

A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE ENGLISH TESTS FOR UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE IN SPAIN AND GERMANY

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Abstract: *This paper is a comparative analysis of the English language assessment of the university entrance examinations “la Selectividad” and “das Abitur” administered nationwide in Spain and Germany respectively. It is of particular interest to researchers and practitioners of English as a foreign language. The major objective of the current research is to identify any similarities and/or differences in the assessment of English as a foreign language for university admission between the two countries. To this end, the test papers used in 2015 for students in Madrid and Berlin were investigated qualitatively. In order for the analysis to be more systematic, the framework from Douglas (2000) was employed. The findings demonstrate that the two national tests share some similarities. First, the candidates of both tests are required to read the given textual input first before they can complete the writing tasks. Second, listening and speaking skills are not assessed in both tests. On the other hand, overt contrasts between the two tests were identified. The assessment designed for the German students takes longer to complete, and it contains a markedly larger amount of textual data. Furthermore, Spanish students are expected to give “selected response” or “limited response” most of the time while “extended response” to all questions is elicited from German candidates. The findings of this study are valuable because they have shown that the national assessment of English as a foreign language for university admission can vary greatly across non-English-speaking European countries. The assessment in Germany appears to be more challenging than the one in Spain, notwithstanding the very early start of English learning among Spanish children. Given the status of English as an international language, it is highly recommended that some measures be taken, at least among members of the European Union (e.g., via a committee modeling on the Bologna Process), to harmonize the assessment of English as a foreign language for the purpose of university admission.*

Keywords: university entrance examination; English language assessment; *la Selectividad*; *das Abitur*; English as a foreign language; comparative analysis

1. Introduction

Universities around the world have their own mechanism for selecting qualified applicants to their undergraduate programs. In most cases, an important criterion is the applicants’ performance in a uniform assessment, which is usually the secondary school leaving examination specifically designed for the countries (or territories) where the universities are situated. Examinations serving such a screening purpose are sometimes called “high-stakes” examinations owing to the consequences they have on the test-takers’ career (Papadima-Sophocleous,

2013). The relatively well-known example is the British General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-Level), which is the most common examination-based qualification for admission to universities in the United Kingdom. Another example is the National College Entrance Examination (*Gaokao*) in the People's Republic of China. Generally, students have to take more than one subject in these examinations. In many countries, this would typically include a foreign language. Given the international status of the English language, it is not surprising that English becomes a popular foreign language in the non-Anglophone sphere. This paper will focus on the assessment of English as a foreign language in two national university admission examinations in Europe. The two countries selected for analysis are Spain and Germany, whose national university admission examinations are called *la Selectividad* (or *Pruebas de Acceso a la Universidad*) and *das Abitur* respectively.

The rationale for this study is twofold. First, as mentioned above, university entrance examinations play an important role in young people's life. Performance in the examinations will determine their chance to receive tertiary education. This can be a justifiable reason for carrying out the present research. Second, the current study is contextualized within Europe. Since Europe is essentially a multilingual continent (as evidenced by the number of official languages in the European Union), it is undoubtedly an intriguing research target in language-related academic inquiries. Nevertheless, including all the European countries in one single study is not feasible. Hence, I decided to pay attention only to Spain and Germany. The fact that these two countries are both located in Continental Europe (one in the southern part and the other in the center) and are among the largest nations in the European Union makes comparative analysis meaningful. Besides, in comparison with places such as Malta, the Philippines and Hong Kong where English instead of the national language is used as the medium of instruction at university, Spain and Germany are very much alike in the sense that English-taught programs are uncommon (Ammon and McConnell, 2002). It can thus be inferred that the English language tests in *la Selectividad* and *das Abitur* are not intended to assess the test-takers' readiness to undertake their undergraduate studies via English. Then what ability are the tests supposed to evaluate? First, capitalizing on Kohn's (2011) discussion vis-à-vis the rising prominence of English in intercultural communication, I believe that the tests assess students' ability to use English as a lingua franca. Second, the language assessment, which forms part of the national university entrance examination, is geared towards measuring students' academic attainment (including foreign language competence) upon completion of their secondary education in the respective countries.

Europe constitutes an interesting research context. On the one hand, it can be regarded as a political entity with common policies (e.g., an internal single market, freedom of movement, etc.). On the other hand, it consists of multiple sovereign states. The problem or issue which this paper aims to address is whether the assessment of English as a foreign language for university admission deviates among European countries, which are somewhat socially and politically unified. Does the assessment vary immensely between Spain and Germany? Or are there many similarities? What precisely are the similarities and/or differences? These are the primary research questions of this study.

