

# TEN YEARS ON: APPLYING THE LESSONS OF A RESEARCH PROJECT IN THINKING ABOUT THE PRACTICALITIES OF RESEARCH DESIGN

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**Abstract:** This paper reports on a loop project, i.e., it describes a research project and makes use of it for analysing the research methodology used in it with the aim of drawing attention to the importance of practicalities in research. The context of the analysis is a large scale and longitudinal research project on task based learning conducted in Hungary by researchers of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest and the School of Education of the University of Leeds. To highlight some relevant practical issues and difficulties emerging in the course of conducting classroom research, the project in focus was compared with a “quasi-ideal” research process. This comparison found that the problems which often challenge the validity, reliability, credibility and dependability of research can be characterized as technical, circumstantial or professional. To counteract the effects of various disturbing occurrences, the suggested measures to take are: careful planning, constant revision and above all, a clear justification of every decision in the process. Whilst the paper focuses on classroom research, the issues raised can also serve as a lesson to researchers in other areas.

**Keywords:** research methods, realities and practicalities of research

*Motto: Theory is when we know everything but nothing works. Practice is when everything works but no one knows why. (Maley, 1991:23)*

## 1 Introduction

The above motto continues: “We have combined theory and practice: nothing works and no one knows why!” In this paper, we hope to prove the opposite and argue that while theory is the directing force behind research, it cannot override the circumstances and the practicalities that present themselves in carrying out research. Therefore, theoretical and practical considerations need both to be taken into account when planning and conducting a project.

Both general and second language research methodology handbooks (e.g., Babbie, 1989; Bell, 1999; Brown, 2001; Brown, & Rodgers 2002; Cohen, et al., 2000; Hitchcock, & Hughes 1995; Hopkins, & Antes, 1990; Seliger, & Shohamy, 1989) outline different phases of the ideal

research process and it can be concluded from them that in the planning phase the researcher should follow the steps outlined in Figure 1. The steps influence one another, and some have to be taken simultaneously. Consequently, the outcome of the individual steps often has to be revised and thus several cycles of planning precede the finalisation of the design and the actual research.

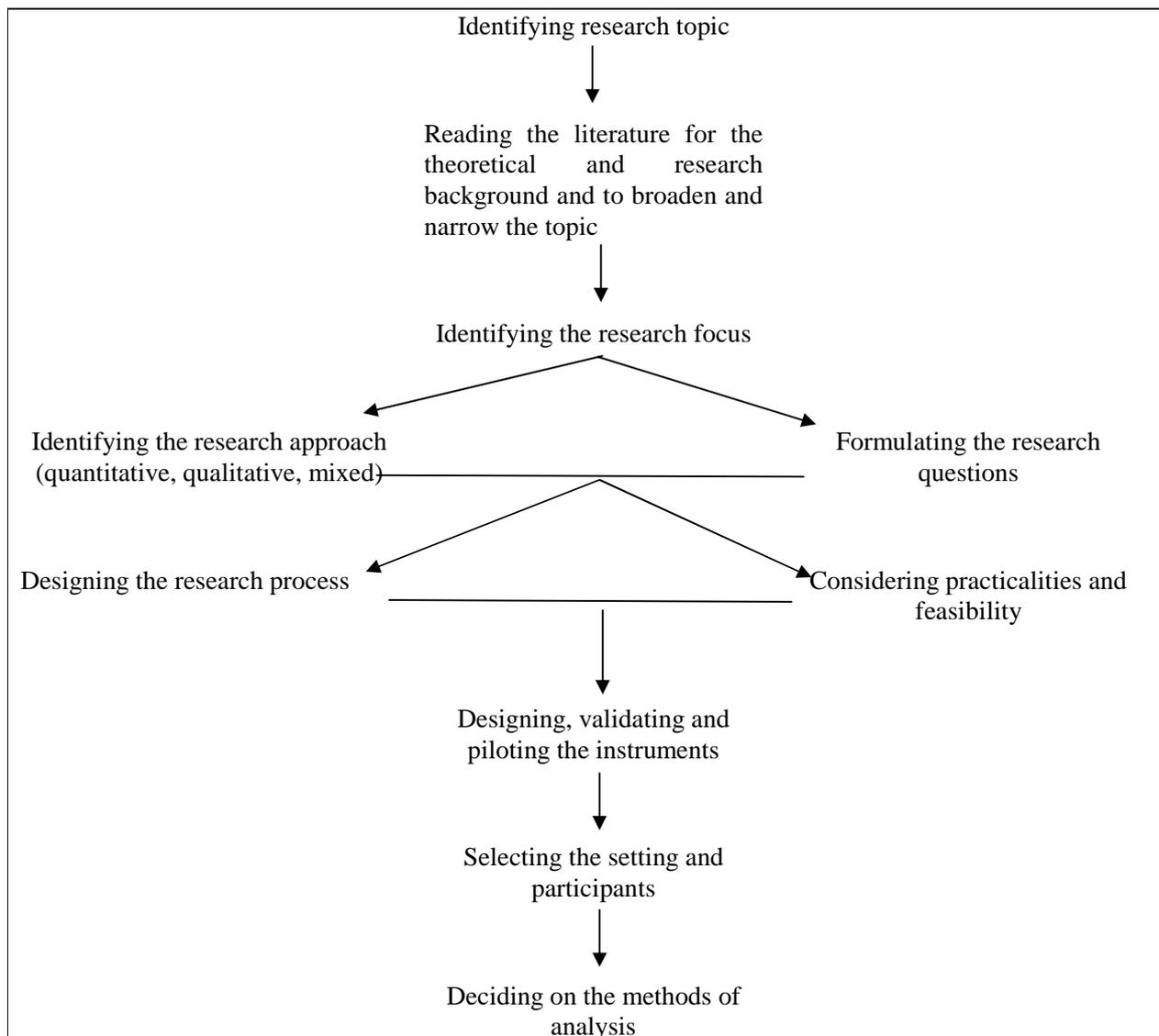


Figure 1. Steps in planning research

The principles of research methodology, however, usually take into account a model situation, supposing that everything proceeds according to the “book”, and tend to disregard that – particularly in the case of applied research – circumstances and practicalities can affect the research process to a large extent. Delamont, *et al.* (1997:67) confirm that “Data collection in all disciplines is unpredictable.” They list several examples of research settings becoming

unavailable unexpectedly to the researcher either because of miscommunication or because of choosing an ineffective way of recruitment. There may also be physical hurdles, such as in the case of a mining student who could not get access to the mines during the 1984-85 national miners' strike in the UK. Pollard (1985) gives an account of the sometimes numbing controversies of being a participant observer in a school where one teaches and carries out research. Besides all the possible problems inherent in the process of data collection and analysis, the circumstances of the research project also have a large role in how a research project is designed. In an ideal case the research is purpose financed and thus the necessary support and technical background are provided. In reality, projects partially financed through a grant are more common. This means that there may be a considerable gap between the researcher's original ideas and the project as realized. The most common form of educational research, however, is unfinanced, for instance in the case of doctoral research, and this necessitates an even larger degree of compromise in order to make a project feasible. It is the nature of the compromise which determines how relevant and academically acceptable the final research is.

