Projects

PLEVALEX - A new platform for Oral Testing in Spanish

Computer assisted language testing has become a common educational feature. The fact that large servers allow teachers to investigate and implement new ways of teaching has been revolutionary in the past five years. Now that TOEFL and IELTS are currently operating their new tests online, it is necessary to obtain similar tools for many different languages at reduced costs. To this end a group of 15 researchers from the Polytechnic University of Valencia (UPV), investigating in the field of Languages for Specific Purposes, has been working for the past two years on designing a new tool for written and, more importantly, oral testing that can cater for a number of current educational needs in Spain: diagnostic tests for Erasmus students, internal university exams, official university entry exams, and preparation for the Cambridge, Trinity, and TOEFL exams. This new platform has been called PLEVALEX (Plataforma de evaluación valenciana de lenguas extranjeras). This article gives a brief description of the platform, its sections and uses. Although PLEVALEX was originally designed to test Spanish and Catalan, it is also transferable to other languages.

How does PLEVALEX work?

PLEVALEX is basically made up of two different sections, each of which comprises a different tool operating in conjunction with each other. The tool was designed and implemented with funding by the Valencian Community Department of Education (HIEO tool) and UPV (HIELE tool).

Diagram 1: Test taking process through PLEVALEX
As we can see above, Diagram 1 illustrates the process of exam taking in a computer room. First, the student has to complete two sections devoted to use of language: a computer corrected multiple choice test and also a written composition with different possibilities of prompts, including videos and audio sequences. Diagrams 2 and 3 illustrate these sections. As mentioned above, although the platform can be used in a variety of foreign languages, its trial version has been developed in Spanish.
After completing these two sections, the student will take a third one, the oral test. One of the main project achievements is the system that has been developed to store and play short images in real time for up to 500 students taking the test simultaneously. Mathematic calculations allow us to believe that this number could easily be increased up to 1500. The third section reproduces three types of questions: very short ones (informal and conversational style), medium sized conversations (up to 3 minutes) followed by questions, and diagram description and interpretation such as pictures or classroom diagrams. Diagram 4 shows how the student would see the first part on his computer.

Diagram 4: HIEO tool - Oral test. Section 1 (personal short answer questions)

Diagram 5: HIEO tool - Oral test. Section 3 (Diagram description)
Afterwards, the data is stored and transferred to the raters section in the backoffice. They will be able to retrieve the information and play the students' recordings as many times as necessary. Then the scores are transferred to the database and finally grouped and analysed accordingly.

**Conclusions**

Our expectations are to complete the trail phase by this coming spring and to start formally using the programme for internal university purposes in June 2006. Some of the studies mentioned below have addressed some of the drawbacks that the project has encountered including connections and transfer rates, learner strategies, washback, etc. Overall, we think that the project has been successful although we are well aware that a lot remains to be done in terms of diagnostic analysis, etc.

**Further reading**

So far the Beta version has been reported on in a number of studies. These studies focus on prospective analysis and expectations. The following constitute our main contributions.


**Acknowledgements**

Acknowledgements are due to the Valencian Community Department of Education and to UPV for funding the project. I would also like to thank the following researchers for their contribution to the project: Emilia Enríquez Carrasco (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia) who is co-author of many of these studies and project manager, Luis G. Bejarano (Valdosta State University, USA.), Slabon Software of Madrid (PLEVALEX programming), Lola Cuenca (Media and filming supervisor), Marie France Collart, Josefa Contreras Fernández, Daniela Gil Salom, Mercedes López Santiago, Maria Amelia Plasencia Abasolo and Inmaculada Sanz Alava from Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, and especially to our new associates Cristina Pérez Guillot, Noemí Pozuelo, Ana Gimeno (Universidad Politécnica de Valencia), and Honesto Herrera Soler (U. Complutense Madrid).

**Jesús García Laborda**

*Universidad Politécnica de Valencia, Spain*