

# Communicative Language Testing: Principles and Problems

Katsumasa Shimada

## 1. Background

### 1.1 Testing and Teaching

In the past decades, there has been a tendency to isolate testing from teaching. However, both teaching and testing are so closely interrelated that it is impossible to consider the former without taking the latter into account. The relationship between teaching and testing looks just like the head and tail of a coin. Teaching facilitates learning, and testing measures learning. Teaching, learning and testing are affected by one another. It should be emphasised, therefore, that we should not deal with testing separately from teaching.

A test — a classroom test in particular — should measure whether or not, or to what extent the students learned what had been taught. If there is a mismatch between what is to be learned and what is to be measured, then the students will feel discontented with the unfairness of testing, resulting in that they will be demotivated in language learning. We should avoid a teaching-testing mismatch as far as possible. If a traditional, structural approach to language teaching has been adopted, the test specifications should closely reflect such a structural approach. If, on the other hand, a communicative approach to language

teaching has been adopted, the test specifications should be based on the types of language tasks included in the teaching programme. It is clearly unfair to administer a test devised entirely along communicative lines to those students who have followed a course concentrating on the learning of structures and grammar (Heaton, 1988).

In the following sections, we will examine how language testing has been developed with special reference to communicative language testing. To begin with, we will have a brief look at the history of language teaching, then we will turn our attention to the development of language testing in relation to language teaching.

## **1.2 History of Language Teaching**

Looking back over the long history of English language teaching methodology, we can compare the shifts in the methods which have been devised to a pendulum swinging from one extreme to another. In the course of the century one method has succeeded another in official favour: grammar-translation gave way to the direct method, which was in turn followed by the reading approach. Then came the Second World War, which brought with it the so-called army method, which under conditions of peace became the audio-lingual approach (Prator, 1972).

As the changes described above show, new movements generally occur as reactions against the existing situation and a new method has been devised to resolve discontent prevalent among contemporary language teachers. In the last two decades, the term 'communicative language teaching' has been a key word in the field of English language teaching. Communicative language teaching is "a reaction against the view of language as a set of structures; it is a reaction towards a

view of language as communication, a view in which meaning and the uses to which language is put play a central part" (Brumfit and Johnson, 1979 : 3).

Traditionally language teachers have paid much attention to mastery of language structures, with the result that they have produced structurally competent but communicatively incompetent students, that is, the ones who have developed the ability to produce grammatically correct sentences — yet who are unable to perform a simple communicative task. Along with the prominence of sociolinguistics, British applied linguists emphasised another fundamental dimension of language that was inadequately addressed in recent approaches to language teaching, that is, the functional and communicative dimension of language. They felt the need to focus in language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures. They have come to pay more attention to what language does rather than what language is.

### **1.3 History of Language Testing**

Roughly speaking, language testing has developed in line with the movements of language teaching. According to Heaton (1988), it can be roughly classified into four approaches; (1) the essay-translation approach; (2) the structuralist approach, (3) the integrative approach, and (4) the communicative approach.

In the essay-translation approach referred to as the pre-scientific stage of language testing, tests usually consist of essay writing, translation and grammar analysis in the form of comments about the language.

The structuralist approach draws on the work of structural

linguistics, especially contrastive analysis, and behaviouristic psychology as the theoretical background, as in the audiolingualism in language teaching. In the approach, a key feature is the breaking down of the complexities of language into isolated segments. This feature regulates both what is to be tested (goal) and how the testing should be carried out (method). It is assumed that knowledge of elements of a language is equivalent to knowledge of the language and that a test is administered to know whether or not correct habits have been established. Discrete-point tests, such as grammar tests and vocabulary tests, are characterised as the tools to measure a small segment, as well as one skill at a time. It should be noted, however, that the whole is not always the sum of the parts.

The integrative approach involves the testing of language in context. Consequently, integrative tests, such as dictation, cloze tests and oral interviews do not seek to separate language skills into one of four skills, instead they are designed to assess the learner's ability to use two or more skills simultaneously. Thus, they are concerned with an underlying language competence or grammar of expectancy. Both cloze and dictation test basic language processing mechanisms and sample a wide range of structural and lexical items in a meaning context, but neither serve as a tool to elicit the candidate's ability to actually use the language in ordinary situations.

Widdowson (1978) makes a distinction between usage and use as aspects of language performance. In normal circumstances in which we engage in conversation, we manifest simultaneously both aspects of performance. Usage is referred to as the "citation of words and sentences as manifestations of the language system". On the other hand, use is referred to as "the way the system is realised for normal

## Communicative Language Testing

communicative purposes” (p.18). A knowledge of use must always include a knowledge of usage, but not the reverse. This part-whole relationship implies that testing language as usage will necessarily leave a large part of language aspects to be tested as use. It is true that linguistic performance has two aspects but we can separate usage from use by focusing more attention on the former rather than the latter. In fact, those two aspects of performance have been treated separately by grammarians and language teachers.

