

A LONGITUDINAL ATTITUDE SURVEY ON ENGLISH ORAL SKILLS: CLASSROOM, CURRICULUM, LEARNING AND PEDAGOGY IMPLICATIONS

*Investigación longitudinal sobre actitudes frente a la enseñanza
del inglés oral: implicaciones pedagógicas, en el aula,
el programa y el aprendizaje*

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Abstract

Although English oral skills have often been a somewhat neglected aspect of foreign language learning within the Spanish educational context, they nonetheless represent a fundamental language component for successful communication in real life settings. To date, very little research has approached this issue in depth but the prospective assessment of oral skills in the 2012 Selectividad exam—as established by the Real Decreto 1892/2008—has raised debate and great concern on the issue. To contribute to this area of enquiry, this paper reports on a longitudinal survey on English teachers' attitudes towards the assessment of oral skills in the new Selectividad English exam. The survey was conducted in 2004 and 2009 and involved almost 200 Bachillerato teachers from the Community of Aragón. Comparative results within the 5-year time span reflect similar attitudes, observations and comments from the two groups of respondents. Implications as regards classroom, learning, curriculum and pedagogy are discussed at the end of the paper.

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Key words: English oral skills, second language learning, second language pedagogy, curriculum design, language skills assessment

Resumen

Aunque las destrezas orales del inglés han sido un aspecto a menudo olvidado en la enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras, éstas representan un componente lingüístico fundamental para la comunicación efectiva en contextos reales. Hasta la fecha, ha sido escasa la investigación sobre el tema, pero la previsión de una prueba oral en el examen de Selectividad para el próximo curso académico 2011-2012 ha impulsado el interés y el debate al respecto. Como contribución al tema y a su actualidad social, este artículo detalla un estudio longitudinal realizado con doscientos profesores de Bachillerato de la Comunidad de Aragón en los años 2004 y 2009. En el periodo de cinco años entre las dos encuestas realizadas, el estudio refleja actitudes, observaciones y comentarios muy similares entre los encuestados. A la luz de los resultados, el artículo finalmente valora las posibles implicaciones en el aula, curriculares, de aprendizaje y pedagógicas de los resultados del estudio.

Palabras clave: destrezas orales del inglés, aprendizaje de segundas lenguas, pedagogías de segundas lenguas, diseño curricular, evaluación de destrezas del idioma.

1. INTRODUCTION

It is commonplace to refer to the poor command of foreign languages — and English in particular— Spanish students have when they finish their secondary education. However, different surveys such as the one carried out by the *Consell Superior d'Avaluació del Sistema Educatiu de Catalunya* (2005) show that in the past few years there has been an overall improvement in the learning of the four skills and that this tendency is particularly noticeable in the case of the oral production. We believe that these results apply to other areas in Spain outside Catalonia and that, to a great extent, they confirm a general trend. The perceived improvement has been the result of a number of factors such as the widespread adoption of the communicative method of teaching languages, a bigger exposure of students to the foreign language —both in and out of the classroom (language academies, summer courses, study stays in other countries, availability of radio and TV in a foreign language, etc.) as well as a considerably better preparation and specialization on the part of the teachers which has led to more participative classes. In this paper, we would like to consider the role of an academic factor, a new policy that has been long announced but not yet implemented and whose influence as an extrinsic source of motivation for both teachers and students may be

significant: the assessment of oral skills in a foreign language as part of the University entrance exam (PAU or “Selectividad”).

With a few exceptions, the English Selectividad exam has always focused on the assessment of the written skills. The resulting mismatch is particularly remarkable if we consider not only the desirable balance between the different skills when learning a language but also the increasing demands both of employers and of the University concerning the communicative competence in spoken English of prospective employees or students. By way of an example, and in accordance with the levels of competence set out in the European Framework of Reference for Languages (2002), a level B1 (roughly equivalent to Cambridge First Certificate) is being considered as the required standard at this stage.

