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## **Daunting, reliable, important or “trivial nitpicking?” Upper secondary students’ expectations and experiences of the English test in the Matriculation Examination**

The Matriculation Examination, the school-leaving exam taken towards the end of upper secondary education, is the only high-stakes examination in the Finnish school system. As the exam may have a strong impact on the students’ further education opportunities, it evokes various feelings and thoughts in students. Yet, there is little research on these reactions. This article, based on a mixed-methods approach, sheds light on students’ expectation and experiences of the English test in the Matriculation Examination. A total of 142 second- and third-year students from one upper secondary school shared their views on the possible washback effect and test anxiety caused by the exam. Also, the students expressed their ideas and experiences of the validity, reliability and fairness of the test. Although the test did not seem to cause excessive washback, it caused significant stress and anxiety. Furthermore, students seemed rather critical of its validity and reliability.

**Keywords:** Matriculation Examination, students’ experiences, test anxiety, reliability, validity, washback

## 1 Introduction

In the Finnish school system, the Matriculation Examination is the only examination that can be considered a national, high-stakes examination (Atjonen 2015; Mehtäläinen & Välijärvi 2013). As school assessment is otherwise teacher-designed and quite low-stakes, the Matriculation Examination stands in marked contrast with it. Thus, it is no wonder the Matriculation Examination evokes various emotions, expectations and experiences in Finnish upper secondary school students. As students' experiences have rarely been studied their responses remain mainly anecdotal or based on hearsay.

This article aims to shed light on students' expectations for and experiences of the English test in the Matriculation Examination (ME) in one Finnish upper secondary school. The findings are based on a web-based questionnaire that 142 second- and third-year upper secondary students answered in March 2014. The study relies on mixed methods as both quantitative and qualitative data and methodology were used.

Firstly, the article will discuss high-stakes assessment and its characteristics as well as the Matriculation Examination. Then, the present study, its methodology and findings will be introduced. Finally, I will discuss the limitations and practical implications of this small study.

## 2 Theoretical background

### 2.1 High-stakes assessment

External, large-scale examinations, such as school-leaving examinations in various countries, are often labelled as high-stakes examinations. However, according to Heubert and Hauser (1999), for instance, what makes assessment high-stakes is not the assessment itself, nor its contents or form, but primarily the way its results are used and what their impacts are on the student, or on other stakeholders. Thus, in the educational setting, high-stakes tests normally refer to tests whose outcome has "high-stakes consequences for students – that is, when an individual student's score determines not just who needs help, but whether a student is allowed to take a certain program or class, or will be promoted to the next grade, or will graduate from high school" (Heubert & Hauser 1999: 14). High-stakes are therefore closely linked with pressure (Nichols, Glass & Berliner 2006).

The proponents of high-stakes testing have argued that today's high-stakes tests are of state-of-art quality: they are, for instance, "highly reliable; free from bias; relevant and age-appropriate" (Cizek 2005: 41). Hence, because of their outstanding validity and reliability, they can have a positive washback effect: when teachers prepare

their students for testing, they will be "teaching to the standards", which leads to better learning (Cizek 2005: 42). Furthermore, the high stakes attached to the test outcomes are believed to motivate students to study harder in order to gain rewards (e.g. admission for further education) and to avoid punishing consequences such as retention or denial of graduation (see e.g. Heubert & Hauser 1999; Kornhaber & Orfield 2001; Nichols et al. 2006). Along the same lines, high-stakes test scores have increasingly been used for other accountability purposes, such as evaluating an individual teacher's effectiveness or a school's performance (Cizek 2005), which they were not necessarily designed for (e.g. Jones, Jones & Hargrove 2003; Stobart 2008). As the rewards or threats are closely linked with money, job security and other significant factors (Amrein & Berliner 2002), they are believed to act as highly effective incentives and thus improve educational quality and effectiveness (e.g. Cizek, 2005).

Those who are critical of high-stakes testing say that instead of improving teaching and learning, the washback effect leads to teaching to test (e.g. Cheng, Watanabe & Curtis 2004; Madaus & Clarke 2001; Stobart 2008). The pressure of accountability means that schools and teachers want to make sure their students do well in exams and start to prepare them for the exams: as teachers devote more time for test revision and practice tests, it narrows both the content and methodology of teaching and learning (Kornhaber & Orfield 2001; Stobart 2008; see also Alderson & Hamp-Lyons 1996). High-stakes tests are also believed to make learning shallower as often students' primary purpose is to pass the test, not to learn the topics or skills per se (Harlen 2012). Furthermore, most tests focus only on the assessment of the outcomes of learning rather than the process of learning. These factors affect the learning strategies chosen by students when studying. All this may contribute to superficial rote learning instead of real conceptual understanding (e.g. Harlen 2012; Volante 2004).

As high-stakes tests are often one single test with highly pressurised time and place constraints, they may also cause considerable stress and test anxiety (e.g. Aydın 2009). According to research, female students in particular seem to suffer from test anxiety, which may weaken their test performance (Cassady 2010; Hembree 1988). Underperforming in the test, in turn, can affect students' motivation, self-efficacy and self-esteem as learners (Harlen & Deakin Crick 2003).

A low-stakes test has no highly significant consequences for the student (Heubert & Hauser 1999). The defining factor not being the test itself but the use and perceived consequences of the test results, what may be a high-stakes test for one student may not necessarily be so for another.

## 2.2 The quality of assessment

The quality of any assessment or test is attributed to several characteristics, such as validity, reliability, fairness, impact and practicality or cost-efficiency of the assessment (see e.g. Bachman 1990; Race, Brown & Smith 2005). With high-stakes testing, these characteristics are all the more crucial; as Bachman puts it (1990, 56): “The more important the decision, the greater the cost of making an error”.

Validity is traditionally “taken to mean how well what is assessed corresponds with the behaviours or learning outcomes that are intended to be assessed” (Harlen 2010: 36; see also Bachman 1990). Validity, however, is a broad concept and includes various types of validity. *Content validity* is about “the relevance of the test content to the content of a particular behavioural domain of interest and about the representativeness with which item or task content covers that domain” (Messick 1993: 17). *Consequential validity* (Messick 1993), then again, refers to the impact of the assessment (Harlen 2010) and *construct validity* to what is assessed (Harlen 2010; see also Messick 1993, 1996). Black and Wiliam (2012: 244) discuss the notions of construct under-presentation and construct-irrelevant variance (see also Messick 1996), defining them as follows:

“Construct under-presentation therefore occurs when an assessment fails to assess things it should. The opposite threat to valid interpretation – when an assessment assesses things it should not – is called construct-irrelevant variance.”

