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Contextual clues in Semi-direct interviews for computer assisted language testing

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Abstract

Language testing is a relatively new field of interest that has become of common interest in the last twenty years not only for traditional purposes but because of the power that language testing has acquired in relation to immigration and also for its implications for educational reforms. The purpose of this paper is to provide a theoretical approach to how audiovisual clues help to contextualize the semi-direct interviews in the Spanish University Entrance Examination (P.A.U.) and how contextualization helps to trigger and improve the student's performance. The study suggests the importance of contextualization of speaking tasks and how computers can enhance language testing.

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1. Introduction

Language testing is a relatively new field of interest that has become of common interest in the last twenty years not only for traditional purposes but because of the power that language testing has acquired in relation to immigration and also for its implications for educational reforms. Language testing has revealed three relevant aspects of the evaluation and assessment process: a) the importance of validation; b) the importance of technology in test design and delivery; and c) alternative means of language testing. Computer assisted language testing is now accepted as a revolting engine in language assessment that has presented significant evolutions in all these three aspects. One of the tasks that has become increasingly integrated in computer assisted language testing is speaking. Speaking, relatively expensive and problematic in its delivery until now has found in computers and the Internet a valid ground to lower delivery costs and maximize the student's performance. Computer based speaking tasks or full tests allow to integrate audiovisual repertoires that facilitate the student's integration in the test and trigger the testee's production.

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2. Prototyping questions for a computer based language test

In 2004, the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia(Spain) started to design a new oral-written computer tool for language testing. In 2007, the Camille researchers started a huge project to design and foresee the possible implications of the design and implementation of a University Entrance Examination (P.A.U.). In those days, it was assumed that a written online test would imply little if any difficulties. Thus, the challenge was implementing an oral section within the test. In order to achieve that goal, a limited number of researchers worked towards the design of the type of questions that would be desirable. So first, the researchers considered what was the exam to provide evidence of. So then, a set of goals were related to the tasks. It was assumed that the P.A.U. administrators wanted the cope with the students’ needs in a foreign language in a non English speaking setting. That means that English in that sense should be use to complement lessons or even attend classes in a foreign language but the interaction out of class would be for communication purposes rather than to live in an English speaking setting (as opposed to TOEFL). In that sense students were to provide evidence of the following aspects:

Table 1. Practical applications of the intended speaking tasks in the new P.A.U. test.

Practical application	Type of oral interaction	Length of the speaker’s turn
Socializing (meeting people and asking identification questions)	Dialogue	one to ten seconds (very short responses)
Obtaining information from a lecture	Giving complete answers to informative questions - Dialogue	Up to one minute
Giving short presentations	Being able to trim a topic of their knowledge and/or interest and speak about it - Monologue	Between three and five minutes
Describing prompts	Being able to describe a diagram or a picture	About three minutes

2.1 Kinds of inferences

The principle that underlies the inferences obtained through the test should provide information enough to deduce that a student would be able to perform properly in the given context. Thus, inferences should provide that type of information. The scores obtained in the test should be valid to obtain generalizations about the testee’s proficiency in the foreign language as well as in the expected academic context while facilitating the interpretation for all the different test stakes (especially the candidate, the test administrators and possible educational bodies such as the Ministry of Education or the prospective university. Therefore, the researchers established a set of expectations according the expected inference stage as follows:

Table 2. Relationship between the administrators' expectations and the inference stage.

Expectations	Inference stage
Descriptors of the students' proficiency are accurate	Evaluation
Oral tasks are appropriate and are valid to measure the students' competence in the test context	
The tasks are valid, reliable and their number is acceptable to measure the student's production.	
Tasks provide enough information and are well contextualized.	Generalization
Context does not jeopardize the generalization of the results.	
The results can be related to the writing and reading measures.	
The mental processes required to respond to the oral items fulfill the administrators' principles and objectives.	
The contextualization and place in the test is consistent with the goals of the test.	Analysis and interpretation
The composition of the items (especially when combining more than one language skill) relates with the administrators expectations.	
The results of the test are related to those obtained through another test of similar features.	Extrapolation

3 Inferences and oral tasks: Semi-direct interviews

3.1 Oral tasks in the P.A.U.

Up to today it is difficult to design oral productive tasks in computer assisted language testing. For this research project the intention was to integrate four main types of tasks. They all consider watching a mini-clip (that can be replaced by an audio recording) before the productive task. The four types are:

- 1) Watching and answer questions with short written answers,
- 2) Watching and answer multiple choice questions,
- 3) Watching and answer questions with long written answers,
- 4) Watching and produce mediated oral responses

The first three can be considered integrated skills tasks because they use different communication channels. Naturally, they are not complete in themselves but require of other tasks that can complement them. The idea of integrating tasks is that whenever possible they should include all four language skills. However, although the Educational Testing Service tends to use them in thematic clusters (such as attending a class in which the student needs to read a diagram or text, listen to a teacher's speech, give a written response and probably speak by answering questions). The research team found that creating banks of such clusters is extremely expensive and not many non-profit or institutional organizations can afford it. In conclusion, the team assumed that the same tasks can be done through a combination of different items in the same test. In relation to the last type of tasks, the team proposed the tasks that corresponded to the expectations from a student as presented in table 1:

- 1) Watching a video clip of a student and answer short informative questions,
- 2) Watching a video clip of a teacher teaching a lesson and answer to his questions,
- 3) Watching a mini-clip and give a mini-presentation.

3.2 Using semi-direct interviews

In working towards the definition of a theoretical framework for the implementation, it was necessary to find a construct that assumed all the possible factors to be found in the answering of an video supported oral task. The

model presented in figure 1 includes a basic diagram of task processing which is repeated as many times as tasks are included.

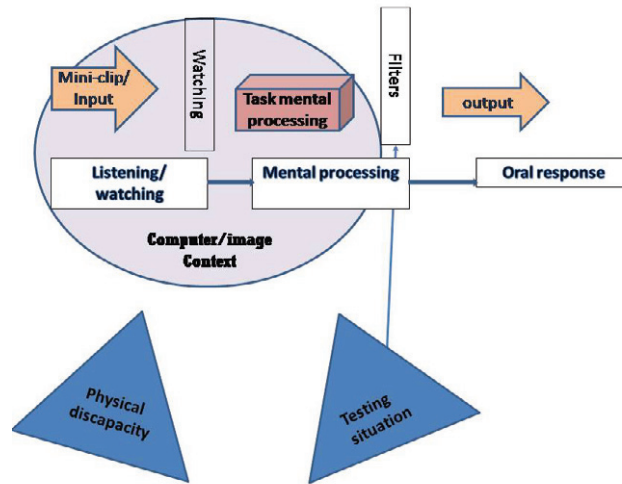


Figure 1. A framework of oral task processing and response.

Oral semi-directed interviews are a set of continuous questions that are interrelated but are not linked. In situations such as informal interrelations do not need to follow a particular dialoguing line. For example, if the input introduced is “how many sisters do you have?” and the answer is “Six”, there is no need to ask about the “sisters” but the following question could be “where do you live”. Although it may be a minor breakdown in a conversation pattern, it is still acceptable as a way to gather information in normal conversation and also as a way to obtain the respondent’s output. Therefore, semi-direct interviews can be recorded in advance and supported by images giving more contextual clues to the testee.

4. Contextual clues for semi-direct interviews

4.1 Choosing when to use semi-direct interviews

Semi-direct interviews are best used when the answers are intended to be short, objective and independent questions are necessary (). In the P.A.U. test semi-direct interview are used for informal purposes mostly like questions from student to student. But they could also be used to collect responses to a teacher’s lesson. The advantage of the informal situation is that when well aimed they can become almost as a whole conversation. Current research indicates that they are positive in tests like SOPI and the results obtained at the Universidad Politécnica also evidence their positive use to obtain quality production from the test candidates.

4.2 Contextual clues

Contextual clues are provided by the use of image and sound to support the candidate’s production. Image and sound have proved to be excellent triggers of production especially in short term memory. They also give life and realism which in turn also ads a “flow” feeling. Overall, previous studies have shown that although the use of video for listening tasks may challenge the task construct (Ockey, 2007), images enrich the students’ responses and very productive because they facilitate vocabulary and syntax recognition and use (Verhallen et al., 2006). In the project they have been mostly used for oral descriptions and items that require item memorization. They may also seem to increase and improve the candidates phonological production (Norrix et al, 2007) since they have a model (as it happens in real life in the native-non-native interaction) to follow.

4.3 Drawbacks of semi-direct interviews

The main drawback is their communicative capacity and the lack of connection between questions. Additionally, some more talkative candidates may feel frustrated by the lack of argumentative line. According to Mikhailova, (2007) semi-directed interviews like those used for the Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI) may not be as productive as thought. However, these students can usually overcome this problem especially more proficient candidates (Malabonga et al, (2005). Since they are used to simulate conversations, they lack the guiding line of a regular conversation, so it is necessary to use them in situations in which questions can be isolated with no need to develop each response.

5. Conclusions

Semidirect interviews facilitate the output of students and provide good evidence of competence to warrant the students' proficiency in language testing. They are better used when supported by video clues. Overall, although much has been said about the use of video to enrich language learning, little has been said about its effect in language testing. As a consequence, it is necessary to devote more studies to analyze its effect in testing. This aspect is currently in study in the Universidad Politécnica de Valencia with the hope to observe whether the results support the idea that using contextual clues as video for integrated tasks is worth.

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