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Washback factors and inference predictors in the Spanish University Examination: The OPENPAU Project (FFI2011-22442)

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Abstract

Background: University Entrance Examinations provide information the student's opportunities to succeed in their academic university career. However, the current foreign language paper of the Spanish University Entrance Examination does not permit to obtain enough evidence to make academic inferences. Purpose of Study: The purpose of this study was to determine if the new test would serve for these objectives according to the students' needs and expected use of the language. Sources of Evidence: Based on Chapelle (2007) and García Laborda (2010). Analysis and results: Primary findings indicate that the test requires a deep revision in the test items, task typology and, overall, the test definition.

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1. Introduction

University Entrance Examinations are usually intended to provide information to infer whether students have opportunities to succeed in their academic university career (Chapelle et al, 2007). However, the current foreign language paper of the Spanish PAU (University Entrance Examination) is far from giving enough information that can permit to obtain enough evidence to make inferences about the prospective students using a foreign language in scholar settings because traditional approaches to the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) are based on written aspects of the language. Thus, objectivity is generally jeopardized by the limited assessment of the students' overall language competence. Since the final goal of the PAU is to get to know whether students will be able to achieve positively in their college studies in tasks that require the use of foreign languages, it is also crucial to do so both in writing/reading and listening/speaking (García Laborda, 2010) to achieve the objective ratings for language competence. Since the current PAU test usually lacks speaking sections, it is necessary to design tasks that can contribute to achieve better assessments.

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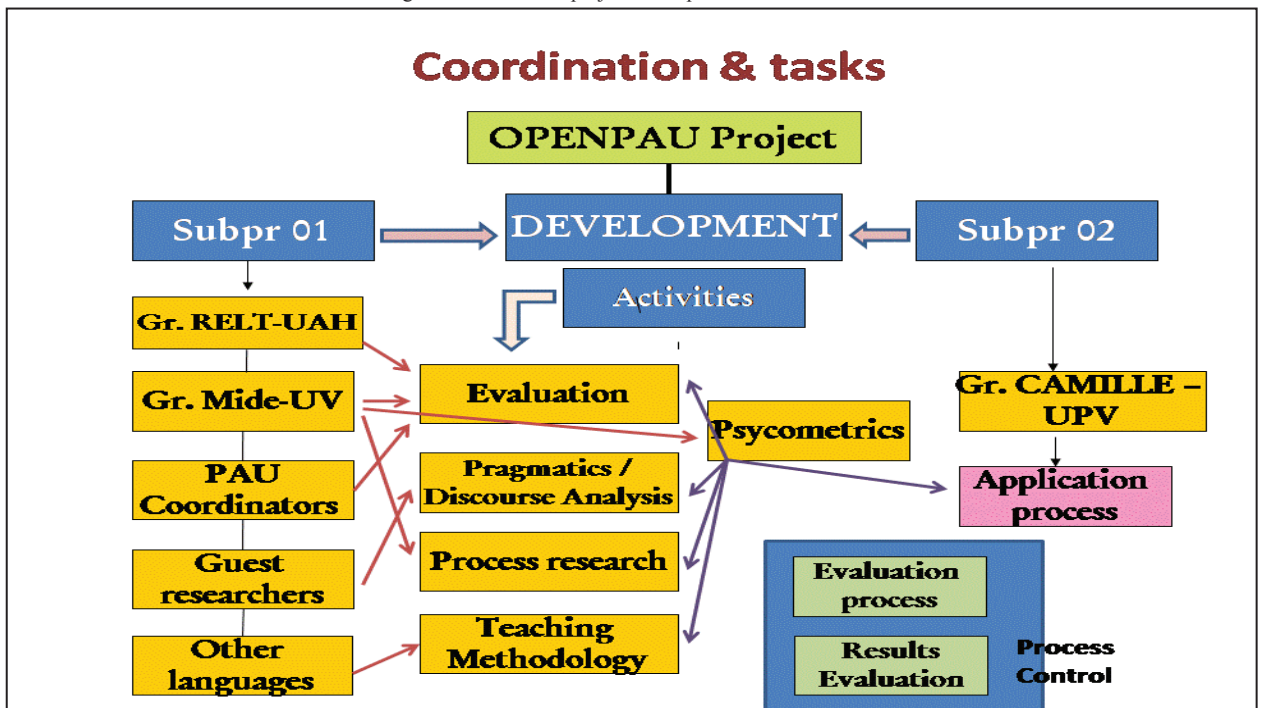
Only in 2008 the Spanish Ministry of Education began to evaluate the possibility to remediate this deficiency. To do so, the Ministry planned to change the English paper in the test but the current lack of studies shows that the test implementation was intended to be done top-down without further considerations and studies. The Ministry then posed the responsibility of the previous study and piloting experiences in the National Language School Academies system. The results so far have been kept under secrecy so no official results have been published. Since further external evidence was desired and a key issue in the Spanish Educational System, a number of local and national projects have served as a first approach to such a difficult matter. The OPENPAU Project (FFI2011-22442) which we describe in the following sections intends to prove an independent approach to the method, construct, delivery and effects in the Spanish Educational System.

