion

Under current Hungarian education policy, the B2-level state-accredited language exam certificate is a basic requirement for admission to higher education; thus it is closely related to social mobility. Furthermore, the increased value of this certification has triggered processes in foreign language education that contradict the main objectives of foreign language learning as defined in the core education policy documents. Our study indicates that the majority of examinees are motivated to take the B2-level exam by the higher education admission and graduation requirements; we can draw this conclusion from the data on the examinee's age, language preference and success in the exam. In addition, a comparison of the B2 level exam results with the Level 2 SSGE results revealed that the government decree equating the two had a major impact mostly in the two years after its introduction. In these years, the number of exam takers markedly decreased; thereafter, the numbers returned to roughly what they had been before the introduction of the relevant decree. Consequently, we find that the aims of the educational policy designed to reduce the financial burden on students and parents (the secondary school exam is free of charge for public education participants) have only partially been realized. Furthermore, with the introduction of the new higher education strategy, according to which the B2-level exam certificate will be a requirement for admission to higher education, upward social mobility for disadvantaged students may become less available—predominantly due to the fact that within the framework of public education, the minimum proficiency level required is only B1.

In terms of the impact of gender and place of origin on social mobility, our results are in line with previous research results: more women take the B2 level exam than men, but men have proven to be more successful than women. Moreover, candidates born in the eastern or peripheral part of the country, presumably having lower socio-cultural resources, are less successful in the exam than those from Budapest or the western part of the country. To investigate this issue further, it would be helpful to perform a multidimensional analysis focusing on the relationship between the exam takers' gender and place of birth in light of their language success—more specifically, in which part of the country women are more successful than men and what factors (such as family background, cultural capital, material capital, school type) influence their success—in order to draw a more complex picture of factors influencing language success in relation to social mobility.

References

- Amendment No. 233/2004. (VIII./6.) on the Government Decree No. 100/1997. (VI.13.) on the issue of exam regulations for the secondary school-leaving exam.
- No. 237/2006. (XI.27.) Government Decree on the admission procedure of higher education institutions.
- No. 423/2012. (XII. 29) Government Decree on the admission procedure of higher education institutions.
- No. 15/2006. (IV. 3.) Ministry of Education Decree on the training and output requirements of the Bachelor's and Master's degree programs.
- Bourdieu, P. (1973): "Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction," In: R. Brown (ed.), *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, Willner Brothers Limited, London. 71–105.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986): "The Forms of Capital," In: Richardson, J. G. (ed.): *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press, New York. 241–258.
- Buchmann, C. and DiPrete, T. A: "The Growing Female Advantage in College Completion: The Role of Family Background and Academic Achievement," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 6, 2006, p. 515–541.
- Buss, D. M., "Human Nature and Individual Differences. Evolution of Human Personality," in: Oliver P. John, Richard W. Robins, and Lawrence A. Pervin (ed.): *Handbook of Personality. Theory and Research*, Guilford Press, New York. (2008), pp. 29–60.
- DiMaggio, P. "Cultural Capital and School Success: The Impact of Status Culture Participation on the Grades of U.S. High School Students," *American Sociological Review*, vol. 47, (1982), pp. 189–201.
- Fényes, H. (2009): Gender Differences in High School and Higher Education School Efficiency in a Borderland. *Practice and Theory in Systems of Education*, **2**, 8–26.
- Fényes, H. (2010): School Efficiency of Boys and Girls in a Borderland Region of Hungary. *Review of Sociology*, **6** (1), 51–77.
- Fényes, H. (2012): A felsőoktatásban tanuló férfiak hátránya a társadalmi (iskolai) mobilitásban, a kétciklusú képzés bevezetése után. [The disadvantage of men in higher education in social (school) mobility after the introduction of two-cycle training program] *Metszetek*, **1**, 20–31.
- Hrubos I. (2012): A társadalmi esélyegyenlőtlenségek új színterek a felsőoktatásban. [Social inequalities are new scenarios in higher education] *Iskolakultúra*, **22**(1), 57–62.
- Miller, S. M. és Roby, P. (1974): A papírkórság csapdája [The trap of credentialism] In: Ferge, Zs. és Háber, J. (Ed.): *Az iskola szociológiai problémái*, [The sociological problems of the school] Közgazdasági és Jogi Könyvkiadó, Budapest. 109–121.

Nikolov, M. (2011): Az idegen nyelv tanulása és a nyelvtudás. [Learning a foreign language and language proficiency] *Magyar Tudomány*, **172**(9), 1048–1057.

Nikolov, M., Ottó, I. és Öveges, E. (2009): *A nyelvi előkészítő évfolyam értékelése 2004/2005 – 2008/2009*. [The evaluation of the preparatory year in languages 2004/2005 – 2008/2009]. Oktatási és Kulturális Minisztérium, Budapest.

Pusztai G. és Nagy É. (2005): Tanulmányi célú mobilitás Magyarország keleti határvidékein. [Education mobility in the eastern border regions of Hungary.] *Educatio*, **14**(2), 360–384.

Pusztai, G. (2009): *A társadalmi tőke és az iskola*. [Social capital and the school] Új Mandátum Könyvkiadó, Budapest.

Róbert, P. (1986): *Származás és mobilitás (Rétegződés-modell vizsgálat VII.)*. [Origin and mobility (Stratification model analysis VII.)]. Társadalomtudományi Intézet, Budapest.

Sebestyén, K. (2014): Miről olvasunk a sorok között? – A május-júniusi német nyelvi, emelt szintű, jeles érettségi vizsgák eredményeinek elemzése 2006-2013. [What do we read between the lines? - An analysis of the results of the German-language, Level 2, secondary school-leaving exams in May-June, 2006-2013]. In: Csiszár, I. és Kőmíves, P. M. (szerk.): *Tavaszi Szél / Spring Wind 2014 Konferenciakötet. IV. kötet: Szociológia és multidiszciplináris társadalomtudomány, pszichológia és neveléstudomány, hittudomány*. Doktoranduszok Országos Szövetsége, Debrecen. 403–410.

Süli-Zakar I. és Lenkey G. (2014): A vidék, mint földrajzi periféria és az oktatás, mint kitörési pont. [The countryside as a geographic periphery and education as a chance to break out] *Educatio*, **23**(3), 371–383.

Veroszta, Zs. (2010): A munkaerő-piaci sikeresség dimenziói frissdiplomások körében. [Dimensions of labor market success among new graduates] In: Garai O., Horváth T., Kiss L., Szép L. és Veroszta Zs. (szerk.), *Diplomás pályakövetés IV. Frissdiplomások 2010*. *Educatio Társadalmi Szolgáltató Nonprofit Kft.*, Budapest. 11–36.