We think it would be interesting to monitor in the coming years to what extent our students’ level of competence may be affected by the top-down implementation of these new regulations. For the time being, however, we would like to focus on the attitudes and expectations of foreign language teachers and to what extent they feel prepared and supported to meet these increasing demands.

2. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

The new model of University entrance exam, which is set out to be implemented in the academic year 2011-2012, represents an important social and pedagogical challenge as it unquestionably demands for teaching/learning oral skills. At the time of writing, no detailed information about the final format of the exam is yet available. However, the G9 University representatives of the Commission in charge of organizing the exams have suggested that the oral part would represent 30% of the total mark and the written part the remaining 70%. As far as the spoken production skills are concerned, two options are still pending agreement: a listening exercise with multiple choice questions and/or an interview in which the student would have to interact with the members of a board. Apart from the legal aspects entailed by these changes, great concern is also placed on the considerable logistic challenges that the implementation of this kind of tests will involve in June 2012.

Along with these technical issues, the situation is indeed quite complex if we look at it from a purely language learning perspective: in the past few years, the Spanish Government has made considerable efforts to promote

the spoken skills in secondary education. The English Selectividad exams, however, do not favour classes with active methodologies, engaging and motivating for students but classes mainly focused on reading and writing input and output. In general, major emphasis is placed on grammatical accuracy and complexity (e.g. in order to prepare students for the heavily scripted exams with exercises of rewriting and composition). This situation has eventually led to the consolidation of a vicious circle: since the Selectividad exam does not assess the students' listening/speaking mastery, these skills have received, in some cases, very limited attention in the English language classroom. Conversely, other teachers feel that all the effort made to teach listening and speaking is of no practical use and students do not feel motivated to master these skills. A second factor to be considered is the attitude of the foreign language teacher him/herself and his/her different personal and contextual circumstances (working conditions, lack of motivation, insecurity when using the language, etc.). Another possible reason, one might further argue, is cultural: Spanish students seem to be reluctant to participate in the classroom actively and, even more so, in a foreign language (as also reported by Pérez-Llantada (2006) in higher education). This lack of confidence or interest, or perhaps lack of critical thinking skills even in their L1 language, might mean that perhaps this challenge requires special attention from a methodological viewpoint.

To date, very little research has approached this issue in depth but the prospective assessment of oral skills in the 2012 Selectividad exam —as established by the Real Decreto 1892/2008— has raised debate and great concern on the issue. In order to retrieve information on all these factors and on the attitudes and opinions of the teachers of English at the Bachillerato level towards the possibility of setting an oral exam in Selectividad, we found it interesting to compare a questionnaire-based study conducted in 2004 with secondary school teachers with a more recent questionnaire survey conducted in 2009, right after the oral exam was officially announced by the Spanish Government.

The rationale behind this longitudinal study was to gather teachers' perceptions about the issue and, from the data retrieved from the two questionnaires, to discuss the implications as regards classroom, learning, curriculum and pedagogy and provide suggestions on future language policies regarding these matters.

The “armonizador de inglés” (i.e. university teacher in charge of setting the exam for that language as well as the grading criteria) during

