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A comparison of pre-service towards testing: The Spanish Baccalaureate General Test and the American OPI

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Abstract

Problem Statement: One of the most frequently neglected aspects of testing is teachers' attitudes. Overall, in-service teachers may have a preconception of what testing means and what its implications are both in high and low stakes testing. However, very few studies have addressed the realities or opinions of pre-service teachers. **Methods:** Two groups of pre-service teachers in the second and fourth year of college in the United State and Spain participated in a pilot study and took a questionnaire about testing styles, exam implications, format and attitudes towards the task of assessment. The study is funded by the Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness in Spain and Valdosta State University in the United States. **Findings and Results:** The study suggests that pre-service training is necessary to get adapted to a high stakes test based educational system. It also shows that pre-service teachers shape more their ideas as test candidates than as educators. **Conclusions and Recommendations:** American pre-service teachers are better prepared for test delivery and organization. Besides, the distorted ideas and ideological distance between the testing concepts and the candidates' internal opinions should possibly be revised and more time should be devoted to the process of testing, which is commonly forgotten in language courses.

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1. Introduction

One of the most frequently neglected aspects of testing is teachers' attitudes. Overall, in-service teachers may have a preconception of what testing involves and what its implications are both in high and low stakes testing.

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However, very few studies have addressed the realities or opinions of pre-service teachers. According to Wharton (1998) most pre-service teachers receive a few lessons on language testing. However, although some countries such as the United States (and soon Spain) have a strict high stakes exams educational system, pre-service teachers do not have specific training for those exams (Cherry & Bradley, 2004; Kosnik, 2005). High stakes language tests have a direct impact on the contents, syllabus and teaching methodology used to teach the language. In fact, some even think that using high stakes constructs in low stakes tests facilitates adaptation to significant tests and lowers students' anxiety (Ortiz-Marrero & Sumaryono, 2010). García Laborda et al. (2012) studied the impact of the University Entrance Examination (PAU) and observed that teachers tend to adapt their teaching to the reading and writing tasks (See also Messick, 1996; Wall, 2005). In countries where educational support in both public and private schools depends to a large extent on measurable tests like those used in some states in the USA under the "No child left behind" policy tend to be more competitive (Fairbairn & Fox, 2009).

According to Murray et al. (2012) "One measure of the impact of a high-stakes test is the attitudes that test takers hold towards it"(577). Brown (2012) observed that pre-service teachers' attitudes towards efficacy in high stakes mathematics tests may have a relative impact but only in relation to accountability while attitudes certainly have an effect in teaching. In a large study, Davis (2011) stated that the format of science tests also shapes the beliefs of teachers about what needs to be included and what is supposed to be a good test (also Krupa, 2011; Taber et al., 2011; Maso, 2010) and they spend a good amount of time in class preparing specifically for exams (Lowry, 2010). On the other hand, researchers like Yazzie-Mintz (2011) have observed that efficient first language teachers may well ignore detrimental high stakes features in order to focus on teaching the content for the good of their students because, for other researchers, preparing for tests may not lead to learning (Collins et al., 2010; Moran, 2010; Starr, 2012).

2. The Spanish Baccalaureate General Test and the Oral Proficiency Interview (SOPI)

In general, Spanish students only have to take one compulsory high stakes test during their academic lives: the University Entrance Examination (PAU). This exam will change into the Baccalaureate General Test beginning in 2014 and during 2013 most of the trials and piloting will be done by the regional educational authorities and the National Institute of Educational Evaluation (INEE). Although García Laborda et al. (2012) suggested a number of tasks, up to now pre-service teachers have only experienced the PAU directly as test takers. When the new educational system will begin in 2014, these pre-service teachers will have obtained their university degrees and they will have to face a significant change that will affect their practices. The PAU consisted of reading, grammar and writing tasks with no speaking requirement. In the United States, American pre-service teachers have experienced the "No Child left behind" act and policy so they are already familiar with high stakes testing, at least, as test candidates. Besides that, if they want to work as foreign language teachers, they must take the Oral Proficiency Interview Test (OPI) for which they can practice through the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). The OPI has four sections just as the OPI does: warm-up, level checks, probes, and wind-down. Contrasting these two totally different but complementary perspectives towards language testing sheds light on the processes that Spanish pre-service teachers will have to acknowledge and be trained in so that they can incorporate themselves adequately into the new educational system in which external and high stakes evaluation will have an important role.

3. Research

Since teachers need specific training to face high stakes tests and previous attitudes towards language testing and impact are an essential part of teachers' identity formation and have a significant impact on what they do and how they teach in class, we consider it important to know what pre-service teachers think about testing and assessment.

3.1. Research questions and experimental design

The research hereby presented is a summary of a first pilot study which compares the attitudes of 9 Spanish students who took the PAU in 2010 and 10 American students who took the SOPI approximately on the same dates. The idea in this first pilot study is to verify their responses and to modify the questionnaire used for a larger study with about 100 pre-service teachers coming from two educational regions in Spain (namely, Madrid and Castilla La Mancha). In this sense the research seeks to obtain responses to the following questions:

- a. Do pre-service teachers share similar attitudes towards testing despite their goals in testing?
- b. Does previous experience have an effect on those attitudes?
- c. What is the expected effect of pre-service teachers' attitudes in their practice?
- d. Is the tool (the questionnaire) used for the definitive study adequate?