Often the variation in student scores that is caused by random factors is discussed under the heading of reliability, “reliability being the consistency or accuracy of the results” (Harlen 2010: 36). According to Black and Wiliam (2012), three main sources of construct-irrelevant variance are generally addressed when discussing threats to reliability. One of them is rater reliability, i.e. whether different raters give the same score to the same piece of student work, also known as inter-rater reliability. Intra-rater reliability, i.e. whether the same rater gives the same score to the same answer consistently, is also a significant issue when considering the consistency of scores (see e.g. Bachman 1990; Harlen 2010). The second source of construct-irrelevant variance is the variance in student performance from one day to another: in other words, the student may perform better or worse on different occasions and at different times. The third source is differences in student performance caused by the particular choice of questions or items in the test (see also Bachman 1990). In sum, Black (1998: 54) characterises reliability as follows: “Reliability depends on whether the results are reproducible with different markers, grading procedures, test occasions, and different sets of questions”.

In addition to validity and reliability, several authors also include factors such as transparency and fairness. Tests or any forms of assessments should not have nasty

surprises and they should be in line with the intended learning outcomes. Moreover, "students should not be playing the game 'guess what's in our assessors' minds'" (Race et al. 2005: 2). Also, assessment practices should not discriminate or favour any individuals or groups of students. One way of ensuring fairness and equity is a balanced array of different types of exercises.

## 2.3 The Matriculation Examination

### 2.3.1 The Matriculation Examination and its history

The Chinese civil service examinations (c. 600–1905), which in some form date back to the times BCE, are credited as the first large-scale, high-stakes examination system in the world (e.g. Elman 2000). However, the standardised, high-stakes tests have dominated educational assessment mainly since the births of the IQ test and the multiple-choice test in the early 20th century (Hanson 1993; Nichols et al. 2006). The current proliferation of high-stakes testing in the USA and Britain, for instance, dates back to the 1980s (e.g. Amrein & Berliner 2002; Black 1998; Kornhaber & Orfield 2001).

The Finnish tradition of testing is quite different from those of the English-speaking countries. The only external, high-stakes examination that we have in the Finnish school context is the Matriculation Examination (Atjonen 2015; Mehtäläinen & Välijärvi 2013). As the word matriculation suggests, its roots lie in an oral entrance examination for Turku Academy. The first modern Matriculation Examination was arranged in 1852. Organised by the Matriculation Examination Board, the new examination was based on upper secondary school syllabi (Kaarninen & Kaarninen 2002; Lindström 1998). Thus far, the Matriculation Examination had still been a university entrance examination. However, in 1919 the Matriculation Examination became the final examination of the upper secondary school, and passing it ceased to mean automatic matriculation to the university. All parts of the examination, both written and oral, were to be organised at schools themselves at the very same time and under strict regulations (Kaarninen & Kaarninen 2002; Lindström 1998).

As with many other high-stakes examinations, the results of the Matriculation Examination were used for assessing the quality of the school until 1918 (Lindström 1998). So, the recent media interest to rank upper secondary schools on the basis of the Matriculation Examination results is not a new phenomenon in Finland. Neither is the washback effect of the Matriculation Examination: according to Lindström (1998) many teachers and principals criticised the Matriculation Examination for narrowing the curricula and teaching methodology into teaching to the test over a hundred years ago.

The Matriculation Examination has also undergone some changes more recently. For instance, a listening comprehension part was added to major foreign or second language tests in the 1970s. Since 1994, it has been possible to divide the examination over three consecutive exam periods, instead of taking the whole exam in just one term. Separate tests for each of the natural sciences and humanistic subjects, instead of an all-encompassing test including all subjects, were introduced in 2006. Currently, the Matriculation Examination is undergoing a process of digitalisation: all of its tests should be computerised by 2019. (For further information, see the Matriculation Examination Board.)

### 2.3.2 Earlier research on the Matriculation Examination

Research on student assessment in general is rather scarce in Finland, and so is research on the Matriculation Examination. There is some research that focuses on the comparability and reliability of the Matriculation Examination grades (Mehtäläinen & Välijärvi 2013), the history of the Matriculation Examination (Kaarninen & Kaarninen 2002; Lindström 1998) as well as its status (Vuorio-Lehti 2006, 2007). Furthermore, Anckar (2011) has investigated the processes and strategies that students used when answering multiple-choice questions in one French listening comprehension test of the Matriculation Examination. Her findings showed that items with flaws, such as too 'tricky' questions or options as well as items with excessive textual information load or difficulty, represented threats to the reliability of item scores.

Two or three studies have touched upon students' own expectations or experiences of the exam. First, Syrjälä (1989) studied students' and teachers' views and experiences on student assessment as part of studying and teaching. One question in the questionnaire that was part of this small-scale assessment experiment dealt with the Matriculation Examination: over 60% of the respondents, who all were third-year students, found the Matriculation Examination useful while 35% did not.

Some years later, Välijärvi and Tuomi (1995) investigated upper secondary school as a learning environment. Their sample totalled 2,850 first- and second-year students: 75% of them said that their teachers emphasised the importance of the Matriculation Examination either very often (43%) or fairly often (32%). Välijärvi and Tuomi (1995: 49) concluded that the "shadow of the Matriculation Examination is cast, according to students' observations, quite strongly on the everyday work of upper secondary school". Considering that the respondents were all first- or second-year students, this conclusion seems well warranted: at that time the Matriculation Examination was taken at one time only, which generally was during the spring term of their third year, so the respondents had a rather long time left before taking the exam.

In 2009, the evaluation of pedagogy in Finnish upper secondary education (Väljärvi, Huotari, Iivonen, Kulp, Lehtonen, Rönholm, Knubb-Manninen, Mehtäläinen & Ohranen 2009) surveyed 8,500 third-year upper secondary students. One item in their questionnaire dealt with the Matriculation Examination: "The teachers teach only for the Matriculation Examination". Thirty-five percent of the respondents agreed with the statement while 45% disagreed with it.

### 3 The present study

#### 3.1 Aims and research questions

The present article is part of a larger study, the purpose of which was to discover what the students at our school thought of assessment in their upper secondary English studies. One topic area of the study was the Matriculation Examination, which is the focus of this article.

The research questions of this article are:

1. Does the Matriculation Examination cause an excessive washback effect? In other words, do students feel that English teachers 'teach to the test' in the upper secondary school? Do students themselves feel that they study for the test alone?
2. Does the English test in the Matriculation Examination evoke test anxiety?
3. Do students consider the Matriculation Examination test a more valid and reliable way of showing their English skills than teacher-based assessment?

#### 3.2 Educational setting

Practically all participating students had started studying English in Year 3 in primary school. Thus far, they had studied EFL for nearly nine or ten years, totalling around 700 or 800 lessons.

Finnish upper secondary school studies are divided into courses, each with 38 lessons. In 2014, there were six compulsory and two specialisation courses of English (Advanced syllabus) and their general guidelines and syllabi were defined by the *National core curriculum for upper secondary schools 2003*. In addition, each school could also offer school-based courses. Although each English course has a theme, they comprise all areas of both oral and written language skills. Hence, course assessment does not focus on any one area, such as grammar, writing or speaking only, but should include them all. Each course is assessed as an independent entity with a numerical

grade (4–10, 10 being the best). In addition to the grade, the student could also be given more detailed assessment and feedback either in writing or orally. (For further information, see *National core curriculum for upper secondary schools 2003*).