This paper will contribute to our existing knowledge of English assessment for

specific purposes. As far as I am concerned, there has been a lack of published work comparing English language tests for university admission across countries. Despite its coverage of only two European countries, the current research can pave the way for future large-scale scholarly projects within or even outside Europe. Furthermore, assessment and teaching are theoretically non-separable. Teachers of English for specific purposes and other stakeholders such as specialists of curriculum design, particularly those in Europe, are able to utilize the results of this study to inform or advance their practice. It is also hoped that recommendations on how to improve the tests, if necessary, can be made.

2. Literature Review

2.1 English in Spain and Germany

As stated by Reichelt (2006: 3), English learning has become prevalent in Spain since the end of Franco's regime in 1975. A reform in the curriculum during the 1980s led to a shift from French to English as the first foreign language (Ammon and McConnell, 2002). In 2015, 99.1 percent of pupils in primary school learnt English as a foreign language (Eurostat, 2016). It was reported that many children start learning English even before their primary education (Reichelt, 2006: 6).

As for Germany, foreign languages (usually two to three hours of instruction per week) have been incorporated in the curriculum of primary education from the third grade in all 16 federal states since the 2004/05 academic year (Goethe Institut, 2016). Different from their Spanish counterparts, only 62.3 percent of primary school pupils learnt English as a foreign language in 2014 (Eurostat, 2016). Despite this, the significance of English is widely acknowledged in the German society because of globalization and English being an international language, particularly in the areas of economy, science and modern media (Goethe Institut, 2016).

2.2 La Selectividad

La Selectividad is also known as *Pruebas de Acceso a la Universidad* (PAU). It is the qualification which allows school graduates to matriculate at university in Spain. The assessment consists of two main parts: (i) the compulsory "general phase" where students are assessed in core subjects including history, philosophy, Spanish language and literature, a chosen foreign language and a co-official language like Catalan if applicable; (ii) the optional "specific phase" where students are assessed in not more than four other subjects of their choice. The assessment of each subject is in the form of a 90-minute written examination. The examination questions are set by the authority of each autonomous region. In the "general phase," the foreign languages available for students to select are English, Italian, French, German and Portuguese (Selectividad Online, 2016). In this paper, I will investigate the contents of the English language assessment.

2.3 Das Abitur

Das Abitur is the qualification needed for students to study at university in Germany. In most cases, students in the last two years of secondary education prepare for the assessment. Since the education policy in Germany is decided at the level of the federal states, there are minor variations in how the assessment is

done. In Berlin, the assessment is comprised of three written examinations, one oral examination and an assignment, covering three areas: (i) language, literacy and art; (ii) social sciences; (iii) mathematics, science and technology. Students are obliged to select a foreign language for the assessment. What is more, two of the five assessment components (or subjects) must be at the advanced level (*Leistungskurs*), which involves longer teaching hours and more specialized subject knowledge (Senatsverwaltung für Bildung, Jugend and Wissenschaft, 2016). For subjects taken at the advanced level, the tasks which students have to complete and the duration of the assessment are different as compared to the basic level (*Grundkurs*). In this paper, I will analyze the contents of the English language written examination at both the basic and the advanced levels.

2.4 Previous Research on Tests of English as a Foreign Language

Tsagari and Banerjee (2015) provided a chronological account of language testing (or assessment) in the field of educational linguistics. According to the two scholars, until the 1970s, language testing was heavily modeled upon the structural perspective of language. As a result, tests mostly focused on isolated components of language knowledge, such as specific lexical items and phonemic differentiation. In the 1980s, more attention was paid to the test-takers' ability to use the target language to communicate and tests were designed to engage the test-takers in dealing with contextualized communicative situations. In the 1990s, the notion of "test wash back" appeared and there was an increasing interest in the positive and negative effects of tests on learning. More recently, scholars have devoted themselves to the issue of effective classroom-based assessment practices (2015: 340–341). As Tsagari and Banerjee (2015: 341) further clarified, core issues which concern language testing are: (i) validity (whether a test really measures what it is intended to assess); (ii) reliability (whether the measurement of the test-takers' performance is consistent); (iii) fairness (whether certain test-takers would be disadvantaged during the assessment because of factors other than their ability which is being evaluated).

