

# DESIGNING AN INTERNET BASED TOOL FOR ORAL EVALUATION IN THE UNIVERSITY ACCESS EXAMINATION IN SPAIN

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## Abstract

This paper focuses on the rationale and underlying processes of an Inter/intranet tool designed to evaluate oral tests and especially the university entrance examination according to the national minimal requirements. This exam is taken by up to 100,000 students simultaneously. This presentation gives information of the tool design and up-to-now results. The authors describe the interfaces, students' reactions and test strategies incorporated in the first trials, and present the fun operational system. The paper describes some of the experiments of image acceptance, attitudes and tool accessibility. The test includes both formal and informal language situations, which promotes are likely to be found in an international school or daily environment, text correction, and develops a feedback model. In the introductory section, the presentation describes the tool addressing its strengths and weaknesses and gives examples of the different tasks to be done in the exam. Then, it moves to the different experiments done in the first semester of 2006 with experimental students in the B1 European Framework of Languages level and shows their feedback according to a questionnaire. The third section, mostly devoted to claim the need of this tool in its current working process and design, the researchers will also emphasize the prospective research and cases agenda for the project. This project was originally set for Erasmus students who needed to be diagnosed to be placed in the appropriate levels in foreign languages at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain). The project was funded by the regional educational board with 30,000 Euro and finished in December 2005. Thus, the results discussed are tentative and further studies will be necessary. The current literature is mostly related to the project and how the new TOEFL oral section was developed.

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### INTRODUCTION

In 2006, the Spanish Ministry of Education will introduce the new educational system that will change syllabus and, even more important, the initial age of foreign language learning in school. The fact that the new syllabus is more communicatively oriented will require new teaching methodologies but also new ways to measure the students' progress through their school period. For a long time, the ministry of education has considered the university entrance examination (Selectividad) the means to evaluate the students' achievements during the school years. This common and compulsory examination is held at the end of year 12. Given its natural importance, teachers and students pay a very especial interest and adopt specific skills and strategies for its preparation.

A recent publication analyzed English the English test of Selectividad administered in several universities in Spain from different perspectives: reliability, consistency, types of items, its history and prospective developments. The two key issues are authenticity of its current format (that includes writing, reading and grammar) and whether and how listening and speaking could be included in the test. In fact, a number of researchers in Spain have claimed that this exam should vary its current format (García Laborda, 2006). However, the current problem is how to include listening and speaking.

## CREATING A COMPUTER TOOL FOR ORAL ASSESSMENT

A similar problem was faced by García Laborda (2004) and García Laborda & Bejarano (2005) when analysing their universities' needs of diagnosing a large number of students of Second Language to place them in different language courses in their universities. This paper addresses a project of an internet based computer tool for language assessment that was originally set for international students who needed to be diagnosed to be placed in the appropriate levels in foreign languages at the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia (Spain) and suggested by Bejarano for Waldosta State University (Georgia, US). The project was funded and granted by the regional Valencian Educational Board with 30,000 Euro and finished in December 2005 (García Laborda, 2004). The platform was designed as a three-module tool with three types of interface design. The interfaces have been simplified to the minimum elements: multimedia prompts, questions, students' identification and function icons (stop, repeat, quit and finish). The interfaces are based on common practices from educational internet / computer software industry but the interfaces were, as opposed to other testing platforms, specifically designed for Internet-based foreign languages tests. Surprisingly, the designs resemble the new TOEFL platform however based on completely different philosophy and needs. Besides, the first results of the Valencian software design were published before the new IBT-TOEFL started to be operative last year (García Laborda, 2004).

The speaking module of the Valencian platform of foreign languages (PLEVALEX) operates by using a combination of traditional Microsoft software and especially tailored software specifically created for this tool. The student's production is recorded in the student's computer and recorded continuously and then sent to a database for retrieval by the examiners afterwards. Operatively, the speaking test has three main types of questions (García Laborda, 2005): a personal semi-interview, a lecture followed by several questions asked by the teacher and, finally, a description (that can have a formal / academic or informal / non-academic register). In the semi-interview, the student watches a video of another student of a similar age who asks general questions addressed and corresponding to the proficiency level (according to the European Framework) evaluated that are general first of origin or identification and then it can be more precise and ask different types of questions that require the required proficiency level. In the second part, a teacher will be speaking for two-three minutes and then asks questions related to the topic, finally the student will see a picture or academic diagram, will have time to take notes and will have certain time to describe what has seen.

### TRIALLING

The PLEVALEX platform has been designed to be used with a large number of users being tested simultaneously. So far, trials have been done with up to 35 students simultaneously. Additionally, the prototype of PLEVALEX is expected to be in use for initial assessment with international students of the Language Center of Universidad Politécnica de Valencia by the beginning of June. In the trials, the researchers analysed usability, student comfort and attitudes towards the testing system. In order to evaluate the usability, 35 students took an English general exam of a B1 proficiency level and filled a 25 item questionnaire. The students were happy about usability but proposed a number of changes and, more interesting, found features that the research team ignored and could be interesting for further developments. For the comfort, one of the researchers met with a group of 10 students and observed the test in a large screen with a data projector and discussed the different sections but little additional information was obtained through this method. As a conclusion of the three first set of trials it was concluded that the platform can begin to be experimentally operative and that students are happy with the current format. Other minor comments lead to slight changes in format.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION AND CONCLUSIONS

The results obtained so far have created the expectations that a similar web tool could be applicable to larger numbers of students. However, reaching 100,000 students simultaneously seems to be far beyond this project's scope. Although the use of synchronous servers could reproduce the exam to a definitely large number of students, streaming and communication seem to be two problems that given the current potential of the net cannot be solved today but we hope that in just a few years these problems could be solved.

The consequences of this Spanish education and, more precisely, the University Entrance Examination would benefit greatly from the introduction of this platform as a testing tool because it could include items of language skills that, although recognized as necessary, by institutions, researchers and general teachers have not been included yet. To provide Spanish high schools with solutions to the technical problems this study suggests the use of parallel servers for large quantity of this high stakes exam and further research complement the current one. The results so far are very promising and hopefully the universities will have a very valuable tool for language assessment and diagnosis at low cost which will certainly benefit the institutions as well as the individuals.

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## BIODATA

Jesús holds a PhD in applied linguistics (U. Complutense Madrid, Spain), a Master's in Comparative Literature and Language (U. Wisconsin-Milwaukee), a Master's in E.S.L (U. Georgia) and is currently working on his second PhD in Language Education (U. Valencia, Spain). He has given training courses in Yugoslavia and Bosnia, and has taught in Spain, the USA, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Slovenia, Croatia and Yugoslavia. Additionally, he has been active in missions in Croatia, Slovenia and Bosnia. His current interest is online testing.

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