While the methods used in a research project hold the key to its validity, reliability, credibility, transferability, dependability (trustworthiness) and confirmability (replicability) (Brown, 2001), in our observation, most research articles and studies tend to give a matter-of-fact account of the processes applied but refrain from discussing any problematic decisions or issues. This article aims to demonstrate problematic issues that may arise due to the circumstances of research through a specific example of a research project.

## 2 Methods

Following from the above, this paper wishes to answer these research questions:

1. What practical problems may arise in the research process?
2. How can the emerging practical problems be solved so as not to compromise the research project?

In order to be able to refer to concrete examples, we have chosen to describe a longitudinal classroom research project on task based learning conducted between 1996-1999 by a team of researchers at the Department of English Applied Linguistics of Eötvös Loránd University, Budapest, henceforth referred to as the 'ELTE team' and a colleague from the School of Education of the University of Leeds<sup>1</sup>. We, the authors of this article, were members of the ELTE research team.<sup>2</sup> The reason we chose to use this project for illustration is that it had to offer a number of practical lessons and as it is a closed project we hope we are not impacting upon any of the participants by pointing out possible shortcomings.

To answer the research questions, we examined documents related to the research such as the research proposal, the plans drawn up at various stages of the research, the research notes kept

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<sup>2</sup> Members of the ELTE team were: Anita Csölle, Zoltán Dörnyei, Dorottya Holló, Krisztina Károly, Nóra Németh. The researcher from the University of Leeds was Martin Bygate. (While general research ethics require that the identity of the participants be concealed, the team members gave permission for their names to be published.)

during the process, as well as the various products of the projects, e.g. the measuring instruments, the tasks that were administered to the participating students, and the publications that were written on the basis of the research. We also relied on the written reflections of the members of the research team and the participating teachers. These were obtained by a questionnaire with open ended questions exploring the respondents' views about their role in the project, about the project itself, and about the research process. The questionnaire can be found in Appendix A. The analysis of the documents and the questionnaires took the form of constant comparison and content analysis (Cohen et al., 2000). The data collection about the research was conducted at the time the research project on task based learning was carried out, the analysis as well as the writing up of the results took place immediately after the project was completed. Some clarifications and evaluative comments were added at the time of reviewing the project for the purposes of this article. Figure 2 summarizes the data sources and methods used to answer the research questions.

Research questions	Data sources	Methods of data analysis
1. What practical problems may arise in the research process?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Documents of the research (e.g. research proposal, plans, research notes, measuring instruments, tasks, publications)</li> <li>• Questionnaire to obtain the reflections of the research team and the participating teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Constant comparison</li> <li>• Content analysis</li> </ul>
2. How can the emerging practical problems be solved so as not to compromise the research project?		

Figure 2. The research questions, data sources and research methods

### 3 The ELTE-Leeds project – an overview

The ELTE-Leeds project consisted of the examination of five secondary school groups of learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) over a period of two years and focussed on the students' abilities to work with tasks requiring argumentation and narration skills. Apart from undergoing the observation and recording process, three out of the five groups were exposed to an intervention of argumentation training. To understand the correlation between the students' performance and a number of variables, we also administered questionnaires about the students' background as well as tests measuring their language proficiency, motivation, group preferences, willingness to communicate and their different roles as students. The analyses of the data was concluded during the third year of the project. From a professional point of view, the main outcome of the ELTE-Leeds project is the corpus of classroom interaction and student performance in different task types.

'Task' was defined by our team as:

*A complex goal-oriented unit whose boundaries are the task instructions and the task outcome; and they enclose two potential phases: the preparatory phase and the communication phase.*

The corpus consists of oral and written data, in oral narrative, oral argumentative and written argumentative tasks from 66 16-17-year-old Hungarian EFL learners working in pairs. The complete data set looks like this:

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3	Group 4	Group 5
<b>Cycle 1</b>	<i>C-test for language proficiency</i>				
	ON2	ON2	OA1	OA2	ON1
			WA1	WA2	
	OA2	OA1	ON2	ON1	OA1
	WA2	WA1			WA1
	OA1	ON1	OA2	OA1	ON2
	WA1		WA2	WA1	
	ON1	OA2	ON1	ON2	OA2
		WA2			WA2
	<i>Questionnaires on: research attitude, group cohesion, L1 willingness to communicate, student roles, sociometry</i>				
<i>Teacher interviews</i>					
<b>Cycle 2</b>	OA3	OA3	OA3	OA3	OA3
	WA3	WA3	WA3	WA3	WA3
	HA	HA	HA	HA	HA
	<i>motivation questionnaire</i>				
	<i>Intervention</i>	–	<i>Placebo intervention</i>	<i>Intervention</i>	–
	OA4	MOA	OA4	OA4	MOA

Table 1. Complete corpus collected by the ELTE-Leeds Project

ON=Oral Narrative Task; OA= Oral Argumentative Task; WA=Written Argumentative Task  
HA=Hungarian Argumentative Task; MOA=Modified Oral Argumentative Task

In the Oral Narrative Tasks participants worked in pairs. Student A received a picture, and the task was to tell a story, the ending of which would be the picture they had been given. The students had five minutes preparation time. Meanwhile, Student B also received the same picture, and had to think of nouns and verbs Student A would use while telling the story. While listening to the story, Student B had to check the nouns and verbs their partner actually used.