As communicative language teaching pays more attention to use as opposed to usage, so does the communicative approach to testing. It is, therefore, concerned primarily with how language is used in communication. It aims to incorporate tasks which approximate as closely as possible to those the students will face in real-life situations. Those who are involved in writing communicative tests are more interested in what the candidate can do with the language rather than what knowledge of the language the candidate possesses.

### **2. The Nature of Communication**

In the preceding sections, it was argued that communicative language teaching and testing is a reaction towards a view of language as communication. Then, what on earth is communication? Before discussing language testing from the communicative point of view, we must make clear what the feature of communication is.

From the viewpoint of a language user, Canale (1983) summarises the characteristics of communication, each of which is interrelated.

Communication

- (a) is a form of social interaction;
- (b) involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in

form and message;

- (c) takes place in discourse and sociocultural contexts;
- (d) is carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions;
- (e) always has a purpose;
- (f) involves authentic, as opposed to textbook-contrived language;
- (g) is judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes;
- (h) is understood as the exchange and negotiation of information;
- (i) involves the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning;
- (j) involves a reduction of uncertainty.

The view of language as communication provides us with a wider perspective on language teaching and testing. In the sections that follow, we will consider 'what' to test (goal) and 'how' to test (method) in communicative language testing and examine in what ways it differs from the traditional testing. All or some of the characteristics described above should regulate both the goal and the method of the tests to improve construct as well as content validity.

### **3. Communicative Competence**

#### **3.1 From Linguistic Competence to Communicative Competence**

As has been pointed out, language should be taught and tested for communication. What kinds of ability are required of learners to communicate effectively, in other words, what is communicative competence? Here we will discuss what the nature of communicative competence is.

To begin with, we will consider competence that Chomsky (1965) distinguished from performance.

Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-

## Communicative Language Testing

listener, in a completely homogeneous speech community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance. (p.3-4)

We thus make a fundamental distinction between competence (the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language) and performance (the actual use of language in concrete situations). Chomsky limited very strongly the field of linguistic investigation to that of competence, and as a result the dimension of performance was not taken into consideration.

It is a sociolinguist, Hymes, who reacted to Chomsky's claims and pointed out that Chomsky's category did not provide for language use. Hymes (1972) looked at a *real* speaker-listener in actual communication. He expanded the concept of competence into communicative competence from the sociolinguistic point of view. He proposes four parameters to the systems of rules that underlie communicative behaviour.

1. Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
2. Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
3. Whether (and to what degree) something is an appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
4. Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails. (p.281)

The first parameter corresponds with grammaticality. Hymes

suggests that grammaticality is only one of four sectors of communicative competence, whereas for Chomsky grammaticality is competence itself. The second is concerned with psycholinguistic factors, which must be taken into account in defining communicative competence, because communication is carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions such as memory constraints, fatigue and distractions. The third relates to sociolinguistic factors. As communication takes place in sociocultural contexts, this factor plays an important role in communicating effectively. The fourth is concerned with probability of occurrence.

It seems to me that among the four parameters the most important is appropriateness. Even if a sentence is grammatically correct, there are cases in which the well-formed sentence cannot be accepted in a social context. In Hymes' own words, "there are rules of use without which the rules of grammar would be useless" (p.278). To put it in another way, there are sentences which are grammatically correct but socially inappropriate. For instance, it might not be appropriate to say, 'Hey, d'you fancy a bite to eat this evening?', if you are talking to your superior. Grammaticality is nothing but a part of communicative competence, although it plays a central role.

In summary, the goal of language learning and testing has thus been expanded into the acquisition of communicative competence, being affected by the sociolinguistic view of language.

### **2.3 Components of Communicative Competence**

There have been a number of attempts to describe a model of communicative competence.

Canale and Swain (1980) subcategorised the components of



## Communicative Language Testing

communicative competence into three and Canale (1983) later expanded them into four: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence.

Grammatical competence is concerned with “mastery of the language code” (p.7). It includes features and rules of the language such as vocabulary (lexis), word formation (morphology), sentence formation (syntax), pronunciation (phonology), spelling (orthography) and semantics.

As communication takes place in discourse and sociocultural contexts, communicative competence naturally involves sociolinguistic and discourse competence as the subcomponents.

Discourse competence concerns “mastery of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text in different genres”. Unity of a text is achieved “through cohesion in form and coherence in meaning” (p.9).

Cohesion deals with structural linkage among utterances. Let us take an example.