In one chapter of her book *A Course in English Language Teaching*, Ur (2012) offered a comprehensive description of the practical matters related to assessment and testing. One of these matters concerns the test design (e.g., which test items are frequently utilized, how reading, listening, speaking and writing skills can be tested, etc.). While Ur's (2012) discussion is meant for assessing English proficiency in general, some scholars like Douglas (2000) and Elder (2016) talked about testing languages for specific purposes (LSP), i.e., tests oriented towards specific language use situations such as English for health professionals. Nevertheless, Douglas (2000: 1) emphasized that all tests are planned for certain purposes so it is not possible to rigidly classify a test as "general purpose" or "specific purpose." Instead, what can be said is that each test may fall onto a scale of specificity ranging from very general to very specific.

A large number of empirical studies on tests of English as a foreign language have been published. Some examples are the research of Cho and Bridgeman (2012), Díez-Bedmar (2011), Laborda and Martín-Monje (2013) and Uysal (2010). Among these four studies, the ones conducted by Díez-Bedmar (2011) and Laborda and Martín-Monje (2013) are of high relevance to the current study because Spain was the research target. Díez-Bedmar (2011) performed error analysis on the test-takers' responses to a writing task in the English language test of *la Selectividad*

which took place in Jaén (a city in the autonomous region of Andalucía) in 2008. The candidates had to write a text which discusses where, outside Spain, they would go on a short pleasure trip. 302 texts amounting to 34 403 words were selected for analysis. In total 5811 errors were found and a large proportion of the errors were attributed to the inappropriate choice of vocabulary, wrong spelling and incorrect utilization of pronouns and articles (2011: 149). Díez-Bedmar (2011) argued that the findings could help language teaching professionals develop suitable strategies which would enhance Spanish students' writing competence. Laborda and Martín-Monje (2013), on the other hand, proposed drastic changes to the existing format of the English language test of *la Selectividad*. The scholars stated that the format has remained the same for two decades and is thus outdated as it does not contain listening and speaking tasks. Laborda and Martín-Monje (2013) subsequently reported on a funded experiment with a suggested new test format in Madrid. It was concluded that a revamped test format which takes into consideration students' oral production skills is highly recommended because this would reflect more accurately the social realities.

3. Data and Methodology

The data of the present study came from the English language tests of *la Selectividad* and *das Abitur* administered in 2015. At the time of research, the latest accessible test questions of *la Selectividad* are the ones in 2015, although the questions of *das Abitur* in 2016 have already been published. To facilitate the comparative analysis, I decided to analyze the tests from the same year. In Spain, the question papers are different across the autonomous regions. Likewise, in Germany, each federal state uses a different test paper. To make the current study more focused, I investigated the test papers developed for students in the two capital cities (viz., Madrid and Berlin). The test paper for Madrid was published by Grupo Anaya whereas the test questions for *das Abitur* in Berlin were published by Stark Verlag.

To systematize my analysis, I employed the framework suggested by Douglas (2000: 50–52) for analyzing task characteristics in LSP tests. The framework, with slight modifications, is presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Framework for analyzing task characteristics in LSP tests [adapted from the work of Douglas (2000)]

<p>Characteristics of the rubric</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Specification of objective • Procedures for responding • Structure and format • Time allotment
<p>Characteristics of the input</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prompts • Input data
<p>Characteristics of the expected response</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Format (written or oral) • Type of response (selected, limited production or extended production)