In the Oral Argumentative Tasks – a sample of which is presented in Appendix B – students had a 10-item list in a particular topic area (e.g. extracurricular classes, ideas for a class excursion, things they would take with them for a trip to Britain, etc.), and in the preparatory phase they had to choose five from the list on their own. Then they had to work in pairs and the goal of the task was to agree on a final list of three items that they both thought were the most important ones in the list. They also had to rank order the three items. They were overtly instructed to use arguments and support, and not to give in easily.

At the beginning of the second cycle, the students were asked to perform a similar argumentative task in Hungarian. This was followed by a 10-class-long intervention (i.e. training

sessions in the pragmatics of argumentation) in two groups, a placebo intervention in one group, and no intervention in the two remaining groups. While the ‘proper’ intervention consisted of conscious training on argumentation, where the students were very much aware of the purpose of the classes, the placebo intervention was administered in the control group to control for the Hawthorne effect. The teacher of the group was asked to discuss controversial issues with the students in ten classes, but no explicit lexical, pragmatic or rhetorical training was provided. After the intervention, students in this group were recorded performing the same type of task as the experimental groups. At the end of the second cycle, the groups who received intervention or placebo intervention, performed similar oral argumentative tasks to the previous tasks; however, the groups which had not received any intervention were recorded during the performance of a modified argumentative task. The task was modified to force the students to produce more argumentation than the original tasks. A sample is shown in Appendix B.

In the Written Argumentative Task, students worked with the same scenarios as in the Oral Argumentative Tasks, but they were instructed to write down their choices, with arguments and support, for an outside body (e.g., the school senate or the headmaster).

To supplement the primary data from the tasks, background data was also gained from the students in the form of a C-test for language proficiency as well as a questionnaire exploring the students’ attitude to the research, a combined questionnaire on group cohesion, L1 willingness to communicate, student roles in the classroom and sociometry, and finally a motivation questionnaire. While the language of communication in the project was English as one of the researchers did not speak Hungarian, and the tasks were also given to the students in English as they formed part of English lessons, the background questionnaires were in Hungarian to allow the students to use their mother tongue. Samples of these questionnaires translated into English can be found in Appendices C-E.

The data collected was analysed from a number of aspects of second language acquisition (SLA), including psycholinguistics, pragmatics, error and interaction analysis, task performance, etc. The results were published in a number of articles. These are presented in Appendix F.

#### **4 The research process – comparing the ideal and the real**

The neat set of data described above came together in the course of a complicated process of planning and implementing the research project. Our purpose in this article is to shed light on some important details of the processes in classroom research, as a valuable source for the improvement of classroom teaching. For this reason, this section describes the procedures we took in the course of the project. At some crucial points a parallel is drawn up between the process of longitudinal projects as they happen ideally, i.e., as described in research methodology guidelines, and how it actually happened in our case.

Figure 3 shows the preparatory stage of a research project. The ideal situation and a realistic situation in general are shown along with the ELTE-Leeds project. The main difference is that while in an ideal situation the aim defines the research plan, in a realistic situation the plan serves the aim as much as possible and in the ELTE-Leeds project both the research aim and the

plan were subordinated to a higher order aim, i.e., that of gaining professional development opportunities for the department. This means that whilst in an ideal situation colleagues are selected for the project with appropriate qualifications and available time to work on a research plan and implement it, in our case the members of the team were recruited so that a team of both experienced and novice researchers were involved. This was intended in order that the junior department members gain substantial research experience and the senior members enrich their experience in a longitudinal project. Outside of the learning experience we were also hoping to make use of this research project to precipitate other professional benefits as well, such as: consultations with international experts, inviting visiting professors, having publication opportunities and attending international conferences.

Following from the above, the research aim and the research plan are very directly related to an ideal situation. However, in more realistic cases – and this was the case with the ELTE-Leeds project – this relationship is heavily influenced by the funding possibilities and research plans are drawn up to match the requirements prescribed in the grant application.

#### PREPARATORY STAGE

	IDEAL SITUATION	REALITY in general	ELTE-LEEDS project
<b>research aim</b>	Person/team has an aim	Person/team has an aim	Department needs benefits (professional development, consultations, publication opportunities, conference participation, visiting professors)
<b>research team</b>	Purpose selection of team for the project – the team members are qualified – the team has time – the team has a job description	Team is selected based on the availability of qualified members.	With professional development in mind a team of experienced and novice researchers are selected.
<b>research plan</b>	Team has a plan to suit the research aim	Team suits the plan to the requirements of a possible grant	Team makes up a plan to suit the interests of the team members, the department and the requirements of a possible grant
<b>application for a grant</b>	No need to apply	Team applies for money	Team applies for money
<b>funding</b>	The institution's budget covers the costs.	Money is granted	Money is granted

Figure 3. The preparatory stage of a research project

Once the funding for the project is granted, the goals have to be finalized, and in accordance with those, the research plan usually needs several revisions. By adjusting the professional aims to the financial and circumstantial possibilities, a final agreement on the processes is reached (See Figure 4.)

**PLANNING STAGE**

<b>IDEAL SITUATION</b>	<b>REALITY in general</b>	<b>ELTE-LEEDS project</b>
Team reviews the original plan and details it to fill every requirement of research methodology	Operationalising the aims	Setting a general aim: putting together a corpus of student interaction in task completion
	Finalising the team	Finalising the team
		Negotiating the individual professional interests, the feasibility, and the department interests
	Adjusting the aims described in the application to the circumstances of the research(ers)	Adjusting the aims described in the application to the circumstances of the research(ers)
	Reviewing the plan	Reviewing the plan
	Finalising job descriptions	Negotiating flexible job descriptions
Team finalises the plan for the process of the research (deadlines, details of implementation )	Team finalises the plan for the process of the research (deadlines, details of implementation )	Team finalises the plan for the process of the research (deadlines, details of implementation)

Figure 4. The planning stage of a research project

This figure aptly demonstrates that, as opposed to the ideal situation where the initial research aim is detailed further, or the realistic scenario, where the aims are operationalised in the planning stage, in the ELTE-Leeds project the planning stage still reflected a two-way process. On the one hand, it was necessary to serve the interests of the department and the individuals participating in the project, as well as pay close attention to the practicalities and feasibility of the research. On the other hand, it was important to create a cohesive, valid and reliable research plan, which could then be broken down into several sub-projects. This is why a general research aim was identified (of creating a corpus of student interaction), but flexibility was preserved in several steps (negotiating individual and department interests, adjusting the aims to the circumstances, and negotiating job descriptions).