All course assessment is teacher-based assessment. The only high-stakes test is the Matriculation Examination, which the students take towards the end of their upper secondary studies. Although the English test is not a compulsory part of the Examination, nearly all students take it, both nationally (Mehtäläinen & Välijärvi 2013) and in this school.

### 3.3 Participants

The second- and third-year students of our upper secondary school were invited to participate in this study in March 2014. Out of 199 students, 146 answered the questionnaire (response rate 73.4%), and 142 of them answered all the questions regarding the Matriculation Examination. Out of those 142 students, 77 were second-year students, who answered the questionnaire during one of their English lessons. Third-year, i.e. final-year, students answered in their own time (65 respondents) as most of them, preparing to take several subtests of the Matriculation Examination (ME) that spring, did not have lessons at school any more.

Altogether 63 students (44.4% of all respondents) had already taken the English ME test, or part of it. They all were third-year students. Fifty-five of these students had passed the test, but seven of them were retaking the test that spring in the hope of improving their grade. In addition, eight students said that they were in the process of taking the test for the first time that spring. As the students answered the questionnaire in their own time sometime in March, some of these eight students had already completed the whole English test, some had only taken the listening comprehension part (in February). Nevertheless, all these eight students are included in the group of students who had taken the test.

Seventy-nine students (55.6%) had not yet taken any part of the English ME test: among them, there were two third-year students, but all the rest were second-year students. However, they, too, had probably had some personal experience of the exam format, in particular of the listening comprehension part, as sections of them had most likely been used in some of their most recent English courses.

Eighty-five respondents were female (59.9%), 57 male (40.1%). The average of the students' self-reported previous English grade was 8.58 (min. 6, max.10). So far in upper secondary school, they had studied, on average, 6.7 English courses (range: 4–11) and had 3.7 different English teachers (range 2–7). Although the results cannot be generalised, they give quite an accurate picture of the situation in our school at

the time of the study as the respondents represent the total student population well, regarding both gender and their grades.

### 3.4 Data collection and analysis methodology

The data was gathered through a web-based questionnaire with altogether more than 100 items and questions. The questionnaire covered several topic areas, for instance students' goal orientation, the assessment methods used in English courses and their usefulness, students' personal experiences of and views on the accuracy, fairness, guidance and agency of assessment, as well as the Matriculation Examination.

The data explored in this article come primarily from the Matriculation Examination section of the questionnaire and its Likert-scale items (see Appendix 1) as well as from the goal-orientation questions (see Appendix 2). Those/these data were analysed quantitatively using descriptive statistics. Students' gender, previous (self-reported) grade as well as the fact whether they had taken (part of) the English ME test or not were used as independent variables. Independent samples T-tests were conducted to test the statistical significance of the differences of means of gender and the test-taking. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated to analyse the correlations between variables.

There were also two open-ended questions dealing with the Matriculation Examination in the questionnaire. Their answers offered qualitative data which were analysed through content analysis (e.g. Patton 2002). First, the content analysis started as inductive analysis "discovering patterns, themes, and categories in one's data" (Patton 2002: 453). However, as the emerging categories and themes, in particular with open-ended answers to Question 9, seemed to match the quality criteria for assessment presented in literature, the second round of content analysis turned into deductive content analysis (e.g. Patton 2002). In other words, at that stage the data were re-categorised according to already existing quality characteristics of validity, reliability and fairness.

## 4 Findings

My original hypothesis was that whether the students had already taken the test, or not, would somehow affect their answers. Therefore, the results show the descriptive statistics of all respondents first, but also those of the sub-categories of the students who had already taken the test and those who had not as well as female and male students.

### 4.1 Does the Matriculation Examination cause an excessive washback effect?

The critics of high-stakes testing have been concerned that high-stakes testing narrows teaching and learning. Therefore, the first research question of this study focused on a negative washback effect: Do students feel that English teachers ‘teach to the test’ in the upper secondary school? Do teachers teach to the test only? Do students themselves feel that they study for the Matriculation Examination alone?

In general, 70 percent of the respondents did not think that their teachers taught to the Matriculation Examination only (see Figure 1.). However, the number of students who said that teachers did indeed teach to the test only was greater among the students who had either already passed the exam or were in the middle of taking it.

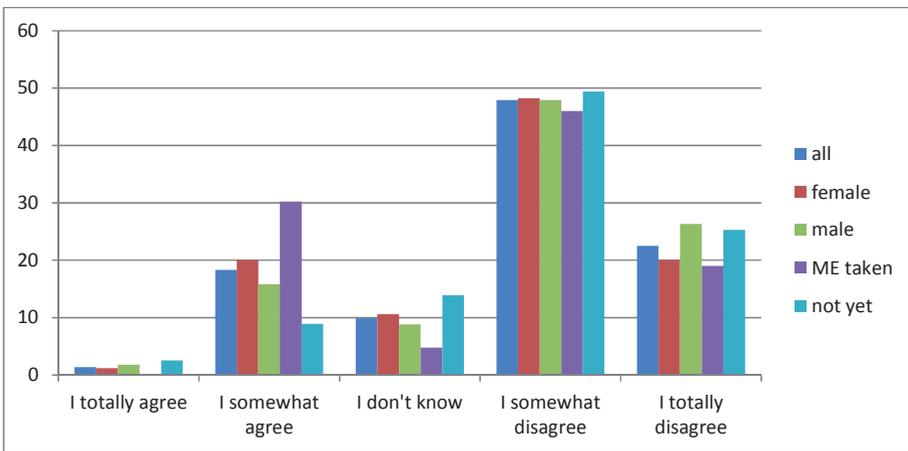


FIGURE 1. Item Teachers teach for the Matriculation Examination only and its responses.

Furthermore, 40% of the students who had not taken the test yet said that their teachers had guided and instructed them too little for the ME test (see Figure 2). Only a good 10 percent of the students who had taken the test shared the same view and almost 80% considered the guidance for the ME test adequate. The difference between those who had taken the test ( $m=1.98$ ) and those who had not ( $m=2.91$ ) was statistically very significant ( $p=.000$ ;  $r=.391^{**}$ ). Female students ( $m=2.74$ ) seemed to consider the guidance for the ME test somewhat less adequate than male students ( $m=2.26$ ,  $t=2.453$ ,  $df=140$ ,  $p=.015$ ;  $r=-.203^*$ ).

