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Developing a new school-leaving exam of English in Poland: synergies and tensions

Educational reform in Poland, following the fall of communism, led to the launch of a new school-leaving exam (Nowa Matura). This exam, or more precisely, battery of exams, was introduced to make university entrance more objective and transparent. A new requirement of the Nowa Matura was that school leavers select a modern foreign language: most select English.

The English exam was partially determined by the specifications imposed on all subjects by the Ministry of Education. In line with other subjects examined, the English exam had to be offered at both a basic and extended level. Thus it was made up of two independent papers, a spoken and a written one, allowing students to select the level of each paper independently. Furthermore, the pass mark for English as for all exams was set at 30%. At the same time the new exam had to account for the expected linguistic proficiency of high school graduates, that is, to test communicative language use at the basic level and language for academic study at the extended level.

This paper explores the extent to which the different demands placed on the English exam are in opposition to each other. It reports on a questionnaire survey of teachers and students investigating perceptions of the exam and the resulting mastery of the language. It suggests that the choice of levels as well as the low pass mark are depressing rather than enhancing standards and that the language aims of the exams are not necessarily being met.