

## **Teachers' opinions towards the integration of oral tasks in the Spanish University Examination**

Jesús García Laborda, Universidad de Alcalá, Madrid, Spain  
Miguel Fernández Álvarez, Chicago State University, Illinois, USA

Including speaking tasks in the foreign language paper of the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) has been inexistent in the last 15 years. However, the implications can be seen in shape of pressure on teachers to get students ready for such tasks in just three years (2009-2012). Because of the high stakes consequences attached to this exam in combination with a previous lack of training and a specific speaking development, scores in the first year may be challenged and thus, the tests great impact on the students fate and the instruction and educational experiences of PAU, magnified. The implication of such change in methods and teaching technique requires a common consensus between the educational authorities and teachers (apart from considering other stakeholders such as schools, students, and so on). This paper addresses a short study done in the Universidad de Alcalá (Madrid, Spain) with 67 teachers responding to a 10 item questionnaire about which and how to introduce the oral tasks for the test. Results include types of tasks and previous preparation.

**Keywords:** Oral Tasks; Erasmus Program; Teachers' Opinions; Spanish; University Entrance; Stakeholders; PAU

### **1. Introduction**

Including speaking tasks in the foreign language paper of the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) has never happened in the last 15 years. The inclusion of such tasks puts teachers in a dilemma: Are we ready for such a change? How should I model my classes? Will I be able to change my classes? Answers to these questions are difficult to achieve and there is an additional consideration: to what extent can we generalize to most teachers or how applicable is this change to the Spanish classrooms (Amengual Pizarro, 2009). If a high stakes test of this magnitude is going to change it is important to incorporate and analyze qualitative and quantitative research to foresee the expected changes in order to create the appropriate test construct (García Laborda, 2010). Most previous studies have addressed the different realities of students in the year of the test. However, in order to understand a change of such nature, it is necessary to look at the final Primary and, overall,

all the high school years. Therefore, it is important to analyze the current realities that happen in the schools to students aged 12-16 but especially those who are 15-16. The present paper attempts to describe teachers' practices and attitudes towards the introduction of the speaking tasks in the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU). In so doing, reference is made to previous research done by the same authors with teachers working towards the test (García Laborda & Fernández Álvarez, 2010). However, most of the data collected in this paper relate to the last two years in the first level of high school (15-16 years).

## 2. Background

High schools in Spain are divided into two sections: compulsory secondary education (4 years) and Bachillerato (2 years). After Bachillerato, students who will to pursue further university studies must take the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) (See Appendix A).

The prospective Spanish University Entrance Examination can have radical effects in the language classroom and many teachers can be affected by such change. The implications can be seen in the form of a pressure on teachers to get students ready for such tasks in just three years (2009-2012).

Spanish teachers often feel that it is their responsibility to train students for the tasks of the PAU test even when sometime this preparation may, in fact, mean that students would not progress at the adequate rhythm in their last high school year [as also seen by Choi (2008) and Kim (2010) in Korea]. They also tend to believe that it is difficult to acquire communicative skills in English at school. Although many Spanish teachers appear to have positive, favorable attitudes towards the inclusion of speaking tasks in the PAU, they believe that the new tasks can jeopardize their students' scores or they may need special test accommodation (Abedi, 2002; 2009; Abedi, Hofstetter & Lord, 2004), especially in the first two years. Thus, assessment, especially dynamic evaluation, may be difficult to achieve (Hill & Sabet, 2009).

Speaking is currently the weakest skill in the Spanish educational system and not many university instructors are happy with the current speaking competence that their students bring into their university classrooms. Consequently, high school teachers fear that the inclusion of speaking tasks in the annual university entrance examination may consistently be low. Therefore, teachers face a paradox. On the one hand, they wish the speaking skill had a place in the test; on the other, they feel the change will take too long to be implemented in a short term. In addition, while more and more teachers implement the communicative language teaching approach in short and punctual activities, there is still a large number of high school teachers who use Spanish mostly as the language of instruction, and most teachers still

use grammar and translation skills in teaching to the PAU—because of the kind of tasks that are included in the exam.

