

## From the Editors

### RESEARCH ON NEW METHODS FOR TESTING LANGUAGE SKILLS: A FOCUS ON SPEAKING PERFORMANCE

The current issue has speaking performance as a conducting thread, specifically, the research undertaken on new methods to test it. Testing language skills and defining the constructs under which tests need to be constructed is a complex task. Particularly, assessing speaking performance is a rather intricate process with many agents and variables involved and many factors affecting the final outcome. Subjectivity, fairness, anxiety, cognitive and metacognitive aspects, particular features of speech, individual abilities, and social constraints among others make the mastery of speaking in a foreign language and its subsequent assessment a definitely arduous task. Critical reflection and research on the part of educational institutions, researchers, test developers or any person undertaking assessment is of paramount importance to guarantee the adequacy, reliability and success of the whole testing process and results.

In the first article of the issue, entitled “New and not so new methods for assessing oral communication”, **Gary J. Ockey and Zhi Li** note the necessary and logical evolution experienced by oral communication assessment practices over the past decades, namely those related to the testing process, the construct to be measured, the tasks employed and the technology used with this aim in the process. Authors delve into the broadening of the construct to be assessed, including interactional competence and technology and thus playing a determining role in the type of tasks currently in vogue and present. Five proposed task types in order to assess the degree to which they can contribute to effectively measure such construct are presented. These include: oral proficiency interviews, paired/group oral discussion tasks, simulated tasks, integrated oral communication tasks, and elicited imitation tasks. They are evaluated based on current conceptualizations of the construct of oral communication, and results seem to indicate

that they do not assess a broad construct of oral communication equally. Consequently, authors advise test developers to use more than a single task type to more effectively ensure construct representativeness, considering the aspects of oral communication that they aim to include or exclude in their assessment when they select one of these task types.

In their “Comparing candidates’ beliefs and exam performance in speaking tests”, **Pérez-Guillot** and **Zabala-Delgado** analyse students’ beliefs about their performance in the speaking section of a language proficiency exam and compare them with their actual results in the exam. In this way, the authors intend to determine whether students’ beliefs were based on their actual level of competence or if they were based on other factors arising from the particular characteristics of this section of the exam, mainly anxiety or stress. The paper suggests that determining the basis for students’ beliefs - either self-perceived or factual- and thus signaling the aspects to be modified would allow us to improve the reliability and quality of the exam. The authors claim that when developing a language exam factors outside the content of the exam, related to administration and organisation, as well as those connected to candidate’s individual features should be considered in order to shed some light on the differences detected between perceptions and actual results.

**Beltrán-Palanques**, explores two different elicitation techniques among those that may be employed to test pragmatic competence, more specifically, discourse completion tasks/tests (DCTs) and role-play tasks (RPTs). As also reviewed by **Gary J. Ockey** and **Zhi Li** (this volume), RPTs and DCTs might be regarded as simulated tasks that can be used to assess pragmatic competence. In his study entitled “Revisiting pragmatic tests in the FL context: Towards interactive tests to examine speech act performance”, Beltrán-Palanques examines the task effect of the two aforementioned elicitation techniques, which have been designed following an interactive perspective. More specifically, the DCTs, traditionally designed to allow participants to take only one turn, have been elaborated interactively to allow participants to freely interact in the written mode, thereby resulting in interactive DCTs (IDCTs). The RPTs used in his study were open,

which also allow interaction between participants. The speech act chosen for the purposes of this study was the illocutionary act of apologies, as an example of an interactive communicative act. His study points out effects across the two elicitation techniques in relation to the speech act outcomes as regards length, amount and typology of apology strategies performed.

The volume also includes a final article entitled “Speaking an additional language: Can study abroad do the trick?” where **María Juan-Garau**, provides an overall picture of the acquisition of speaking abilities in a given second language acquisition (SLA) learning context. Specifically, she tries to ascertain whether studying abroad can indeed ‘do the trick’ when it comes to effectively and “quickly” learning a second or foreign language, and, if so, under which conditions. The author deals with the features of the study abroad (SA) context, analysing the way it may affect oral performance and thus the acquisition of oral competence. She proceeds focusing on the specific linguistic benefits in the oral domain that can accrue in this learning context. With this aim, an overview of empirical research projects findings is provided. At the same time that an array of individual and external variables that may impinge on successful language acquisition abroad are discussed to show that the SA context is definitely advantageous for the development of language learners’ speaking skills as long as the relevant conditions outlined in the study are met.

Two books reviews have also been included in this issue. The first one, authored by **Elena Martín Monje**, reviews the volume entitled *Changing Methodologies in TESOL*, whose author, Jane Spiro, presents a work aimed at the student, student teacher and practising teacher of TESOL who might be interested in the teaching and learning process of English language nowadays as well as in the way it is experienced worldwide. The reviewer describes the work as “a valuable resource for pre-service TESOL courses” which may also be used as a reference book for teacher trainers and individual teachers to be informed of the latest developments in the field.

Finally, **Raquel Lázaro Gutiérrez** reviews the volume *An Introduction to Interaction: Understanding Talk in Formal and Informal Settings*, authored by Ángela Cora García. The reviewer presents this volume as “a comprehensive guide for (mainly, but not only) linguistics, sociology, communication and even business students on the theories and research methodologies of conversation analysis”, and concedes that when students reach its last chapter they are expected to be able to apply the basics of conversation analytical research to the transcripts provided or to any conversation.

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