

Implementing the Oral English Task in the Spanish University Admission Examination: an International Perspective of the Language¹

La implementación de la prueba de inglés oral en la Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad: una perspectiva internacional de la lengua

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Abstract

Current research on the status of English around the world has shaken English language teaching (ELT) to its foundations. There has probably been no parallel movement in the history of language teaching that has initiated such a profound deconstruction of the long-established, taken-for-granted bases of ELT. Initial considerations about the expansion of language itself have paved the way to an intense debate about the need for a decentering process that questions the ultimate meaning of English, nativeness and ownership. Consequently, scholars and teachers have felt the urge to revise the goals, norms, models and standards of ELT. As a result of studies on oral exchanges among native and non-native speakers of English and the patterns of language use underlying these acts of communication, we are beginning to elucidate the boundaries of intelligibility in international oral communication.

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The findings are of particular relevance to both the teaching and especially the testing of English oral skills. The design of the new English Test included in the Spanish University Admission Examination (PAU) includes the obligatory evaluation of a speaking component. This initiative has been launched by the Spanish education authorities in an attempt to achieve beneficial washback and respond to the real linguistic needs of Spanish students in this new communicative scenario. However, this orientation to globalization poses challenges for those involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of candidates' oral performance. This paper addresses the main issues involved in the definition of the oral construct of the new oral sub-test and its specifications, providing some guidelines concerning tasks and scoring procedures. It also tackles some major issues for consideration that are thought to be crucial in the design and development of oral tests from a perspective of English as an international language.

Keywords: Spanish University Admission examination, English test, oral sub-test, World Englishes, English as an international language.

Resumen

Las recientes investigaciones realizadas sobre la posición que ocupa el inglés en el mundo han sacudido los principios básicos relativos a la enseñanza del inglés. Probablemente no haya habido en la historia de la lengua inglesa un movimiento semejante que haya iniciado esta profunda deconstrucción de las bases de la enseñanza del inglés. Los enfoques sobre la expansión de la lengua han promovido un intenso debate sobre el proceso de «descentrización» que cuestiona los conceptos de propiedad del inglés. Ello ha obligado a re-examinar objetivos, modelos y estándares vinculados a su enseñanza. Gracias a los estudios realizados en el intercambio de mensajes orales entre hablantes nativos y no-nativos, y de los modelos del uso del lenguaje que subyacen dichos actos comunicativos, se empiezan a discernir las barreras de la inteligibilidad en la comunicación oral internacional.

Estos resultados son especialmente relevantes en el contexto de la enseñanza y evaluación de las habilidades orales en inglés. El diseño del nuevo examen de Inglés en la Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad (PAU) incluye la evaluación obligatoria de un componente de producción oral. Esta iniciativa promovida por las autoridades académicas españolas intenta estimular un efecto rebote positivo y atender a las necesidades comunicativas del alumnado español en este nuevo escenario comunicativo. No obstante, dicho enfoque plantea nuevos retos para aquellos involucrados en el proceso de diseño y evaluación de las producciones orales. Este artículo examina los principales aspectos relacionados con la definición del constructo del componente oral que se incluirá en el examen de inglés y sus características esenciales. También se detallan algunas directrices que pueden ser de gran utilidad en la implementación de las tareas orales y sus criterios de evaluación. Finalmente, se analizan aspectos críticos

relacionados con la implementación de las pruebas orales desde una perspectiva del inglés como lengua internacional.

Palabras clave: Prueba de Acceso a la Universidad, examen de inglés, prueba de producción oral, World Englishes, inglés como lengua internacional.

Introduction

There is nothing original in stating that English has become the most important language used for international communication. The importance of English transcends the limits of its native speakers. Estimations disclose the hardly negligible figure of 80% as the total amount of verbal exchanges conducted in English daily that do not include native speakers of the language (Gnutzmann, 2000).

Two vibrant proposals, namely, the New Englishes approach and, in connection with this, the global English approach (Graddol, 2006), seem to be permeating the boundaries of the rigid traditional native vs. non-native speaker categorisation, enriching what is nowadays understood as “the English language”. These two proposals will be the focus of the next section.

Rethinking Goals, Models, Norms and Standards: the Potential of English as a Lingua Franca for English Teaching and Assessment

Shifting Perspectives: from Nativeness to Competence

The Kachruvian threefold model constitutes one of the paradigms that has most influenced English studies during the last decades. In Kachru's Concentric Circles (1985), the inner circle corresponds to the countries where English is spoken as the mother tongue of most of their inhabitants, namely the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand; the outer (or extended) circle involves the places where English has been institutionalized in non-native contexts, such as Bangladesh, Ghana, India or Nigeria; and the third or expanding circle relates to other countries where English is a foreign language. Pedagogically speaking, every circle ideally demands the implementation of a singular language teaching approach.