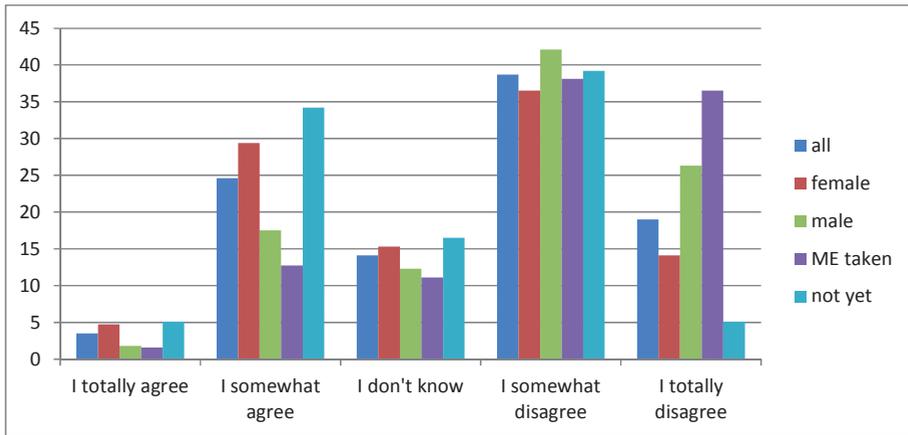


FIGURE 2. My teachers have instructed me too little for the Matriculation Examination.

At the beginning of the questionnaire, the students were asked how much some goals had influenced their studies in the upper secondary school (see Appendix 2). Over 85% of all the respondents said that a good success in the Matriculation Examination had been a goal that had affected their studies either very much or quite a lot. The Matriculation Examination thus seemed to be an important goal – and even more important than a good upper secondary school certificate (see Figure 3).

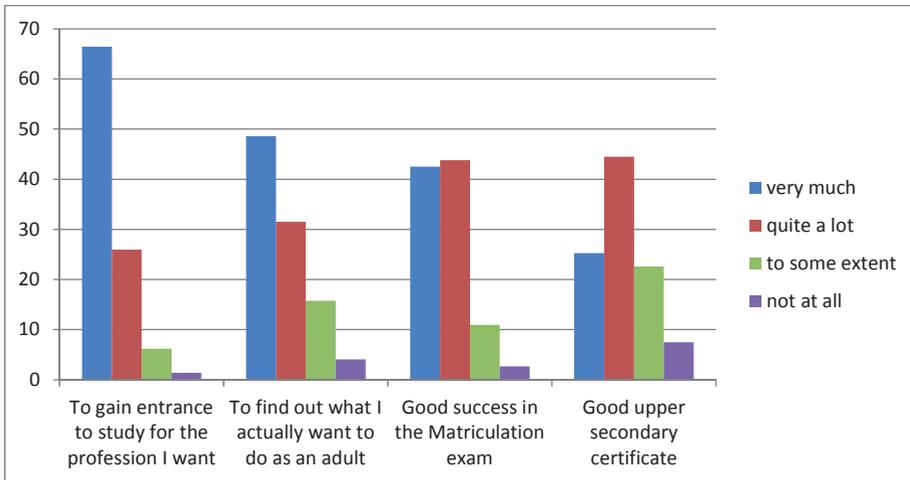


FIGURE 3. To what extent have the following goals guided your upper secondary studies?

Yet again, when asked why they studied English, the results changed. Only about 30% of the respondents said that a good grade in the Matriculation Examination was the most important goal of their upper secondary English studies whereas approximately 55% of the respondents disagreed (see Figure 4). Quite unanimously, the respondents agreed that they studied English primarily for their own future and not for the Matriculation Examination (see Figure 5).

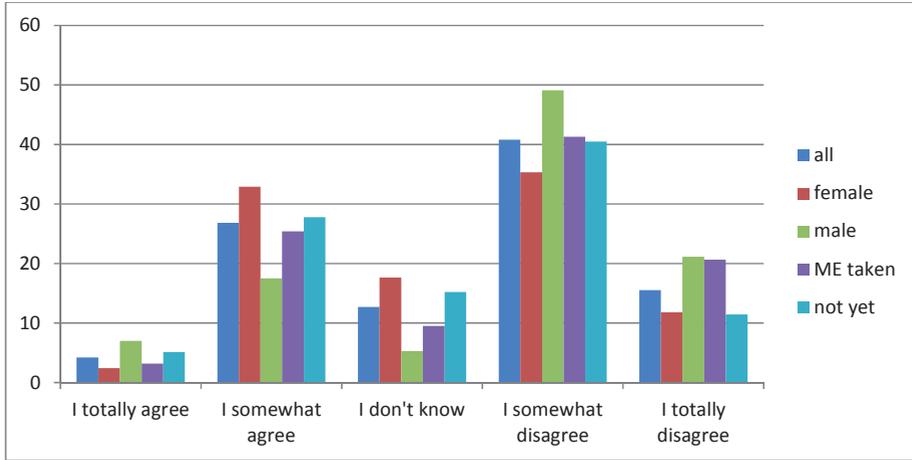


FIGURE 4. The most important goal for me in my English studies is a good grade in the Matriculation Examination.

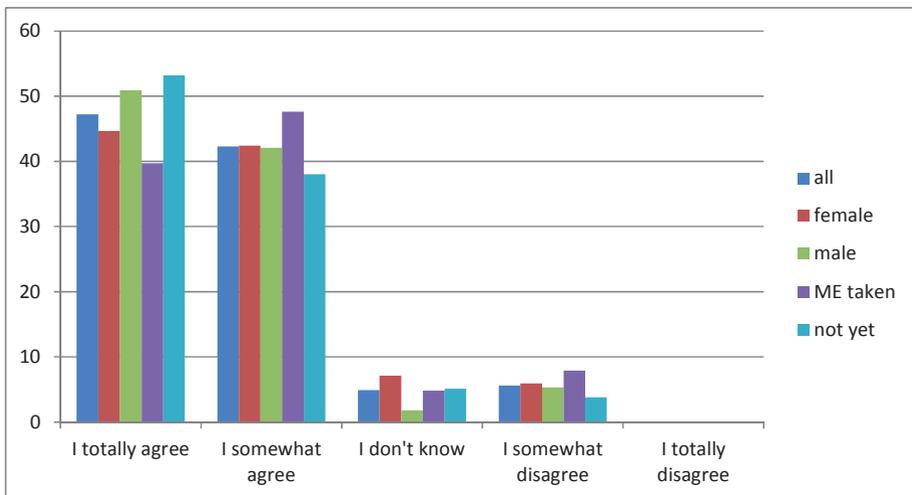


FIGURE 5. I study English for life and for my future, not for the Matriculation Examination.

So, the Matriculation Examination was an important goal that strongly influenced upper secondary studies. However, the primary goal for students' English studies was their own future, not the Matriculation Examination. According to the students in this study, although teachers did not seem to teach to the test at least during the first two years of the upper secondary studies, teaching to the test seemed to increase when the exam approached. Students' earlier success in the English studies, i.e. their previous English grade, did not correlate with any of these items discussed above.