In relation to motivation, teachers are not sure whether the inclusion of speaking tasks would benefit their students' motivation towards the language. Of course, once the students get into college, they clearly see the importance of speaking a second (or subsequent) international language in order to move across Europe for leisure but more than anything else for academic purposes. The Erasmus program that has become as democratic as easy to accomplish has made students eager learners but only at advanced levels and in not few occasions they get to miss the lost opportunities while in high school. Certain aspects associated with high school achievement, and the fact that most high schoolers eventually find a job, had a negative effect in education in general and in foreign language learning in particular. Thus, many students do not get to see the need to learn such a second language although many Spanish teachers feel that the social web is introducing a change in this sense.

### **3. METHOD**

This study is a continuation of research being done by the Polytechnic University of Valencia in the analysis of the current situation of the Spanish University Entrance Examination in reference to both the inclusion of a new type of speaking tasks and also the use of computers in the PAU exam (similar to the new TOEFL, IELTS, DELE or OSYM) with secondary branches in the development and validation of language testing software. In this section, the design adopted for the study is described.

#### **3.1. Participants**

All 67 teachers participating in this study were teaching high school PAU preparatory courses as well as courses in compulsory secondary education (high school years 3 and 4). Their ages ran from 26 to 65 and most teachers tended to be in the 46-55 segment. The teachers correspond to the Alcala-Madrid area (center of Spain), and there was a larger number of female teachers (65%) than male ones (35%).

#### **3.2. Questionnaire**

These teachers agreed to respond to a 23 item questionnaire that included both closed and open questions. In some cases, they were also asked to rate or delimit the activities they did in the classroom. Overall, the questionnaire was divided in the following sections:

- a. General data
- b. Introduction to where and how oral tasks are done in class

- c. Listening comprehension
- d. Speaking.
- e. Specific preparation for the test

The Spanish questionnaire<sup>1</sup> is reproduced in Appendix B.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Since the full analysis of the teachers' responses would not fit in the requirements set for this paper, we will try to summarize the results obtained.

### **4.1. General data**

Most teachers in the study worked in public high schools. They usually had in between 15 and 25 years of teaching experience. As mentioned, most of them were in between 45-55 years old and mostly females.

In general, when teachers were asked about the difference in the quantity of speaking activities in their classrooms, they believed that they were a bit limited and that most of their students practiced most of their speaking in the classroom.

### **4.2. Listening comprehension**

In relation to this skill teachers mentioned that most of the exercises were short easy to correct exercises such as multiple choice or True/False exercises. Exercises with short answers (such a listening for data) are not very common, and exercises with longer responses or connected to other skills are rather unusual. Most of the sources they used were not real (usually teachers used those exercises that were included in their textbooks). When real exercises were done, a variety of the sources were available, but most teachers obtained their materials from the Internet especially from You Tube, Vimeo, Google Videos, and other video repositories. When asked about the length of time, most teachers responded that exercises could have different lengths, but that they were usually between three and five minutes long. Over 75% of the teachers devoted less than 10% of their class time to listening activities.

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<sup>1</sup> We did not perform the reliability or validity analyses because this was an attitudinal questionnaire. In order to design it, we followed the Delphi method based on the expertise of the different agents in the process: (1) a first version was designed by the researchers, then (2) we submitted it to the test coordinator who offered a number of suggestions, and (3) we also did one focus session with close colleagues who suggested no changes to the second version. We consider that validity and reliability might be appropriate for large samples or language testing which by no means was the case ( $N=67$ ).