The norm-providing or inner circle follows an exonormative or native speaker model; the norm-developing or outer circle would benefit from an endonormative or nativised model –the local model of English accepted in a particular community of the outer circle–, and the norm-developing or expanding circle would fit in nicely with a *lingua franca* model (Kirkpatrick, 2007), even though, as it stands, it still echoes the EFL tradition.

Although this paradigm has paved the way for an enriching and sometimes heated academic debate, the model has been criticised for constituting an ethnocentric proposal not completely adequate for a context of international English (Alptekin, 2002). An alternative approach is to replace the concept of nativeness with the notion of competence. Modiano (see Rajadurai, 2005 and Burt, 2005) proposes a centripetal circle model at whose heart are positioned not native, but competent users of international English, whose second circle contains native speakers of English which is not apt for international communication and non-native speakers of English with incomprehensible naturalised varieties, and whose third circle comprises individuals who have not achieved proficiency in any variety of English. Thus, there seems to be a need to distinguish between English used within a particular community and English as an International Language (EIL) or English as a Lingua Franca (ELF).

The advent of ELF research has been the object of a fruitful academic debate. Although there is no unique variety of ELF (as there is not a single variety of British or American English), ELF research has evinced that there are clear tendencies to how English is used in NS-NNS (native speakers - non-native speakers) and NNS-NNS interactions and how they differ from NS-NS exchanges. Attempts at depicting the core features of ELF are probably best seen as samples of how «incorrect» forms are irrelevant in ELF communication rather than being interpreted as features to be imposed upon ELF users. This entails that, even though ELF learners may not have a good command of a particular grammatical aspect, they may be expert ELF communicators provided that they master key ELF areas such as flexibility, negotiation and accommodation strategies. As for models and standards, inner circle standard English still constitutes a valid model, even though expanding circle users need to be aware of and familiar with other varieties of English (Acar, 2008).

Pedagogical Implications

The previous considerations carry highly important implications for foreign language teaching (Modiano, 2001; Jenkins, 2003; Graddol, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2007). First of all, the «native speaker» is no longer the unique model to follow in foreign language teaching. There

is no such thing as the «ideal» speaker of a language, but there are many speakers who express themselves according to a particular variety of the language, the «foreign accent» being just one of them. Denying foreign users of English the possibility of speaking English with a foreign accent is denying their own identity (Paikeday, 1985; Rajagopalan, 1999).

Secondly, the expansion of the language into different zones of all the continents accounts for the appearance of numerous varieties of English. English as a *lingua franca*, or rather, *lingua franca Englishes* (Cogo and Dewey, 2006) turn out to be the alternative that fits the expanding circle in particular. ELF materializes in an emerging range of varieties (Breibach, 2003; Seidlhofer, 2003), on an equal footing with the many other varieties of English. ELF contains tendencies in the international use of English and originates from the many exchanges of communication that are produced everyday around the world among speakers of different cultural and geographical backgrounds who manage to communicate successfully. British English or American English may not compose the most feasible or desirable variety of English to be learnt or adopted by a foreign speaker who may need English to communicate internationally without feeling the need to be identified as a native American or British speaker of the language, and who may be a highly proficient user of the language without having a native-like accent.

Thirdly, the concept of interlanguage (IL), as a stage of «imperfect» use of English in the process of an approximation to a «perfect» native-like competence, needs to be revised. This notion is customarily associated with deficiencies, mistakes and errors (Acar, 2006). In the case of ELF, the fact that non-native speakers outnumber native-speakers may indicate the possible need to move away from the norms and standards of native speakers.

Fourthly, this denationalization of English may demand a new orientation in ELT from correctness to appropriateness (Seidlhofer, 2001), whose main goal is not the attainment of native-like communicative competence and whose cultural content is not exclusively inner circle societies (McKay, 2002). More realistic goals seem to be accommodation and intelligibility in international communication (Acar, 2006), and communicative competence in international communication. Finally, the reconsideration of the goals, norms and standards of ELT has to be coupled with a similar review of assessment. The crux of the matter in assessment is how interlocutors adjust their speech and mutually accommodate to enable understanding (Jenkins, 2003).

To conclude, the ELF paradigm does not only carry implications for non-native speakers of English. On the contrary, native speakers may need to be aware of the necessity to adapt their speech to the international sphere and ELF in terms of speed, pronunciation, and their use of expressions whose meaning can be understood almost literally rather than metaphorically (Grzega, 2005).

Specifying the Threshold of Intelligibility and Comprehensibility in Oral ELF Interactions

Achieving real understanding among NS-NNS and NNS-NNS depends on three main elements (see Pickering, 2006): intelligibility (i.e. the capacity to recognize and understand items in isolation or in connected speech), comprehensibility (i.e. the ability to understand the meaning of terms in context), and interpretability (i.e. the skill to understand the speaker's intentions).

