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### What is Eurydice?

The task of the Eurydice network is to understand and explain how Europe's different education systems are organised and how they work. The network provides descriptions of national education systems, comparative studies devoted to specific topics, indicators and statistics. Through its work, Eurydice aims to promote understanding, cooperation, trust and mobility at European and international levels. The network consists of national units located in European countries and is co-ordinated by the EU Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. All Eurydice publications are available free of charge on the Eurydice website or in print upon request. For more information about Eurydice, see <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>

### The full report

*Languages in Secondary Education: An Overview of National Tests in Europe – 2014/15* is available in English on the Eurydice website <http://ec.europa.eu/eurydice>

### Printed copies of the report

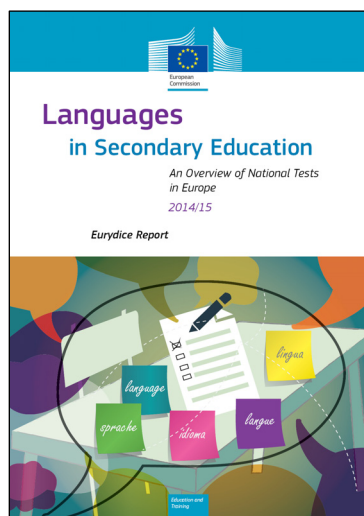
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## Eurydice Highlights

# Languages in Secondary Education: An Overview of National Tests in Europe – 2014/15



*Is there a long history of national testing in foreign languages at school level? What is the purpose of these tests? How many languages are involved, and which languages and skills are tested most often?* These key questions are the focus of Eurydice's new report on languages.

The linguistic and cultural diversity in Europe calls for the promotion of language learning at school level and beyond. This issue is important not just because it helps protect Europe's cultural heritage, but because good language skills are a social and economic necessity if Europe is to become a living and concrete reality for its citizens. At European

level, the learning of foreign languages at school is therefore recognised as crucially important and is strongly encouraged.

The results of the first European Commission survey on language competences published in 2012 showed great variety in language proficiency across Europe, and pinpointed the need to sustain efforts in promoting and improving the teaching and learning of languages at school. It is therefore essential that national authorities in Europe continue their efforts to improve the teaching and learning of languages. Moreover, as stressed by the Council of the European Union in the *Conclusions on multilingualism and the development of language competences* <sup>(1)</sup> in 2014, the assessment of language competences is a key factor in the effective teaching and learning of languages at school. In this context, the European Commission asked Eurydice to provide a Europe-wide comparative overview of the national tests for assessing the language <sup>(2)</sup> competences of secondary school students.

The *Languages in Secondary Education: An Overview of National Tests in Europe – 2014/15* report covers the 28 EU Member States as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Turkey, Montenegro and Serbia. The reference year is 2014/15. This 'Eurydice Highlights' provides a snapshot of some of the main findings of this study.

<sup>(1)</sup> [http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142692.pdf](http://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/educ/142692.pdf)

<sup>(2)</sup> 'Languages' means all languages except: the language(s) of instruction, ancient languages and regional languages. In most countries, the term 'foreign languages' is used (for a detailed definition, please consult the full report).

## National tests in foreign languages have become increasingly important in Europe over the last 20 years

The report *National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results* (Eurydice, 2009) <sup>(3)</sup> has already shown that national testing is a form of student assessment which has become increasingly important since the 1990s. This rise in importance also applies to languages. Indeed, in the vast majority of countries, the current national tests in languages have been developed fairly recently, and many have only been introduced since 2001. However, in some countries, national language tests have a longer history, dating back to the nineteenth century.

Due to the complexity of developing tests in languages, it has been common for countries to adapt their existing national tests to meet current needs, usually by including more languages, widening the range of skills assessed, and/or increasing the number of students tested. Luxembourg, Malta and Finland provide examples of countries where the range of languages tested has expanded over the years. Elsewhere, such as in Bulgaria, national tests originally conceived to assess one section of the student population have gradually been extended to embrace other groups.