### **4.3. Speaking**

Most speaking activities are done in pairs in front of the whole class. Monologues and paperwork do not seem to have an effect in the classroom. Role plays are also considered but not in a large amount. In general most speaking activities last about an average of three minutes. Teachers also recognize that they consider that preparing for the PAU would take at least three years (including the one in which the test is to be taken). Finally, speaking activities are rarely organized out of classroom and very few teachers actually use web 2.0 programs or websites to present their students speaking contents or to focus their activities.

### **4.4. Other pedagogical concerns**

Teachers usually stick to their textbooks to organize and develop speaking activities. In relation to homework about 25% usually ask their students to do the additional listening activities that students can find in the workbook CD Rom. As for what aspects to focus on they pay special attention to pronunciation and intelligibility but intonation and other suprasegmental features are not usually corrected. They also tend to correct in the middle of the students' production but usually for grammatical form rather than to clarify the students' production.

## **5. Conclusions**

In brief, teachers have a genuine interest in developing the speaking and listening components in their classroom. However, they tend to focus more on form than on meaning and limit the students' interaction to the classroom. We hardly found any teacher who recommended any Internet website to develop either skill. The collected data indicated that students tend to limit other learning and oral skills evolution because they usually lack the knowledge to extend classroom learning by using podcasts, for example. In general, these findings have direct implications in the classroom because teacher may be missing important opportunities to extend the students' receptive and productive possibilities of continuous training in communication.

In relation to the exam, it seemed evident that the time devoted to oral components should be increased in future, and that the students who will take the PAU in future would have to spend more time both at home and in the classroom on these activities. It is our task as researchers to warn the national bodies of the current problems. However, this study goes beyond the Spanish classrooms and may be applicable to other countries where the oral components of language learning seem to be a handicap rather than a challenging activity. In this sense, this paper is just a first approach that will

need to be replicated across different national and educational realities in each individual country.

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### ***The Authors***

Jesús García Laborda (jesus.garcialaborda@uah.es) is an associate professor of Modern Philology at Universidad de Alcalá. He holds a PhD in Linguistics and an EdD in Language Education. Dr Jesús García Laborda is a reviewer for 3 SSCI journals. He has published over 50 papers (7 in SSCI journals).

Miguel Fernández Álvarez (mferna20@csu.edu) is an assistant professor in Bilingual Education at Chicago State University. Dr Miguel Fernández Álvarez has a PhD in Linguistics, is a reviewer for 3 SSCI journals, and has published over 20 papers (2 in SSCI journals).