2004-2005 in Aragón (and co-author of this article) prepared a questionnaire with three sets of questions. The first set of questions, all of them closed, sought to provide information on the extent to which the oral skills could be adequately practiced in the language classroom and on the difficulties that the teachers found to introduce these skills. The second set of questions, also closed questions, enquired into the teachers' attitudes about the introduction of an oral test in the exam and asked the teachers' opinions about different possible options for assessing these skills (e.g. "a listening test", "an oral interview", "both", "others", etc.) in the Selectividad exam. The third set, in the form of open questions, was expected to retrieve more detailed information on the teachers' actual problems and difficulties when teaching and assessing the oral skills. The questionnaire was distributed among the teachers during the meeting of Armonización. In this annual meeting, the "armonizador de inglés" and the teachers of English in "Bachillerato" (i.e. the instructors of the students who will take the exam) discuss the format, marking, list of subjects and other questions of a practical nature. Although we are aware that the sample in this meeting may not be totally representative (e.g. each school sends usually one teacher depending on seniority, availability, etc.) we think that the positive traits (they were all informed respondents with an interest in and a good knowledge of the subject) outnumbered the negative ones. A second reason why we decided to distribute the questionnaire during the Armonización meeting was that these meetings gather a large number of respondents willing to collaborate (e.g. some 200 took the survey overall in both years). The surveys were all anonymous and the questions were kept brief for practical reasons. At the time of the first survey, the ICE (Institute of Educational Science) at the University of Zaragoza also had in mind the organization of a Seminar on "Teaching and Assessing the Speaking Skills" and we thought that this survey would make an interesting source of information for both speakers and participants and a convenient springboard for debate during the sessions.

As briefly stated above, the second survey (2009) was conducted in a different context. After the Real Decreto 1892/2008 was published in the Spanish Official Bulletin on 14 November 2008 and thus the new type of exam officially approved. The same questionnaire was issued by the current "armonizador" (the second co-author of this article) with the aim of comparing whether the teachers attitudes and opinions had changed during these five years. It was also time to enquire whether they had already been preparing for this new type of assessment now that they

knew that the oral skills were going to be assessed within a three-year time span. All in all, 96 subjects responded to the survey in 2009.

3. RESULTS

Comparative results over the 5-year time span revealed similar attitudes, observations and comments from the two groups of respondents. The main findings are reported below.

To the first question of the survey (“¿Puedes dedicar en tus clases el tiempo que consideras necesario a las destrezas orales?”), both the 2004 and the 2009 respondents gave very similar replies. As shown in the figures below, in both surveys, more than 80% of the respondents considered that they could not devote the necessary time to the teaching of oral skills in the class.

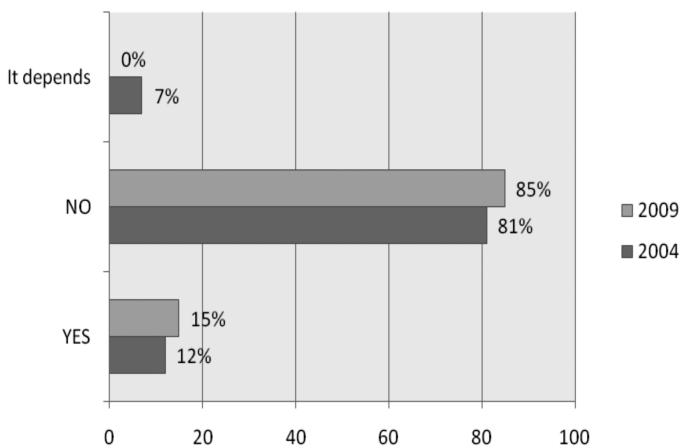


Table 1. Teachers' perception of the amount of classroom time devoted to oral skills

This huge difference speaks for itself but the fact that some 7% of the respondents in 2004 claimed that their answer would depend on the type of course being taught (i.e. secondary education vs. bachillerato) encouraged us to elicit in 2009 a more detailed answer in which those teachers who thought the amount of time devoted in class was fair enough (15%, or a total of 14 teachers) were asked to specify the number of minutes/hours actually taught. Out of these fourteen, four teachers stated that they

imparted the whole class in English, six teachers used 10 minutes per class for the oral skills, three teachers stated that they used one hour per week and one teacher devoted 30 minutes per class to the teaching of these skills.

An interesting source of information was the data retrieved from the question “¿Cuáles son las principales dificultades que encuentras?” This question tried to elicit some information about the main difficulties teachers face or perceive when introducing the oral skills in their classes. More than one answer was allowed in this case so there were 155 (2004) and 186 responses (2009) overall. According to the surveys, most teachers are not especially concerned about theoretical or methodological problems. Even an understandable lack of initial confidence on their part is generally not considered a problem. Instead, as shown in Table 2 below, their answers cluster around the options dealing with the practical problems of their everyday class.