There is not a single variety of ELF, but as many varieties as language encounters among NS-NNS and NNS-NNS. However, the remarkable commonalities among these exchanges are that there exist a number of variables which do not affect intelligibility and comprehensibility. According to Jenkins (2006), the identification of the «frequent and systematic used forms that differ from inner circle forms without causing communication problems» (p. 161) represent the major outcomes of ELF research.

The main defining features of ELF related to phonology, lexicogrammar and pragmatics will be discussed in the sections below.

Phonology

Phonology has been the most extensively investigated area of ELF. Jenkins (2000, 2003) proposes a «Lingua Franca Core» to ensure maximum intelligibility. The following aspects, widely taught in the English class, do not seem to cause misunderstanding in ELF communication and constitute instances of acceptable variations (Jenkins, 2003):

TABLE I. Phonological Non-core Features

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The distinction between the «th-sounds»: /θ/ and /ð/.• The «dark l» allophone / ɫ /.• Vowel quality used consistently (/bʌs/ and /bɔ̃s/).• The not entirely correct quality of vowel sounds (except / ə :/).• Weak forms (use of / ə / instead of the full vowel in words like «to», «was»).• Features of connected speech such as assimilation.• Word stress placement (which also changes considerably across the different LI varieties of English).• Stress timing.• The use of pitch to signal attitude or grammatical meaning. |
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Interestingly, some of these features, in spite of being irrelevant in terms of intelligibility, are considered by native speakers from England as aesthetically serious errors (Grzega, 2005), which indicates the need to distinguish between communication efficiency and native speaker's attitudes or perceptions of phonological ELF patterns.

On the other hand, segmental and suprasegmental features whose mastery is essential for international communication are:

TABLE II. The Phonological Lingua Franca Core (Jenkins, 2003)

Consonants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The whole inventory with the exception of the «th» sounds. • Rhotic /r/ (like AmE rather than non-rhotic BrE varieties). • /t/ in intervocalic position (<i>water</i>) should stay /t/ (BrE rather than AmE). • Allophonic variation as long as it does not overlap with phonemes (/v/ and /b/ distinction is particularly useful for Spanish speakers).
Additional Phonetic Requirements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional consonantal features such as the word-initial aspiration of /p/, /t/, /k/ (otherwise they can be confused with the voiced /b/, /d/, /g/). • Shortening of vowel sounds before voiceless consonants and maintenance of length before voiced consonants (/i:/ is shorter in <i>seat</i> than in <i>seed</i>; /æ:/ is shorter in <i>sat</i> than in <i>sad</i>).
Consonant Clusters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No omission of consonant clusters in initial position. • In medial and final positions the omission of the cluster is permitted according to inner circle rules of syllable structure (<i>friendship</i> can become <i>frienship</i> but not <i>friendip</i>).
Vowels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vowel quantity: maintenance of contrast between long and short vowels (such as <i>leave</i> and <i>live</i>, a particularly difficult distinction for Spanish speakers). • L2 consistent regional varieties are acceptable except substitutions for /ə:/:.
Stress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nuclear tonic stress, especially when used to indicate contrast («I came by TAXI» and «I CAME by taxi»), the latter with the additional meaning of, for instance, «but I am going home by bus»).

To conclude, new voices arise in defence of a move towards the teaching and assessment of pronunciation for «international intelligibility», for which prosodic elements may be even more relevant than segmental aspects (Pickering, 2006).

Lexicogrammar

By the same token, lexicon is likely to hamper communication in the following instances:

TABLE III. Lexical Lingua Franca Foundations

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lexical gaps. • Serious false friends. • Wrong use of a word or word combination. They may be relatively easily understood by a speaker of the same mother tongue but may be almost incomprehensible for an interlocutor unfamiliar with it (Grzega, 2005). • «Unilateral idiomaticity»: idioms, phrasal verbs, fixed expressions such as <i>this drink is on the house</i> or <i>we can give you a hand</i> seem to be handled with difficulty by ELF interlocutors (Seidlhofer, 2003). • Metaphorical or idiomatic expressions that are not interpretable word for word as well as foreign metaphorical or idiomatic expressions translated into English word for word, but not interpretable word for word (Grzega, 2005). The tendency observed is the attempt to express meanings via L1 proverbial expressions (Meierkord, 2002) which, when «translated» into English are hard to understand for other ELF interactants. • Use of localized vocabulary items (see Pickering, 2006). • Categorizations (<i>banana</i> is a fruit in Europe and the USA and a vegetable in Latin America). • Culture dependent prototypes (<i>football</i> associated with «soccer» in Europe, and with «American football» in the USA and Australia). • Connotative differences generally go unnoticed but may cause communicative discomforts or breakdowns (<i>federal</i> is positive in Germany but negative in the UK) (Grzega, 2005).

According to Seidlhofer (2003): «Typical learners' errors which most English teachers would consider in urgent need of correction and remediation, [...] appear to be generally unproblematic and no obstacle to communicative success» (p. 18).

Grammatical miscues that do not hinder communication are:

TABLE IV. Grammatical Non-core Features

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dropping the third person present tense -s (Seidlhofer, 2003). The 3rd person zero option generally occurs in main verbs and very scarcely in auxiliary verbs; this option takes place in NNS-NNS communication contexts as 3rd person singular -s presence is significantly higher in NS-NNS exchanges (Cogo and Dewey, 2006).• Confusing the relative pronouns <i>who</i> and <i>which</i>.• Failing to use «correct» forms in tag questions (e.g. <i>isn't it?</i> or <i>no?</i> instead of <i>shouldn't they?</i>) (Seidlhofer, 2003).• Inserting redundant prepositions (<i>We have to study about</i>).• Overusing certain general verbs (<i>do, have, put, make, take</i>).• Replacing infinitive-constructions with <i>that</i>-clauses (<i>I want that</i>).• Overdoing explicitness (<i>black color</i>) (Seidlhofer, 2004).• Omitting definite and indefinite articles where they are obligatory in native speaker language use (Seidlhofer, 2003) or including them where they do not occur in Standard English (Hülmbauer et al., 2008).• Preference for bare/full infinitive over the use of gerunds (<i>interested to do</i> instead of <i>interested in doing</i>).• Exploited redundancy, such as ellipsis of objects/complements of transitive verbs (<i>You can borrow</i>) (Cogo and Dewey, 2006).• Overuse of progressive verb forms (Hülmbauer et al., 2008).• Pluralization of nouns which do not have a plural in Standard English.• Use of the demonstrative <i>this</i> with both singular and plural nouns (Hülmbauer et al., 2008).• Avoidance of passive forms (see Grzega, 2005).• Mixing of present perfect and simple past.• Wrong plural formation.• Wrong past tense and past participle formation.• Mixing of progressive and simple forms (Grzega, 2005).
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Pragmatics

Finally, the research conducted on ELF interactions shows that, in spite of the lack of shared signs and common knowledge, misunderstandings do not take place frequently (Meierkord, 2002; Seidlhofer, 2003). ELF turns out to be the exponent of negotiation and collaboration, thus being a consensus-oriented, cooperative and mutually supportive act of communication (Meierkord, 2002).

TABLE V. Pragmatic Lingua Franca Core

- Few utterance completions used by interactants (Firth, 1996, quoted by Cogo and Dewey, 2006).
- The commonality of the «Let-it-pass» principle (see Seidlhofer, 2001). Interlocutors seem to ignore rather than deal explicitly with unclear utterances and expressions. A fundamental aspect is whether the interlocutor simply glosses over the misunderstanding or whether the problem is not even perceived (Burt, 2005). Furthermore, the consensus reached may be superficial and conceal deeper misunderstanding (House, 2003).
- The large amount of self-repairs contrasts with the scant number of other-repairs of grammatical non-standard forms. Scarce attention is paid to deviations or instances of non-standard forms and usage to make the talk seem normal and easy-going (Burt, 2005).
- LI discourse conventions and conditioned ways of interacting are transferred into the ELF discourse, even though they do not generally lead to misunderstanding (House, 2003)
- Politeness strategies such as back-channels and formulaic expressions. Some of the routine formulaic expressions employed are influenced by the interlocutor's LI (Meierkord, 2002). The lack of linguistic resources to produce verbal back-channels is compensated by means of more reliance on non-verbal cues such as laughter (Meierkord, 2002; Cogo and Dewey, 2006).
- Shorter turns, pausing and turn length is not necessarily related to the speaker's cultural background (Meierkord, 2002). Given the limited amount of discourse markers exhibited by ELF practitioners (Meierkord, 2002) pauses mark topic and phase boundaries, and help to gain time for encoding the message (Hülmbauer et al., 2008).
- Reduced number of expressions of request, «greetings, how-are-yous and leave-takes» (Meierkord, 2002) or limited set of textbook-like forms (Grzeg, 2005). Speakers seem to be aware of their lack of shared linguistic competence and use other means such as laughing at their own non-standard usage of the language (Burt, 2005).
- Structuring devices such as topicalization (Meierkord, 2002).
- Selection of safe topics and topic avoidance when unsure about their appropriateness (Meierkord, 2002).
- Fast and abrupt changes in topics (Grzeg, 2005).
- Rephrasing and repetition (Meierkord, 2002) as a strategy to indicate cooperation and to attain effectiveness (Cogo and Dewey, 2006). They "represent" echoes or mirror what the previous speaker has said as a way of providing textual coherence, requesting confirmation and as a way of indicating comprehension (House, 2003).
- Overlaps of the communicative style and latching (when there are no pauses between turns, usually indicating informality and engagement in the speech acts) (Cogo and Dewey, 2006).
- Code-switching to request assistance and also to refer to cultural elements (Hülmbauer et al., 2008).
- Accommodation skills. They give rise to a modification of the interlocutor's speech according to the interlocutor's perceived competence (Meierkord, 2002; Jenkins, 2006).

Proposed Specifications for the English Oral Sub-test in the Spanish University Entrance Examination

The changing pedagogical priorities concerning both the teaching and testing of English as an international language suggest that we have to reconsider the dominant paradigms of testing based on single varieties of English, namely standardized British or American English (i.e. inner-circle speech communities). Clearly, «postmodern globalization» (Hall, 1997; Canagarajah, 2006) raises questions about some of the assumptions behind the Kachruvian model (Kachru, 1986), and demands that we

bear in mind the diverse varieties of English in the outer or extended circle as well as the expanding-circle. In fact, these communities are developing new norms and diverse grammars as they use English for international communication. According to Ganagarajah (2006), in this context, the definition of proficiency becomes complex since it implies that proficient speakers of English have to be multidialectal in order to negotiate diverse varieties of English to facilitate communication. As he states: «we have to move from the “either-or” orientation in the testing debate to a “both and more” perspective». This new communicative scenario highlights the importance of pragmatics and interactional competence rather than grammatical competence. All this leads to the development and reconstruction of instruments that are sensitive to the communicative needs of English as an international language.

This orientation to globalization also poses difficulties for those involved in the design and development of direct speaking tests that are required to feature social negotiation among the diverse varieties of English. In this regard, Kang (2008) points out that the characteristics needed for raters of oral performance to test non-native speakers English as well as the validity of raters' impressions of «foreign accentedness» should be considered to help them assign scores which are more valid. Furthermore, Kang claims that raters' negative stereotypes and attitudes toward non-native speakers' Englishes (i.e. World English pronunciations) can significantly influence their ratings and impede objective evaluation of speaker pronunciation.

The definition of the test construct and its specifications are fundamental aspects to be taken into account in any language testing situation. Therefore, the inclusion of a new oral sub-test in the Spanish University Entrance Examination (SUEE) to be put into effect in 2012 (see *REAL DECRETO 1892/2008, de 14 de noviembre, BOE de 24 de noviembre*) must necessarily address these issues.

The English Test in the Spanish University Entrance Examination: the Assessment Context

The Spanish university entrance examination (SUEE) is a high-stakes public examination taken annually by millions of students at the end of their secondary education in order to be able to enroll in a Spanish university. The SUEE includes a competitive norm-referenced proficiency English Test (ET), whose main purpose is to discriminate among students as reliably as possible. Given the crucial role of this examination, the results obtained in the ET are of critical importance since they are decisive in determining the choice of most students' future careers.

The current ET format across the majority of Spanish universities fails to evaluate important communicative abilities of the students since it concentrates almost exclusively on candidates' reading and writing abilities (Herrera and Laborda, 2005; Amengual, 2006). To its credit, the ET allows a thorough evaluation of the latter two competences, that is, reading and writing, although, in its current design, it is not considered a valid measure of communicative language ability (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer 1996). Furthermore, the ET format appears to have a negative influence or washback effect on the teaching of oral communication since teachers devote most of their class time to the practice of skills featured in the ET, neglecting untested skills (Amengual, 2010).

Therefore, the future inclusion of an oral sub-test in the design of the ET as proposed by the Spanish education authorities is seen as an attempt to achieve beneficial washback and meet the ever-increasing demand for more communicative English tests.

Models of Communicative Competence: Definition of the Oral Construct

Although different models of communicative competence have been developed, most recent theoretical and empirical approaches to defining language ability and oral proficiency are largely based on two models or approaches: on the one hand, Bachman's (1990) Communicative Language Ability (CLA) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model of Language ability, and on the other hand the description of components of communicative language competence in the Common European Framework for Languages (CEFR, 2001).

The CLA is usually considered the most influential and comprehensive general model of language ability (Weir, 1990; Skehan, 1991; Luoma, 2004). It includes three basic components: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. One notable advance compared to previous models of communicative language ability is that Bachman's (1990) and Bachman and Palmer's (1996) frameworks acknowledge the importance of strategic competence, which can compensate for a lack of competence in other areas. Thus, strategic competence acts as a mediator between language competence and sociocultural knowledge in the context in which language use takes place.