Unlike the Preparatory and the Planning stages of a research project, it is more difficult to generalize the steps in the stages of the implementation of the project. The ELTE-Leeds project was carried out in three cycles, approximately one year long each. In Cycle 1 baseline data was collected about the students, and two oral narrative, two oral argumentative and two written argumentative tasks were recorded. In Cycle 2 slight modifications were made to the initial plans based on an analysis of the recordings in Cycle 1. The language performance of the students in the oral argumentative tasks was lower than was expected. Students produced few arguments, used few discourse markers and in some cases, the debate was merely on managing the task rather than producing claims, support, counter-claims and counter support. Therefore in Cycle 2 it was decided to discontinue the recording of narrative tasks and concentrate on argumentation tasks. First, the same task type as in Cycle 1 was recorded to check the effect of general language development; then the same task type was recorded in Hungarian, to check the students' argumentation skills in L1; finally, in two groups we modified the task, another two groups

received an argumentation training in 10 classes, whereas the fifth group acted as a control group and received placebo treatment. (See Table 1.)

Due to the different goals and methods used, the Implementation stage/stages of each research project in task design varies/vary a lot, and it is difficult to generalize. In a quasi-ideal case, the planning stage is followed by task design, background data collection, finding classes, checking the equipment, and setting up the schedule for the research, collecting the data, and the initial analysis of the data. Figure 5 compares the ELTE-Leeds project to a quasi-ideal situation:

	QUASI - IDEAL	ELTE-LEEDS project
<b>IMPLEMENTATION STAGE I.</b> <b>Preparation of data collection</b>	Designing, piloting and validating the tasks	Finding classes
	Designing background data collection	Designing task types and finalising the number of recording opportunities
	Finding classes to visit	
	Checking equipment	Checking equipment
	Setting up the schedule	Setting up initial schedule
		Designing task variations, wording
		Piloting and validating the tasks
<b>IMPLEMENTATION STAGE II.</b> <b>Cycle 1: Data collection</b>	Data collection sessions Cycle 1.	Data collection sessions Cycle 1 (background data and tasks).
		Reviewing and revising data collection techniques
	Transcriptions	Transcriptions
	Initial analysis of Cycle 1 data	Initial analysis of Cycle 1 data
		Reviewing and finalizing definitions
		Identifying factors determining performance
		Designing and administering additional background tests
		Interviews with teachers to explore their views
Detailed planning of Cycle 2.	Replanning of Cycle 2.	
<b>IMPLEMENTATION STAGE III.</b> <b>Cycle 2: Data collection and analysis</b>	Intervention	Intervention
		Task modification (adding a task in Hungarian and a modified task in English)
	Data collection	Data collection of tasks and motivation questionnaire
	Transcriptions	Transcriptions
	Analysis according to the aims set out in the plans	Analysis according to the individual interests of the researchers

Figure 5. The implementation stages of a research project

As can be seen from the figure above, the difference between the quasi-ideal situation and the ELTE-Leeds project is that, whilst in an ideal situation the research is theory driven and controlled by the research design – in that it strictly follows the aim initially set both in terms of research focus and research methodology –, in this specific case the research was organized around a number of practicalities. These mostly concerned issues related to the selection of participants and the data collection process.

#### 4.1 Selecting participants

Rather than beginning by designing tasks to test with the students, the initial activity comprised a meticulous process of finding classes. The target groups were 2<sup>nd</sup> year (16-17 year-old) students in Budapest secondary schools, as the data collection lasted for two years and the final year in the secondary schools is usually overloaded. It was an aim to find students in the same type of schools, with the same type of communicative language training, at approximately the same language level, with the same number of classes a week, and with enthusiastic teachers who were willing to work in such a large scale project for three years. It was only once students were identified and information was clear about their background, the syllabus they were following, the course material they were using, that the designing of the tasks could begin.

To an outsider to this project it might seem that selecting the participants before designing the tasks weakens the validity of the project. It was the opinion of the ELTE team that gauging the task to the students meant that more precisely measurable task performance opportunities were created for the students by cutting down on the number of variables such as proficiency level, nature of core vocabulary, general interests, etc. The language level and the topics were thus more suited to the students. It was also easier to pilot and validate the tasks with a particular student population in mind. At the same time, it was found that knowing who the participants would be helped us create a framework for the collection of background information. This way, the decision not to carry out the research process by the book proved to be useful, and allowed for some flexibility that turned out to be very constructive in the later stages of the research.

Looking at the participants through the eyes of an onlooker may raise concerns, such as was raised in a later conference, about two issues: One concern was that the number of participants was too low and therefore the results of the study were invalid and the project was like “water under the bridge”. The number of participants in a project may always give rise to discussions and the issue has to be carefully planned. Although Brown (2001), Cohen, *et al.* (2000) and others put the minimum number of participants to 30 for the purposes of quantitative research so that statistical methods can be applied correctly, they warn that the bigger the sample, the more generalisable or transferable are the results of the research. This also stands to common sense. At the same time, the sample also depends on the type of research approach and on how the cases to be examined are delimited. Brown and Rodgers (2002) confirm that in classroom research, for instance, it is perfectly adequate to record and analyse the interactions of the students in one class. Examining research articles in task based learning also reveals that analysing two recordings with one single speaker (Bygate, 1996) or two recordings with two groups (Lynch, 2007) may also yield valid results. The 7 recorded oral tasks and 3 written pieces from a sample of 66 students in five classes of the ELTE – Leeds Project certainly stand to reason and validate the results.

The other criticism concerning the implementation of the research was that the students were working on the tasks in pairs, but as not all the students were present at all the recording

sessions, some students had to work with a new partner occasionally, so the dyads were not stable. The critic was right in that this added to the number of variables affecting task performance as the relationship between the speakers may certainly influence their communication. However, a classroom is not a laboratory where the ingredients of the different substances can be dispensed in precise measures. Classroom research should not disrupt regular classroom work (Hopkins, 1985; Mackey, & Gass, 2005) Also, if we consider that, in fact, it is more natural to communicate with different people rather than with just one partner, the changing of the students in the dyads even serves a pedagogical aim. For these reasons, not discarding the data gained from pairs whose members changed from time to time is justifiable.