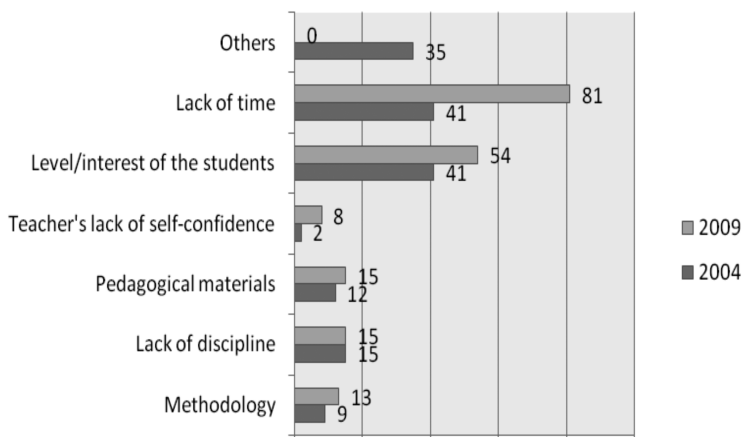
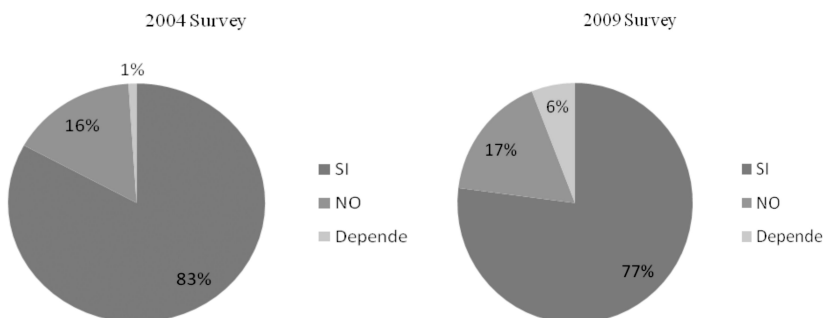


Table 2. Number of teachers' responses to difficulties in introducing the oral skills in the classroom

When asked about reasons for this apparent mismatch, lack of curriculum time (or, similar answers such as the difficulty of covering the official syllabus) was mentioned in both surveys as the main reason. It is interesting to note that the second reason alluded to in 2004 as a source of trouble (i.e. perceived interest of the students) has decreased as opposed to the increasing problem of lack of time.

In 2004 a variety of opinions was classified under the heading “*Otros*” but most of them focused on the ratio or number of students per class (between 25 and 30 in most cases) which was considered excessive and prevented a more communicative approach. In the 2009 questionnaire the situation turned out to be basically the same since the generalized response to this question consistently referred to teacher-student ratio in the language classroom.

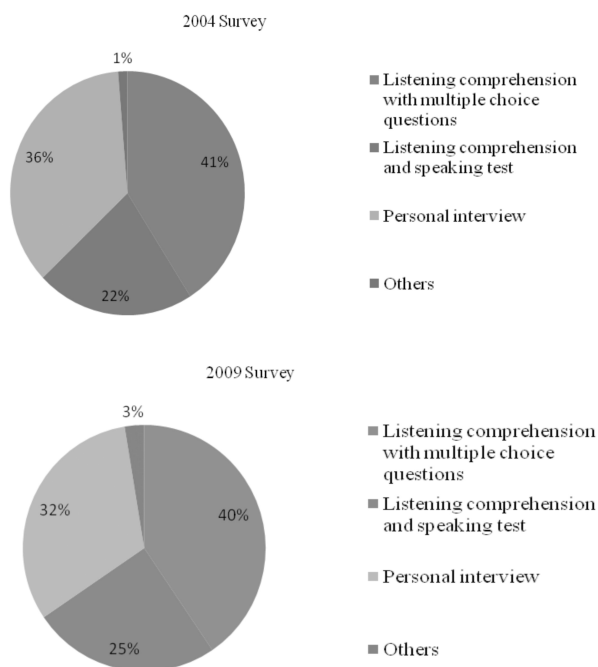
The third question of the survey was intended to ascertain whether the need to assess oral skills at this level was perceived as a necessity or an imposition on the part of the academic authorities. The percentages—around 80% of the respondents thought it was necessary to include the oral skills in the exam—were similar in both surveys. As we said before, the first survey was taken when this possibility was still remote whereas respondents to the second survey were aware that this new type of oral exams would be implemented relatively soon.



