

## Testing Communicative Language Skills of the Speaking Test in EFL Classrooms at King Abdulaziz University

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**Abstract** – Due to the communicative language teaching approach, more researches on communicative language testing have been carried out and more awareness regarding its benefits has been raised. Communicative language testing help teachers to test their students' ability to use the language in a realistic content-specific situations and tasks. Due to time and practicality constraints, sampling students' language was hard to collect. This essay will first briefly identify other methods of testing before communicative language testing emergence, including what they measure and their theoretical basis. Next, an examination of the models on which communicative language testing is based on and ways in which communicative testing differs from other forms of language testing will be put forth. Then, an example of the speaking test administered in the preparatory year EFL classes at KAU to determine whether they meet the criteria they claim to test is going to be discussed. Finally, some of the problems communicative language testing faces and how these problems have been addressed will be examined.

**Keywords:** communicative language testing, principles, features, problems, solutions, assumptions, communicative speaking, communicative listening

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

By the mid-1980s, language testing platform had evolved considerably when communicative language testing emerged. Tests no longer aim to evaluate students' knowledge of the language, especially vocabulary and grammar, but to design communicative language testing tasks (Brown, 2003). Communicative language testing approach was mainly an opposition of the reliability and validity aspects of language testing during the 1960s (Spolsky, 1995; Fulcher, 2000)

Due to the communicative language teaching approach, more researches on communicative language testing have been carried out and more awareness regarding its benefits has been raised. Communicative language testing helps teachers to test their students' ability to use the language in a realistic content-specific situations and tasks.

Moller (1981) defined communicative language testing as assessing students' ability to use one or more of the syntactic, semantic, and phonological systems of the language in order to

communicate, receive and understand ideas and information to and from another speaker/reader and vice versa.

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Having experienced firsthand the benefits of communicative language skills testing of my students in EFL classrooms at KAU is what influenced me to explore and read about communicative language testing.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Difference between Communicative Language Testing and Other Forms of Testing**

Language testing has gone through three eras identified by Spolsky in 1975, before the emergence of communicative language testing. These periods are the pre-scientific, the psychometric-structuralist, and the psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic era (Fulcher, 2000). Morrow (1979) named these period as "the Garden of Eden, the Vale of Tears, and the Promised Land" (p. 144) that witnessed the birth of communicative language testing in the early 1980s.

Spolsky (1995) stated that the pre-scientific period started two thousand years ago with the rise of Chinese civil service exams, although he believes that its present form is based on the 18th century Cambridge Tripos. The pre-scientific period is characterized by oral examination, essays, and open-ended examinations where test results are determined by an authorized examiner. Tests of this era were not based on linguistic theory, as its name suggests, where the production of a test that felt fair was more important than reliability.

The psychometric-structuralist era is a collaboration of the structural linguists and the psychometrists. The structural linguists were responsible for identifying the elements of the language that they wanted to test. The psychometrists, on the other hand, were taking care of producing objectives and testing the students' control of language elements through the use of reliable methods.

In the 1970s, language testing has moved from what is called "discrete point testing" proposed by Lado to psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic era. Although discrete point testing divides the language into small parts that could be tested using structural contrastive analysis, it failed to measure students' language ability in a sufficient manner. Similarly, Oller's (1979, cited in Weir 1990) integrative testing hypothesis, such as cloze tests, has been heavily criticized by Bachman

(1990) and Morrow (1979, cited in Weir 1990) because it tested students' competence and knowledge about the language, rather than their performance. Both discrete point and integrative testing paved the way for communicative language testing (Weir, 1990). Spolsky (1989) stressed that language tests should measure the knowledge and proficiency of the students.