A: What did the rain do?

B: The crops were destroyed by the rain. (Widdowson, 1978 : 25)

This exchange conflicts with the so-called ‘end focus principle’ because the new information comes before the old information. Although both utterances are grammatically correct, the sequence is not structurally correct.

Coherence refers to the relationships among the different meanings in a text. In the case of coherence, as opposed to cohesion, we can infer the covert connections by interpreting the illocutionary acts. Let us consider the following example.

A: That’s the telephone.

B: I'm in the bath.

A: O.K. (Widdowson, 1978 : 29)

If we interpret A's first utterance as a request, and B's reply as an excuse for not complying with A's request, and A's second remark as an acceptance of B's excuse, the exchange forms coherent discourse.

Sociolinguistic competence addresses "the extent to which utterances are produced and understood appropriately in different sociolinguistic contexts depending on contextual factors such as status of participants, purposes of the interaction, and norms or conventions of interaction" (p.7). This competence includes appropriateness of both form and meaning.

Strategic competence is concerned with "mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies" not only "to compensate for breakdowns in communication" but also "to enhance the effectiveness of communication" (p.10-11).

As Canale himself points out, the four areas of communicative competence described above are analysed as a theoretical framework and it is not clear how these components interact with one another as a working model of communicative competence.

It seems to me that strategic competence has different features from other three components because it is not based on any rules while all of the others are rule-governed.

Bachman (1990) further expanded Canale's framework. The Bachman model consists of a number of overarching components: language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. Language competence includes organisational competence and pragmatic competence. Organisational competence is divided into grammatical competence and textual competence. Pragmatic compe-

tence is subcategorised into illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Strategic competence includes three components: assessment, planning, and execution. Psychophysiological mechanisms refers to the four skills involved in the execution phase of language use.

We do not want our students merely to know about the language what the native speaker knows, but to be able to do with it what the native speaker does. Knowing the rules is not enough, the student must be able to use the rules in actual communication. Not only the declarative knowledge but also the procedural knowledge are necessary. The Bachman model, in which strategic competence is considered as a completely separate element from the others' and functions as a 'bridge' from language competence to psychomotor skills which are realised in four ways, can be characterised as a communicative *proficiency* model as opposed to Canale's model of communicative *competence*.

We have discussed components of communicative competence. The "divisibility hypothesis" (Weir, 1990 : 5) suggests that when in writing a test the test writers should bear in mind which component(s) of communicative competence the test is focusing on.

## **4. Methodology of Communicative Testing**

### **4.1 Basic Tenets of Communicative Testing Methodology.**

In the preceding section we have discussed 'what' to measure in the communicative testing. In this section we will turn our attention to 'how' to measure communicative abilities of the candidates.

First of all, we will consider the general characteristics of the communicative approach in language testing in comparison with the structuralist approach.

The basic principle of communicative language teaching methodology is expressed in Morrow's (1981) words:

A method which aims to develop the ability of students to communicate in a foreign language will aim to replicate as far as possible the processes of communication, so that practice of the forms of the target language can take place within a communicative framework. (p.62)

As Figure 1 illustrates, in the audio-lingual(AL) approach, a language learner has no area in common with a language user, on the other hand, in communicative language teaching (CLT), a language learner has a good deal of areas in common with a language user. The bigger the black area (User) in the white circle (Learner) becomes, the more communicative the teaching becomes. This implies that we should write a test from the language user's point of view to make it as communicative as possible.

In the structuralist approach learning language is one thing, and using language or communication is another thing. Communicative testing, however, tries to reflect as much as possible the characteristics of communication summarised in 2.1.

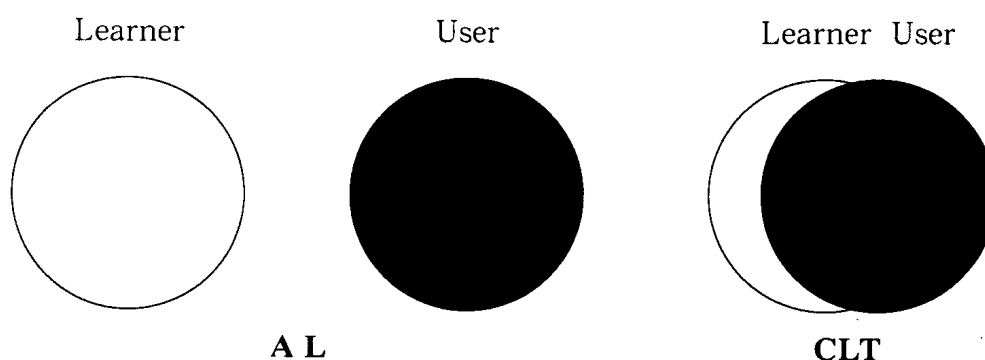


Fig. 1

## 4.2 Five Principles of Communicative Testing

Seeking for a consistent methodology, Morrow (1981) established five principles of communicative teaching methodology.<sup>1</sup> It seems to me that the principles could be applied to language testing. In this section we will consider the methodological principles and some problems entailed in communicative language testing under the modified slogans.