## 4.2 Data collection

This research project was driven by a general aim, i.e., that of creating a database of student interaction, and the concrete aspects of analysis were not specified at the beginning of the research, even though the ELTE team had a rough idea of the directions it wanted to pursue in the analysis, as the participants had all expressed their interests. Some of these were concerned with fluency, errors, the pragmatics of argumentation, the correlation of task performance and motivation. However, because there were multiple research aims and they were not all fully detailed in the planning stage to allow for flexibility, a number of issues emerged as the data collection proceeded. This is why it was only the initial analysis of the data in Cycle 1 that prompted the need for further background data about the students.

After the preliminary analysis of the data in Cycle 1, factors were identified which determined performance. Figure 6 lists the variables we established:

Variable	Factors
Individual	Willingness to talk
Social	Group role Status of individual Intermember relationship Group norm system
Organizational	Instructions Time Format Task roles
Motivational	Intrinsic Extrinsic
Language related	Communicative competence Language requirements (quantity, specificity) Task-specific language (generic context)
Task related	Task complexity Task support Level of abstraction Background knowledge

Figure 6. List of variables determining foreign language task performance

Based on this emerging list of variables, questionnaires on research attitude, group cohesion, student roles and willingness to talk in the mother tongue were administered still in Cycle 1, while a motivation questionnaire was given to the students in Cycle 2. Preliminary

analyses often lead to modifying the original research design – in fact, in qualitative research emerging research design is the norm –, and thus have a strong potential of improving its quality as it did in this case. It can therefore only be recommended that emerging issues be considered flexibly and allowed to affect even a previously approved plan.

While working on the project, a number of further ideas surfaced for different types of data that could still be useful: such as acquiring data from native speakers of English performing the same tasks for comparison or conducting interviews with the students to explore their way of thinking about tasks and task completion. However, the first idea was dropped for lack of finances, and the second for fear of ‘drowning in data’ (Delamont, *et al.*, 1997). For the same reason it was decided to forego the narrative tasks in Cycle 2. This allowed for greater focus on argumentation.

## 5 Lessons from the lessons – some practical considerations

In order to take stock of everything that might be a useful outcome of this project from a research methodological perspective, we – the authors of this article – monitored the whole process, made observations, kept research notes, and also asked our fellow researchers and the participating teachers to provide their views on the project in a questionnaire. This made it possible for us not only to rely on our own experience in the project. The practicalities that surfaced in the research can be organized into three main categories: technical, circumstantial and professional (see Figure 7).

<b>TECHNICAL</b>	EQUIPMENT	- reliability - video recording - audio recording
	OBSERVATION	- presence of visitors - presence of recording equipment
	INSTRUCTIONS FOR TEACHERS	- timing - integration of tasks - guidance
<b>CIRCUMSTANTIAL</b>	PERSONAL	- difference in planning - commitment, enthusiasm - team for project – project for team - flexibility in performing tasks - ground rules are needed - rules for communication
	FINANCIAL	- matching grants - fitting a grant for a purpose
	PR	- image of research important from the point of view of the outcome
	LIFE	- the unknown and the unforeseen
<b>PROFESSIONAL</b>	TEACHERS' INVOLVEMENT	- from the teachers' perspective - from the researchers' perspective
	FLEXIBILITY OF PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION	- finding and using the suitable methods - multiple aims - complex outcome - database

Figure 7. The practicalities of research emerging from the research on the ELTE-Leeds Project

## 5.1 Technicalities

### 5.1.1 The equipment

Whilst enthusiastic researchers compensate to a great degree a lack of facilities, it is imperative to have very reliable equipment and also, ideally, appropriate technical staff to ensure maximum results. It is irritating how easily a technical snag can influence the outcome of a large project. Data collection was obviously a crucial point in the research. Audio and video recording was mainly employed for this, in the hope that the video recording would then also serve as a resource for teacher education in examining methods for class observation or lesson planning with special focus on the integration of tasks. Unfortunately, as there was only one camera and no technician, the video recordings were not of adequate quality and could only serve as a backup, so this aspect was lost.

The data collection of the student interaction happened through audio recordings. The students were recorded in pairs, in their real classroom environment – as opposed to a studio – as the classes generally occur. Good quality tape recorders were utilized, one for each pair, which recorded the two students well despite the background noise created by everyone talking at the same time. A minor issue could easily have had destructive effects though: As was only discovered later, some of the small cassette recorders were voice activated, meaning that silences were not recorded. As a result, a fluency count could only be conducted on part of the recordings. This points to the necessity of planning research very carefully down to the smallest technical detail.

### 5.1.2 Reducing the effects of observation

The presence of visitors and the recording equipment in the classroom influences and affects the students' performance. In order to achieve realistic results it was decided to keep the circumstances in the classrooms as natural as possible with as little intrusion as possible. To let the students become accustomed to being observed, they were allowed to play a little with the camera before and after the lessons. They enjoyed this and became used to its presence. The team members engaged in conversation with the students and developed a friendly relationship, which helped in relaxing the students also.

Conducting research at multiple scenes raises the need to try to keep the circumstances of the lessons very similar. This was not always simple. The size and the arrangement of the classrooms may potentially influence the students' behaviour and performance. For this reason – wherever it was possible – the team made a point of sitting behind the students. There was no verbal contact during the lessons and when eye contact was established briefly, team members tried to be encouraging.

### 5.1.3 Instructions for the teachers

The team owes a great deal to the teachers. They were enthusiastic participants of the project and contributed to it all the way. A difficulty was presented by the need to decide if the classes should be conducted similarly to one another or that the teachers be given independence in planning their lessons and integrating the tasks the way they felt was best. Trying to create uniformity would perhaps have added to the overall reliability of the results from an abstract aspect of research methodology. However, since the team was far more interested in how the tasks would work in normal classrooms and believed that optimal results would be achieved by allowing the teachers remain in charge, it was decided to give detailed instructions to the teachers as to how to carry out the tasks themselves but there was no interference with the teacher's authority and independence when designing the lessons. The result was interesting: some teachers integrated the tasks completely into their lessons, others set some time apart for doing the tasks, sometimes the task became the core element of the lessons with everything else built around it, and on other occasions the observers were not sure for most of the lesson if the task would fit into that particular class.

