

How spiky can a spiky profile be?

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Introduction

This talk presented initial findings from exam data sourced from UCLan's School of Language, Literature and International Studies Testing project. Learners' proficiency in English is assessed in the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The CEFR refers to the four skills, and it is no surprise that proficiency tests, such as UCLan's, feature papers with the same monikers. There is often a 'Use of English' element too. These papers are equally weighted, which suggests that ideally a candidate would have a similar level of proficiency in each skill area. However, proficiency can be unbalanced, with the term 'spiky-profile' being used to refer to erratic performance across the skills. I became interested in instances where there appears to be a discrepancy between the two productive skills of speaking and writing.

A pattern emerges

Variation in the scores across these papers is to be expected because learners can develop mixed proficiency due to a variety of factors including L1, previous exposure to English, maturity, mode preferences and motivation for learning English (Weissberg 2000; Kormos & Trebits 2012). I wanted to see whether learner profiles take an identifiable pattern, and whether an analysis of these could inform teaching practices, i.e. to identify whether change is required in the balance of skills teaching or if profiles can be used to predict competence in particular areas. Initially, I looked at exam results from four sittings of a C1 test in Greece from 2011 to 2014; there were 1627 candidates. As my focus was productive skills, the speaking and writing scores were isolated for comparison. A pattern began to emerge, so then scores in the same papers were compared at B2 level, taken from the same Greek context, as this was a much larger dataset of 37880 candidates. All the candidates were between 14 to 16 years old.

There was a consistent pattern across all four years at both levels, with writing scores being rarely better than speaking. The average percentage of candidates scoring higher in the writing paper than the speaking paper was 1.3% at C1 and 1.4% at B2. The average speaking

score at C1 was 76% (SD: 12.1) and at B2 it was 73% (SD: 12.5). The average writing scores at C1 and B2 were 46% (SD of 10.5 and 10.3 respectively). The average gap between writing and speaking at C1 was 30% (SD: 13.1) and at B2 was 26% (SD: 12.5). A Pearson correlation coefficient was calculated at 0.330 for all 4 years' of C1 data and 0.419 at B2. The scores were positively correlated, with the strength of the correlation being stronger at B2. The data shows a considerable difference between writing and speaking proficiency which persists through the levels, whereas I had expected the gap to close at C1.

Implications for teaching & the assessment process

The score gap suggests that more practice is needed in writing as opposed to speaking. It is possible candidates are not receiving the right quantity or quality of writing practice which means these candidates are not developing as writers. Bereiter and Scardamalia's (1987) model of 'knowledge telling' vs. 'knowledge transforming' characterises the difference between levels of proficiency within the CEFR. The ability to compose text that contains a coherent argument orientated towards an audience, as opposed to the writer simply presenting their knowledge on a particular topic in written form, indicates the development of a skilled writer. Perhaps the teaching approach is not facilitating this development, or perhaps the candidates lack the maturity or motivation to produce texts of this sophistication.

Another observation on these findings is that the students are performing less competently because of anxiety in exam conditions. However, this would also affect the speaking exam results and is an unavoidable aspect of any proficiency testing. Finally, there is the possibility that the speaking paper is being marked too generously. Having been an oral examiner, I would argue it is intrinsically harder to assess a flow of speech than a written text, so despite all the quality assurance protocols, the assessment of the written mode is possibly more exacting.

Ideas for future research

An analysis of score profiles from another proficiency test, with a similar test-taker profile, would begin to establish to what extent the patterns I found are particular to the Greek context. Furthermore, a comparison with an older age range of candidates could further explore the effect of maturity on test-takers' cognitive development and/or motivation.

References:

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