



Overview of the Foreign Language Sections in the Matriculation Exam in Poland and the University Entrance Exam in Türkiye

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Abstract

This paper highlights the contrasting approaches to foreign language assessment in high-stakes examinations for university education in Poland and Türkiye, focusing on content, task types, and language skills. In Poland, language acquisition is seen as a tool for effective communication, while in Türkiye, it is often perceived as rote memorization of grammar and vocabulary. This difference in mindset is influenced by prevailing assessment practices, where Türkiye's evaluation methods prioritize memorization, leading to a diminished emphasis on communication and practical language use. This disparity is reflected in the EF English Proficiency Index, with Poland ranking high and Türkiye ranking low in language proficiency. Neglected language skills, such as speaking and listening, further exacerbate the issue. Despite discussions on transforming assessment practices for decades, Türkiye has made little progress. The practicality of multiple-choice-based tests in Türkiye is noted, but their limitations in testing language skills comprehensively are acknowledged.

Keywords: Foreign Language, Testing, Assessment, Türkiye, Poland, Comparison

Introduction

University admission is usually based on some form of candidate screening process. Depending on the particular education system, these may be university entrance exams or high school leaving qualification results. These assessments are meant to provide a

standardized and objective measure of the candidates' academic skills, abilities, and knowledge to help universities make decisions concerning a large pool of applicants fairly and equitably and ensure that admission decisions are based on merit and academic potential. University entrance requirements help maintain academic standards and ensure that admitted students possess the necessary foundational knowledge and competencies to succeed in higher education. By assessing students in various subject areas, such as Mathematics, History and foreign languages, these exams aim to help universities maintain quality education and uphold their reputation, motivate students to strive for academic excellence and provide a clear goal for their educational pursuits. The competitive nature of these assessments encourages students to work hard, develop strong study habits, and acquire essential knowledge and skills required in real life. However, although teaching, learning, and assessment are intricately intertwined, profoundly impacting teachers' and learners' behavior positively, it is also observed that in educational contexts where assessment determines what is to be learned and practiced, the purpose of teaching and learning languages might focus on what is tested in these exams. In other words, in contexts where assessment dictates the curriculum and influences teaching practices, a phenomenon known as negative washback (Taylor, 2005) can occur. In high-stakes language exams, where the outcomes determine students' educational opportunities, the focus on exam preparation often shapes the purpose and content of language teaching and learning.

This paper aims to explore and compare the university entrance assessment in foreign languages (FLs) conducted in Poland and Türkiye,¹ offering insights into language education and assessment practices within other realms. The comparative study of these two countries has brought about several factors for this exploration. Poland is located in the center of Europe, while Türkiye straddles the route from Europe to Asia. By analyzing the FL examinations from these two countries, we yield knowledge regarding how regional factors dominate language learning and assessment. Such an endeavor will contribute to developing a nuanced understanding of language education practices. Poland and Türkiye both have unique education systems, as well as language learning policies. Exploring each country's perspective on language education and comparing their FL examinations allows the identification of the similarities and differences between the two countries. This study results from the cooperation of two scholars representing two universities from the two countries in question. The research was conducted through the study of relevant legislation, available literature, and exam samples.

Overview of the Foreign Language Section of the Matriculation Exam in Poland

In the Polish education system, admission to higher education is based on the results of the Polish matriculation or maturity examination (Pol.: *matura*; hereafter: *Matura*). The exam is not compulsory to finish secondary education, but it is obligatory for those who want to pursue higher education. Universities and other higher education institutions autonomously establish standards and candidate requirements according to the field of study and the number of available admission slots. However, these are to be based on the *Matura* results. The requirements of specific universities and fields of study involve specific exam subjects,

¹ The change in the spelling of the name of the country known in the English-speaking world as Turkey was agreed on by the United Nations upon the request by the Turkish government in 2022.

exam level, and the minimum scores that candidates must achieve to be admitted. Additional screening procedures are allowed only for a narrow selection of disciplines where other skills and abilities, not assessed by the matriculation exams, are of importance (e.g., drawing skills for architecture or art; physical fitness test for physical education) (Kierznowski, 2016, p. 15).

The Matura exams are external, standardized tests developed at the national level by the Central Examination Board (*Centralna Komisja Egzaminacyjna*; hereafter: CKE) in collaboration with Regional Examination Boards (*Okręgowe Komisje Egzaminacyjne*; OKE). All candidates nationwide take the same paper on the same day and time. The exam is taken by between 250 and 350 thousand secondary school leavers each year². Apart from some unique situations, the exams take place in the candidates' schools and are supervised and invigilated by the school's teachers accompanied by external examiners and observers. The written papers are coded and marked externally by qualified markers according to standard grading criteria. Thus, the results of all the candidates who take a particular written exam in the same examination session are comparable and can be used for screening purposes no matter where the candidate sat his/her exam.

The matriculation exam has been present in the Polish education system since the late 18th century and has undergone numerous changes over time (Sendur, 2023a, 2023b). Before introducing the current system, secondary school graduates first sat the internal Matura exams at their schools. Then they took university entrance exams to continue their education at a higher level. Since 2005, however, Matura has been conducted as an external, standardized examination, and separate university entrance exams have been banned. The most recent revisions of the Matura were in effect for the first time in 2023. These, however, were conducted according to a modified version of the regulations initially planned for that year. Some of the exam requirements were lowered for two consecutive years: 2023 and 2024, in which students in secondary education during the remote learning period of the Covid-19 pandemic would sit their final exams. Therefore, in the description of the FL exam of the Matura, we will refer to the modified requirements for 2023 and 2024 (CKE, 2022a) and those which should eventually be in effect starting from 2025 (CKE, 2021).

Exams are taken at either the standard level (SL) or the extended level (EL). Three compulsory exams must be taken at the SL, while any elective or additional subjects must be taken at the EL. Oral exams do not have level distinctions. At the time of writing, the Matura consists of six compulsory exams, as outlined below:

Oral exams:

- Polish (one level)
- Foreign language (one level)

Written exams:

- Polish (SL)
- Mathematics (SL)
- Foreign language (SL)

² Based on the statistics for 2010–2021 (<https://stat.gov.pl/obszary-tematyczne/edukacja/edukacja/liczba-osob-ktore-przystapilyzdaly-egzaminaturalny,15,1.html>)

- Elective subject (EL)

A foreign language is one of the elective subjects that can be taken at the EL. Currently, there is no minimum passing score for the EL exams; however, this is planned to change in 2025. For obligatory SL subjects, the passing score is set at 30%. While this cut-off may seem relatively low for a high-stakes exam, it serves a specific purpose. Simply passing the exams and obtaining a Matura certificate, regardless of the specific scores, may be enough for admission to some higher education institutions. However, when applying for a tuition-free spot in a popular or prestigious course at a top university, acceptance depends heavily on high scores in the relevant examination subjects.

The Foreign Language Exam of the Matura

Candidates can take a FL exam in English, French, Spanish, German, Russian or Italian, but an overwhelming majority opt for English. In 2023 English was chosen by 97% (CKE, 2023). The FL exam is structured in the same way irrespective of the language; the same skills and abilities are tested at the same overall proficiency level. Both the oral and the written FL exams are compulsory. All candidates must take a selected FL written exam at the SL; the speaking test has one level for all test takers. Those who may need FL exam results for admission to higher education or want to test their abilities at a higher level can also sit the written exam at the EL (CKE, 2022b). Although a FL is an obligatory part of the Matura, it is not always required for admission to all programs. However, many universities do require the results of an extended-level FL exam, even for programs that are not related to foreign languages. Those that accept the SL exam results, require relatively higher scores. The oral exam lasts about 15 minutes and is conducted by one interlocutor with another exam committee member present. The exam starts with an unassessed warm-up task. The tasks proper include a role play, a picture description and a question-answer session connected with the topic of the picture, and a conversation based on prompts.