Communicative language testing is based on two communicative models: Canale and Swain's model (1980) and Bachman's framework (1990). While attempting to define what communicative competence is, Canale and Swain came up with four competences: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Grammatical competence is knowing about language lexis, syntax, morphology and phonology. Sociolinguistic competence is using the language socially and culturally. Strategic competence refers to communicative verbal and non-verbal strategies during communication breakdown due to insufficient competence. Finally, discourse competence includes the knowing about cohesion and coherence that exist in many genres. Canale and Swain's model helps in distinguishing testing students' knowledge about the language (competence) and their ability to use it communicatively in different situations (performance).

Similar to Canale and Swain (1980), Bachman's framework has three competences: language, strategic, and psycho-physiological competence. Each competence encompasses a number of sub-competences. For the reason of space, a general overview of Bachman's framework will be discussed briefly. Language competence includes all the elements necessary to communicate using the language. Strategic competence refers to implementing language competence in situations that require communication. Psycho-physiological competence includes the psychological and neurological processes during the language production and comprehension.

Language competence models proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) have influenced and contributed in forming a framework for communicative language testing (Weir 1990).

## **2.2. Communicative Language Testing Principles and Features**

### **2.2.1. Principles**

The goal of communicative language tests is to measure students' ability to use the language in real life communications and situations. These tests covered all four language skills (speaking, writing, reading, and listening) that are based on communicative competence. Canale and Swain (1980) stated that communicative competence has to involve students' knowledge of linguistic forms (linguistic competence), their ability to appropriately use the language in context (sociolinguistic competence), their production of a coherent and cohesive sentences (discourse competence), and their use of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies (strategic competence).

In order to evaluate communicative language tests, understanding communicative competence model is very helpful and vital. It involves knowing the objectives of the test and considering test effect on learning and teaching.

According to Bailey (1998), there are four principles of communicative test. The first principle is that test makers must know what to test and how test takers are going to perform when using the target language in a specific context (Katsumasa, 1997). After that, test makers will have the opportunity to measure students' performance following scales and criteria of assessment created by test makers. In order to avoid affecting the test validity in a negative way, testers should not take into account unstated objectives while grading test takers.

The second principle is content concentration that involves implementing tasks and topics. The content of the test should be suitable to the students' age, interest, proficiency level, and needs. In addition, the tasks should be authentic and genuine match what their society expects of them in real life such as introducing themselves.

The third principle involves preparing the students in order to be ready for the test by providing appropriate review that suits the best and the weaker students (Swain, 1984). According to Brown (2003), communicative tests should exploit students' best performance that includes encouraging the students to ask questions about difficult words and reading the text more than once to the students if it is higher than their level of proficiency (Bailey, 1998).

The fourth and final principle is obtaining positive washback. In order to achieve it, teachers and students should be provided with clear scoring criteria, course objectives, and test content. Wesch (1983) stated that it is important to clarify the interaction purpose, context, discourse type, and skills degree because these factors help in promoting positive feedback and choosing appropriate materials with suitable structures and vocabulary.

### **2.2.2. Features**

According to Brown (2005), there are five core features of a successful communicative language test including authentic situations, creative language output, meaningful communication, integrated language skills, and unpredictable language input.

First, communicative language tests should use authentic situations in order to have meaningful communication because meaningful language will not exist if there is no context (Weir, 1990). Furthermore, Brown argued that it is impossible to predict the speaker's language input and output, i.e., what the speaker will say to someone and emphasized that the unpredictability factor should be replicated in communicative tests. Also, meaningful communication should be the basis of communicative tests because it promotes and activates useful language and meets students' needs. Communicative tests provide students with the opportunity to be able to receive and produce the language in authentic situations. Last, but not least, communicative tests should promote the students to use a combination of language skills, especially in real life communication.

