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Co-Participation In Oral Paired Interviews: Preliminary Findings Of The OPENPAU Project

Jesús García Laborda[a]*, Nuria Otero de Juan[a], Margarita Bakieva[b]

[a]Universidad de Alcala, c/ Trinidad, 3, 28801 Alcalá Henares-Madrid, Spain
[b]Grupo MIDE-Universidad de Valencia, Avenida Blasco Ibañez 30, Valencia 46010, Spain

Abstract

The Ministry of Education is changing how Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) will be delivered in 2017. To test the construct, experimental oral interviews with potential candidates of the PAU were done. Purpose of Study: The research observed whether paired interviews favored the delivery and organization of the PAU test and if this type of delivery favors the students' performance. This paper studies how students in paired interviews outperform the individual. Sources of Evidence: About ten interviews were delivered in the US and about 40 in Spain. They all were recorded and analyzed from the interaction and output quality. Analysis and results: The study indicates that co-construction of output may favor communication and improve the student's individual performance.

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Keywords: Testing; speaking; discourse; competence.

1. Introduction

The English paper of the Spanish University Entrance Examination (PAU) has kept the same construct for many years. Recently the Ministry of Education, Culture & Sports introduced a new law that regulates how this test is to be delivered (http://www.boe.es/boe/dias/2013/12/10/pdfs/BOE-A-2013-12886.pdf). Up to now, oral tasks were not included in test construct and since many teachers teach "to the exam", the speaking competence remains

* Jesús García Laborda. Tel.: +34 91 885 5041; fax: +34 91 885 4441.
  E-mail address: jesus.garcialaborda@uah.es

underdeveloped in Spain. As a matter of fact, as seen in the European Survey of Foreign Language Competence, Spanish students are far behind than most of their counterparts in Europe. This can clearly be seen in the following figures 1 to 3 (source: European Union, http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/docs/en/final-report-escl_en.pdf).
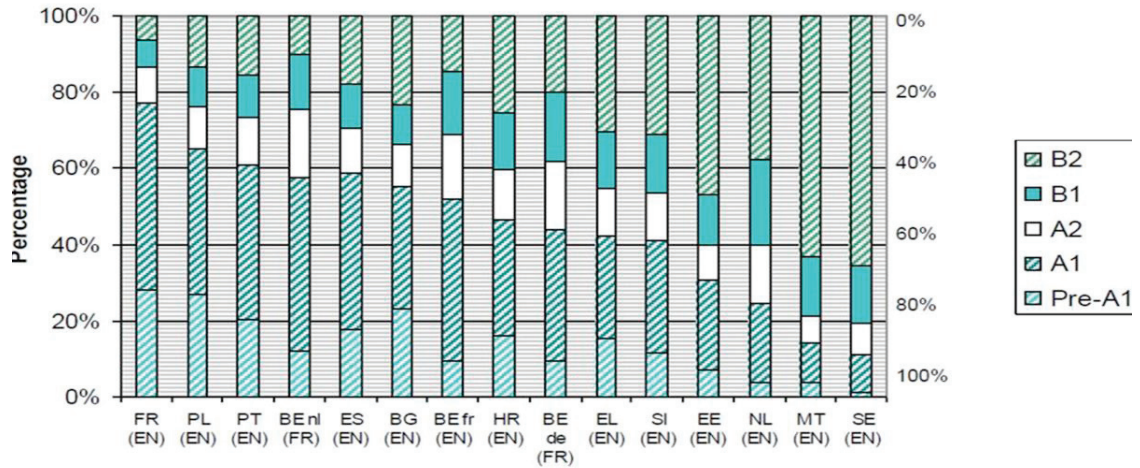