Somehow, this overwhelming majority who feel the need for a more complete exam seems inconsistent with the initial issue about the perceived lack of time to cover the scheduled lessons. The apparent contradiction shows that teachers are aware of two powerful sociocultural factors: 1) the current importance given to a mastery of the oral skills, which are somehow equated with a “real” competence in the foreign language. Significantly, some of the 2009 respondents noted that the knowledge of the English language, both written and oral, has become a must in everyday life; and 2) a motivational factor or, to quote some of them, the fact that “if something is not included in the exam, it is overlooked by the students” or, in other words, “if the PAU exam concentrates on reading and writing skills, these skills will go on being a priority in the English classroom.”

In addition, the surveys revealed the respondents' mixed feelings about the issue. While the assessment of oral skills in the PAU exam was perceived as a problem in its present state, it was also considered as the only means of making students perceive its real importance.

Question 4 tried to gather information about their suggestions on the method of assessing the oral skills which they considered more appropriate for the students taking the Selectividad exam. People were allowed to pick more than one answer, which is why the percentages did not add up to 100% overall and have been normalized. The survey asked the teachers to choose among the following options: "an oral comprehension test with a multiple choice exercise" (Option 1), "an oral comprehension and production exercise" (Option 2), "a personal interview" (Option 3) and "others" (Option 3). The graphs below indicate strikingly similar responses in the five-year time span.



The respondents' perceptions and opinions about the preferred format in the two surveys were very similar. A large number of respondents (41% in 2004 and 40% in 2009) thought that a listening comprehension excerpt

together with a multiple choice exercise in written form was the best option given. To be sure, there may be a certain bias in the answer because this method of assessing the oral skills has been gradually applied in Catalonia (DURSI) with some success and, all in all, the format is very similar to the listening section adopted in well-known exams (i.e. Cambridge). The fact that very few people came up with new possibilities to include under the heading “*Otros*” shows that the classical methods of evaluation are still the most popular.

As experts in setting and administering tests, respondents were allowed a qualified answer giving positive and negative reasons for their choice. We thought this might be useful to analyze their sticking to well-known formulas. In the 2004 questionnaire the respondents explained that a listening comprehension test is easy, equitable and effective; it does not require a considerable logistic effort in the organisation of the test and, from the students’ viewpoint, it is less stressful than a spoken one-to-one interview. Others argued in favour of both oral comprehension and production tests, as they considered these as more comprehensive tests, easily adaptable to the current curriculum and to the logistics available at that moment. Along similar lines, the respondents of the 2009 questionnaire agreed that the listening test was more feasible considering the large number of students to be examined and the scarcity of technological resources. From the perspective of the examiner, these respondents pointed out that the listening test is easy to prepare, administer and mark compared to other assessment methods. They also added that it is objective, as opposed to more complex methods which would involve boards of examiners with different grading criteria, or which would require more available time and a greater number of examiners.