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**Appendix A**

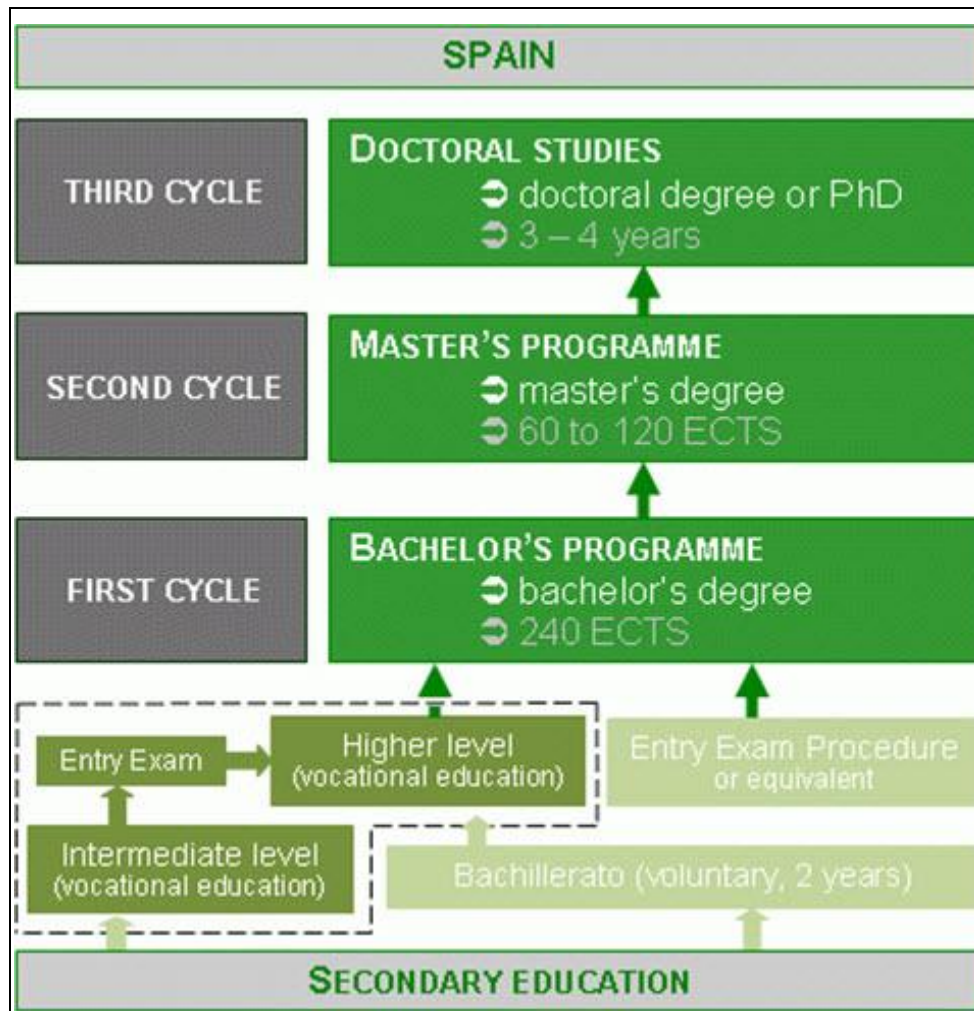


Figure 1. The Spanish educational system.



## Appendix B: Attitude Questionnaire in Spanish

### Cuestionario sobre el examen de Inglés en las Pruebas de Acceso a la Universidad

La presente encuesta forma parte de la investigación en la informatización de la Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad organizada por la Universidad de Alcalá. Se trata de una experiencia en la que se pretende medir y valorar los cambios de dicho examen en el contexto educativo dentro del marco de los centros docentes correspondientes a dicha universidad.

Para que esta encuesta sea efectiva es necesario que el/la profesor/a firme la siguiente declaración:

Por la presente, autorizo a los investigadores de la Universidad de Alcalá de Henares a utilizar los datos obtenidos a través de este cuestionario para las investigaciones derivadas de las experiencias en artículos de investigación futuros.

\_\_\_\_\_ a \_\_\_\_\_ 2010

Firma \_\_\_\_\_ DNI \_\_\_\_\_

### Cuestionario sobre el proceso de la PAU en la zona dependiente de la Universidad de Alcalá

#### Datos Generales

1. Tipo de centro en el que trabaja

- a) Concertado
- b) Privado no concertado
- c) Público

2. Indíquenos su edad

Menos de 35      35-45      45-55      Más de 55

3. Indíquenos su experiencia docente

Menos de 7 años      7-15 años      15-25 años      Más de 25 años

4. Indíquenos su sexo

Masculino

Femenino

En caso de que el MEC/CAM pidiera a las universidades una investigación más profunda ¿Le gustaría participar?

No

Sí

En caso afirmativo, por favor, indique un teléfono móvil, e-mail o dirección donde podríamos contactar con Vd.

Teléfono móvil

Email

Dirección

**Encuesta sobre la docencia**

Todas la preguntas siguientes se refieren a su experiencia con cursos de la ESO y primero de Bachillerato porque son los que supuestamente experimentarán las tareas orales en la Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad. Considere que un alumno que complete el Bachillerato deberá tener un nivel intermedio (B1) de idioma extranjero.