Fig. 1. First target language Reading: CEFR levels by educational system.
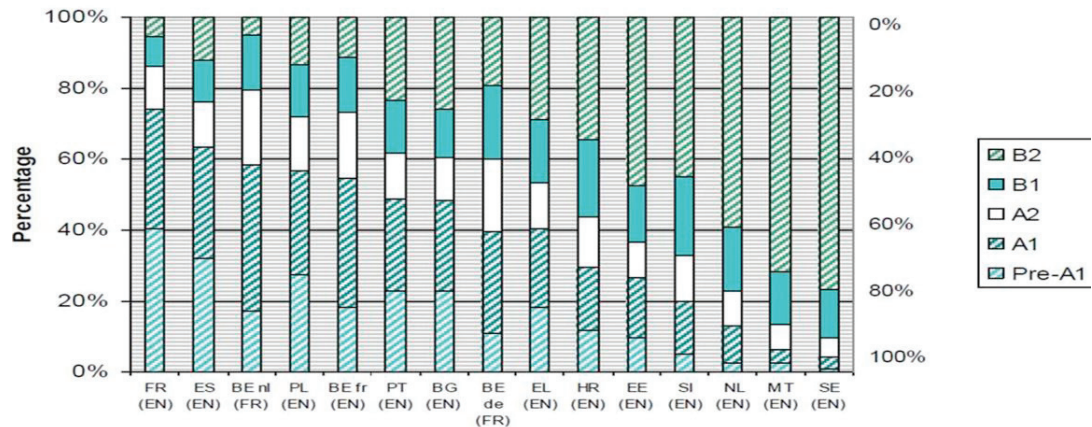

Fig. 2. First target language Listening: CEFR levels by educational system.

This situation led to the need to find new ways of testing that could have a reduced budget and still provide with adequate inferences. Being that the case, the OPENPAU project addressed a number of issues that implied a total revision of the current test. Those aspects included better and well developed items, new tasks, ICT resources in shape of mobile applications and tablet Pc's, materials and others. A second part of the project was the field research. To elaborate on this, we tried to deliver tests for high school leavers in five different regions in Spain. However, we found that in 2012 many schools were reluctant to accept researchers in their classes for two main

reasons: first, because the law was going to change soon after; and second, because the Ministry was already doing their own research. Since test revisions and change are extremely sophisticated, figure 3 presents the set of elements that requires deep revisions to implement a well-fundamented change.
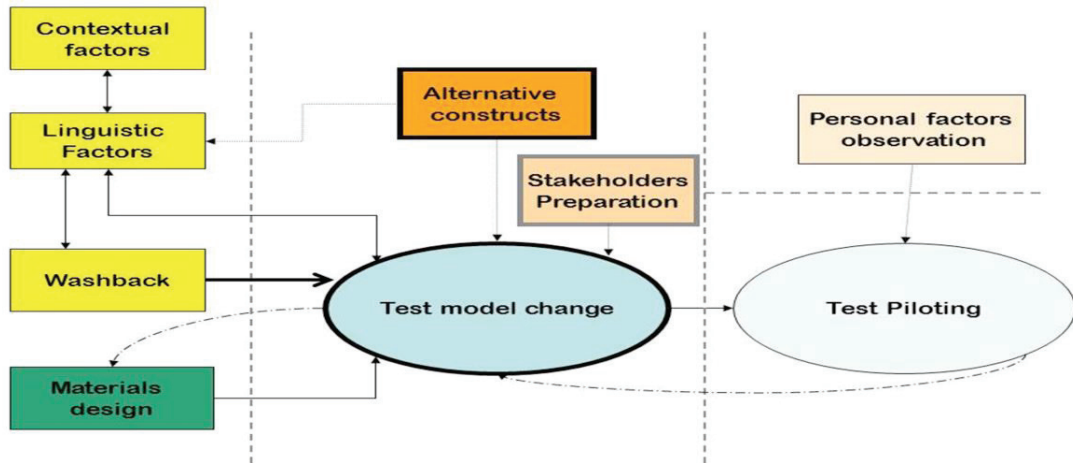

Fig. 3. Analysis of elements affecting the test change

In this presentation, we focused in two main points: Stakeholders preparation and Personal factors. These are the factors where we located the individual performance according to context. As context, we also understood what Weir (2005) claims to be deliver modes in his socio-cognitive theory of language testing. It is understood that if the number of subjects changes so does the test delivery and, consequently, the student's individual performance.

2. The study

To verify whether students' performance changes according to the delivery mode in paired interviews, we arranged about 60 interviews in five regions in Spain plus 20 more with international students enrolled in Penn State University (Pennsylvania, USA). Of those, we chose 20 at the college of Education in Alcalá de Henares in the Madrid region for this pilot study hereby referred.

The students were informed of the three tasks they would be delivered. First, a short dialogue interviwer-interviewee about general matters. Most of the possible questions were included in the original proposal. Second, students described a picture and had one or two questions from the other interviewee. Finally, the third is a role play with a minimal two-minute preparation. The total amount of time for the test was about 15 minutes per pair. The interviews were video-recorded and are being analyzed currently.