Although statistically speaking the results of this pilot study do not lead to clear inferences, the research team felt that a small sample like this would be valid and reliable to implement the final study. The researchers are also aware that the results are tentative and are merely intended to shed some light on how the research should be extended. In this paper, statistics are used with great moderation although a few quantitative aspects are presented here. Thus, these results should simply be considered as indicators. The questionnaire can be found in the Appendix.

3.2. Results

In general, most of both American and Spanish students cannot recognize what style of teaching they had in high school. Although they have had a course on teaching methodology, they can hardly understand the differences between grammar-translation, communicative approaches or eclectic ones. Nevertheless, while the Americans put forth different responses, they tend to state that they had more teachers who used grammar-translation methods. This percentage is even higher in the Spanish case. It is most likely that the Spanish students either tend to have a great influence from old methodologies or they do not fully understand the differences among methodologies.

In terms of the question about whether language tests can have an impact on language learning progress, six American and Spanish students responded that it tends to be negative. This shows that there is at least a balance of positive and negative effects. In both cases, the qualitative responses indicate that pressure, lower grades and higher anxiety tend to limit students' performance.

In relation to the tests taken, more than half of the Americans indicated that they had taken at least three high-stakes tests corresponding to those taken at the different school levels. Most of the Spanish students had only taken one high stakes language test, the PAU. However, some had taken school tests for language given by the Cambridge Board of Examinations or the Spanish School of Languages.

One of the questions that shows the greatest disparity is number four, which is about focusing on passing tests or on learning teaching methods. While the American students show a more genuine interest in learning and emphasize the need for good teaching methodology, the Spanish students focus almost totally on passing the test (table 1). The interesting issue in this case is that the implications for testing would be different and would also lead to different kinds of tests. The American students would probably tend to use norm-referenced tests, while the Spanish would be criterion-referenced oriented (for a difference between norm and criterion referenced test look at <http://www.altalang.com/beyond-words/2008/05/22/norm-referenced-vs-criterion-referenced-language-tests/>). The implications are tremendous as the first are more competitive but the second are more democratic and clearly aimed at the educational benefit of all the students as opposed to the prevailing American tendency to reward only the best students.

Table 1. Have you been more anxious about passing tests than learning about practical teaching methods?

| | Pass | Learn | Both | Lost |
|-------|------|-------|------|------|
| Spain | 6 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| US | 4 | 2 | 4 | |

A small difference was found in relation to familiarity with testing, the last two questions. While six American pre-service teachers state that they would be able to give language tests, only three Spanish ones feel able to do so. This may imply that additional training towards language testing would be desirable. The main problem is that language testing does not have a significant role in any of the language content classes in most universities in Spain. This is the reason why only one Spanish pre-service teacher considers herself capable of assessing her prospective students but a total of nine American pre-service teachers did.

4. Implications and conclusions

The results of this pilot study indicate a number of conclusions. In relation to study question d in section 3.1 above, we found that the questionnaire was well understood by the pre-service teachers except for the first question. According to the contextual information, the Spanish group may not understand well the differences between different teaching methodologies. However, there is a long-standing tradition that Spanish foreign language classes tend to be taught in Spanish and they are oriented towards grammar as not many teachers follow a communicative approach (Criado & Sánchez, 2009). If this is true, none of the questions would need to be rephrased. Other questions evidenced great discrepancies but local researchers assumed them as genuine and credible.

In relation to question a, the research found that there is a great difference in how American pre-service teachers approach language testing as opposed to their Spanish counterparts. While the former favor norm-referenced assessments, the later are more used to criterion-based ones. This is especially significant because the implementation of an educational system with a strong testing component may imply a special emphasis on educating teachers for high stakes testing. This lack of interest may be the reason behind Spain's poor results on international diagnosis tests (such as PISA, PIRLS and so). Maybe Teaching and Education colleges in Spain should revise their practices in this sense to reinforce the capacity of their teachers to assess students adequately in the benefit of general education. It would seem to be a problem to have the vast majority of Spanish pre-service teachers consider themselves incapable of assessing their future students.

To conclude, assessment and evaluation are not necessarily opposed to education. A positive impact can be expected from good and fair assessment practices. As mentioned in the literature at the beginning of this paper, high stakes testing can enhance content learning (in this case, foreign language). The Spanish educational system can benefit from this increase through the use of adequate assessments, but if the Spanish government wants to do so, it will have to provide good training for pre-service and practicing teachers.

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Appendix

General Perceptions of Pre-service teachers towards testing and the SOPI

- Thus far, to which language teaching style have you been exposed?
 grammar-translation based communicative-functional eclectic
- In your opinion, can testing negatively impact the process of learning a foreign language?
 yes no explain:
- During your preparation to become a teacher, what required tests have you taken?

4. Have you been more anxious about passing tests than learning about practical teaching methods?
 yes no explain:

5. Are you already familiar with testing formats to assess all language skills?
 yes no explain:

6. Do you think that you will be prepared enough to efficiently assess your future language students?
 yes no explain: