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A comparison of Ukrainian and Hungarian school-leaving English exams

Annually, hundreds of millions of students worldwide face the crucial moment of their scholastic progression: matriculation examinations. These important assessments, often a critical gateway to tertiary education, influence future pathways of countless individuals. This is particularly true in Ukraine and its neighbouring country, Hungary, where these exams hold significant weight. In both nations, school-leavers undertake English matriculation exams at independent test centres ensuring impartiality and standardization. These centres operate under the watchful eyes of official government bodies, the Ministry of Education and Science in Ukraine and the Ministry of Human Resources in Hungary, guaranteeing adherence to national standards. In Ukraine, the English External Independent Evaluation (EIE) traditionally evaluated key reading, writing, and use of English skills. Notably, between 2018 and 2021 listening skills were also assessed. However, the onset of the devastating Russian-Ukrainian war on February 24, 2022 dramatically altered the academic environment. The 2022 English EIE was cancelled, replaced by the National Multi-disciplinary Test (NMT), which initially excluded English. In 2023, the NMT reintroduced an English component, featuring 32 items focused on reading comprehension and the use of English. On the other hand, a flexible two-tiered system for the matriculation exams is employed in Hungary: intermediate and advanced levels. Implemented since 2005, this structure provides a nuanced assessment of students' abilities. Both levels evaluate reading, listening, writing, and use of English skills, corresponding to B1 and B2 levels of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, respectively, in the written exam. Separate oral examinations assess speaking proficiency, ensuring a comprehensive evaluation. This article aims to compare and contrast the English matriculation examinations in these two Central European nations, highlighting the similarities and differences in their approaches to assessing English language proficiency.

Keywords: *advanced level, English school-leaving exam, External Independent Evaluation (EIE), Hungary, language skills, National Multi-subject Test (NMT), the Matura exam, test, Ukraine.*

Introduction. Thousands of teenagers take the school-leaving exams in Ukraine annually. It is crucial to pass the matriculation exams for those willing to continue their studies in tertiary education in the country. At present, Ukrainian Language, Mathematics and History are compulsory for all school-leavers. In addition, they can choose from a range of school disciplines in which to take the matriculation exams. Since 2009, they have also been able to take an advanced level external independent exam in foreign languages (English, German, French, and Spanish). All secondary school graduates who wish to continue their studies in the humanities field at a higher education institution in Ukraine can choose and take the EIE in a foreign language at external independent test centres.

The foreign language (FL) exam corresponded to level B2 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR, 2001). The test measured three areas: reading skills, language use and writing skills. From 2018, however, the number of examined areas increased, as listening was also included among the skills tested. Accordingly, the exam lasted 150 minutes and max. 200 points could be achieved.

Due to the Russian-Ukrainian war that broke out on February 24, 2022, the EIE was abolished in 2022, and instead the National Multi-subject Test (NMT) was introduced, which, however, contained no FL questions, only Ukrainian, History and Mathematics knowledge of school-leavers was measured (Husztli, 2022a).

Various examinations are applied to assess the effectiveness of public education. They primarily function as a tool to assess and reward the performance of individual students; however, often crucial feedback is provided by them on the performance of an institution or even the education system as a whole (Horváth & Környei, 2003). Orosz (2022) believes that matriculation exams measure the extent to which candidates have acquired via secondary education the competences necessary for continuing learning at tertiary level, including critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

The purpose of the external independent evaluation (Huszt, 2016) is to identify the level of formation of foreign language communicative competence among graduates of general educational institutions in accordance with the state standard of basic and comprehensive secondary education, current curricula and all-European recommendations on language education (level B1) (All-European Recommendations on Language Education (Level B1) – the title of the programme) (Prohrama, 2018). The use of test tasks as an effective means of frontal knowledge verification is particularly relevant today (Valihura & Davydenko, 2024; Kachur & Huszt, 2015).

The English EIE is in accordance with the requirements of the valid national curricula in English (Huszt, 2020). In addition, Forostyuk and Sherstyuk (2019) claim that the English EIE uses task types similar to those found in international language exams of the type of Cambridge First.

In Hungary, it is the general certificate of secondary education and the state-accredited language exam certificate that officially document knowledge of a foreign language. The value of these two documents is regulated by a legal framework, which implies that both documents are an advantage or a prerequisite for progress at different levels of the education system. By obtaining these documents, the examinees lay the foundation stones of the path to their future profession, as the general certificate of secondary education is a passport to the higher education system, for which Government Decree No. 237/2006 (XI.27.) sets the legal framework (Fekete & Csépes, 2018).