3. Results

According to our records, the students in this relatively small sample evidenced a high interest in the test. Although the interview had no further implications in their grades, they evidenced a great interest in participating.
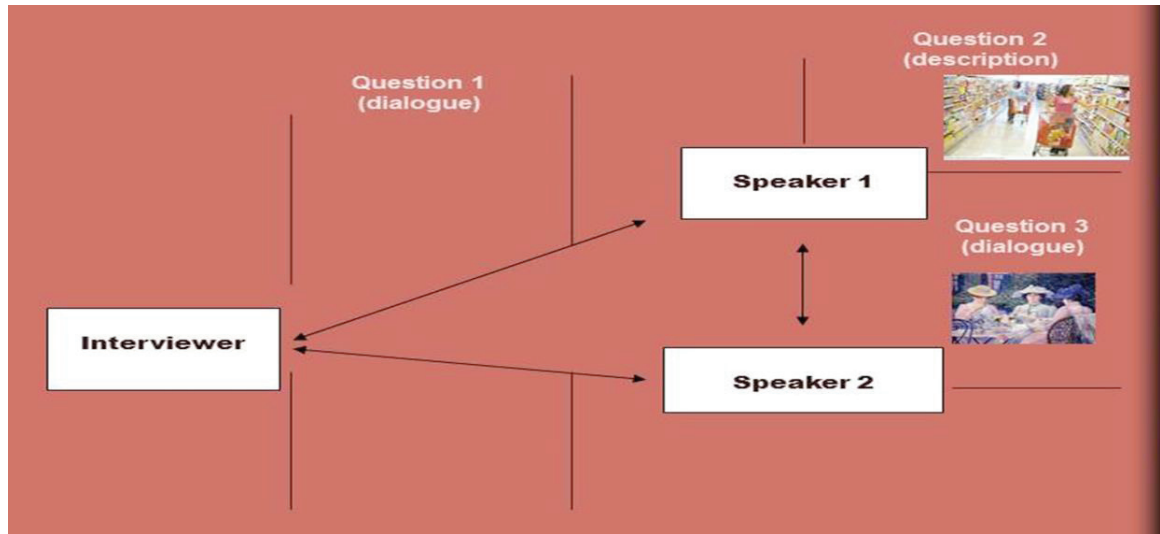
Fig. 4. Types of interaction according to the question

Figure 4 presents the types of interactions according to the task and question. Overall, we found that the interaction between speaker 1 or 2 and the interviewer was always very limited probably for two main reasons: first, oral tests are usually very stressful for the students so the beginning of the test is usually harder; second, if the interviewer is not able to make the student feel at ease, he will become even more anxious. As opposed to the native speaker, in our study we realized that in oral tests, especially in this first interaction, students tend to focus on form or "monitor" their speech more than they did in question number three. We also observed that students did more self-repair in this question than in question number three. This may also be due to the fact that test interviewers generally think that a student must provide "evidence of knowledge" at a test rather than simply trying to communicate the ideas in a comprehensible manner. In fact, this is very much what happens in question number three (figure 5). As it can be observed in figure 5, students' attitudes vary considerably according to the interlocutor.

A   B

Fig. 5 A B =Two moments of interview 14

In most of these paired interviews we observed that when the interaction is done with the interviewer the other student's body language reflects a fall in their interest that is retaken as soon as the activities become more interactional. A significant part of our research found that in paired activities, students tend to support the other students responses. This may have a significant effect in their performance. In fact, most of the students in our

research showed that their output seems to improve when addressing the other student. The atmosphere is also more relaxing and students tend to speak better and more. The length of production also increases and turn taking becomes more vivid reflecting more what could be expected from a communicative language teaching approach.

4. Discussion and conclusions

From our observations we discovered that there are two different grades within the same interview, one is obtained in a more constrained situation in which the student tends to "show off" and evidence her highest competence in the language and another in which the student intends to simply try to communicate. Monitoring is natural in a controlled conversation like a test so that is probably why students produce more self-repair and tend to emphasize more their ideas in the relation with the interviewer. However, we also found that students usually "do better" in their co-construction of the dialogue with their peer. This may well indicate that the fact that their affective filter is lower and the more possibilities are given to interaction may also enhance their production. As a consequence our current research looks at how students con simple be more communicative in paired interviews. This may have a positive effect in the PAU because this can permit better assessments in less time and better scores as well as more realistic evidence to take decisions. Out future research may link these results either with connectionist theories of language development or interactional competence in language testing. In either case, current research is rather limited and might be worth observing whether these premises can be fulfilled in larger studies.

Acknowledgements

References

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