It is known from the teachers' feedback that some of them enjoyed the freedom while others would have appreciated more detailed guidance. The lesson from all this is that there is no amount of communication between participants that would be enough to make sure that concepts and instructions are interpreted the same way and that therefore even planning freedom has to happen in a minutely structured way.

## 5.2 Circumstances

### 5.2.1 Personal relationships in the project

Perhaps the most important circumstance to affect research is the human factor. The personal relationship of the researcher and the participants or gatekeepers and those within a research team can play a crucial role in the planning and implementation of a project.

It has already been mentioned that while in an ideal case the participants are selected for a research project, in this case the team was the starting point. However, since each team member had different professional interests, it was clear from the start that it would be difficult to synchronize personal aims. In the end, the team managed to draw up a plan that contained numerous research opportunities for all the members. Naturally, compromises had to be made whereby the research became less focussed. What the team members gained through this was not only that the project satisfied individual research interests but that with these complex aims in mind the data collection procedure was extended so the outcome was a huge database for future exploitation and the added benefit that the results of the different analyses could be compared to throw light on the connections of the different variables. Another result of catering for the team members' individual interests was that the group developed a responsible and committed attitude, which was very useful throughout the research process.

Setting out the directions of the research was successful because considerable time was spent in negotiating. With seven researchers, five teachers and a distance of 1625 kilometres (1000 miles) as an added obstacle, communication always played an important role in the project. Flexibility was a key issue during all the stages in the project. As there was no strict distribution of labour or responsibilities, when the need arose, someone would always step in. However, flexibility and unregulatedness may also be counter-productive: Uneven workload can be just as irritating as unclear power relationships within a group. We found – not surprisingly – that democratic procedures work best even if they take longer. On the other hand, it is very important to outline the precise role and authority of the leadership, who should also be responsible for providing professional guidance and input as well as ensuring democratic decision-making processes regarding both financial and professional issues. This suggests that it is a good idea for a new team to first draw up a set of rules and job descriptions.

Rules or no rules, communication is the key to keeping a group satisfied. In a team where the members come from different language and cultural communities, where they represent different age groups, have a varying length of experience, and who are under constant time pressure since they are not paid to do the research and therefore have full time university and school jobs along with other professional commitments, special attention has to be laid on the amount and quality of communication. Team members had different needs as regards the timing and amount of information. On the other hand, the person who was the source of information was perhaps not available, did not have time to write in as much detail as required, and the lack of communication occasionally lead to tensions. Apart from the efficiency of communication, its efficacy also needs to be considered. A difference in communication styles – which almost always occurs in an intercultural/international setting – can easily frustrate the participants. The three things that are essential in preventing a breakdown of personal relationships in the course of research are the awareness of differences in communication, tolerance, and straightforward communication both face to face and in writing. In the case of teamwork, ideally, the procedures of communication should also be discussed at the beginning of the process.

### 5.2.2 Finances

Personal management - along with other aspects of research - is closely related to the financial circumstances of a project. Financing bodies often have a specific ideology behind their framework for sponsoring projects and therefore are unable to cater for particular needs. In this case the grant was to cover the international exchange of the participants. There was no consultancy fee, no pay for the participants, and with the exception of small running costs – like cassettes for the recordings – no money for the equipment or other expenses in this budget. While this arrangement might be realistic elsewhere, for example in the form of matching grants, in Central Europe, universities are usually not in a position to provide funds for such programmes.

Whilst sponsorship often creates the opportunity for research, it can also curb the possibilities of the researchers. It is not uncommon that the final version of a research plan has to be modified significantly compared to the initial research proposal because of lack of funds. The research then has to be restricted to what is considered viable but relevant at the same time. What

is important is to keep up this precarious balance and justify the steps of the research in the light of these two concepts.

### 5.2.3 Public Relations – the face validity of a research project

The PR of the ELTE-Leeds project was an important element. The selection of the teachers in the beginning of the project was not only carried out with professional requirements in mind but it was intended to keep this rather formal. Initially contact was made with some teachers, and then the team members visited the classes of those who expressed interest. This was followed by an information session at our department. The teachers were then invited to decide if they wanted to join the programme or not. The team believed that, apart from having a friendly and good working relationship with the teachers selected, keeping up a more formal contact with the schools contributed to the face validity of the research. Headmasters and the students were notified about the developments of the project both in writing and in classroom presentations. The students were also given small presents – English readers – for Christmas on two occasions.

What would have required a little more adroitness on the team's part was in managing reliance on the teachers' initiative and yet keeping some aspects of the research from them. In the second cycle, for instance, teachers could not be advised if their class was used as a control group because this would have influenced them. When they learnt about this later, they were a little disappointed. Still, it seems that by inviting the teachers to the project discussion sessions regularly, by talking to them individually and by giving them the opportunity to attend two IATEFL conferences in England the team managed to keep up teacher motivation. It is interesting that this cannot be said so clearly about the students. In their feedback some teachers reported that the students were generally not motivated enough, while others said that the research itself was highly motivating for the students. This suggests that a lot depends on how research partners are treated and on the image of the project. In turn, this fact points to two directions: While it is quite impossible to change the "chemistry" of the classes and the way the students react to their teacher's attitudes and unspoken messages, the way the teachers are involved plays a crucial role in the students' view of the project and thus in their performance.

### 5.2.4 The unignorable element: LIFE

The last point to mention in the category of circumstances influencing the project is LIFE. 'Life' here represents the unknown, i.e. predictable and unpredictable incidents that cannot be prevented. An example of a predictable but unpreventable issue is that, despite careful planning, we could only compile the complete set of recordings, written tasks, tests and questionnaires of 10 students out of 66. This is mainly due to absence because of illness. Also, two students changed classes in the second cycle of our research, which could certainly not be predicted. We initially planned the tasks to follow one another in a similar way and with the same intervals in all five classes. Yet, quite unpredictably, lessons cancelled because of a flu epidemic, a bomb scare, or the teacher's illness made some intervals longer than others. While these are all disturbing

factors in research, we can very confidently say that having kept this project to such a large scale ensured that the results are valid, reliable, dependable and confirmable.

Discipline or rather the lack of it can easily interfere with classroom research. The project was lucky in not having had to face any discipline problems. One of the team's greatest fears was that some students would use Hungarian rather than English in the tasks but fortunately this did not happen. Perhaps it was the work invested in the PR of the project that gave it enough face validity for the students to respect the recording process of their task completion.

