

2nd GLOBAL CONFERENCE on PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCHES, 28-29, November 2014

The Spanish language testee profile: Issues in standardized language testing

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Abstract

Spain is currently living a transitional situation. In 2013 a new educational law was passed, the Organic Law that Modifies the Quality of Education (LOMCE). That law, among many other aspects, introduces the use of standardized external tests either to (1) guide or provide suggestions for the educational track, or (2) to obtain inferences towards to what further studies should students follow (whether professional training and the academic Baccalaureate). This is especially a problem because language is one of the worst subjects for many Spanish students. This presentation is aimed at describing these problems along with a framework of how they can be solved.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Academic World Research and Education Center.

Keywords: LOMCE, Organic Law, Quality of Education

1. Introduction

Spain is currently living a transitional situation. In 2013 a new educational law was passed, the Organic Law that Modifies the Quality of Education (LOMCE). That law, among many other aspects, introduces the use of standardized external tests either to (1) guide or provide suggestions for the educational track, or (2) to obtain inferences towards to what further studies should students follow (whether professional training and the academic Baccalaureate). Testing is considered a valid tool to improve the educational policies as well as to observe information at three levels: school, educational district and educational measures (Wall, 2005; Cho & Eberhard,

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2013). As Stockard (2013) says: “assessment data such as that mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act can be used to examine the effectiveness of educational interventions” (2225).

The following figure shows the low position of Spain among the different countries of the OECD in English language knowledge and use (Figure 1).

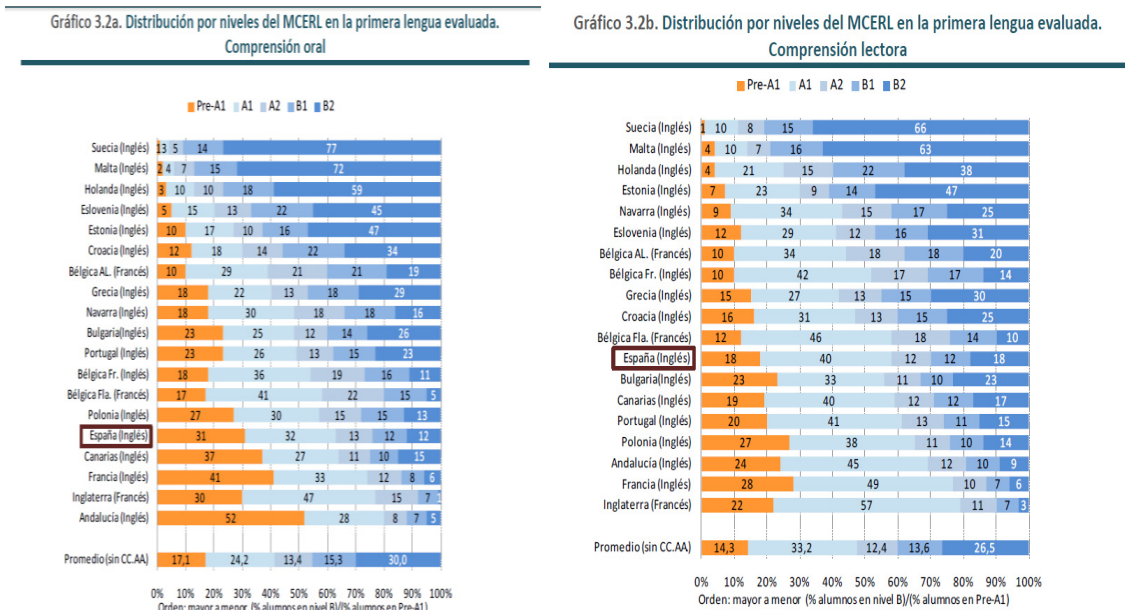


Fig. 1. Results of Spanish students in the European Survey of Language Competence

This figure clearly shows a low position in reading and speaking comprehension with a large number of students in the initial stages (Pre A-1). This situation may be due to a lack of knowledge but there might be other factors affecting such low performance. Among them, the following could be considered:

- (1) teachers test oriented culture; teacher preparation for
- (2) effects of teaching in the schools;
- (3) individual preparation for testing; and
- (4) student’s personal acceptance of test implementation.

In relation to teachers test oriented culture, Henwood & Featherstone (2013) believe that teachers do not believe in the results obtained in the tests. Since many of them are measured against the results obtained those tests, strong feelings against a culture of testing are natural. Thus, they do not consider that results may be indicators of knowledge or internal teaching quality or processes of the school. This position is partially supported by Ruff who studied a number of accountability reforms and says “Results indicate that the efficacy of student support personnel has been negatively impacted by accountability reforms, but schools that maintain a positive culture dedicated to excellence minimize that effect” (1270).

In relation to the effect of teaching, what is called backwash or washback, it is self-evident that it very much depends on how teachers actually approach testing. For those who testing is beneficial, results in the test can end up in being an adequate guide to improve their teaching (Spratt, 2005; Adediwura, 2012). Additionally as Daly, Baird Camberlain and Meadows mention, when “students and teachers welcome[d] the stretch and challenge policy and there were some indications that changes to the design of question papers could have some positive backwash effects” (2012, 139). Furthermore, Vikiru reported on a “study in Kenya on strengthening the development of

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