The written paper at the SL measures the candidates' language abilities at B1 level for productive skills and B1+ concerning comprehension. The 2025+ requirements are half-a-level higher: B1+ and B2 respectively. The exam is 120 minutes long and consists of listening, reading comprehension, a grammar and vocabulary section and a writing task. There are various task items: from all kinds of closed-ended questions, through gap-fill and short answer questions, to a more extended writing task (80–130 words in 2023 and 2024; 100–150 in 2025).

The EL exam (an elective exam) is structured similarly to the SL exam. However, the texts are longer and at a significantly higher language level (unadapted or slightly adapted), the tasks are more challenging, and the exam duration is extended to 150 minutes. The candidates' language abilities are tested at B2 and B2+ (productive and receptive skills). The fully-fledged exam in 2025 is supposed to reach even higher, with the target levels at B2+ and C1. In the writing paper, candidates must write a 200–250-word text.

There is also a FL exam at a so-called bilingual level, intended for candidates who attended bilingual secondary school classes (where some of the subjects are taught in a FL). However, since this applies to only a small portion of the population, we will not cover this assessment here in detail.

Overview of the Foreign Language Section in the University Entrance Exam in Türkiye

In the Turkish education system, admission to higher education is based on the results of Yükseköğretim Kurumları Sınavı (Higher Education Institutions Exam; YKS, hereafter), which is the only exam that secondary school graduates have to take in order to be accepted to a university in Türkiye. Higher education institutions are autonomous regarding the number of places for admission. However, they cannot set standards or requirements, which are all decided by Yükseköğretim Kurulu (YÖK; Higher Education Council). The only exception to this are the departments that require skills related to arts and sports. The admission is still based on YKS; however, these institutions can also conduct specific performance exams.

The university entrance examinations are conducted by OSYM (The Republic of Türkiye Center for Assessment, Selection, and Placement), an external public institution responsible for preparing exams and placement processes according to the YKS results. The exam is taken by around 1.7 million secondary school leavers each year³. The university entrance process in Türkiye consists of two stages: Temel Yeterlilik Testi (TYT) – Basic Proficiency Test and Alan Yeterlilik Testi (AYT) – Field Proficiency Test, which are both conducted by the OSYM. These exams are standardized external papers developed at the national level, and all the candidates nationwide take the same papers on the same day(s) and time. The exams occur in different schools in the cities where candidates reside or choose to take them. The exams are conducted and invigilated by supervisors and proctors, university faculty members, administrators, and teachers at the Ministry of National Education. The exam papers are marked externally using optic readers since all the questions are multiple choice (MCQ).

YKS has been present in the Turkish education system since 1974 and has undergone several changes (OSYM, 2023a). The last change was introduced into the examination with the two separate sessions in 2017, and most of these changes include changing the names of the exams, the number of questions, or the weights of the tests in the calculation of the score. At the time of writing, TYT includes the following compulsory subjects, which each candidate is required to take:

- Turkish
- Social Sciences (History, Geography, Philosophy, Religion, Culture, and Ethics or additional Philosophy questions)
- Basic Mathematics
- Science (Physics, Chemistry, and Biology)

A minimum number of correct answers is required from each candidate; otherwise, their scores are not calculated. Candidates whose scores are calculated in TYT can be admitted to a two-year college program. However, if they wish to undertake an undergraduate program, they must also take the Field Proficiency Test (AYT). TYT includes the following compulsory subjects for all candidates:

- Turkish Language and Literature

³ Based on the statistics for 2022

(<https://dokuman.osym.gov.tr/pdfdokuman/2022/YKS/sayisalbilgiler18072022.pdf>)

- Social Sciences – 1 (Turkish Language and Literature, History, Geography)
- Social Sciences – 2 (History, Geography, and Philosophy Group – Philosophy, Psychology, Sociology, Logic; Religion Culture and Ethics or additional Philosophy questions)
- Mathematics
- Science (Physics, Chemistry, Biology).