Unforeseen events and logistical problems always occur and sometimes jeopardize the quality of the research. This suggests that carefully designed preventive measures have to be taken by devoting special effort to anticipating problem issues and to finding solutions and alternative methods during the planning and implementation stages.

### 5.3 Lessons about the professional approach

The professional lessons from the lessons, including the involvement and the professional growth of the teachers were a key question to everyone concerned. Interestingly enough, the way this was conceived depended entirely on the participants' personal disposition and professional interests. The teachers themselves were divided as to whether they should have been involved to a larger extent or not and the same goes for the researchers. The fact that there were multiple aims in the project accounts for this difference. Had more focus been placed on the teaching processes, there would doubtless have been more immediate effects on the teachers and their classes – as this was the case in the interventions – but even so the insights that the researchers received into the routines of secondary schools certainly affected their attitudes to teacher training and development with particular emphasis on task design and the application of theory in real life classrooms.

Almost all the professional lessons were the results of the planning. At first sight the changing of the original plan for the project may not look extremely professional. On the other hand, maintaining the participants' enthusiasm for three years helped to keep everyone committed, and the revisions provided the necessary flexibility for making it all viable, reliable and creditable. This also meant that the team constantly evaluated its work and used an emerging research design by re-planning when thought necessary. Undeniably, setting multiple aims in this way led to a degree of dissatisfaction on everyone's part, since the list of things that could/should have been done was longer in this case than in others where the research project is more focussed, but the list of gains is also much longer.

The results of this large scale, longitudinal classroom based research project are validated by the fact that the team interfered as little as possible with the normal routine during the data collection and the intervention. The outcomes of the study included relevant results in psycholinguistics, pragmatics, error and interaction analysis and other aspects of SLA with a special focus on task completion. Apart from the publications, the project also served as the basis of a PhD course at ELTE, which in turn helped develop and support the theoretical underpinning

of the whole project. A team was created with members who worked well together and who maintained a high level of research discipline even though they had different individual research aims. In the course of planning and revising the project areas of research methodology and management were also identified.

## 6 Conclusion

While this paper examined the practicalities of classroom research, many of the issues raised are valid for other kinds of research also. Using the ELTE-Leeds project as an example, our investigations led to the following answers to the research questions:

Practical problems emerge in every stage of a research project from the preparation through to the detailed planning to the implementation. The research aim determines the research process in theory, yet some conditions may easily alter the original goals and focus, and may also modify the detailed plans and the steps in the execution of the project. It was found that the practicalities that emerge most often can be described as technical, circumstantial or professional issues affecting the research process. What actually falls in these categories depends on the individual projects and the research environments.

Careful design with some degree of flexibility, built-in routines to revise the process and adapt it to the emerging needs, creating trust and good personal relationships with the research partners and participants, paying attention to even the smallest details, having contingency plans but not being afraid to make on-the-spot decisions all contribute to dealing with the practical problems that arise in the course of a research project. However, the most important precaution researchers can take to ensure that their research is not compromised is to weigh all their options throughout the research process and justify all their decisions very clearly first to themselves and then also in writing up their research.

*Proofread for the use of English by: Anthony Gall Ph.D. freelance*

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## APPENDIX A

The questionnaire on the research administered to the team members and the participating teachers

24 September, 1998

Dear .....

As you probably know one part of the ELTE- Leeds task based learning project is to examine the research methodology that has been used. One aim is to validate the research through this, the other is to set up guidelines for future classroom research drawing from our experience.

Since it would be impossible to conduct a personal interview with all the participants, we opted for open-ended questions to be answered by everyone in writing. We know that this is more time consuming but every detail that you might mention counts, and therefore we are asking you to take some time and answer the following questions. If it is convenient for you please return this by email to .....@ludens.elte.hu, if not then please let us have it back on paper by Thursday, 8 October.

Thank you very much for your time and attention.

*Holló Dorottya*

*Németh Nóra*

- 1., Why did you enter the project?
- 2., What were your expectations?
- 3., What were your forecasts?
- 4., Were you responsible for the initial planning? To what extent?
- 5., Did you have a role in planning in the later stages? How do you see your role?
- 6., Did you have any important aims/ideas that were lost already in the planning stage that you regret?  
What were these?
- 7., What would you have done differently in the planning?
- 8., What would you have done differently in the implementation?
- 9., With so many variables, what is it that guarantees the validity of the data for you?
- 10., Was there anything - perhaps of lesser importance compared to the whole project - that you found disturbing or irritating?
- 11., Has your aim changed as the project proceeded? How?
- 12., Has your motivation changed as the project proceeded? How?
- 13., Have you perceived any conflicting professional interest in the research team? If so, how has this been treated?
- 14., To what extent has the research lived up to your expectations?
- 15., What did you get out of the project (professionally, personally)?
- 16., Have you had any unforeseen benefits/ outcome of the project? What were these?
- 17., Do you consider this project successful? Why?
- 18., Are you planning to use the data in the future? How?
- 19., Have you learnt anything about team building for such a research project from a personal perspective? Is so, please elaborate.
- 20., Please add any other comments.

**APPENDIX B****An argumentative task used in the study**

You are a member of the school student committee. Your school wants to participate in the district's social life and asks students to offer their help. The following possible options have been suggested:

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Delivering lunch to elderly people in the district | <input type="checkbox"/> Collecting newspaper/wastepaper             |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Publishing a local newsletter                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Feeding birds                               |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Helping out in the library                         | <input type="checkbox"/> Maintaining the park                        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Providing tourist information                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Performing for children in the kindergarten |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Performing for elderly people                      | <input type="checkbox"/> Organising sports events                    |

First, look at the list alone for three minutes and choose **5 activities** you would find interesting or useful. Put them on these lines *in the order of your preference*.

- |         |         |
|---------|---------|
| 1 _____ | 4 _____ |
| 2 _____ | 5 _____ |
| 3 _____ |         |

Second, compare your list with your partner's. The lists are probably different. Your task is to find the best compromise with your partner and *prepare a final list of 3 activities* you together will recommend to the school management.