The CEFR (2001) conceives communicative language competence as the ability which enables a person to perform actions using specifically linguistic means. Communicative language competence comprises three main components: linguistic

competence, sociolinguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Although strategic competence is not included in this framework, it is worth noting that each of these three components is explicitly defined not only as knowledge of its contents but also as skills and «know-how», that is, the ability to use and apply this knowledge. Strategic competence is also mentioned in the section which the CEFR devotes to communicative language use. This competence, however, is understood in its broadest sense as the use of all types of communication strategies. In that sense, it is similar to the application of metacognitive strategies (planning, achieving, controlling and correcting) on different forms of language activity: reception, interaction, production and mediation.

The conceptualizations of communicative competence as established by Bachman (1990), Bachman and Palmer (1996), and the CEFR are the ones that best explain the operationalization of the oral or speaking construct to be implemented in the oral sub-test meant to be included in the SUEE. That is, candidates' strategic competence is believed to mediate candidates' language ability and many other traits of the candidates, such as their personal characteristics, topical knowledge and affective schemata with the context of language use (Bachman and Palmer, 1996).

Bachman's (2001) model of oral test performance is also of particular relevance here. This model specifies that a candidate's score in a speaking test is dependent on different factors, namely, the candidate's underlying competence and ability to use the foreign language, the raters, scale criteria, speech samples, task qualities and characteristics, interactants (examiners and other participants), and the speaking performance itself. A candidate's test score is based on the interaction of these various facets embedded in a particular context.

Finally, according to the guidelines of the CEFR, candidates' general English proficiency in spoken interaction is reflected in their ability to communicate with other candidate interlocutors through the negotiation of meaning so as to construct conjointly (CEFR 2001, p. 73). In fact, current models of communicative competence have been criticised for focusing more on the individual rather than on interactional processes, which would include collaboration, cooperation and coordination (Jacoby and Ochs, 1995). The SUEE oral sub-test should closely follow the CEFR recommendations on spoken interaction and, therefore, highlight the interactional aspect of conversation in spoken tests.

Definition of Tasks

Two different kinds of tasks are usually proposed in order to evaluate candidates' oral proficiency:

- TASK 1: The performance of a two-three minute sustained monologue (spoken production).
- TASK 2: The development of an eight-nine minute conversation (spoken interaction) between two or three candidates.

The main purpose of the collaborative task (Task 2) is to widen the construct of the candidate's speaking ability by eliciting more interactional modes or patterns (i.e. negotiating, reevaluating, checking for comprehension, etc.). Thus, this task allows candidates to interact in a more varied and genuine way with each other. The authenticity of the task is important since it leads to more valid score interpretations by relating the test results to the target use language situation or real world. The format adopted of group oral tasks is also an attractive option for other reasons, namely, the criterion of practicality (various candidates can be evaluated at the same time, fewer resources in terms of time, raters and rooms are needed, etc.), and the potentially positive washback effect that it has, since it encourages teachers to make use of more communicative oral activities in the classroom. In addition, research has found that candidates report positive reactions to group orals (Fulcher, 1996; Ffrench, 2003).

As regards testing instruments and procedure, an authentic short text (i.e. three or four lines in length) with a series of pictures is recommended to be used as prompts to help candidates contextualize and elicit the required responses in the target language. Prompts could also include topic-related questions to be used as a starting point for discussion. All candidates' responses will be audio-taped for later reference and evaluation. Prior to taking the oral test, all candidates would need to be trained in the delivery of the test in order to avoid candidates speaking directly to the examiners rather than their group members in the collaborative task. It is, therefore, important that candidates become familiar with the test format and the expectations of the different tasks.

Candidates can choose among two texts dealing with different topics and, therefore, discard topics that do not interest them. The texts should avoid specific knowledge of any subject and be relevant to their age and communicative interests. A maximum of fifteen minutes of preparation time is usually allowed for candidates to prepare the tasks and organise their ideas before the oral examination takes place.

Undoubtedly, the high-stakes of the task will affect candidates' performances. In low stake situations, candidates may not be motivated by the need to perform at their best to be awarded a valid score. On the contrary, if the stakes are high, candidates may compete with each other to get a higher score (Ockey, 2009). Results also

indicate that the questions or parts of the test that carry most weight are the ones to which teachers and candidates pay more attention. Indeed, teachers and candidates alike focus on the aspects of the test that will bring about the best results in the ET (Amengual, 2010).

Rating Procedure

Although no specific criteria have already been established regarding the rating procedure for the oral sub-test, these are also recommended to be in line with the CEFR guidelines.

For the purpose of giving some insight into the development of the rating procedure, some proposals are made in this paper. Thus, as is common practice in speaking tests, the English speaking sub-test should involve at least two examiners or raters who would evaluate the candidate or groups of candidates individually irrespective of the performance of the other candidates in the group.