The Foreign Language Test (YDT) in Türkiye

The Foreign Language Test, or YDT (Yabancı Dil Testi), is designed and compulsory for candidates who wish to pursue studies in FL-related departments such as English Language and Literature, Language Teacher Training programs, and Tourism. It is not a mandatory requirement for other candidates. Other candidates can sit the language exam to test their FL knowledge if they wish so. However, their scores on other tests are not affected. Candidates can take an English, French, German, Russian, or Arabic FL exam. However, an overwhelming majority opt for English. The exams are structured similarly, irrespective of the language tested. All the questions are written in the multiple choice format with five options. YDT does not assess the candidates' oral or written abilities since no productive skills are tested directly; there is no listening test (Çakır & Canlı, 2022), which creates a negative washback effect on test takers (e.g., Kılıçkaya, 2016).

According to the YKS Guide, YDT includes 80 MCQs and lasts 120 minutes (OSYM, 2023a). There is no official document or guide regarding the content of the tests or the distribution of the items; however, based on the past exam questions, articles published on YDT, and several practice books on the market, it can be stated that YDT includes the following language components and task types, which are all in a MCQ format:

Grammar:

- Selecting the grammatical structure that best completes a sentence
- Cloze passage with multiple-choice options

Reading / Vocabulary / Language functions:

- Selecting the lexical item that best completes a sentence
- Reading texts (MCQ based on short paragraphs)
- Choosing the correct paraphrase of a sentence
- Selecting the sentence that best maintains paragraph coherence
- Selecting the sentence that is not in line with the coherence in a given paragraph
- Dialogue completion with multiple-choice options
- Selecting the appropriate expression in a given context or situation

Translation:

- Finding the equivalent translation of English/Turkish sentences

Considering the language tested and task types, it can be stated that YDT focuses mainly on reading ability, with no space left for other skills. However, as indicated in the newsletter (OSYM, 2023b), integration of the four skills is planned for future examinations: “A computer-based exam that measures English based on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills is being developed” (p. 26). In terms of scoring, there is no predefined

minimum score that candidates need to achieve in the YDT exams. Instead, candidates are placed into their desired programs based on the exam results. However, in order for candidates' weighted scores to be calculated, they must obtain a minimum raw score of at least 0.5 in one of the two required tests. Additionally, some programs implement The Lowest Success Rank system to determine the minimum rank for successful admission. For instance, in teacher training programs, the lowest rank considered successful is the 300,000th rank, while for medical studies, the lowest successful rank is the 50,000th.

The Differences and Similarities in the Foreign Language Sections in Poland and Türkiye

As discussed earlier, the two examination systems differ significantly. The first difference lies in how the exams are perceived in each country. The Matura and the YKS are both taken after completing secondary education (high school) and serve as university entrance qualifications. Despite their similar timing, status and function, the Turkish examination is viewed as a university entrance exam, while the Polish Matura is seen as a secondary school-leaving exam.

A significant difference between Poland and Türkiye is the requirement of FL proficiency in the national exams. In Poland, all candidates must undertake a modern language as a compulsory subject in the exam. In contrast, in Türkiye, this requirement is limited to individuals wishing to study at departments related to FLs. This distinction may seem peculiar within the Turkish educational context as students in Türkiye receive consistent FL instruction throughout their educational career, from primary school and through high school, with 12 years of education and 836 FL hours in total (Tuzcu Eken, 2021). Interestingly, although subjects like History and Geography are mandatory in Türkiye's exams, English, despite being the dominant global language, does not receive proportional emphasis. This discrepancy raises questions about the prioritization of language learning and its implications for learners' overall linguistic competence and their ability to engage effectively in a world where English is a common medium of communication.

In addition to differences in FL requirements, the support and resources available to candidates in Poland and Türkiye also vary significantly. In Türkiye, official exam guides are limited to issues such as the application process, regulatory requirements, and previous exam questions (OSYM, 2023a, 2023c). These guidelines provide essential information about procedures and administrative aspects of the examination. However, they fail to comprehensively describe the exam's content, format, and assessment criteria. This lack of in-depth guidance may leave candidates uncertain about what to expect in the examination. Conversely, Poland offers a markedly different approach, with abundant resources available to candidates. Polish examination guidelines include comprehensive test specifications, outlines of the test structure, sample items, assessment criteria, mock exams, and exam preparation course books. This thorough documentation helps Polish candidates understand the exam content and focus their preparation effectively, allowing them to approach their exams with confidence.