Communicative language testing is different from other testing forms because they have a number of distinct features. In order for the communicative language test to judge how the students will react in a real situation outside the test and the classroom, the test should reflect that situation accurately as much as possible. Thus, the test will be high in its content validity and context-specific with tasks reflecting the language and skills students need to perform in real life context. Weir (1990) stressed that when measuring students' ability to communicate using the language, tasks should be authentic and realistic with genuine discourse and appropriate length. Communicative language testing tends to test authentic, real life skills rather than testing what will not likely to happen in real life such as cloze tests, despite the fact that it is not agreed upon. Authentic tasks guarantee the tests to have high face validity as well. Morrow (1981) stated that tests' face validity is more important than their reliability.

Furthermore, there are vital aspects according to Morrow (1981) that communicative language testing should reflect including normal spoken discourse, chances to initiate, and unpredictability.

Communicative language testing should assess the students' ability to perform in real life situations qualitatively (Morrow, 1981). Morrow further explained that students' answers to the test should be assessed according to how they resemble those of native speakers. In addition, tests should reveal how students perform using the language.

### **2.3. Assumptions Underlying Testing of Communicative Language Skills**

The assumption that language is all about structure and syntax is no longer considered valid. Hughes (2003) stated that a language is a way to deliver communicative meanings or functions and test measurements are indicators of what students could do with the language. Tests, influenced by the teaching taking place in the classroom, should motivate the students and support their learning process. Heaton (1988) argued that tests administered for assessing students' performance in L2 focus too much on language elements testing. The result is teaching driven by the test that affect communicative language teaching. Heaton also argued that fluent students or students who are able to communicate in real life situations can use their knowledge of language when listening and speaking. Being able to answer in pen and paper tests where students can use certain structures of the language effectively is not an indicator that they are proficient speakers of the language.

When assessing language skills rather than language structures, sampling is greatly needed. Any test should represent and test the skills that the students learnt in the class (Hughes, 1988). Therefore, tests should not include items that have never been taught before or trick the students into giving wrong answers. Multiple choice tests, also known as recognition tests, could be misleading because students might choose wrong answers. Production tests, on the other hand, demonstrate learners' proficiencies because students are asked to complete a sentence where a number of possible answers could be correct. Integrative tests have the benefit of

demanding the students to tap into and use their linguistic, textual and background knowledge such as cloze tests.

The testing of communicative ability paved the way to using bands, with each band being described in detail. Speaking tests have a high degree of validity because they measure authentic language use for communication, whereas reliability cannot be achieved for several reasons. Scoring the speaking test is instant, varied, subjective, and made on the spot, instead of spending more time to review voice recording and videos of the tests. Furthermore, examiners of speaking tests can get tired and this could affect the scoring process.

In the following section, a description of the speaking test given to thirty foundation year students in the intermediate level who attend the English Language Institute (ELI) at King Abdul Aziz University in Saudi Arabia will be presented. All the questions reflect what the students took in their English language classes. Due to the mixed language and communicative abilities of the students within the same class, test items had to be designed accordingly.

#### **2.4. Examples of Communicative Speaking (and listening) Language Test Administered at EFL Classrooms at KAU**

Communicative language testing has been used in the English Language Institute (ELI) ever since it first started in 2005. Test questions were designed to reflect what students had learned in their language classes. Test items included different language communicative abilities to cover a class of 19 students in their foundation year. Tests are given to the students twice, in the middle and end of the academic term.

The speaking test has two parts, simple dialogues (find someone who...? task) and teacher/students interaction. Test items reflect what the students already learned in their English language syllabus. The test is designed to test students' comprehension and production of English language (Hughes, 2003). After observation, students were graded using speaking bands. During the first task (find someone who...?) that includes asking follow-up questions by the teacher, students are rated according to their interaction. Students also rated while solving a vocabulary exercise in groups of four. Finally, the teacher gives the student an information gap task. All the tasks in the test reflect the extension of students' skills while taking part in a conversation in the target language i.e. English.

Seventeen students got a band of 1 and a couple of students took -1. Weir (1990) stated that band (-1) signals poor pronunciation, inability to function and lack of flexibility in responses or no utterances at times. Band (1), on the other hand, represent L1 influenced pronunciation, with a limited range of meaning expressed, and one word utterances.