I would like to emphasize that the framework stipulated in Table 1 is a step-by-step guide to my analysis. In other words, I analyzed the data first on the basis of “characteristics of the rubric,” followed by “characteristics of the input” and then “characteristics of the expected response.” The term “rubric” generally encompasses “test-related procedural information” that is not part of the test input. According to Douglas (2000: 50–52), the rubric of an assessment includes the objective (viz., what kind of ability is being tested), procedures for responding (viz., how test-takers should complete the tasks), structure and format (viz., the number of tasks and the relative significance of each task) and time allotment (viz., the amount of time given to test-takers for completing the tasks). Unlike “rubric,” “input” was defined by Douglas (2000: 56) as material which directly relates to the tasks. “Input” includes prompts (viz., contextual information necessary for performing the tasks such as the specific role which test-takers have to take on) and input data (viz., the text and visuals which test-takers must process while completing the tasks). “Expected response” refers to the nature of linguistic production anticipated from test-takers (Douglas, 2000: 63). For example, are they required to provide a written answer? Or should answers be given orally? Douglas (2000: 73) differentiated between “selected response” (viz., multiple-choice questions or something similar), “limited response” (viz., production at the sentential level or below) and “extended response” (viz., paragraphs or essays). It should be noted that the two publishers Grupo Anaya and Stark Verlag both specialize in producing educational materials for *la Selectividad* and *das Abitur* respectively. They do not only publish the examination questions, but they also provide solutions (including sample essays which mirror students’ English proficiency). To enrich the analysis, these sample essays (24 in total) were analyzed as well. Since the language tests are intended for students who would like to study at university, I checked these sample essays against the Academic Vocabulary List (AVL) compiled by Gardner and Davies (2014) from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA). The checking was done through an online interface (available at <http://www.wordandphrase.info/academic/analyzeText.asp>) housed by Brigham Young University. The interface can highlight the words of a given text which tend to be found in the academic genre. Users of the interface can also find out the academic disciplines (e.g., humanities, science, business, etc.) with which the identified words are usually associated.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Characteristics of the Rubric

The English language test paper of *la Selectividad* begins with a short instruction written in Spanish. Students are advised to read carefully the texts in the whole paper and the corresponding questions. After that, they have to choose one of the two options (A or B) and answer the questions of the selected option in English. Each of the two options contains a text followed by five questions. The text in Option A has 277 words while that in Option B consists of 243 words. Although the two texts deal with different topics, the first three questions in both options are related to reading comprehension. In the first question, students have to determine

whether two given statements are true or false by giving evidence from the text. In the second question, students are asked to use their own words to respond to questions about the text. In the third question, students are given four words and they have to identify their synonyms from the text. The last two questions move away from reading comprehension. In the fourth question, students have to fill in blanks so that the resulting sentences are grammatically correct. In this part, students are tested on their knowledge of various grammatical rules (e.g., conditional sentences, relative pronouns, passive voice, prepositions, etc.). The final question is a writing task. Students are asked to produce a text of about 100 to 150 words on an issue closely related to the given text. Students have to complete all the questions within 90 minutes and dictionaries are not permitted during the assessment.

As for *das Abitur*, the two test papers (one for *Leistungskurs* and the other for *Grundkurs*) have the same structure. Both test papers are divided into two main parts (*Aufgabe 1* and *Aufgabe 2*). At the beginning of each part, the focus areas (*Themenschwerpunkte*) are specified. These focus areas are “ethnic diversity,” “the impact of media on society,” “personal relations in their social context” and “science and technology.” In both test papers, one of the two parts is comprised of a text written in English followed by three tasks and the other part is made up of two texts (one in English and one in German) and four tasks, one of which is specifically connected to the German text. This particular task is known as “mediation” in the sense that students have to outline the information presented in the German text for an English-speaking audience. In the final task of each part, students are given a choice of three questions which involve: (i) explanation of a quotation taken from the text; (ii) compare the information of the text with literature or films which students have read or seen; (iii) produce a text of a particular register (e.g., “a speech for an international youth conference”). The three texts in the *Leistungskurs* test paper amount to 1962 words while those in the *Grundkurs* test paper amount to 1483 words. Students are given 270 minutes and 210 minutes to complete the *Leistungskurs* test paper and the *Grundkurs* test paper respectively. Unlike the test in Spain, the use of monolingual dictionaries is allowed.

The analysis in this part has shown that although the two tests aim to assess English language proficiency for the purpose of university entrance, different types of knowledge or skills from candidates are assumed. The test-takers in Germany have to be knowledgeable about the German language, otherwise they will not be able to complete one of the tasks. Nonetheless, a person who does not speak Spanish will not experience any critical disadvantage during the English language assessment of *la Selectividad*.