The purpose of the article. The main objective of the present article is to characterize the advanced level English matriculation examinations in two neighbouring countries, Ukraine and Hungary. It aims to compare and contrast them identifying similarities and differences between them. The following tasks have been set:

- to describe and characterize the English EIE and NMT;
- to describe and characterize the English Matura;
- to identify the similarities and differences between them.

Presentation of the main research material. Both exams have a clear structure. First, the English EIE will be analysed followed by the examination of the NMT English block. Finally, the English Matura will be considered.

On the one hand, in Ukraine it is the Ministry of Education and Science that supervises the process of conducting the matriculation exams in close cooperation with the Ukrainian Centre for Educational Quality Assessment (Український центр оцінювання якості освіти). On the other hand, in Hungary this official body is the Education Office (Oktatási Hivatal) under the auspices of the Ministry of Human Resources.

As is known, a total of 56 points can be collected at the English EIE exam by solving the test flawlessly. These exam points are converted into competition points with the help of the scale determined by the ministry, which represents the final exam results of the candidates: max. 200 points.

The test consists of three parts (see detailed description in Huszt & Kacsur, 2016):

- Reading.
- Use of English.
- Writing.

The English language test uses tasks of four types (Huszt, 2022b):

1. Matching tasks (No. 1–5, 11–16).

In the tasks, it is required to choose headings for texts/parts of texts from the given options; statements/situations for announcements/texts; questions to answers or answers to questions. The task is considered completed if the test participant has established the correct correspondence and marked the correct answer option in answer sheet A.

2. Multiple choice tasks (No. 6–10).

For each task, four answer options are provided, of which only one is correct. The task is considered completed if the test taker chose and marked the correct answer in answer sheet A.

3. Gap-filling tasks (No. 17–42).

The tasks suggest supplementing paragraphs/sentences in the text with sentences/parts of sentences, phrases/words from the given options. The task is considered completed if the test taker chose and marked the correct answer option in answer sheet A.

4. Task with an expanded answer (No. 43).

The task requires the test participant to create his own statement in written form on answer sheet B in accordance with the proposed communicative situation.

School-leavers are expected to use vocabulary and grammar adequately in accordance with a given communicative situation and to use an appropriate style. They also need to be able to convey their own point of view, attitude, personal feelings and draw conclusions (Prohrama, 2018; Kachur & Husti, 2015).

In 2023, enrollees to higher education institutions took the national multi-subject test (NMT) for the second time, which was conducted in computer format. The test contained three blocks of tasks: in the Ukrainian Language, in Mathematics and in one subject of choice (History of Ukraine, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, foreign (English, German, French, or Spanish at the choice of the participant) language). It is crucial that the content of the tasks of the NMT unit on the English language corresponded to the current program of the EIE on the English language. In 2023, the NMT English language unit included two sections: Reading and Use of English. There was no listening comprehension check, or writing skills measurement, either.

There were 32 tasks in the NMT English language block, including: 5 multiple choice tasks, 11 matching tasks, and 16 gap-filling tasks. The tasks of the English language block were evaluated according to the scoring scheme used in the external examination. That is, 1 test point was awarded for each correct answer to the task with the choice of one correct answer, 1 test point for each correctly defined logical pair in the matching tasks, and 1 point for each correctly indicated option for filling in the blanks in the text. Thus, a max. of 32 points for completing the tasks of the NMT block in English could be collected. The final score for the NMT was calculated after all the three blocks were completed by a school-leaver. Then, the result of each block was converted into a scale of 100–200 points. To obtain a positive result of the English language test on a scale of 100–200 points, the applicant needed to score at least 4 test points in 2023 (Multitest, 2023).

The advanced level English Matura exam (CEFR level: B2) is monolingual, i.e. everything on the worksheets, including the task definitions and instructions, is in English. The exam consists of a written (total of 240 minutes) and an oral (total of 20 minutes) sub-test. All the tasks of previous years (2005–2024) can be downloaded from the official site of the Hungarian Education Office: <https://www.oktatas.hu/koznevelas/erettségi/feladatsorok>. The written exam checks reading (length of paper: 70 minutes), use of English (length of paper: 50 minutes), listening (length of paper: 30 minutes), and writing (length of paper: 90 minutes). There is a fifteen-minute break after the use of English paper in the written exam.

