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An Overview of The Needs of Technology in Language Testing in Spain

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Abstract

Over the few years, computer based language testing has become prevailing worldwide. The number of institutions that use computers as the main means of delivery has increased dramatically. Many students face each day tests for well-known high-stakes decisions which imply the knowledge and ability to use technology to provide evidence of language mastery. However, this situation is not the same everywhere. While countries like the United States or the United Kingdom are spearheads of this tendency, others like Spain, lag way behind. This paper addresses the needs of use of computer based language testing in the new Spanish educational system. To do so, this paper introduces the current situation in Spain, then proceeds to do a SWOT analysis emphasizing the lacks and opportunities for language based assessments and concludes by stating the positive issues involving them.

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1. Main text

Computer based language tests have a prevailing position in the world today. Their incorporation in educational practice due to their versatility as well as their low cost has made them a cornerstone for assessment especially for high-stakes external exams. Their delivery process has also led to the need to revise their mode along with some other traditional ways of delivery. Far behind remain those times in which some students did evidence problems in

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adaptation to the use of keyboards. Today the matter is not so much whether students will be able to adapt to new devices such as iPads, netbooks or laptops but whether that implies differences in test validity or even if the use of each individual device will satisfy different users (that means test-takers). A number of issues in the last few years have been introduced by different researchers which can be grouped into two main categories: technology development and candidate-test relationship. Current research in language testing in Spain is rather limited to just a few researchers but research in technology based testing is almost non-existing. Since 2004 there has been a significant and increasing interest from the perspective of research but how this has been reflected in real life seems quite a different issue. According to the observations, technology based language testing in Spain has observed the following issues:

- a. **Delivery:** Over these years, research has focused in the benefits of integrating technology for delivery. For instance, in 2006 García Laborda mentioned the possibility to design a system to replace Dialang through an extensive set of new tasks that were not performed until then (such as speaking). The original idea was based in the use of desktops which at that point was only done in a very controlled manner by the Educational Testing Service (ETS). According to the same author and Magal Royo (2005), investing in computer technology for language assessments increased the test face validity and also made the exam more complete and reliable to infer the capacity of test takers (also de Siqueira Rocha, Martinez-Saez, Sevilla-Pavon, Gimeno-Sanz, 2011). Alfonseca, Carro, Freire, Ortigosa, Perez, Diana, et al. (2005) also did an extended research on autoring applications for adaptive free texts in tests.
- b. **Computer use:** In 2005, García Laborda, Magal-Royo, De Siqueira Rocha and Alvarez Fernández stressed the importance of revising visual ergonomics (previously suggested by Fulcher (2001) for language tests in the Spanish University Entrance Examination proposal that had been suggested by García Laborda (2010). Their perspective towards contextual visual clues was also supported by García Laborda (2010; also Diez Bedmar, 2011).
- c. **Test construction:** López-Mequita Molina (2009) suggested the test construct and working process for a computer adaptive vocabulary test.
- d. **Activity organization:** In 2005, González Tuñón emphasized the need to revise which items or tasks are more adequate for revision and improvement. This argument was also used by Laborda, Jesus Garcia; Bakieva, Margarita; Gonzalez-Such, & Pavon Sevilla (2010) to observe how traditional exams could be specifically modified to achieve better assessments in English. Later, García Laborda & Magal Royo (2009, 2010) and García Laborda & Litzler (2011) also suggested that in order to achieve competent assessments it was also necessary to train the teachers not only in technology but also in testing techniques. According to Gimeno Sanz & De Siqueira Rocha (2009) computer tools provide far better and faster feedback than traditional procedures and García Laborda, Magal Royo and Bakieva (2010) observed that students using computer based language testing were more motivated towards the test.