#### 4.2 Does the Matriculation Examination evoke test anxiety?

The second research question dealt with test anxiety, another concern that the critics of high-stakes testing have raised. The results of this study seem clear: the Matriculation Examination evoked some fear or test anxiety in about 60% of the respondents. However, the fear or anxiety seemed to grow a bit milder with the passing of the test, as can be seen in Figure 6. Female students were clearly more susceptible to ME anxiety, and among them, the anxiety was significantly higher ( $m=3.84$ ) than among male students ( $m=2.70$ ,  $t=5.108$ ,  $df=101.933$ ,  $p=.000$ ;  $r=-.411^{**}$ ). In fact, half of the male students did not seem to suffer from any Matriculation Examination anxiety. Students' previous grades did not correlate with anxiety ( $r= -.125$ ).

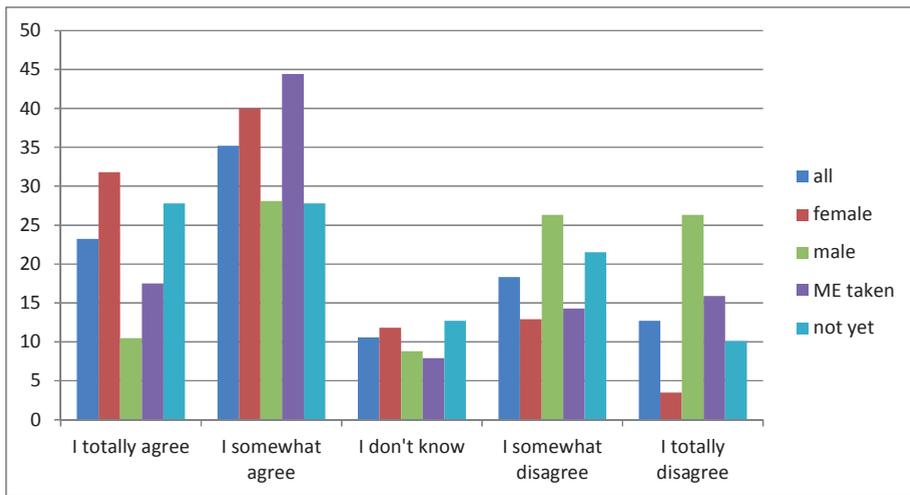


FIGURE 6. The Matriculation Examination scares me.

Approximately one student in four also mentioned either stress or anxiety in their open-ended answers to Question 9: "What do you think of the Matriculation Examination in Advanced English? What kinds of thoughts/emotions does the examination evoke?"

Eight of the students who mentioned stress or anxiety had already taken the test. Their stress or anxiety was mostly linked with the test-taking situation or with the high-stakes of the exam:

The test situation itself is unnerving and exhausting, so the test performance does not always correspond with the real performance.

In listening comprehensions, in particular, stress decreases scores and thus doesn't give a totally reliable picture of the skills.

I'm scared of the ME. test because it affects further studies so much.

Perhaps surprisingly, the students who had not taken the test yet mentioned anxiety or apprehension more often: twenty students (out of 61) mentioned that they were anxious because of the test. Their anxiety or fear ranged from slightly anxious excitement to strong fear that had affected their study plans:

Haven't done it yet. Mostly anxiety and fear, because I'm scared that I will totally fail in the test even though my English skills are quite good in my opinion.

I fear that ME test the most in the upper secondary school. I chose Advanced Maths so that I won't have to take the Advanced English exam. I'm beside myself with fear because I don't believe I'll pass it with dignity.

On the other hand, ten students were confident of their skills and not worried or anxious about the test:

I'll pass it even if I had my eyes shut and hands tied behind my back.

It's quite normal, doesn't evoke any feelings, really.

In sum, expectations, perhaps based on other students' anecdotes, seemed somehow stronger, either more anxiety-ridden or more relaxed and confident, than the actual experiences. As with the quantitative answers, attitude and also anxiety seemed to grow more realistic and perhaps milder when lived through.

As expected, it was quite difficult for me. I had quite a lot of pressure in the test, but I managed well, considering my skills.

Yet, in sum, approximately 60% of all the respondents, and over 70% of female respondents, said that the English test of the Matriculation Examination frightened them at least to some extent.

### 4.3 Students' views on the validity, reliability and fairness of the ME English test

The proponents of high-stakes tests say that high-stakes testing, designed by assessment experts, is more valid and reliable as an assessment tool than, say, teacher-based assessment (e.g. Cizek 2005). The last research question of this article was to see if the students agreed with this notion.

The questionnaire had two items that addressed the validity and reliability of the Matriculation Examination English test. One of them read as follows: *In the Matriculation Examination, I can reliably show how good my English skills are.* Nearly 60% of the students who had already taken the test did not agree with the claim (see Figure 7). However, approximately a third agreed with the statement. Male students ( $m=3.18$ ) in general seemed to trust the reliability of the Matriculation Examination more than female students ( $m=2.39$ ,  $t=-3.943$ ,  $df=140$ ,  $p=.000$ ,  $r=.316^{**}$ ). There were no statistically significant differences between the students who had already taken the test and those who had not. Students' previous English grade did not correlate with this item ( $r=.098$ ).

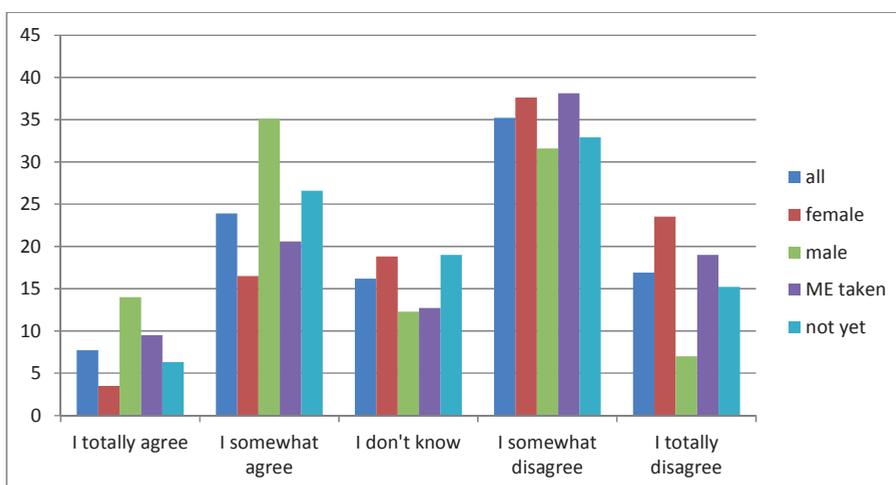


FIGURE 7. In the Matriculation Examination, I can reliably show how good my English skills are.

The second item compared the accuracy of teacher assessment with that of the Matriculation Examination: *The assessment given by the teacher gives a more accurate picture of my skills than the ME test.* Once again, nearly 60% of those who had taken the test thought that the course assessments gave a more accurate assessment of their skills than the Matriculation Examination test (see Figure 8). Only approximately 13% of them disagreed with that claim, leaving 30% undecided. Somewhat surprisingly,

although female students seemed to consider the Matriculation Examination a clearly less reliable format to demonstrate their skills than male students, there were no statistically significant differences between male ( $m=3.47$ ) and female students ( $m=3.58$ ) in this item; nor did the previous grade correlate with this item ( $r=.121$ ).

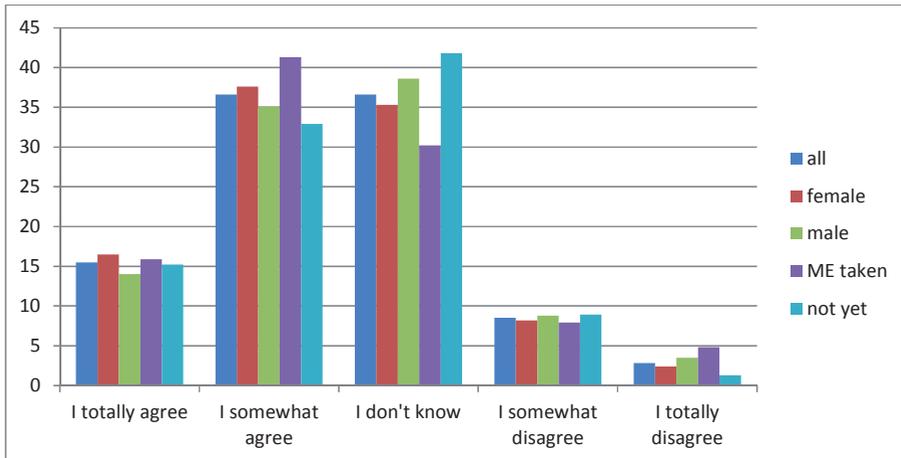


FIGURE 8. The assessment given by the teachers gives a more accurate picture of my skills than the ME test.

In addition, students' open-ended answers illuminated the students' experiences of and expectations of the reliability and validity of the Matriculation Examination test. The students readily volunteered answers: 58 out of the 63 students who had already taken (part of) the test answered the following question: (Q9) *What do you think of the Matriculation Examination in Advanced English? What kinds of thoughts/emotions does the examination evoke?* In the following account, I will concentrate on their answers, because of their first-hand experience. However, I will also briefly mention the expectations of those students who had not taken the test yet. All these answers are categorised according to the main quality requirements of assessment, i.e. validity, reliability and fairness.

#### 4.3.1 Validity: does the test measure what it is supposed to measure?

Out of those 58 students who had taken the test and volunteered open-ended answers, three complimented the test whole-heartedly:

Good, versatile test. Seems that they know their business in the Matriculation Board.

In addition, eight students regarded the test as good, but also offered some criticism or suggested some improvements:

Listening comprehensions are quite difficult but otherwise it is suitable. Essays have sometimes rather bad [topic] options as you should have specific knowledge or experience on things.

In my opinion, the test was good but to my mind an oral test should be part of the package because oral communication is important.

Nonetheless, 35 students (out of 58) questioned the validity of the Matriculation test in one way or another. First of all, the test did not assess students' oral skills in any way, which was criticised in 11 answers:

The test is deficient in the sense that it doesn't measure the student's ability to communicate orally in English.

Oral component is missing. Yet, it's one of the main elements of language skills.

The students also commented on the difficulty or 'excessive difficulty' of the test (21 mentions), which surpassed the difficulty level of the English courses (4 mentions):

Quite challenging, but some structures are really challenging and the teaching during the courses doesn't match their difficulty.

You can't do well by just attending the English courses offered at school - - The vocabulary and reading comprehensions are more difficult than in the English courses.

Students mostly criticised the test for testing too detailed grammatical knowledge (12 mentions) or vocabulary (8) which were "not important or relevant for good language skills" or real life:

We learn languages so that we could encounter new people and get to know different cultures. - - This is something the Matriculation Board doesn't seem to understand when they include excessively difficult lottery exercises that test the grammatical knowledge of the exceptions to the exceptions.

Vocabulary was impossible for an average student wishing for a good grade.

The difficulty level is rising all the time and the vocabulary needn't be quite so scientific.

However, four students understood the difficulty of the test:

The English ME test is frighteningly difficult but I guess that separates the best from the rest.

Four students mentioned consequential validity – i.e. the impact – of the Matriculation Examination test on their further studies in their answers:

Despite the unfairness of the test, in the eyes of further studies institutions, the applicant's English skills are directly comparable with the letter that stands in the Matriculation Examination certificate.

Overall, the students who had taken the test seemed quite critical of its validity. How about the students who had not taken the test yet? Altogether 61 out of 79 students volunteered answers to Question 9. Their answers were not as detailed as the answers of those who had personal experience, and quite a few students also expressed that their answers were based on expectations and other students' stories, not their own experiences. Nonetheless, similar validity issues emerged:

It's a bit too hard for an ordinary Finn because even native speakers have problems with it at times.

It contains too much of all sorts of nitpicking that isn't really that much relevant in the development of practical English language skills.

Altogether, eight students criticised exercises for focusing on too detailed knowledge and four students for the lack of an oral part in the test. The difficulty of the test was mentioned ten times and its irrelevance for real life languages skills an additional five times.

All in all, many students seemed quite critical of the validity of the Matriculation test. Its content validity was not regarded as particularly good because speaking was not tested. Furthermore, too detailed knowledge of grammatical exceptions or rare vocabulary was considered irrelevant for real-life language skills. The difficulty level was also seen as too demanding when compared to the syllabi of Advanced English courses.

#### **4.3.2 Reliability: is the ME test a reliable and accurate way to show one's skills?**

Once again, many students who had already taken the test (25 out of 63) mentioned various threats to reliability, i.e. many sources of construct-irrelevant variance (Black & Wiliam, 2012). The greatest threats, according to them, were trick questions and red herrings (17 students). Many students compared answering these questions to the draw of the lottery numbers.

The questions and answers lead you astray, to answer wrong...even if you understand the text/what you hear, the options in the answers trick you to answer wrong, and that is not right.

The listening comprehension test includes too many so called trick questions and thus doesn't really measure your language skills

Those bloody multiple choice trolls irk me every time, but of course similar situation may come up in real life too.

In addition to those 17 students, three students also mentioned luck as a possible factor affecting results.

Because there's only one exam, the result depends very much on test exercises, and doesn't necessarily give the right overall picture of the student's skills.

Another threat to reliability was the test-situation itself with its time constraints and pressure. Four of these seven students specified listening comprehension tests.

The stressful situation affects your results too and all your skills won't necessarily come out as well as possible.

I think the listening comprehensions are unfair because they try to bluff the student deliberately and the pauses are so short that you don't have time to read the questions then. So, the results don't give the right picture of your skills then.

Nevertheless, and perhaps slightly surprisingly, none of the 58 students mentioned any concerns about reliability in the sense of inter- or intra-rater reliability.

Out of the students who had not yet taken the test, ten mentioned trick questions. Chance or luck with the topics of the test or with the test's difficulty was mentioned in three answers.

Exercises made weird and tricky on purpose and not a test that is made on the basis of the real language skill needs.

Scared, because the difficulty level varies so much between years.

Furthermore, five students also concluded that the test did not necessarily measure or capture one's real English skills.

