The Big Four Skills: Teachers’ Assumptions on Measurement of Cognition and Academic Skills for Non-Native Students

Figueiredo, S*, Alves Martins, M. Silva, C., Nunes, O.  
* sandradfigueiredo@ua.pt
Introduction

• The four-skills on tests for young native speakers commonly do not generate correlation incongruency concerning the cognitive strategies frequently reported.

• Considering the non-native speakers there are parse evidence to determine which tasks are important to assess properly the cognitive and academic language proficiency (Cummins, 1980; 2012).
• Research questions: It is of high probability that young students with origin in immigration significantly differ on their communication strategies and skills in a second language processing context (1);

• attached to this first assumption, it is supposed that teachers significantly differ depending on their scientific area and previous training (2).
Methodology

Purpose of the study: This study intends to examine whether school teachers (K-12) as having different origin in scientific domain of teaching and training perceive differently an adapted four-skills scale, in European Portuguese.
The study involved 77 teachers aged between 32 and 62 years (M=47 years, SD=7.4), of whom 11 (14.3%) were male and 60 (77.9%) were female, with an average of 22 years teaching experience (SD=6.7). Teachers teach at nine schools/groupings in the district of Lisbon, Portugal.
Concerning the question of the study, the knowledge and representations that different teachers have regarding evaluation tests vary mainly according to the predominance of the scientific area compared to other factors that have been confirmed as not being strong predictors in the model: age, length of service and experience with multicultural groups. Regarding the scientific area, in the early part of the paper we present the differences in perceptions that teachers, by scientific area, denote and explain their valuing of reading and listening comprehension tasks to the detriment of the writing and speaking tasks. As noted, previous studies suggest that teachers have inadequate knowledge and representations of instruction and assessment of priority tasks in L2 (Graham & Peri, 2007; Littlewood, 2007; Veenman, 1984).
This study concludes that the teachers with more positive perceptions are language teachers and basic education teachers, who understand more tasks, focusing on all the skills to satisfactorily assess immigrant pupils. These data contradict the study by García-Nevarez, Stafford & Arias (2010), which examined an American sample (Arizona State) of basic education teachers regarding the importance of adjusting teaching to non-native students (English as L2), and detected a huge variability of answers, which depended on the type of training these teachers had had, with those qualified to teach bilingual education being more favourable and more supportive of L2 learners, unlike older teachers (bilingual and monolingual) who, compared with the younger ones, had negative attitudes towards non-native MT students.
• This study demonstrates that teachers effectively value this type of skill less (writing skills according to the audience) and for this reason it appears as one of the items with a lower mean. It seems that for this kind of task, Foreign Language teachers value it less than the Portuguese language teachers, and in the same proportion regarding the valuing of grammar rules.

FLs teachers are the ones who undervalue these two aspects of writing the most, when they should be the most sensitive to the grammar question and sociolinguistics of the audience. However, these data are in line with a meta-analysis study conducted by Graham and Peri (2007) who identified the priorities of teachers in the writing teaching tasks as being teaching strategies and 'peer assistance' to the detriment of grammar, pre-writing activities and processing aspects in texts written by the students. According to studies conducted in the eighties (Scarcella, 1984), L2 writers have major problems in writing for specific audiences, which is related to "attention engaging" (p. 671) during the writing task. One cause may be related to the subject’s incomplete proficiency in Mother Tongue (Khuwaileh & Shoumali, 2000) and to difference in cognitive processing (and therefore different strategies) in the contexts of Mother Tongue and L2 (Silva, 1993).
The same variability of answers, albeit dependent on other variables, was also found in teachers (Michigan) examined by Karabenick and Noda (2004), supporting the teachers’ perception regarding the students’ bilingualism as an advantage compared to non-bilingual L2 pupils. In this study, in more advanced levels of basic education and high school, social sciences teachers (History and Geography) and sciences (and visual arts) teachers select fewer items, thereby minimizing the number of tasks and focusing more on reading and listening comprehension skills. These results are consistent with data advanced by Hansen-Thomas and Cavagnetto (2010), who found that teachers in the area of mathematics do not distinguish between tasks that these students should complete to be able to develop the language of the subject. Also, a study by Reeves (2006) showed that high school teachers had insignificant positive attitudes regarding including immigrant students in regular classes, due to the specific teaching for L2 and to the change of plans and programmes to adapt to these students.
Implications for policy/Practice

The results presented in this study are an important contribution especially in two aspects: the analysis of teachers’ perception of relevant tasks in L2 is pioneer in Portugal. On the other hand, it presents a corpus of results that corroborate and contrast those of previous international studies, with implications for education and concepts of practices that teachers from various scientific fields reveal about L2 teaching and the type of tasks to consider in tests and in the classroom.
Implications for policy/Practice

• The inconsistency in perception and practices across different groups of teachers and respective experiences results from the variability in their responses and from the statistically significant differences in the specific tasks they have chosen as being relevant and irrelevant. However, when compared to the group of teachers from one of the samples of the original study (Rosenfeld, Leung & Ottman, 2001), Portuguese teachers are more positive when differentiating tasks.
• And despite the fact that the variables related to experience with multicultural classes and application (knowledge) of the PLNM measure had little predicting value in the analysis of the results, we consider these factors to be important to improve teachers’ perceptions of tasks to be done in classrooms with different minorities, especially considering that over the last few months Portuguese schools have been receiving refugee students.
• Acknowledgements

This work was supported by the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) under the Grant n.º SFRH/BPD/86618/2012; and Center of Psychology Research of Universidade Autónoma de Lisboa, Lisbon Portugal.
The Big Four Skills: Teachers’ Assumptions on Measurement of Cognition and Academic Skills for Non-Native Students

Figueiredo, S*, Alves Martins, M. Silva, C., Nunes, O.

* sandradfigueiredo@ua.pt