4.2. Characteristics of the Input

The English language test papers in Spain and Germany are primarily based on “reading-to-write” rather than “writing-only” tasks, as the test-takers have to read certain textual materials (viz., “input data”) first before producing their own texts. Gebril (2010) noted that this is a relatively new assessment method. Nevertheless, analysis of the test papers has revealed that noticeable deviations in the characteristics of the input exist between the two national tests. First of all, the prompt in the English language assessment of *das Abitur* indicates that students are tested on a wider range of “higher order thinking skills” (Anderson and

Krathwohl, 2001). Examples are “outlining,” “commenting,” “comparing” and “assessing.” On the other hand, students taking the English language assessment of *la Selectividad* are tested mainly on their ability to “identify” and “paraphrase” relevant information from a short text, which is geared towards “lower order thinking skills.” Only in the fifth question, students are given the opportunity to express their opinion with justifications. As for the input data employed in the assessment, both national tests make use of written textual input. No chart, audio or table is utilized as the input data. Nevertheless, students in Germany have to process a larger amount of textual input than their Spanish counterparts, as the findings reported in Section 4.1 have illustrated. Furthermore, the textual input used in *das Abitur* consists of excerpts from novels and news articles, which are considered “genuine” textual data (Douglas, 2000). By contrast, the textual input in *la Selectividad* was supposedly created by the test developer for the purpose of the assessment since the text was not attributed to any external source.

4.3. Characteristics of the Expected Response

Students’ response to the questions in both national tests is expected to be in written English only. Spoken English skills are not assessed. The test-takers of *das Abitur* are required to produce “extended response” (i.e., a paragraph or lengthier written text) to all the tasks or questions. Conversely, those of *la Selectividad* generally need to provide either “selected response” (i.e., the true-or-false format) or “limited response” (i.e., a word, phrase or sentence). The only exception is the writing task at the end where students have to produce a text of about 100 to 150 words.

4.4. Analysis of the Sample Essays

Table 2 displays the total length of the sample essays given by the two publishers in response to the writing tasks of the two tests. The table also shows the percentage of words in the essays which overlap with the top 3000 academic words of the Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner and Davies, 2014).

Table 2: Length of the sample essays and the percentage of academic words

Test	Total length of the sample essays provided by the publishers	Percentage of academic words
<i>la Selectividad</i>	269 words	14%
<i>das Abitur (Leistungskurs)</i>	4511 words	12%
<i>das Abitur (Grundkurs)</i>	3447 words	11%

It is clear that students taking *das Abitur (Leistungskurs* as well as *Grundkurs)* would have to produce much longer texts than those participating in *la Selectividad*. However, the sample essays for the two tests have more or less the same “academic density.” 14% of the words in the sample essays for *la Selectividad* are commonly found in the academic genre while the figures are 12% and 11% for *Leistungskurs* and *Grundkurs* of *das Abitur* respectively. Due to the paucity of the Spanish data, caution has to be exercised and any conclusive

statement should be avoided at this stage. Also, one ought to bear in mind that the sample essays are not really the students' answers. An alternative would be to examine the essays written by the test-takers, which is beyond the scope of the present research. I will talk more about this in the conclusion.

5. Conclusion

In this section, I will discuss the contributions of my research findings to our knowledge about English assessment for specific purposes. After that, practical recommendations will be put forward.

The present research has shown that the national assessment of English as a foreign language for university admission can differ greatly across non-English-speaking European countries. It appears that the assessment in Germany is more demanding than the one in Spain, despite the very early start of English learning among Spanish children as mentioned earlier in this article. German students have to undergo a longer duration of assessment and have to handle a significantly larger quantity of textual data (including one text in their first language instead of the target language) than their Spanish counterparts. Of course, this study has examined only two countries and more work is definitely needed in order to increase our understanding of English assessment for university entrance in Europe. However, I believe that this paper has laid the groundwork for future research.

Besides, my analysis has confirmed the applicability of the framework proposed by Douglas (2000) to research on language testing. In addition, I have demonstrated that this framework can be combined with the Academic Vocabulary List (Gardner and Davies, 2014) when English assessment for university admission is investigated. One limitation of the current study is that only the sample essays provided by the publishers were checked against the Academic Vocabulary List. For researchers who have access to the essays written by the candidates of the tests, the use of the Academic Vocabulary List is potentially promising.

As for my recommendations, listening and speaking skills, which are fundamental to language proficiency but are not assessed in the two national tests, should be integrated into the assessment. Furthermore, in light of the large discrepancies between the two tests identified in this study, it is advisable that initiatives should be taken, at least among the members of the European Union, to harmonize the school leaving assessment of English as a foreign language across the various countries. There are two ways in which such "harmonization" can be achieved. First, test designers may align the assessment with well-established benchmarks like the ones implemented by Cambridge English (University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 2016). Second, a special task force resembling the Bologna Process (European Higher Education Area, 2016) can be set up to work on the comparability of English language assessment for university entrance across countries. It goes without saying that cooperation between relevant parties from different countries is a precondition for "harmonization."

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