2. Towards a definition of the needs

Much of the needs in Spain are given by changes in learning styles, the progressive use of technology in the classroom, the need to standardize language testing and the increasing need to obtain objective data to take educational decisions. Current international evaluations such as PISA, TIMMS and so evidence that OECD countries require cooperation for these issues. Another example of this progressive implementation of external standardized tests in education is that PISA 2015 will be done totally online or even that the computer versions of the Cambridge suite for schools are also becoming more and more common. In this sense, some education ministries in the world, like Spain, are lagging behind the private educational companies. However, research has not proved so far adequate competence to work on online writing in foreign languages.

Hereby below an SWOT analysis (figure 1) of the implementation of computers in language testing is presented. The analysis emphasizes technical, funds, facilities and human resources. It also stresses that there is a clear opportunity to implement it and that teachers' and administrators would be accepting the changes given the current prevailing situation and context in most schools (both primary and secondary) in Spain.

Use of computers in language assessments in Spain

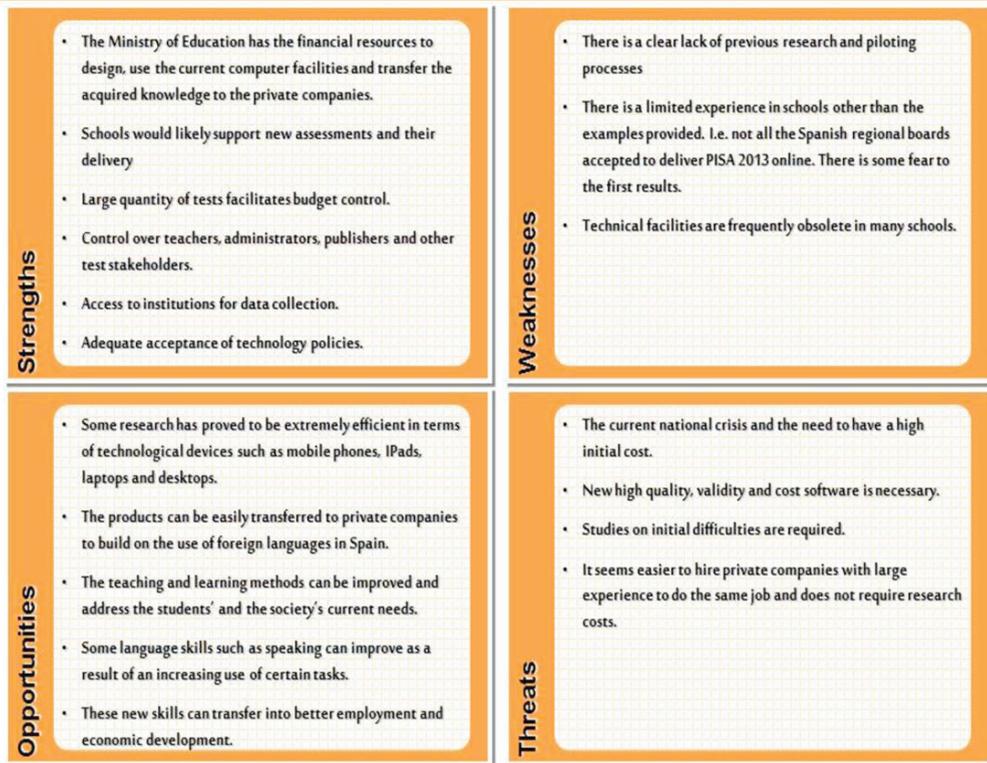


Fig. 1. SWOT analysis of the use of computers in language assessments in Spain.

4. Conclusion

The current situation in language testing leads to a significant opportunity to implement computer or mobile devices based language tests. The opportunities given the needs of the country make accessible the funds but especially a political interest towards the implementation. The benefits in education, standardization and cost are as promising as the expected results in the classroom. At this point, it seems evident that previous research should be looking at new types of items as well as delivery means. Our analysis, however, can be just too optimistic and maybe using resources provided by private companies could be prioritized, but in such a case, the Ministry would be ignoring completely the experience and work of few but very committed Spanish researchers.

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