The Reading Paper contains four tasks. Text types include instructions (e.g. instructions manual), informative texts (e.g. program booklet), electronic and printed letters, electronic and paper-based newspaper articles (e.g. news, report), narrative (modern, fiction) texts, or journal style texts. Possible task types are: multiple choice, true / false statement, matching, grouping, ordering, sequencing, identifying, gap-filling, open questions requiring short answers, etc. The Use of English Paper contains four tasks, among which there can be multiple choice items (choosing one correct answer out of four options), identifying the location of the sentence fragment taken from the text using text cohesion tools, completion of incomplete text independently or from a predefined vocabulary set, inserting the inflected forms of given words or new words formed from them into the text, error identification, etc. The Listening Paper contains three tasks. Each audio recording contains the text that is the subject of the task, as well as the accompanying instructions, which are verbatim the same as the instructions on the worksheet. Each text is played twice for the testees, the second time with interruptions: breaks necessary to read and solve the task are inserted. Text types may include announcements and notices of public interest, recorded telephone texts (e.g. answering machine), instructions, media releases (e.g. short news), conversations, phone conversations, program excerpts, reports, interviews, informative texts on a topic of general interest, etc. Task types include, but are not limited to the following: multiple choice, true / false statements, determining the sequence of events, map tracking, filling in forms, filling in tables, sentence completion, open questions (requiring short answers), identification and correction of factual errors, etc. The Writing Paper contains two tasks. This is the only part of the Matura exam where testees are allowed to use a mono- or bilingual printed dictionary. The first task usually means creating a shorter, interactional or transactional text (120–150 words) based on three guiding principles, while the second one is creating a longer text based on four guiding principles (200–250 words), expressing the testee's opinion in relation to a given topic. Text types may include private or institutional letters, e-mails, blog entries, internet comments, reader's letter, or article for a (student) newspaper.

The oral exam lasts for about 20 minutes and contains the following parts: introduction, conversation, debate, and individual long turn. The introduction is a short, maximum one-minute conversation which basically only serves to relieve tension and is not part of the oral exam. As a result, the candidate's answers to the questions asked by the examiner will not be evaluated in this part. The conversation part is where the exam proper starts.

It covers one topic and the testee has to answer the questions asked by the examiner. The examiner first marks the topic and then asks the questions one by one. No written help (i.e. item sheet) is provided for the testee, who is allowed to ask the examiner to repeat the question in case they do not understand it. However, this is possible only once for each question. In the debate part of the oral exam, the testee receives a task sheet, which includes the statement that forms the basis of the discussion, as well as three guiding (helping) principles. The testee gets half a minute to prepare for the task. During the discussion with the examiner, he or she must consistently argue for or against the statement on the task sheet. The testee is encouraged to support their statements and arguments with examples in order for them to be more convincing. In the individual long run part, the testee has to coherently express his or her thoughts and opinions in relation to a more general topic. In addition to the task definition, the task sheet contains a couple of pictures. Here again, the examiner can ask helpful questions (related to the given topic) in case the testee gets stuck. Half a minute is provided for preparation. The pictures on the task sheet only serve as a starting point; the candidate is not expected to give a complete description of them.

Research results: similarities and differences. Both the advanced level English Matura exam in Hungary and the English EIE test/NMT in Ukraine are standardized assessments aimed at evaluating students' proficiency in English language skills. However, there are some differences in terms of the structure, purpose, and significance of these exams.

1. Purpose:

- English Matura in Hungary: The English Matura exam in Hungary is a part of the Matura system, which is the final exam taken by students at the end of their secondary education. It is designed to assess students' overall knowledge and skills in various subjects, including English. The Matura exam is crucial for obtaining a secondary education certificate and is used for university admissions in Hungary.

- English EIE/NMT in Ukraine: It is specifically focused on evaluating students' proficiency in English language skills. While it is a part of the broader External Independent Evaluation system, its primary purpose is to determine students' readiness to pursue higher education and to assess their language abilities for university admissions.

2. Structure:

- English Matura in Hungary: The structure of the English Matura exam in Hungary can vary depending on the specific exam board or curriculum. Generally, it includes multiple sections, such as reading comprehension, writing tasks, listening exercises, and a speaking component.

- English EIE in Ukraine: It typically consists of written tasks that assess reading, listening, and writing skills. The test does not include a speaking component. The NMT does not measure the school-leavers' listening skills.

3. Grading and Impact:

- English Matura in Hungary: The results of the English Matura exam contribute to the overall assessment and grading system used for the Matura diploma. The Matura results are crucial for university admissions in Hungary.

- English EIE/NMT in Ukraine: The results of the EIE/NMT are an essential factor in determining students' readiness for university admission. High EIE/NMT scores may increase the chances of being accepted into a preferred academic program in Ukraine.

Overall, while both exams assess English language proficiency, the English Matura in Hungary is part of a broader examination system covering multiple subjects, while the English EIE/NMT in Ukraine focuses solely on English language skills. The purpose and impact of these exams also differ, with the Matura being crucial for both the secondary certificate and university admissions in Hungary, while the EIE/NMT specifically assesses readiness for higher education in Ukraine.