The option ‘a personal interview’ was considered as appropriate (by 35.9% of the respondents in 2004 and 32% in 2009) since it helped to assess the student’s real life communication strategies and to favour a more accurate perception of the student’s actual oral language proficiency. Some of the teachers noted that assessing the oral skills by means of an interview could be advantageous in the sense that it would definitely justify the introduction of the teaching/learning of oral skills in the Bachillerato English classes.

The respondents to the 2009 Survey tend to equate personal interviews (and especially in English) with a more “real” type of communication (i.e. not computer mediated) or even with “the real thing” (i.e. communicative competence, interaction, paralanguage, impromptu speaking). As

reported by the teachers, the interview can stand as a valid test to assess language comprehension and production as well as the overall communicative skills of the student. It was also regarded as a suitable assessment method to measure both the linguistic (i.e. knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and discourse) and the strategic competence (i.e. ways of interacting and maintaining the communication with the interlocutors) of the students. Further, it allows the assessment of both planned and unplanned speech production and favors the use of paralinguistic and extralinguistic elements in communication, very close to real life communication. Along similar lines, this method of assessment was conceived as very appropriate to prepare students to study and work in Europe or abroad and, from a different perspective, advantageous in that it paves the way for students' creativity in their expression of ideas.

A listening comprehension together with a speaking test was the third option in 2004 (22% of the respondents) and in 2009 (25% of the respondents). One possible reason in favour of this test is that it has been originally used in many countries and gradually adopted in Spain as a way of screening applicants for a job. Among the perceived risk factors, we should mention the fact that many of these oral exams have been modified to be administered by means of a computer. Many teachers mistrust or are still reluctant to use new technologies in exams and extend this feeling of riskiness to students who may not be familiar with the medium. In sum, the reasons provided are mainly of a practical nature (e.g. logistics, feasibility, easiness to administer, etc.) which also reveals that these methods are well-known and have been tried in class.

Apart from these three best-known categories for oral assessment, the questionnaire left a final open-ended "*Others*" for suggestions on other ways of assessing the oral skills in the language classroom which could be used in the official exam. Only 1% and 3% respondents in 2004 and 2009 respectively put forward the "paired speaking" method of assessing speaking typical of the Cambridge exams and, in 2009, a more structured type of exam in which students were shown a video sequence as a prompt and asked to respond to questions related to it.

The last question of the questionnaire ("*Topics that would be necessary to consider if the oral skills are going to be assessed in the Selectividad exam*") was introduced in order to elicit information about the teachers' interests and concerns to be covered in the course to be organised at the ICE and to leave some room for open-ended comments. What seems to

be of greatest interest from the attitude survey was the varied range of implications that the assessment of oral skills involves in terms of the actual classroom implementation of oral skills, the adaptation of oral skills to the Bachillerato curriculum, the strategies, lacks and difficulties of teaching/learning oral skills as well as other higher-rank pedagogical implications. The 2004 survey hinted at some of the problems the respondents faced at that time, namely, those challenges and changes in the regular classes that the assessment of oral skills might bring with it. More than 25% of the respondents found it difficult to introduce the oral skills due to time constraints in the current curriculum, mixed ability classes, high ratio of students per class, and lack of technological means (e.g. language laboratories). Another 21% stated that the assessment of oral skills in the Selectividad would entail a re-consideration of classroom methodology and current assessment methods as well as the need for devising a comprehensive and coherent language curriculum for both primary, secondary and bachillerato education. The existence of mixed-ability classes (i.e. students with different levels of proficiency) and creating a suitable classroom environment in which the students can freely interact were, according to the 2004 survey, important factors that may make it difficult to implement the oral skills in the class.

Respondents to the survey in 2009 observed remarkably similar issues and handicaps —the latter being the lack of time and the high ratio of students per class. These respondents also remarked that the methodological proposals and didactic resources are exclusively adapted to the Bachillerato curriculum and to the PAU exam and would, in consequence, need to be thoroughly revised. Another issue that was pointed out in the 2009 survey was that the low language proficiency level that the students usually have in the bachillerato level may be probably be attributed to the lack of coordination of the languages department. Other various handicaps that the respondents referred to were the following: lack of computer resources and language labs, lack of discipline (which makes it difficult to adopt some methodological approaches in the class) and logistic factors such as the fact that the syllabus of 2nd bachillerato is, as the respondents put it, “too wide” and does not allow time to work specifically with the oral skills. Lack of human resources to assess the spoken skills, or classes with heterogeneous levels (i.e. mixed ability classes) were also issues raised in the 2009 survey. From a broader educational perspective, some respondents reported that they were not fully satisfied with the current funding and technological resources, the

lack of support on the part of the mass media (e.g. foreign films are usually dubbed) or with educational policies such as the fact that the optional language in the 2nd year of bachillerato has 4 weekly hours whereas the compulsory first language has three.

A large number of respondents came up with possible methodological suggestions: helping the students to learn the pronunciation of words, splitting the classes—at least once a week—into smaller groups in order to practise oral comprehension, or devoting the class to the practice of integrated skills. As far as assessment methods are concerned, the respondents suggested that the present assessment system should also assess the spoken skills or should assess the four skills in a similar way to that followed by the EOIs (Official Schools of Languages). Also related with the need of an oral examination, the respondents raised issues such as reinforcing the spoken skills already in primary education or adding an extra hour per week to the practice of the spoken skills.

An interesting set of responses concentrated on didactic proposals such as providing students with more personalised help, changing the current methodology and implementing methodologies that foster the oral use of the foreign language. As for questions of logistics, the respondents thought that it would be advisable to increase the number of grants for student exchange programmes, to allow secondary school centres to hire conversation assistants and/or create their own bilingual sections, to provide greater emphasis on the spoken skills in secondary education since the syllabus of 2nd Bachillerato is, at present, too dense and compressed and does not allow any space for the practice of the spoken skills. All these perceptions were, in fact, implicitly suggested by the responses to the 2004 survey.

Finally, in the case that an oral assessment test is finally implemented, the 2009 respondents were on the cautious side and suggested that it would be convenient to “script” it; that is, to decide on a fixed selection of topics, on the estimated percentages for the oral and the written part of the exam, to specify clearly the format of the exam and its assessment criteria. In addition, they were fully aware that implementing an oral exam would require changing textbooks and adopting the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) <http://www.coe.int/T/DG4/Linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp> whose main aim, as already stated, is to provide a 6-level method of assessing and teaching which applies to all languages in Europe.

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

From this longitudinal survey reported above, we can infer that in the current teaching/learning environment in the English classroom —except for a few instances of classes in which English is the medium of instruction— the practice of explicit teaching of oral skills in the foreign language classroom is regarded as an extra activity. The data retrieved from this longitudinal study summarized above shows that more than 80% of teachers of English in Secondary schools feel that, with the present conditions, they cannot devote enough time to the teaching of oral skills. The main reason is attributed to lack of curriculum time. In spite of this, almost 80% feel that oral skills should be included and assessed in the University entrance exam. This reminds us that apart from the explicit teaching of oral skills a greater value should be placed on to the different opportunities for using talk for different purposes during the class (e.g. instructional value).

All in all, the survey further reveals that secondary school teachers are very much aware of the need for assessing the oral skills of the foreign language as a means of fostering the students' competence in these skills. More importantly, in our view, are the multifarious issues that arise from the attitudes and perceptions of the respondents in the two surveys. These issues are discussed below and some suggestions are tentatively provided.