Examiners should preferably avoid interacting with the candidates or participate in the discussion except in those exceptional cases where a candidate fails to understand the task or participates very little in the conversation and, therefore, does not provide a sample of rateable discourse. Attention should be taken to ensure candidates are not scheduled with classmates so as to avoid any possible effects due to familiarity with group members or acquaintanceship (O'Sullivan, 2002). Likewise, candidates should not be scheduled to be rated by their classroom teachers in order to avoid a situation where prior knowledge of the candidates could affect their conceptions of a candidate's ability and influence their rating behaviour.

The criteria presented as CEFR Table III for "qualitative aspects of spoken language use" (CEFR, 2001, p. 7) could be used to develop the rating instrument to be implemented in the speaking sub-test. CEFR Table III defines the requirements for each of the 6 CEFR levels (A1-A2, B1-B2, C1-C2) in terms of five analytical criteria:

- *Range* (i.e. use of different linguistic forms, command of idiomatic expressions and colloquialisms, etc.).
- *Accuracy* (i.e. good control of grammatical structures, errors and mistakes etc.).
- *Fluency* (i.e. smooth flow of language, control of pauses, tempo, etc.).
- *Interaction* (i.e. initiation of discourse, turn-taking, referencing, allusion making, etc.).

- *Coherence* (i.e. well-structured speech, control of organisational patterns, connectors and devices, etc.).

Of course, these speaking rating criteria are mere guidelines and may need some adaptations to make rating more consistent with the particular testing context. Therefore, other relevant CEFR scales for Spoken Interaction and for Spoken Production could also be consulted in order to allocate marks and rate candidates' oral performances. In fact, as previously mentioned, recent debates on testing English as an international language advocate a more «interactionist approach» to the assessment of speaking (Thompson, 2009). In this current movement of globalization and World Englishes, a shift of emphasis from grammar to pragmatics in testing practices is also suggested since proficient speakers of English need to be able to negotiate among the different varieties of English (McKay, 2005; Canagarajah, 2006; Thompson, 2009). As has been stated above, non-native speakers use English more in communication with other non-native speakers rather than with native speakers in international contexts. Therefore, Canagarajah (2006) proposes to broaden the concept of strategic competence so as to include and evaluate sociolinguistic and pragmatic skills such as speech accommodation, code alternation, and the use of interpersonal strategies which are necessary in multilingual communication. Other aspects such as turn-taking, offering opinions or employing strategies to repair misunderstandings that reflect the candidates' ability to effectively interact, and use the language in conversation should also be considered in the design and implementation of oral rating scales. Thus, raters should take account of phonological non-core features (i.e. the distinction between the "th-sounds": /θ/ and /ð/), grammatical non-core features (i.e. overusing certain general verbs such as *do*, *have*, *put*) and pragmatic lingua franca core features (i.e. politeness strategies such as back-channels and formulaic expressions) that constitute acceptable variations of English and do not hinder communication.

Ideally, candidates' performances should be rated separately, independently of the scores being assigned to the other candidates or members of the group. In this regard, raters should avoid comparing the performances of candidates within the group since this could affect their scores. On the contrary, each candidate's performance should be compared to the established rating criteria. It would also be advisable to establish consensus among raters regarding their respective scores so that they could discuss their rating and come to an agreement on the final scoring.

A major concern with oral testing is that the tasks require subjective assessment by raters. It is well established that raters vary their rating behaviour depending on

the group of candidates, the different tasks and the particular occasion (McNamara & Adams, 1991/1994; Lumley & McNamara, 1995). Therefore, before each test administration, raters should necessarily be informed and receive some training in rating procedures and criteria. Aspects such as students' proficiency, intended purpose of the test, application of evaluation criteria, interpretation of proficiency levels, etc. should be discussed in training sessions in order to ensure both inter-rater reliability and fairness. During the training sessions, mock videotaped spoken tasks could be discussed and rated according to the rating scales provided until it becomes clear how the rating scales should be used, and raters agree on their scoring. Given the different number of candidates' variables present in group oral tests, special attention should be paid to the main features of interactional competence that raters may find salient when evaluating group speaking tasks, namely, personal characteristics of the candidates, assertiveness, body language, etc.

Since results of training may not be sustained for a long period after a training session, raters will need to be retrained after a certain period of time. Raters found to be inconsistent in their rating (i.e. either too lenient or too strict) should be identified and removed from participation in future test administrations. Candidate's scores should be as reliable and fair as possible.

Issues for Consideration

The major claim made by proponents of the paired speaking format and the group oral or speaking test is related to authenticity, since candidates communicate in an unpredictable sequence, reacting to the utterances of other participants (i.e. initiating, responding, turn-taking, etc.) and involving all of them in real and varied interaction. Since candidates have to be competent listeners to be able to understand each other and interact successfully, these formats seem to broaden the construct of speaking to one that is more interactional, or as Canagarajah (2006) states, deals with «intercultural communicative competence».