This article describes the expected outcomes and impact of the implementation of the project. The paper begins by describing the project to go on into the expected features and benefits. The article concludes by stating the positive aspects of the project and setting the goals of further research.

2. The OPENPAU project

This research project intends to address a broad number of matters. In this project (Figure 1), twenty five university professors have to construct and design a proposal of the future test. As a consequence, in 2011, the professors will be divided into two groups. Subproject 1 will be working on the design and simulation of the test including a development of the construct while a second group will be studying its possible implementation online. The computer based subproject will also consider the application process. In between both groups there is a third group considered the central group whose responsibilities are to assure the adequacy of the research processes and possible derivations of the main project in areas such as Evaluation, Pragmatics and discourse analysis, teacher training and Evaluation/ Assessment/ test impact.

Figure 1. OPENPAU project description and coordination



3. Integration of new tasks

The first proposal for the new type of oral tasks includes the integration of traditional tasks such as language use or grammar, reading or writing with the new ones.

Table 1. Proposal and revision of current tasks in PAU

Skill	Task	Already done in PAU	Combined response
<i>Reading</i>	Multiple choice	NO	NO
	Short controlled responses	YES	NO
	Free responses	NO	YES
	Long writing response	NO	YES
<i>Writing</i>	Free responses	NO	NO
	Long writing response	YES	NO
<i>Listening</i>	Multiple choice	NO	NO
	Short controlled responses	NO	NO
	Free responses	NO	YES
	Long writing response	NO	YES
<i>Speaking</i>	Short responses in common situations	NO	NO
	Academic inference response	NO	NO
	Comprehension, description and explanation of simple pictures and diagrams.	NO	NO

4. Expected benefits and impact

Bachman and Palmer (1996) consider washback of significant importance in test's impact on society, educational systems and individuals. For them, washback is operational at two levels:

- The micro level (i.e. the effect of the test on individual students and teachers); and
- The macro level or the impact the test may have on society and the educational system.

We also considered these two aspects in order to approach the expected benefits of the project.

4.1.1. Macro level

In general, the expectations at macro-level refer to those whose impact can be social and have deep implications in the society. For instance in Table 2 the observer will notice the general improvement of speaking skills which intends to affect the academic and working conditions of many people by the acquisition of speaking skills which in turn will represent greater chances of European and worldwide mobility. This could also represent the need to implement additional English language programs such as bilingual education programs or additional English programs.

4.1.2. Micro level

New needs will also imply in certain cases more teacher training or new standards for pre-service teacher education. Teachers will certainly benefit from the new test formats and even its delivery (García Laborda, 2010). Motivation in individuals is also expected to increase as well as the redefinition of the teaching goals.

Table 2. Chart of washback effects on the Spanish PAU

Value/ Specificity	Factors Mediating Washback	Participants	Processes	Products
<i>General Positive Washback</i>	<i>Macrocontext:</i> General improvement of speaking skills at national level	School decisions: Bilingual, additional education in English longer classes, bilingual education (primary and secondary)	Students could perform in face-to-face situations but according to subproject 2 they could also improve the computer skills	
	<i>Microcontext:</i> Instrumental motivation: International trade; student mobility, Positive parental perception	Teacher Training and new standards in teacher education. Revision of teaching diplomas Student's Motivation intrinsecal and extrinsecal Refined goals		
<i>Specific Negative Washback</i>	Teaching in high school: Exam oriented Teacher's beliefs: Centrality of test Language learning Communicative language teaching	Syllabus Specific objectives Classroom activities and interaction In-class evaluation practices		Students' level of communicative competence clearly oriented towards the test

5. Expected drawbacks

Drawbacks are mainly related to the current interest in focusing only in the test at the stakes of general language teaching as it has been the trend over the last twenty-five years.

6. Conclusions

The main conclusion is that the inclusion of oral tasks can have a positive impact in the overall educational and professional expectations of prospective students in Spain. Through the OPENPAU project students will improve

their communicative skills successfully. The project also suggests ways in which the test can also be used to teach computer skills. Further, the results of the evaluation show that students could improve their motivation and thus reduce computer and test anxiety produced by the higher complexity of the new test format. As a consequence, No significant differences against the traditional format (no speaking, pen and paper) would be expected. And thus, the new PAU would facilitate the achievement of a higher grade of language knowledge not only in the speaking tasks but also in the written ones. Further research should consider the effect of pragmatics and culture studies in the students' performance as well computer skills as suggested by previous works by the same authors.

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