As regards educational policies affecting secondary education curriculum design and course planning, we believe that the recently taken decision to add an additional fourth hour in both 2nd and 4th year of ESO (secondary education) is a sensible one. This policy is expected to implement the splitting of large classes into smaller groups to cope with excessive teacher-student ratios and to provide language assistants for the district of Aragón. Also, institutional support from the Autonomous Government is planned to continue with grant policies to favour student exchange mobility, summer courses and stays in foreign language countries. If this support is successfully exploited, the teaching/learning of the oral skills will —at least in theory— be fostered to a great extent. From the results of the survey, it seems advisable to consider whether a major change in the educational system, starting with the teaching/learning of the oral skills already in primary education would favour the acquisition of those skills in the long term (cf. Ferguson 2006). In any case, as the respondents themselves acknowledge, this should be part of either local and/or national government decisions. Alternatively,

the reported lack of curriculum time can be partly solved by implementing “content and language integrated learning” (CLIL; cf. Marsh 1994, 2000). Though challenging, this would indeed bring to the fore the importance of integrated work with other subjects and would foster the significance of oral skills in the command of other disciplines.

As far as the actual classroom environment is concerned, major concern should be raised on the respondents’ agreed opinion about their students’ lack of interest. Several feasible suggestions can be provided for effective and efficient instruction in second language learning environments. For instance, it would be advisable to consider for the forthcoming academic years the implementation of methodological approaches that either favour the integration of skills through task-based work (e.g. Estaire & Zanón 1994; Foster and Skehan 1996; Skehan 1996) or foster cooperative and collaborative learning in the foreign language classroom (cf., for instance, Fabra 1992, Pérez-Llantada 2006, 2007). Relying on sound evidence and experimental research, these two approaches, which specifically rely on the premises of constructivism (cf. Spiro et al 1992; Kagan 1992; Johnson & Holubec 1999; Slavin 1999) prove to be apposite means of consolidating students’ acquisition of new knowledge.

Another possible option is to profit from attractive and motivating teaching materials, use of *realia* and the help of the new technologies (Plo & Andrés 2007). Alternatively or rather complementarily, the new technologies can play, as Collins (2002) advocates, a vital role in fostering motivation, participation and interest in the practice of the spoken skills (cf. also other attractive proposals related to Data Driven Learning (DDL), cf. Hadley 2004). In our view, other ways of fostering students’ autonomous learning, developing their critical thinking skills (Cederblom & Paulsen 2001) and, on a more personal level, providing affect to support for the learners themselves in their individual learning processes (Arnold 1999; Scharle & Szabó 2000) can contribute to building a more convivial foreign language classroom environment.

Pedagogically, an important issue which the introduction of the oral exam in PAU raises relates to the learning of competences and, in the long run, lifelong learning (cf. Fallows & Steven 2000; de la Cruz 2005, cf. also European Commission Education and Training <http://ec.europa.eu/education/index_en.htm>) Learning the language should never be strictly targeted at passing the PAU exam but rather at achieving a mastery of the

language for future communicative events. Other important challenges should be addressed within the educational arena. On the one hand, the introduction of the oral skills in the language classroom obviously calls for the need for training and updating language teachers in these language skills and in methodologies suitable for teaching/learning them. On the other hand, it would be crucial to reconsider the current PAU assessment system, hopefully geared to assess both the written and the spoken mastery of the foreign language. Needless to say, all these considerations should be taken into account in the prospective European degrees

To conclude, these are the challenges that the longitudinal survey has revealed, and these are the challenges that English teachers should be eager to face if we want to make our students effective communicators in the foreign language. At the time of completion of this article, the suggestions for the spoken test in the PAU in the Community of Aragón revolve around a listening test and an oral interview, both of them amounting to 30% of the total mark of the English subject. What seems to be true is that either one option or the other will indeed lead to greater interest in the spoken skills, and to devoting more time and efforts in practising and acquiring those skills. No doubt English is, at least to date, the dominant international language for cross-cultural communication and taking the challenge of providing an effective and efficient teaching/learning environment is, though perhaps hard, a feasible enterprise within teachers' own hands. Indeed, this training and knowledge will be most useful in an increasingly globalizing and internationalized socio-cultural context at the turn of the first decade of the third millennium.

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