Using bands made the criteria of assessment explicit that helped in increasing reliability level. As for validity, the test is valid because it measures what it claims to measure, that is, the communicative ability of students. The limitation of this test is that speaking and listening

abilities are not isolated from each other and students' abilities could have been acquired before the start of and during the English classes. As expected by their teachers, these test revealed that foundation year students have a low proficiency in the English language because of their limited exposure to the target language and limited usage in daily life.

### **3. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TESTS**

There are a number of problems associated with communicative language testing that have been addressed by language testers. Assessment is the first problem. As mentioned above, communicative language tests are qualitatively assessed rather than quantitatively. Due to this assessment, their reliability will be doubted because of judging them subjectively. Weir (1990) commented that testers need to keep in mind assessing productive skills holistically and qualitatively and their implications for testing reliability. Furthermore, he commented that criterion-referenced approach (CR) to communicative language testing needs to be examined. Bachman (1990) defined students' ability, under the influence of CR explanation of test scores, as completing the tasks successfully within a set of criterion tasks. These scores help in providing information about a student's performance in a language rather than comparing it with other students, and this is what norm-referencing does.

Another problem, as stated by Brindley (1991), is that of the rating scales used. Finding empirical basis for scales is very difficult, despite the fact that they are widely accepted. Furthermore, Brindley mentioned more drawbacks of using rating scales. Upper and lower reference or end points are impossible to set because they only exist in theory i.e. no one is a perfect speaker or has zero ability.

Steps can be taken to recognize and address these two problems. According to Weir (1998), it is possible to obtain high rater reliability by sufficient training and standardization of examiners to the procedures employed. According to Brindley (1991), consulting expert judges such as teachers is one way to produce suitable criteria to be used in proficiency tests. Native speakers are another source of opinion since they are the type of people students are going to encounter when using the language. Another suggested group is the students who are taking the test themselves who use self-assessments based on learner-defined criteria in the classroom.

Sampling and hypothesizing results are a second related problem of communicative language tests. The samples of the language used in the test help in making inferences about students' ability to use the language they learned outside test situations (Weir, 1990). Test contexts and tasks reflect what students might encounter in real life. In order to obtain a full sample of students' language, more tasks should be included in the test. However, Weir (1990) argued that having as many items as possible will conflict with the need for efficiency.

Task format is the last problem to be discussed and addressed. Testing methods affect test performance in a significant way. Bachman (1991) stated that many studies have been conducted in the 1980s that demonstrate how tasks and topical content affect test performance, in

addition to the abilities the test want to measure. Introspection studies addressed this problem by assuming that students will respond to the test in the way testers think they do (Skehan, 1991). However, these studies showed that students do not perform, during or after taking the test, in a way that testers assume or use different linguistics processes than the testers expected. Consequently, testers' concepts of validation have become wider and how tests correspond to reality has been extended (Skehan, 1991).

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Communicative language testing has gone through a number of phases past the pre-scientific era. It placed more importance on testing students fairly rather than focusing on reliability. Nowadays, it is interested in the ability of students to use their knowledge of the language in real life communicative situations. Like any other test, communicative language testing has some problems. Teachers and researchers are responsible to solve them.

Implications of communicative language testing include elevating the standards of language instructions, motivating students, and supporting the learning process since language theories have moved on from defining a language as a set of structures. Adopting an integrative approach to language testing will help while measuring students' language abilities. In order to ensure validity and reliability of communicative language test, results should be analyzed statistically while constructing the test.

Many reservations have been highlighted concerning some practices and assumptions about testing including depending on multiple choice tests, lacking measurable bands while conducting speaking tests, or scoring students on instructions they have not received. By challenging these practices and assumptions that affect testing negatively, communicative language testing will help improving students' communicative skills. Furthermore, it will be a valuable addition to teachers' repertory.

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