Although I feel that I'm pretty good at English, I'm scared that the test will go badly and everybody will get the wrong image of my skills.

#### 4.3.3 Fairness: Is the scoring and grading of the Matriculation Examination fair?

The other open-ended question dealt with the Matriculation Examination grade and its accuracy and fairness: *If you have already taken the Matriculation Exam in English, did you get the grade you deserved in your opinion? Why/why not?(Q5)*

Within the Finnish Matriculation Examination system, if a student has passed any ME sub-test, he or she can retake it once in an attempt to improve the grade. The better grade of these two attempts will be the official grade. Out of those 48 students who had already completed the English ME test and were not going to re-sit it, 45 students answered the question. Twenty-five of them said that the grade had been what they had deserved; for one it was more than she had expected.

Yes, the grade corresponds with my skills and is in line with my course grades.

Yes, I went there to get a certain grade, and I got it in the end.

I got a far higher grade than I thought so I was happy with the result.

An additional five students said that even if they were not quite satisfied with their grades, they thought they had deserved it for one reason or another:

I would have wished for a better grade, but in my opinion I deserved that grade because I just could not do better then.

Eleven students, however, did not consider the grade to be what they would have merited. In their opinion, the grade was not in line with their course grades or with their real skills. Furthermore, some students criticised both the excessive difficulty as well as the focus and format of the ME test – in other words, the same issues discussed earlier with validity or reliability:

The vocabulary in the test was really challenging, and it went badly. In my opinion, I can use English much better than what the grade suggests.

Multiple choices have often questions and options that are somehow bad: several right answers, no completely correct option or a question that can be interpreted in several ways. In open-ended questions you can't guess/deduce what sorts of things they want in the answer. I understand everything but can't always get my answer 'right'.

All seven students who were going to retake the exam answered the question. Five of them said they had not got the grade they felt they deserved:

In my opinion, no, because I got better results from the tests we did as prep tests than from the real one and that bugs me.

No, I didn't. In my opinion, the grade doesn't reflect my skills because the listening test was a very unnerving experience for me and therefore, anxiety probably ruined my performance. After that when the written part came I was as if I had lost all my hope since I knew I couldn't reach the grade I wanted by any means.

No because it doesn't match my course grades.

Two of them, however, regarded the grade as deserved:

Yes, I put too little effort into it.

To summarise, most students seemed to think that they had been quite fairly scored and graded in the ME English test, and that the grade they got was mostly deserved for that particular test. However, they did not seem to think that the Matriculation Examination test itself was a most valid or reliable way to show their skills.

## 5 Discussion and conclusions

Several opponents of high-stakes tests blame them for a negative washback effect that narrows the curriculum into teaching to the test. Therefore, one of the aims of this article was to find out whether the Matriculation Examination caused a washback effect in this school, and whether students considered the potential washback effect excessive. In the 1995 study by Välijärvi and Tuomi that seemed to be the case. In this study, the results were quite the contrary: 40% of the second-year students felt that their teachers had instructed them too little for the future Matriculation Examination.

In another study by Välijärvi et al. (2009), a good third of the respondents, who all were third-year students, said that their teachers taught only for the Matriculation Examination; nearly half of the respondents, however, disagreed. Although two thirds of all the respondents in this study did not think that their teachers taught only for the Matriculation Examination, 30% of the third-year students thought that they actually did. In that respect, the result is somewhat in line with that of Välijärvi et al. (2009). In sum, the Matriculation Examination seems to have quite a strong washback effect during the final upper secondary courses, but not earlier. Thus, the washback effect cannot perhaps be considered excessive. However, although the Matriculation Examination should be based on the upper secondary school curriculum and its syllabi, the examination is not part of the upper secondary curriculum per se.

Yet, the Matriculation Examination is still a highly important goal for the students, and, therefore, probably also for their teachers. First and foremost, however, the students regarded English as a life skill; almost all the respondents said that they studied English for their future, not for the Matriculation Examination.

Although the Matriculation Examination does not influence the upper secondary studies as much as it may have done in the past, it still 'casts a shadow' on students' daily work in the form of apprehension, stress and anxiety, with nearly two-thirds of the

respondents saying that the exam scared or frightened them. Female students seemed to be more anxious than male students. The reasons the students mentioned for anxiety were, for instance, the pressurised test-taking situation as well as the consequences of the exam for their further studies. Hence, this study corroborates the findings of earlier studies that high-stakes testing causes test anxiety and that female students are more vulnerable to it (e.g. Cassady 2010; Hembree 1988).

Is anxiety a necessarily evil, in other words, is the examination so important and excellent that it is worth the anxiety it seems to cause? The third and final research question of this article focused on students' experiences of and expectations for the validity, reliability and fairness of the Matriculation Examination test as a test of their English skills. Out of those students who had already taken the test, over half thought that the Matriculation Examination test was not a reliable way to show their skills and considered teacher-based assessments a more accurate assessment of their skills. Not everybody agreed with them, though, and students did not seem totally convinced that teacher-based assessment would necessarily be much better.

Yet, many students seemed quite critical of the validity of the Matriculation test in their open-ended answers. Its content validity, or content relevance and coverage, was not regarded as particularly good because speaking was not tested. Furthermore, too detailed knowledge related to grammatical exceptions or rare vocabulary was considered irrelevant for real-life communication skills. The difficulty level was also seen as too demanding when compared to the goals and syllabi of Advanced English courses.

The reliability of the test was not considered very high, either. Students who had already taken the test mentioned various sources of construct-irrelevant variance (Black & Wiliam 2012; Messick 1996), in other words, several threats to reliability. Deliberately tricky questions "that lead you astray, to answer wrong" were considered the greatest threat to reliability (see also Anckar 2011). Quite a few students compared answering tricky multiple-choice questions to pure guessing (see also Anckar 2011). The pressurised test-taking situation and luck were also regarded as threats to the reliability of the test. Hence, the students did not seem convinced that they could show their English skills very reliably in the Matriculation Examination test. Yet, although not necessarily happy with the test and its format, the students seemed to consider the scoring and grading of their test papers quite fair.

This study has many limitations. First of all, it was limited to one school only, and thus the findings cannot be generalised. Furthermore, the academic achievement of the student population in this school is well above national average, also in the Matriculation Examination. Thus, these data do not include many views or experiences of students who struggle with their upper secondary school studies or who risk failing the ME English test. Although the previous English grade did not correlate with any of

the findings in this study, the experiences of and expectations for the ME English test might look different in larger and more varied student populations. Furthermore, had there been more questions dealing with the Matriculation Examination test, or different questions, the findings might have changed. Also, the data analysis methods employed in this article were quite basic. Thus, other data collection and analysis methods would most probably have yielded additional, or different, information. However, this small study sheds some light on students' experiences of the English ME test and also brings forth many interesting questions that still remain unanswered. Thus, further research on students' experiences of the Matriculation Examination with more varied student groups as well as data collection and analysis methodology is clearly needed.