- |         |
|---------|
| 1 _____ |
| 2 _____ |
| 3 _____ |

**You have 10 minutes** to convince your partner about your ideas. Make sure you give reasons but remember that you **MUST come to an agreement on the best proposal**.

**A modified argumentative task**

Student A.

A friend has offered you and your friend to give you a free lift to England for a three week holiday. The condition is that the two of you take only one suitcase. You have already packed the essentials and now there is space for only **five** more things. Here is the list of things you'd like to take. Your friend also has a similar list. Take 3 minutes to think which items you'd like to take and why.

spare pair of trainers

a book on Budapest

alarm clock

travel iron

playing cards

tennis racket

a small bottle of Tokaji

discman with 2 Cds

Hungarian cigarettes

Now make your final decision together with your partner. Remember that you can only take **five** more things.

[Student B's task is the same. The items on their list are as follows:

radio

camera

mobile phone

spare pair of jeans

tennis racket

guide book on Britain

a small bottle of Scotch

hair dryer

roller blades ]

a pocket dictionary

**APPENDIX C****Questions of the research attitude questionnaire used in the study**

(translated from Hungarian)

[All the items are six-point Likert scales, with the scales ranging from 'Very much' to 'Not at all' in items 1-5 and 'Yes, willingly' to 'No, I wouldn't want to.' in item 6.]

1. How difficult did you find the following tasks?
  - a. story telling based on pictures
  - b. argumentation task (choosing from a list)
  - c. written task
2. How useful did you find the tasks from the point of view of learning?
  - a. story telling based on pictures
  - b. argumentation task (choosing from a list)
  - c. written task
3. How much did you like the tasks?
  - a. story telling based on pictures
  - b. argumentation task (choosing from a list)
  - c. written task
4. How well do you think you did in the tasks?
  - a. story telling based on pictures
  - b. argumentation task (choosing from a list)
  - c. written task
5. How much did it bother you that we were recording what you said?
  - a. story telling based on pictures
  - b. argumentation task (choosing from a list)
  - c. written task
6. Would you be willing to participate in a similar research project in the future?

**APPENDIX D****Questions and statements of the combined questionnaire for group cohesion, willingness to communicate in the mother tongue, student roles and sociometry used in the study**

(translated from Hungarian)

**I. Group cohesion**

[All the items are six-point Likert scales, with the points representing: 'I strongly disagree.' – 'I don't really agree.' – 'I have some reservations.' – 'I agree to some extent.' – 'I mostly agree.' – 'I strongly agree'.]

1. I feel that the company in my English group is better than in other similar groups.
2. Some people in this English group do not like one another.
3. If I were transferred to another English group, I'd like it to have a group of similar people to those in this group.
4. Group members help one another.
5. I am not satisfied with my English group.
6. This group is made up of people who are well-matched.
7. There are cliques in this English group.
8. I feel I am an active member of this English group.
9. The group members are very competitive.
10. I like my English group.

**II. Communication in the mother tongue**

[All the items are six-point Likert scales, with the scales ranging from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.]

To what extent would you participate in a conversation in Hungarian in the following situations?

1. You are standing in the bus stop with your friends.
2. You can ask questions at a student-teacher forum at school.
3. Someone takes you to a social gathering where you don't know anyone apart from him/her.
4. You meet a (not too close) acquaintance at the post office.
5. You and your friends go to McDonald's.
6. You and a stranger are in the lift.

**III. Student roles**

[Here the students had to associate possible roles with the members of the group.]

The list of roles was as follows:

the diplomat, the rebel, the clown, the initiator, the outsider, the inquirer, the eternal optimist, the incredulous, the leader, the bookworm, the "brain", the moaner, the appeaser, the stropky, the understanding, the organizer, the macho, the trouble-maker

**IV. Sociometry**

1. Which two members of the English group would you choose as team members at an English competition?
2. If you received three tickets to go and see a film, which two members of the English group would you take along?
3. List one or two people in the English group who you can talk to most freely.

**APPENDIX E****Questions of the motivation questionnaire used in the study**  
(translated from Hungarian)

[All the items are six-point Likert scales, with the scales ranging from ‘*Strongly disagree*’ to ‘*Strongly agree*’.]

1. Sometimes I feel that language learning is a burden for me.
2. I would like to get to know as many Americans as possible.
3. I am sure that I’ll be able to learn English.
4. English is the most important language in the world today.
5. I think I have a fairly good language aptitude.
6. I wish we had more English classes at school.
7. When I have to speak in English classes, I often lose confidence.
8. I like to work hard.
9. Unfortunately, I am not too good at learning English.
10. I would rather spend time on subjects other than English.
11. I am pleased with my current level of English.
12. I would like to spend a lot of energy learning English in the future.
13. I am not too interested in the English classes.
14. English people are modern and open-minded.
15. Learning English often causes me a feeling of success.
16. I like the way the Americans behave.
17. In my parents’ view, English is not a very important school subject.
18. I would be pleased to be able to master an intermediate level of English.
19. I really like the English language.
20. I generally feel uneasy when I have to speak English.
21. We learn things in the English classes that will be useful in the future.
22. Learning English is one of the most important activities for me.
23. I rarely do more work than what is absolutely necessary.
24. I would like to get to an advanced level in English.
25. I don’t mind it if I have to speak English with somebody.
26. I am satisfied with the work I do in English classes.
27. I easily give up the hard-to-reach goals.
28. I like the English classes.
29. I would like to get to know many English people.

Why is English important/unimportant for you? Learning English is important to me ...

30. ... because I may need it later (work, further education).
31. ... in order to become more educated.
32. ... because I would like to spend some time abroad.
33. ... so that I can read English language books, magazines and newspapers.
34. ... because I would like to get to know the culture and art of its speakers.
35. ... because I can get to know many people from all over the world through it.
36. ... because one cannot achieve any kind of success without it.
37. ... in order to be able to get to know the life of English speaking people better.
38. ... because I would like to make foreign friends.
39. ... in order to understand English speaking films, videos and TV programmes.
40. ... because it might be useful during my travels.
41. ... in order to be able to understand the lyrics of English songs.

Finally, what do you think of the tasks used in our research?

42. I have found the tasks useful from a language learning point of view.
43. I have found the tasks hard.
44. I liked the tasks.
45. I could do my language proficiency justice when doing the tasks.

## APPENDIX F

## Publications based on the ELTE-Leeds Project

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