In spite of the advantages attributed to this format, paired speaking tests have also been criticized. The main challenge they have to face is how to evaluate individual performances and make separate judgements in each pairing or group irrespective of the performance of the other candidates when they are all involved in a joint enterprise. Indeed, the «co-constructed» nature of conversation (Kramsch, 1986; Hall, 1995; Swain, 2001; May, 2009) is an important issue to be considered in interactive

speaking tests since interaction should be viewed as a socially derived and context specific phenomenon. Furthermore, findings suggest that the score of a candidate may change depending on the other candidates that take the test and be affected in a negative way by the performance of other candidates who are not capable of collaborative interaction (Ikeda, 1998; Brown, 2003; Galaczi, 2010) or who are introvert, etc. Nakatsuhara (2010), for instance, found that extroversion-level variables had an impact on open tasks. Ikeda (1998) also warns us about the risks of grouping personality-wise incompatible candidates.

Candidates' language proficiency is also a crucial aspect to be taken into account. However, according to Iwashita (1998), different proficiency levels may not be as problematic as they appear to be. Iwashita (1998) found that the level of students' proficiency had an impact on the quantity of discourse elicited, although it did not significantly change scores awarded to candidates. Davis (2009) reached the same conclusion and stated that, in spite of having different levels of English proficiency, scores given to candidates were not affected.

Other factors may also be responsible for the resulting patterns of interaction, including «learner acquaintanceship». From a study on test taker familiarity, O'Sullivan (2002) found an «acquaintanceship» effect in which female Japanese EFL participants achieved significant higher scores when talking with friends rather than with unfamiliar interlocutors. This finding raises the issue of whether to select interlocutors or randomly assign them.

Task and cultural variables in group orals have also been investigated. Fulcher and Márquez (2003), for instance, assert that cultural variables may have an impact on spoken discourse and task success. Thus, certain tasks are likely to be more difficult than others for candidates from certain L1 cultural backgrounds. Rather than being penalized as «inappropriate», the authors suggest that this variation should be considered in the design of second language speaking tests. In this respect, it is important to ensure that the type of candidate behaviour called for in the tasks is not incompatible with their cultural, sociological and personal parameters.

Finally, and since raters have been found to be an additional source of measurement error, rater factors should be taken into account in the scoring of candidates' oral proficiency. In addition to the exploration of certain raters' characteristics such as sex (O'Loughlin, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2000), age, native language (Chalhoub-Deville and Wigglesworth, 2005), etc., Kang (2008) suggests investigating raters' characteristics within the World Englishes perspective, including raters' native/non-native status and their attitudes toward World Englishes for testing oral performances. In fact, Kang

asserts that an ethical approach to language testing makes clear the limitations of tests of oral performance only judged by non-native speakers of English. Furthermore, according to Kang, raters' intercultural contact and exposure to non-native varieties can make raters familiar to accents and influence their scoring of oral performance. That is, raters who have had more contact with non-native speakers tend to be more lenient. This finding supports the claim that the amount of interaction with non-native speakers or speakers of World Englishes facilitates listening comprehension of those English varieties. Therefore, collaborative projects among linguistic experts, World Englishes and researchers in language testing need to be promoted in order to improve rater training and oral assessment criteria.

In light of these results, the procedures for pairing candidates or making groups for oral tests should be seriously considered and constantly revised. However, given the strong support on the part of the teachers and the potential washback effect of the spoken test on the curriculum and syllabus design (Amengual, 2010), facing the challenge of this testing procedure seems critical. In this regard, it is believed that the new ET design will improve education and cater better for the linguistic needs of our students in this new communicative world.

Conclusion

In this paper we have outlined key aspects concerning the oral construct and the specifications of the oral sub-test to be included in the Spanish University Entrance Examination from the perspective of English as an international language. In effect, the new ELF paradigm has deconstructed old language traditions, reconfigured new models of language use (Canagarajah, 2007), and established a certain threshold of intelligibility (at phonological, lexicographical and pragmatic levels) in ELF communication from which English language teaching and assessment can certainly benefit. Emerging from these new trends, there is a deeper understanding of the complex interplay of tasks, candidates' variables and raters' variables in oral tests. All these issues must necessarily be considered in the validation processes of tests of oral performance.

It is still premature to make generalizations about the effectiveness of the new oral sub-test due to be included in the SUEE. Indeed, the feasibility of developing this test is not guaranteed. However, it is hoped that this paper serves as a discussion document

that helps re-examine the dominant paradigms of testing in terms of the inner circle of English within oral tests, and generates further research on the test specifications that promote a positive influence or washback effect on English language instruction and assessment.

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