The structure and format of the FL exams in Poland and Türkiye also play a crucial role in shaping language learning and assessment practices. The Turkish assessment is a

machine-scored, MCQ-based test, making it fast and practical, especially given the test-taker numbers (Jones, 2021). However, the practicality of the MCQ format comes with significant limitations. Hughes and Hughes (2020) outline these issues, noting that MCQs only test recognition of knowledge, restrict the scope of what can be assessed, and may be influenced by guessing. Furthermore, MCQs are challenging to design, may lead to harmful washback, and facilitate cheating (Hughes & Hughes, pp. 79–82). In contrast, the Polish exam includes a combination of closed- and open-ended questions. While closed-ended items are machine-scored, certified examiners assess the short-answer and extended-response tasks. Given the number of test takers in question, this is an extensive and very costly undertaking.

A significant contrast in the underlying philosophies of FL assessment in the two countries is evident in how language learning is perceived. In Poland, acquiring a FL is viewed as the ability to effectively communicate in that language, using the language as a tool for interaction. Conversely, in Türkiye, learners often view language learning as a mere compilation of grammatical structures and vocabulary items to be mechanically memorized, without recognizing their true communicative purpose. This mindset is influenced by the prevailing assessment practices in Türkiye. The evaluation methods and systems in place often prioritize rote memorization and regurgitation of language components, encouraging learners to focus solely on mastering grammatical rules and lexical knowledge rather than on effective communication. The emphasis on genuine understanding and practical application of language skills is diminished.

In Poland, this focus on effective communication is at the heart of the approach to FL learning and teaching. The perspective on FL learning emphasizes effective communication, with language as a tool for genuine interaction and expression. This aligns with contemporary language teaching methodologies that prioritize functional language use, contextual comprehension, and the ability to navigate real-world situations. The practical implications of this perspective are evident in the content, task types, and language skills assessed in high-stakes examinations, which evaluate not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to engage in meaningful conversations and convey ideas effectively. In contrast, Türkiye's approach often leans toward a more traditional emphasis on rote memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary. The implications of this mindset are reflected in the design of assessment tasks and the evaluation of language skills. Hence, examinations in Türkiye tend to assess language proficiency through tests that focus on isolated linguistic elements, overlooking the practical application of language skills in authentic communication scenarios.

The limitations of Türkiye's FL assessment practices are further highlighted by various studies. The findings of several studies in the Turkish context indicate that grammar and vocabulary knowledge are promoted and assessed, while essential skills such as speaking and listening are neglected (e.g., Çakır & Canlı, 2022; Keleş, 2023; Sayın & Aslan, 2016). This issue is not limited just to FL tests but extends to the overall teaching practices and classroom experiences. Additional studies have demonstrated the harmful effects of high-stakes exams on productive skills and the need for integrative assessment of the four language skills (Akpınar & Çakıldere, 2013; Asma & Saka, 2022; Karabulut, 2007). It is also noteworthy that although the necessary changes in assessment practices to make the exams communication-oriented and skills-based have been discussed for several decades, decision-makers do not seem to have taken significant action except for several statements regarding the preparation of a new form of assessment (OSYM, 2023b). This lack of

progress is a cause for concern, as it might hinder the development of crucial communication and skills-based competencies among students. As indicated by Kic-Drgas and Çomoğlu (2017), and British Council and Tepav (2013), learners' lack of communicative ability in a FL may stem from viewing FLs merely as a subject rather than a means of communication. There are mainly grammar-, reading-, and vocabulary-based learning and teaching practices and assessments, leading to challenges in functioning in the FL. Learners and teachers are affected by the primary method dictated by the teaching and examination effect. Although teachers can select from and use various materials, they may feel pressured to teach what is relevant to the test. Accordingly, learners might also wish to be taught in that direction. This, in return, leads to negative impacts such as "excessive cramming, too much time practicing multiple-choice items, or teaching-to-the test" (Saville & Buttery, 2023, p. 205).