5. Mis alumnos de la ESO realizan tareas orales en la actualidad como parte de su aprendizaje.

No demasiadas    Un poco escasas    Suficientes    Bastantes    Muchas

6. Mis alumnos de 1º BAC realizan tareas orales en la actualidad como parte de su aprendizaje.

No demasiadas    Un poco escasas    Suficientes    Bastantes    Muchas

7. La mayor parte de los ejercicios auditivos los realizan

En clase

En casa

8. La mayor parte de los ejercicios de habla los realizan

En clase

En casa

**Comprensión auditiva**

9. Los ejercicios de comprensión auditiva suelen ser fundamentalmente (ordene de 1 a 4 sus preferencias):

Ejercicios de selección múltiple y matching ..... Porcentaje .....

Ejercicios de V/F ..... Porcentaje .....

Ejercicios de respuesta escrita corta ..... Porcentaje.....

Ejercicios de respuesta escrita larga ..... Porcentaje.....

Ejercicios que promueven respuesta en forma de redacción... Porcentaje

10. Los tipos y fuentes de de materiales que utilizo para ejercicios de comprensión auditiva son (ordene de 1 a 3 sus preferencias)

- Reales .....Porcentaje .....
- No reales- Monólogos.....Porcentaje .....
- No reales - diálogos .....Porcentaje .....

11. Duración (cada ejercicio sin considerar repeticiones de segmento de audio)

- menos de 3 minutos .....Porcentaje .....
- 3-5 minutos .....Porcentaje .....
- Más de 5 minutos .....Porcentaje .....

12. Tiempo que le dedico en clase a la semana

Menos de 10 minutos	10-15 minutos	16-25 minutos	26-30 minutos	Más de 30 minutos
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### Expresión oral

13. Los tipos de tarea de *speaking* que utilizo son (ordene de 1 a 3 sus preferencias)

- Monólogos (incluye presentaciones).....Porcentaje .....
- Diálogos (incluye role plays).....Porcentaje .....
- Otros tipos (por favor, cítelos).....Porcentaje .....

14. Duración de cada ejercicio (sin extensiones ni cambios de pareja)

- menos de 3 minutos .....Porcentaje .....
- 3-7 minutos .....Porcentaje .....
- Más de 7 minutos .....Porcentaje .....

### Preparación

15. Considero que para preparar una PAU con tareas **escritas** debo empezar a preparar tareas similares en

Primer ciclo ESO    3º ESO    4º ESO    1º BC    2º BC

16. Considero que para preparar una PAU con tareas **Orales** debo empezar a preparar tareas similares en

Primer ciclo ESO    3º ESO    4º ESO    1º BC    2º BC

17. Mis alumnos preparan y realizan las siguientes tareas orales en (p. eje. Proyectos, presentaciones, webquests, tareas orales en web o web 2.0)

- a) La ESO
- b) Bachillerato

18. Mis alumnos suelen realizar tareas orales de... oral en casa

- Comprensión .....
- Expresión .....
- Ambas .....

19. El libro de texto trae materiales adicionales para el trabajo autónomo de tipo oral

- Comprensión .....
- Expresión .....
- No trae .....
- Sí trae pero no me da tiempo de usarlas .....

20. En referencia a las tareas orales, pongo especial interés en (señale 4 factores)

21. En general, la diferencia entre mi trabajo oral en la ESO y BC es...

22. Una PAU con tareas orales sería

- a) Más difícil para los alumnos
- b) Más justa
- c) Más compleja de preparar
- d) Expresa otras ideas

23. Pienso que cuando introduzcan las tareas orales mi forma de impartir mi docencia cambiará

- No .....
- Sí .....

En caso afirmativo ¿Cómo?

24. Tipo de centro en el que trabaja

- a) Concertado
- b) Privado no concertado
- c) Público

25. Indíquenos su edad

Menos de 35      35-45      45-55      Más de 55

26. Indíquenos su experiencia docente

Menos de 7 años      7-15 años      15-25 años      Más de 25 años

27. Indíquenos su sexo

Masculino      Femenino

**¡Muchas gracias por su colaboración!**