## The majority of national tests are intended to inform decisions on student progression

It is important to stress that 'national tests' refer to standardised tests/examinations set by central/top level public authorities and carried out under their responsibility. They may be any form of test that requires all test takers to answer the same questions or questions selected from a common bank of questions; they are scored in a standard or consistent way.

countries administer this category of tests. 'Low stakes' tests are used to evaluate performance either of the education system as a whole, or of schools and/or individual students in order to improve teaching and learning methods – a little more than half of the countries studied administer this type of test.

In fact, tests can be grouped into two main categories. 'High stakes' tests are intended to assess students' achievements at the end of a school year or educational stage/level, and they are used to inform formal decisions on student progression – almost all

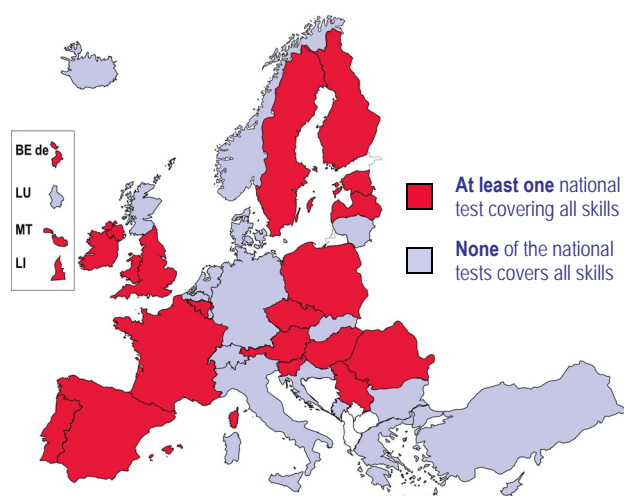
In general, most of the countries and regions set national tests at both lower and upper secondary levels. The majority of the tests are administered at the end of a level or at the end of compulsory education.

## Speaking is the least tested skill, while reading is the most commonly assessed

One of the fundamental goals of foreign language learning is the acquisition of the four main communication skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, not all national tests examine all these skills. Indeed, only around half of the national language tests cover all four skills.

Differences are the most striking in relation to speaking skills. It appears that speaking is the competence the least assessed by means of national testing, while reading is the most commonly assessed skill. Writing and listening come between these two, and are tested to a similar extent. It is probable that the complexity of testing speaking skills as well as the high costs involved, mean that this skill is either simply not tested, or that the speaking tests are designed at school level instead of centrally. For example, nine countries (Bulgaria, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands, Austria, Slovenia, Slovakia, the United Kingdom and Norway) have one or more national tests where the speaking skills part is locally designed.

**Countries with at least one national test in languages at ISCED level 2 or ISCED level 3 which covers reading, writing, listening and speaking skills, 2014/15**



Source: Eurydice.

<sup>(3)</sup> <http://bookshop.europa.eu/en/national-testing-of-pupils-in-europe-pbEC7809995/>

## Most countries have national tests covering more than five languages, and nearly all countries have developed national tests in English

The majority of countries/regions set national tests in more than five languages, and a few countries such as Ireland, France, the United Kingdom (England, Wales and Northern Ireland) and Norway have national tests in a very large number of languages, with 23, 47, 20 and 39 respectively. However, in a dozen countries, national tests assess one language only; in the large majority of cases this is English.

English is, in fact, the most commonly tested language in lower and upper secondary education, and nearly all countries/regions have national tests in English. This reflects the particular position that the English language has in national and school curricula and it is by far the most commonly learnt foreign language. In some cases, it is even a compulsory subject of study. Students' competences in the other most commonly learnt foreign languages – French, German, Spanish, Italian and Russian – are also assessed through national tests.