Even though public discussion on the possible abolition of the Matriculation Examination sometimes surfaces, the exam enjoys a high status in Finland (Vuorio-Lehti 2007). Students were not asked directly whether they considered the exam needed or not in this study but my guess, a pure hunch, is that most of the students who have passed the exam would not like to abolish the examination. It seems to be a rite of passage that is part of the school-leaving tradition (Vuorio-Lehti, 2006).

Nevertheless, the students in this study voiced several concerns over the English test which are worth careful attention. Firstly, assessing speaking should somehow be part of the examination. The Matriculation Examination Board has announced that oral production will, sometime in the future, be included in the test. Secondly, the test format should perhaps be reconsidered. As cost-efficient and seemingly reliable (at least in the sense of rater reliability) as the multiple-choice questions are, is there over-reliance on them in the foreign/second language tests? At the moment, approximately half of the total test score, and most of the reading and listening comprehension score, is based on multiple-choice questions. Furthermore, although the difficulty and trickiness of the items may create variance in test results conveniently, is this variance necessarily fair? Moreover, is that variance not too much based on construct-irrelevant variance (Black & Wiliam, 2012; Messick, 1996)? Also, because of the pressurised test-taking situation (as it is the case with the listening comprehension part, in particular) is the test equally fair for all students – including those who suffer from test anxiety?

What should be done? The idea of using the Matriculation Examination results even more extensively for the admission to further education, as suggested, would raise the stakes of the examination considerably. That would also increase the pressure. That, in turn, might have detrimental effects on teaching and learning, as several studies have shown elsewhere. The shadow of the Matriculation Examination would certainly grow longer, and probably darker, again. How would all that accord with the new *National core curriculum for general upper secondary schools 2015* that emphasises versatile assessment methodology, assessment *for* learning, promoting and encouraging students' learning, as well as self-assessment, for instance? No matter how excellent a

test, one single test should never have too much power over a student's future. And as the students in this study have pointed out, there is room for much improvement in the present Matriculation Examination and its English test.

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## APPENDIX 1.

The nine Likert-scale items dealing with the Matriculation Exam with their percentages, means and standard deviations.

	Täysin samaa mieltä <i>I strongly agree</i>	Jokseenkin samaa mieltä <i>I agree</i>	En osaa sanoa <i>I don't know</i>	Jokseenkin eri mieltä <i>I disagree</i>	Täysin eri mieltä <i>I strongly disagree</i>	m	sd
Opiskelen englantia elämää ja tulevaisuuttani enkä yo-kirjoituksia varten. <i>I study English for life and my future, not for the Matriculation Examination.</i>	47.2	42.3	4.9	5.6		4.31	.809
Yo-kirjoitukset pelottavat minua. <i>The Matriculation Examination scares me.</i>	23.2	35.2	10.6	18.3	12.7	3.38	1.357
Opettajien antama arviointi antaa oikeamman kuvan osaamisestani kuin yo-koe. <i>The assessment given by the teachers gives a more accurate picture of my skills than the ME test.</i>	15.5	36.6	36.6	8.5	2.8	3.54	.950
Yo-kirjoitusten arviointi ei vastaa opettajien arviointikäytänteitä. <i>The assessment and grading of the Matriculation Examination doesn't correspond with those of the teachers.</i>	7.7	36.6	38.0	16.9	0.7	3.34	.874
Voin yo-kirjoituksissa luotettavasti osoittaa, kuinka hyvin englantia osaan. <i>In the Matriculation Examination, I can reliably show how good my English skills are.</i>	7.7	23.9	16.2	35.2	16.9	2.70	1.225

Lukiassa pitäisi käyttää vain samoja arviointitapoja kuin yo-kirjoituksissakin. <i>In upper secondary school, only the same assessment methods that are used in the Matriculation Examination should be used.</i>	4.9	26.8	10.6	41.5	16.2	2.63	1.183
Englannin opintojeni tärkein tavoite minulle on hyvä arvosana yo-kirjoituksissa. <i>The most important goal for me in my English studies is a good grade in the Matriculation Examination.</i>	4.2	26.8	12.7	40.8	15.5	2.63	1.158
Opettajani ovat opastaneet minua liian vähän yo-kirjoituksia varten. <i>My teachers have instructed me too little for the Matriculation Examination.</i>	3.5	24.6	14.1	38.7	19.0	2.55	1.158
Opettajat opettavat vain ylioppilaskirjoituksia varten. <i>Teachers teach for the Matriculation Examination only.</i>	1.4	18.3	9.9	47.9	22.5	2.28	1.054

## APPENDIX 2.

The goal-orientation items:

Missä määrin seuraavat tavoitteet ovat ohjanneet lukio-opiskeluasi? (%)

*To what extent have the following goals guided your upper secondary studies? (in percentages)*

	<b>Erittäin paljon</b> <i>Very much</i>	<b>Melko paljon</b> <i>Quite a lot</i>	<b>Jonkin verran</b> <i>To some extent</i>	<b>Ei lainkaan</b> <i>Not at all</i>
Päästä lukion jälkeen opiskelemaan tavoittelemaani ammattiin. <i>To gain entrance to study for the profession I want.</i>	66.4	26.0	6.2	1.4
Selvittää itselleni, mitä isona oikeastaan haluan tehdä. <i>To find out what I actually want to do as an adult.</i>	48.6	31.5	15.8	4.1
Hyvä menestyminen ylioppilaskirjoituksissa. <i>Good success in the Matriculation Examination.</i>	42.5	43.8	11.0	2.7
Hyvä päättötodistus. <i>Good upper secondary certificate.</i>	25.3	44.5	22.6	7.5
Oppia suunnittelemaan opintojani ja tulevaisuuttani. <i>To learn to plan my studies and future.</i>	24.7	47.9	24.7	2.7
Saada hyvä yleissivistys. <i>To get a good all-round education.</i>	24.0	50.7	23.3	2.0
Opiskella mahdollisimman paljon kiinnostavia kursseja. <i>To study as many interesting courses as possible.</i>	21.9	45.2	27.4	5.5
Oppia tuntemaan itseni, vahvuuteni ja heikkouteni. <i>To learn to know myself, my strengths and weaknesses.</i>	18.5	43.2	30.1	8.2
Opetella itse ottamaan vastuuta asioista. <i>To learn to take responsibility.</i>	15.8	45.2	32.9	6.2
Oppia tekemään päätöksiä ja valintoja. <i>To learn to make decisions and choices.</i>	11.0	44.5	37.0	7.5
Oppia ilmaisemaan itseäni. <i>To learn to express myself.</i>	8.9	43.2	40.4	7.5
Oppia tulemaan toimeen erilaisissa ryhmissä ja erilaisten ihmisten kanssa. <i>To learn to get along in different groups and with different people.</i>	8.9	34.9	49.3	6.8
Mennä samoille kursseille kuin kaverinikin. <i>To go to the same courses as my friends.</i>	2.7	15.1	43.8	38.4