Conclusions and prospects for further investigation. From the comparison of the English Matura exam in Hungary and the English External Independent Evaluation (EIE) test OR THE National Multi-disciplinary Test (NMT) in Ukraine, several pedagogical implications can be drawn. These implications can guide educators and policymakers in designing language assessments and improving language education programs.

1. Understanding the purpose and objectives of language assessments is crucial. Educators should ensure that the assessments align with the broader educational goals and objectives of the country's education system. This clarity will help in designing more focused and relevant language tests.

2. While both exams assess reading, writing, and listening skills, the absence of a speaking component in the English EIE and the lack of a listening and speaking component in NMT is notable. Including speaking assessments is essential to holistically evaluate students' language proficiency since speaking is a critical communication skill. Implementing speaking assessments in language exams can promote language fluency and oral communication abilities.

3. Ensuring fairness and transparency in language assessments is vital. Pedagogical approaches should avoid any form of bias and ensure that language tests are culturally sensitive and inclusive, considering the diverse linguistic backgrounds of students.

4. Language assessment results should provide constructive feedback to students, teachers, and schools. Teachers can use assessment data to identify areas of improvement and implement targeted interventions and remedial measures to enhance language learning outcomes.

5. Given the importance of language exam results in university admissions (e.g., the Matura in Hungary and the EIE/NMT in Ukraine), educators and policymakers should collaborate with higher education institutions to ensure the alignment of language assessments with university admission requirements. This helps create a more seamless transition for students from secondary to tertiary education.

6. Language educators should receive ongoing professional development opportunities to stay updated with best practices in language teaching and assessment. Continuous training can help teachers design effective language learning experiences and assessments that prepare students adequately for language exams.

Overall, the comparison between the English Matura exam and the English EIE/NMT underscores the significance of a well-structured, comprehensive, and fair language assessment system. Pedagogical practices and language education programs should be designed with the overarching goal of developing students' language proficiency and fostering effective communication skills across reading, writing, listening, and speaking domains. Further research is necessary to establish the effectiveness of the two exams under analysis in indicating the English proficiency levels of examinees.

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Порівняння українського та угорського випускних іспитів з англійської мови

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Щороку сотні мільйонів студентів у всьому світі стикаються з вирішальним моментом їхнього навчального процесу: випускними іспитами. Ці важливі оцінювання, часто критично важливий шлях до вищої освіти, впливають на майбутні шляхи незліченної кількості людей. Це особливо актуально для України та її сусідньої країни, Угорщини, де такі іспити мають значну вагу. В обох країнах випускники шкіл складають іспити з англійської мови в незалежних тестових центрах, що забезпечує неупередженість і стандартизацію. Ці центри працюють під пильним наглядом офіційних державних органів – Міністерства освіти і науки України та Міністерства людських ресурсів Угорщини, – гарантуючи дотримання національних стандартів. Описано, що в Україні зовнішнє незалежне оцінювання (ЗНО) з англійської мови традиційно оцінювало ключові навички читання, письма та використання англійської мови. Зокрема, у період з 2018 по 2021 рік також оцінювалися навички аудіювання. Однак початок руйнівної російсько-української війни 24 лютого 2022 року кардинально змінив академічне середовище. ЗНО з англійської мови 2022 року було скасовано, замінено Національним мультипредметним тестом (НМТ), який спочатку не включав англійську мову. У 2023 році НМТ знову запровадив компонент англійської мови, що містив 32 завдання, спрямовані на розуміння прочитаного та використання англійської мови. Охарактеризовано гнучку дворівневу систему випускних іспитів (середній і просунутий рівні), яка застосовується в Угорщині. Упроваджена з 2005 року, ця структура забезпечує детальну оцінку здібностей студентів. Обидва рівні оцінюють навички читання, аудіювання, письма та використання англійської мови, що відповідає рівням B1 та B2 Загальноєвропейських рекомендацій з мовної освіти, у письмовому іспиті. Окремі усні іспити оцінюють навички говоріння, забезпечуючи всебічну оцінку. Наша стаття має на меті порівняти та протиставити випускні іспити з англійської мови в цих двох центральноєвропейських країнах, висвітлюючи схожість та відмінності в їхніх підходах до оцінювання рівня володіння англійською мовою.

Ключові слова: поглиблений рівень, випускний іспит з англійської мови, зовнішнє незалежне оцінювання (ЗНО), Угорщина, знання мови, національний багатопредметний тест (NMT), випускний іспит в Угорщині, тест, Україна.

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