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The Spanish language testee profile: Issues in standardized language testing

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Abstract

Spain is currently living a transitional situation. In 2013 a new educational law was passed, the Organic Law that Modifies the Quality of Education (LOMCE). That law, among many other aspects, introduces the use of standardized external tests either to (1) guide or provide suggestions for the educational track, or (2) to obtain inferences towards to what further studies should students follow (whether professional training and the academic Baccalaureate). This is especially a problem because language is one of the worst subjects for many Spanish students. This presentation is aimed at describing these problems along with a framework of how they can be solved.

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1. Introduction

Spain is currently living a transitional situation. In 2013 a new educational law was passed, the Organic Law that Modifies the Quality of Education (LOMCE). That law, among many other aspects, introduces the use of standardized external tests either to (1) guide or provide suggestions for the educational track, or (2) to obtain inferences towards to what further studies should students follow (whether professional training and the academic Baccalaureate). Testing is considered a valid tool to improve the educational policies as well as to observe information at three levels: school, educational district and educational measures (Wall, 2005; Cho & Eberhard,

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2013). As Stockard (2013) says: “assessment data such as that mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act can be used to examine the effectiveness of educational interventions” (2225).

The following figure shows the low position of Spain among the different countries of the OECD in English language knowledge and use (Figure 1).

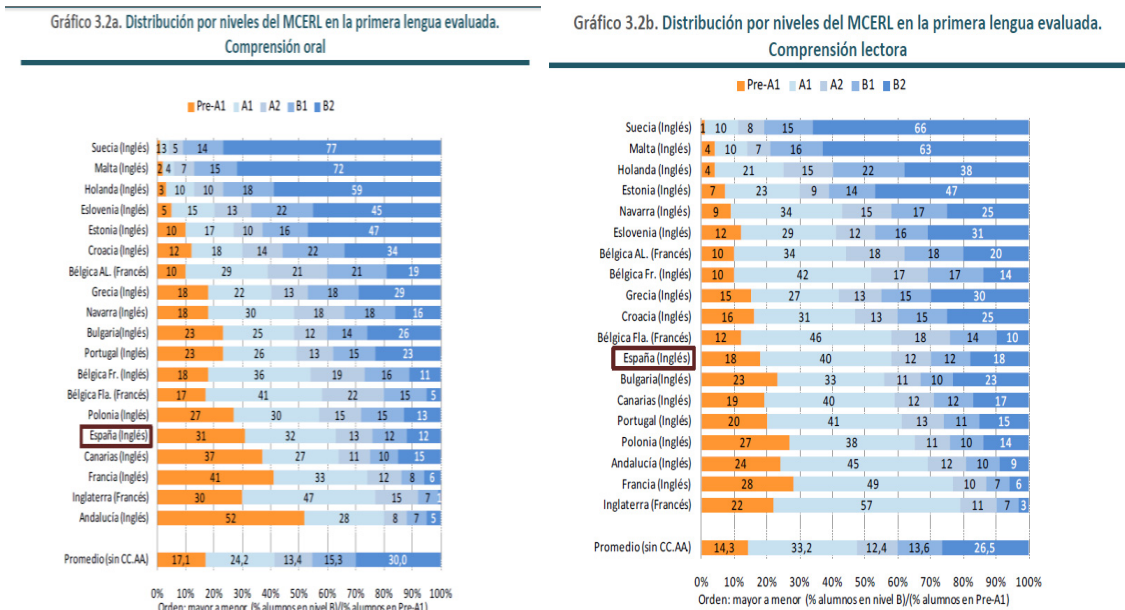


Fig. 1. Results of Spanish students in the European Survey of Language Competence

This figure clearly shows a low position in reading and speaking comprehension with a large number of students in the initial stages (Pre A-1). This situation may be due to a lack of knowledge but there might be other factors affecting such low performance. Among them, the following could be considered:

- (1) teachers test oriented culture; teacher preparation for
- (2) effects of teaching in the schools;
- (3) individual preparation for testing; and
- (4) student’s personal acceptance of test implementation.

In relation to teachers test oriented culture, Henwood & Featherstone (2013) believe that teachers do not believe in the results obtained in the tests. Since many of them are measured against the results obtained those tests, strong feelings against a culture of testing are natural. Thus, they do not consider that results may be indicators of knowledge or internal teaching quality or processes of the school. This position is partially supported by Ruff who studied a number of accountability reforms and says “Results indicate that the efficacy of student support personnel has been negatively impacted by accountability reforms, but schools that maintain a positive culture dedicated to excellence minimize that effect” (1270).

In relation to the effect of teaching, what is called backwash or washback, it is self-evident that it very much depends on how teachers actually approach testing. For those who testing is beneficial, results in the test can end up in being an adequate guide to improve their teaching (Spratt, 2005; Adediwura, 2012). Additionally as Daly, Baird Camberlain and Meadows mention, when “students and teachers welcome[d] the stretch and challenge policy and there were some indications that changes to the design of question papers could have some positive backwash effects” (2012, 139). Furthermore, Vikiru reported on a “study in Kenya on strengthening the development of

literacy in English among primary school children, which established that the learners performed poorly on skills that were not directly tested in the conventional examinations” (2011, 129). In the English classroom, Munoz and Alvarez (2010) observed that the inclusion of certain speaking tasks triggered the students’ performance especially in loquacity and will to achieve. Similar results were observed by Zhang & Elder (2009) among high schoolers in one of the most important standardized tests in China that serves to take decisions on university admissions.

Achieving a positive washback is one of the most important issues that depends on both the test to be delivered as much as on the test process that requires to be changed. In the following section, the language testing process along with its intrinsic difficulties will be presented.

2. Observations of the testing process and its constraints in Spanish students

As mentioned, changing a test requires a deep understanding of what the test takers’ problems are. Much of the current situation in Spain especially in the dysfunction of speaking skills has been blamed on the fact that very few students have the adequate preparation due to the following reasons:

- a. Limited use of L2 in the classroom
- b. Not enough practice in Speaking
- c. Underprepared teachers
- d. Language proximity and language difficulty
- e. Lack of time for oral skills due to constrains in the syllabus
- f. Written exams are predominant.

The OPENPAU project

Suggested all these problems in 2010, The Universidad de Alcalá requested funds to the Ministry of Education to research what the current situation of the Spanish University Entrance Examination (like the Özym) was. A number of initial reports led to the need to revise the current test construct (Bueno Alastuey, Garcia Laborda, Munoz Alcon, & Luque Agullo, 2014) and delivery and also to look for new ways to implement it nationally. Although the piloting stage was extremely valuable, the researchers also observed that many of the problems stated just above remained the same (Garcia Laborda, 2012). Thus, there was a clear need to research other factors, especially from the psychological perspective.

Current research shows that factors a to f may be partially true (Garcia Laborda, 2010), research into the language tester characteristics is currently missing in Spain. Thus, it seems necessary to explain what goes on in a regular test to be able to address some of the problems individually rather than as a whole whose difficulty may lay far beyond to be addressed. Figure 1 shows the common understanding in the OPENPAU project.

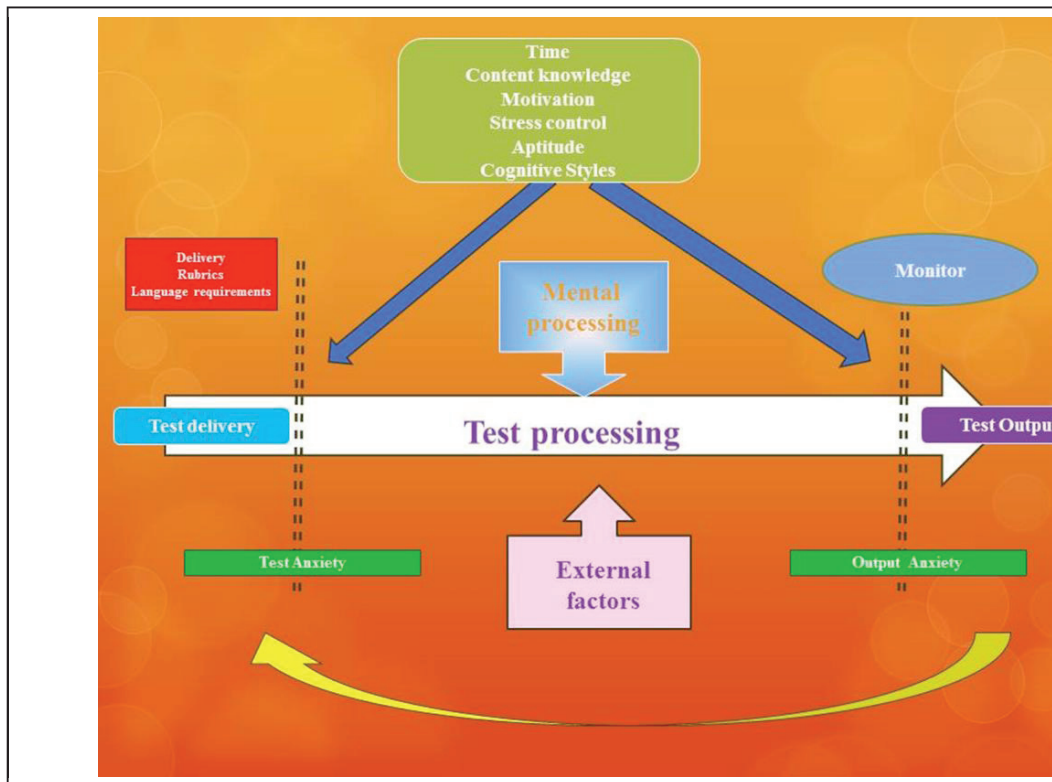


Fig. 2. Psychological processing of language testing

The psychological factors affecting language tessees have been rarely addressed in the Spanish educational research. Both teachers and administrators have seek limited explanations to justify the poor results. What the currents research has observed is that test delivery is crucial. Students in pen and paper tests tend to achieve better because they get the time to monitor their production. That is, to have a strict control of their own production. This permits certain security and relaxation especially if the adequate amount of time is provided for the test. However, this is not the case in spoken tasks where an immediate demand is necessary and where factors such as content knowledge, motivation and aptitude can have a limited effect especially the stress control suffers maladjustments due to the excess of pressure due to factors such as impossibility to correct one's production at will or even the fact that once the test is recorded (which is immediately), it cannot be changed. All these factors lead to difficulties in the output and ultimately when the tests are graded.

3. Effects for language testing and conclusions

Given the cognitive situation described in the previous section, language tests in the new educational law after 6th and 12th grade should consider aspects such as the test construction but also locus control. Previous work has been done by national researchers to suggest significant changes in the test construct. However, this seems to be quite an easy and rapid response to a more serious issue. If the problem is of psychological nature, this solution may not be as acceptable as it seems. Previous research in other fields have proved that Spanish people may be reluctant to assume determined irreversible decisions full of anxiety which put their knowledge or work at stake. I.e., two recent examples could be observed in the World soccer and basketball championships in which Spanish players

clearly failed when they were favorite. In this case, a combination of test anxiety and foreign language anxiety may make things even more difficult. Of the three stages of test anxiety (anticipatory anxiety, situational anxiety or evaluation anxiety), most likely students would suffer situational anxiety that can hardly be addressed (Young, 1986; Hewitt & Stephenson, 2012). Further research should look at the candidates' personalities and especially significant whether there is some general application of common personality traits that could make difficult oral high-stakes exams for Spanish speakers. Furthermore, changing the interest from the test to the testee at this point is a must. revising whether new items (Garcia Laborda & Martin-Monje, 2013) are more important than a humanistic approach to standardized language testing through innovative proposals such as Dynamic Assessment is also imperative. In this sense, there seems to be still a lot to do in a near future.

Acknowledgements

Acknowledgements and Reference heading should be left justified, bold, with the first letter capitalized but have no numbers. Text below continues as normal.

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