Moreover, it is interesting to note that due to political, historical and/or geographical reasons, some countries have developed tests in some less commonly learnt languages. For example, Poland and Norway have national tests assessing the national languages of their neighbouring countries (Ukrainian and Finnish respectively). Unsurprisingly, there are more national tests assessing Russian in Eastern European countries, while national tests assessing Spanish and Italian are more common in southern European countries. Some countries have also developed tests for the languages of recent or longstanding immigrant communities. This is the case of the Netherlands with the testing of Turkish and Arabic, the United Kingdom with the testing of Cantonese, Bengali and Urdu, and Norway with the assessment of Somali and Urdu.

## Countries have developed a variety of ways to ensure consistent and reliable scoring procedures

As with any tests, the organisation of national tests in languages must take into account the significant challenge of ensuring reliability. There are a number of important factors to be considered here, such as the development of test questions and tasks, and the conditions for administering the tests. The scoring procedures are a key factor in ensuring consistent and comparable test results. In this respect, the identification of those responsible for marking the tests is particularly relevant.

Indeed, national tests can be scored either internally or externally. Marking is considered to be 'internal' when it is performed by teachers working at the school where the tests take place, while it is considered to be external when it is done either by

teachers or other staff outside the school in question, or when it is carried out by means of optical scanning. In some countries, external marking involves all or part of the tests being scored electronically. Overall, it is worth noting that the tests which have an impact on student progression are predominantly externally marked, as are the tests intended to monitor the education system as a whole. However, the tests used for informing improvement in teaching and learning at school level are generally internally marked.

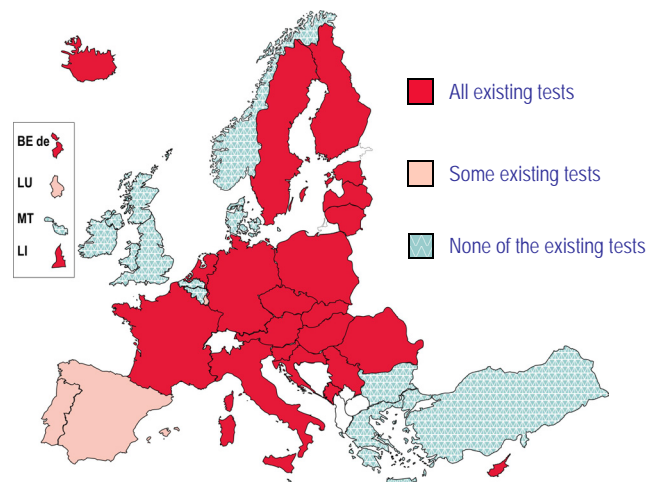
Most countries with national tests in languages now have systems in place to ensure that marking procedures are robust.

## The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has greatly influenced the development of national language tests

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is designed 'to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials and the assessment of foreign language proficiency'. Since its establishment by the Council of Europe in 2001, it has greatly influenced the development of national language tests. Indeed, in the majority of countries, all national tests are now linked to the CEFR scale <sup>(4)</sup>. In lower secondary education, A2 and B1 are the highest levels tested in most national tests. At upper secondary level, the majority of national tests are not set above level B2.

<sup>(4)</sup> The CEFR defines six levels of proficiency: basic user (A1 and A2), independent user (B1 and B2) and proficient user (C1 and C2).

National tests related to CEFR levels, ISCED levels 2 and 3, 2014/15



Source: Eurydice.

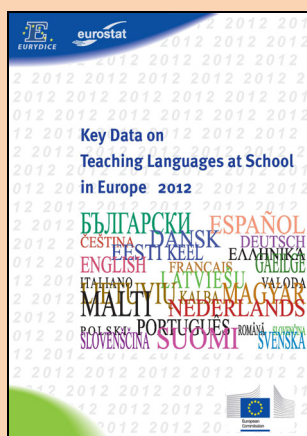
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**See also:**

#### **Key Data on Teaching Languages at School in Europe (Eurydice/Eurostat, 2012)**



#### **National Testing of Pupils in Europe: Objectives, Organisation and Use of Results (Eurydice, 2009)**

