

Time for Reflection on the New Matura Examination

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Właśnie mija kolejny rok, w którym maturzyści stawiają czoła Nowej Maturze. Jako nauczyciel j. angielskiego w szkole średniej, a zarazem egzaminator OKE w Krakowie, chciałam się podzielić kilkoma refleksjami na temat zreformowanego egzaminu dojrzałości.

Introduction of the New Matura exam gave rise to changes in the way of teaching secondary school students. New standards and demands of the exam required adjusting new teaching methods in order to prepare students in the best possible way for one of the most important events of their life, for the exam that determines their future. The reform aroused fears, but at the same time hopes for a better examination system evaluating knowledge and skills in a more objective way and improving entrance procedures to higher education institutions. Today, a time has come for the reflection on the exam and for answering fundamental questions: 'Does the New Matura fulfil its primary goals?' and: 'Have students' and teachers' great expectations been met and their fears allayed?' Thus, let's look at the exam in perspective, making a special reference to English, which is the most popular foreign language picked as an obligatory subject by more than three-quarters of all students sitting the New Matura.

For the purpose of this article it seems essential to start with presenting the structure of the exam in order to show what kind of knowledge and skills it tests. Thus, as most exams in foreign languages, the New Matura exam consists of a written and oral part, both of which can be taken at two different levels, i.e. basic and extended, the latter being obviously much more challenging for students. Since the oral part is taken as an internal exam, whose result in most cases is not decisive as far as admittance to university is concerned, let us concentrate on the written part, which causes much more anxiety among students.

At each level of the *external* exam¹, students are supposed to do a number of listening and reading comprehension tasks. Moreover, at the basic level they are to write a letter of 120-150 words and a short message, e.g. a postcard or an e-mail, whereas in case of the extended level, it is an essay, description, story or a review (200-250 words). Finally, the extended level comprises tasks on 'the use of English', which check students' knowledge of grammar structures and vocabulary. Thus, at its basic level, the exam focuses on checking students' ability to communicate, i.e. understand written and spoken messages concerning general subjects as well as impart information on such subjects in both written and spoken forms, of course in a comprehensible way. The extended level is much more demanding for students. Not only does it check students' communication skills, but also puts greater emphasis on correctness and knowledge of much more advanced lexical and grammatical structures. In addition, all the rules concerning the way of marking students' written forms are stricter in case of the

extended level. What is also important, a student sitting the exam at its extended level can receive 18 points for the essay, whereas at its basic level- 15 points, which again suggests that more attention is paid to productive skills when it comes to the extended matura.

The first thing that seems to be worrying is that only 30% of the maximum number of points is required to pass the exam and considering that a substantial number of matura tasks is either multiple-choice or true/false tasks, for many students the exam resolves itself to random guesses which are often accurate. Even if they do not understand a written or heard message, they may mark all the sentences as true or false and always end up with a few points. This is true especially in case of the basic level where some students treat the exam in English as a necessary evil and thus, resort to methods such as the one presented above.

What, however, seems to be most alarming and what arouses a feeling of outrage in all of this is the ratio introduced by the former Minister of Education- Roman Giertych. The ratio can be presented in the form of the following table:

extended level- result (%)	basic level- result (%)	extended level- result (%)	basic level- result (%)	extended level- result (%)	basic level- result (%)
34	43	68	73		
1	1	35	44	69	73
2	2	36	45	70	74
3	3	37	46	71	75
4	4	38	47	72	76
5	5	39	48	73	77
6	6	40	49	74	78
7	7	41	49	75	79
8	8	42	50	76	79
9	9	43	51	77	80
10	10	44	52	78	81
11	11	45	53	79	82
12	12	46	54	80	83
13	13	47	55	81	84
14	14	48	55	82	85
15	15	49	56	83	85
16	16	50	57	84	86
17	17	51	58	85	87
18	18	52	59	86	88
19	19	53	60	87	89
20	20	54	61	88	90
21	21	55	61	89	91
22	22	56	62	90	91
23	23	57	63	91	92
24	24	58	64	92	93
25	25	59	65	93	94
26	26	60	66	94	95
27	27	61	67	95	96

28	28	62	67	96	97
29	29	63	68	97	97
30	40	64	69	98	98
31	41	65	70	99	99
32	42	66	71	100	100
33	43	67	72		

(adapted from: <http://studente.pl/artykuly/artykul/2613/Maturzysci-poszli-na-latwizne/>)

Anyone having a closer look at the table can easily arrive at the conclusion that the ratio is unjust and demotivating for students. First of all, it is hard to work out why such figures have been decided on as 'counterparts'. Why is it so that the result of 30 % at the extended level has its 40 % equivalent at the basic level and then, all of the sudden, 97 % at the extended level means 97 % at the basic level?! It seems strange, to say the least. After all, it is hard or even impossible to talk about comparability of the results bearing in mind that the two levels of the New Matura exam are totally different. A student taking an extended version of the exam and achieving a 97 % result cannot be in any way compared to a student sitting the New Matura in its basic version and having the same result. It can easily be proved. Before students sit the real matura, they take one or two 'mock exams' of this type and it turns out that, e.g. a student achieving 46 % at the extended level would achieve more than 90 % at the basic level, the result which is almost twice higher! Thus, what is the sense of the ratio? None. Fortunately, some universities have created their own ratios and admit students according to them. Unfortunately, the ratio introduced by Giertych is still used and it successfully discourages young students from sitting the New Matura in its extended version.

To sum up, despite all these disadvantages, the New Matura has probably fulfilled its primary goals. The present examination system is certainly more objective and students are educated in a different way. As has been pointed out at the very beginning, new teaching methods are used to prepare students for the exam and, at least it seems so, for life in the united Europe. Yet, it goes without saying that the system needs further improvements in order to be a really 'effective tool for mobilisation and encouragement of young people to undertake AMBITIOUS tasks.' (*Analyses & Opinions*, No 22; The Institute of Public Affairs)

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1external in the context refers only to the way of marking, not to the place of the examination. Students sit the New Matura exam in their own schools, but then, the papers are sent to be marked by 'external' examiners.

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