Finally, the disparity in language learning approaches and outcomes between Poland and Türkiye is reflected in international proficiency benchmarks, such as the EF English Proficiency Index. In 2022, Poland was placed in the 'very high proficiency' rank, at position 13 out of the 111 countries. In contrast, Türkiye was ranked 63, indicating 'low proficiency' (EF, 2022). Turkish learners may lack the ability to confidently and fluidly engage in real-life conversations or express themselves creatively in the target language since they only focus on what is tested in FL exams such as YDT, which do not consider the need for a more communicative approach. In contrast, Polish assessment practices strongly emphasize the use of language skills, exposing candidates to the necessary tools and competencies to engage in meaningful interactions in various linguistic contexts. Consequently, Polish candidates engage with language through listening, speaking, reading, and writing tasks both in exams and in the classroom. For Türkiye, integrating the skills and authentic communication tasks might help learners and test takers shift away from a focus on memorization of grammar and vocabulary towards a more comprehensive evaluation of language skills.

Pedagogical Implications

The divergent assessment practices in Poland and Türkiye have a significant impact on language proficiency outcomes, as evidenced by the EF English Proficiency Index (EF, 2022). Poland's ranking as higher in language proficiency might reflect the alignment between its communicative approach to assessment and the multifaceted nature of language proficiency. On the other hand, Türkiye's lower ranking might highlight the potential limitations of its assessment and classroom practices in adequately measuring holistic language proficiency, particularly in neglected skills, such as speaking and listening. The persistent disparity in assessment approaches between Poland and Türkiye is not without its complexities. Discussions about transforming assessment practices have occurred over an extended period in Türkiye (OSYM, 2023b); however, there is still progress needed regarding this transformation. The prevalence of MCQ-based tests in Türkiye is a practical consideration, considering the large number of test takers. Multiple choice items may offer insights into discrete language components, yet they fall short in creating real communication and language use (Jones, 2021). Therefore, assessment should focus on evaluating language skills for real-life communication, encompassing the four skills: speaking, listening, reading, and writing tasks. Moreover, Türkiye should consider making foreign language a compulsory subject in the university admission exam for all students, similar to the approach in Poland. This change could enhance students' overall linguistic

competence and their ability to participate effectively in a globalized world where English is widely used as a lingua franca. Efforts should be made to explore alternative formats, including open-ended questions, to ensure a more comprehensive and direct assessment of language skills. Türkiye should also enhance the provision of detailed exam guidelines to candidates, similar to the approach in Poland. Comprehensive outlines of the test structure and content can help candidates prepare better and approach the exams with greater confidence.

Conclusion

Based on the discussions comparing the foreign language assessment practices in the two countries, it can be stated that there is a pressing need for a shift in the approach to language assessment in Türkiye. The stark differences in mindset, language learning approaches, and proficiency levels highlight the urgency for change. As the discussion revealed, the prevailing assessment practices in Türkiye focus heavily on rote memorization of grammatical structures and vocabulary, leading to a lack of emphasis on effective communication and practical language skills. This approach hinders students' ability to confidently engage in real-life conversations and express themselves creatively in the target language. To foster language proficiency that aligns with global communication needs, it is crucial to implement assessment methods that prioritize authentic communication and the practical application of language skills. Furthermore, making FL proficiency mandatory for university admission in Türkiye is essential. Despite receiving consistent FL instruction throughout their educational life, students in Türkiye currently face an uneven distribution of priority when it comes to language learning. While subjects like History, Religion, and Geography are compulsory, language learning often remains an elective choice. Recognizing the critical role of English as a global communication medium, as well as the importance of multilingualism in today's interconnected world (Dendrinis, 2018), it is imperative to include foreign languages as a compulsory subject for all students. This will enhance students' linguistic competence and better equip them to function effectively in the globalized world. It must be stressed here, however, that although in comparing the two systems FL teaching and assessment seem to be notably more effective in Poland, FL proficiency among Polish high school graduates on the national scale still leaves much to be desired.

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