### 4.2.1 Principle one: Know what you are measuring.

As has been seen in Section 2, communication always has a purpose. Every utterance is made to perform a function. Morrow(1981) claims that every lesson should focus on learning how to do something or perform a function and end with the learner being able to see clearly that he can do something which he could not do before the lesson. This implies that the objectives of every test should be described in terms of the behavioural objectives focused on the function. Before making a test, the test writers must make clear what they are trying to measure. As communicative language teaching begins with need analysis of the participants in the course, so communicative language testing needs to identify what it is that the candidate has to do with the language in a specific situation. However, the question arises as to whether need analysis can cover all the functions to be performed in real situations which the students will face. We cannot predict what will happen in real situations, since communication is characterised as being unpredictable. This is the issue of sampling (Alderson, 1981; Hughes, 1988).

Even if we can predict a specific function and the candidate can perform the function well in a performance test, it cannot be guaranteed that the candidate can do the same thing at the same level of accuracy

and fluency outside the classroom. This is the issue of predictive validity.

#### 4.2.2 Principle two: The whole is more than the sum of the parts.

Communication is a dynamic and developing phenomenon, which is changing in real time and takes place in discourse. It should be noted, therefore, that communication cannot easily be analysed into component features without destroying the nature. Knowledge of the isolated elements of a language counts for nothing unless the language user is able to combine them in new and appropriate ways to meet the linguistic demands of the situation in which he or she wants to use the language. What is needed and to be measured is the ability to deal with discourse or strings of sentences in the context of real situations. As has been discussed in 2.3, discourse competence is one component of communicative competence. In order to elicit discourse competence, we need to provide the students not with an isolated sentence but with stretches of language above one sentence level.

On the basis of the distinction between usage and use, Widdowson (1978) also distinguishes *signification* from *value* as aspects of meaning. Signification is referred to as "the meaning that sentences have in isolation from a linguistic context or from a particular situation". On the other hand, value is "the meaning that sentences take on when they are put to use in order to perform different acts of communication" (p.19). To put it in another way, a sentence has both propositional and illocutionary meanings and the latter meaning depends on the situation in which the sentence is addressed. The meaning of a sentence is largely valued within the surrounding context. A sentence in isolation is frequently meaningless from the communicative point of view.

## Communicative Language Testing

Let us consider the following example:

The policeman is crossing the road.

This sentence might have a number of functions, for instance, it might take on the value of part of a commentary, or it might serve as a warning or a threat, or some other acts of communication. This example shows that there is no one-to-one relation between a form and a function. A form has a great variety of potential functions and it is the situation that determines what function the form takes on.

### 4.2.3 Principle three: The processes are as important as the products.

The characteristic of CLT methodology is to reflect the features of the real communication processes. Morrow (1981) illustrates three features of communication processes; information-gap, choice and feedback.

Communication is a series of interactions. Interaction-Based is a feature of language use (Morrow, 1979 : 149). The purpose of interaction is to bridge the information gap or opinion gap between more than two participants. Except in the classroom, language is never used for its sake, but always for the sake of achieving an objective or to perform a function. People exchange information to bridge the gap between them, with the result that there will be a reduction of uncertainty. Our job is to set up the situation in which an information gap exists and to motivate students to bridge the gap in some way.

Since a speaker has choice both in terms of what he or she says and how he or she says it, and there is no one-to-one relationship between what to say (function) and how to say (form), this choice will bring unpredictability and creativity in both form and message. The choice means that there is always doubt in a listener's mind

about what is to come next. Communicative testing, therefore, needs to provide learners with opportunities to engage in unrehearsed communication and thereby experience doubt and uncertainty.

Communication is a two-way street, not a one-way one. Whenever someone says something to another, he or she anticipates some responses in his or her mind. What the other says to the speaker or feedback information will be evaluated in the light of his or her aims. If they cannot achieve the goal by one exchange of information, they continue to negotiate the meaning until they achieve the goal.

4.2.4 Principle four: To measure it, let him do it.

Only by giving the candidate a performance test, can we measure whether or not, or to what extent the candidate can perform well in the real situation given. All we have to do is to put the candidate into a situation in which linguistic behaviour is required to perform a function and see how he copes with the task. Setting up real situations improves content validity of the test.

One of the problems with the performance test is the issue of subjectivity. It is quite likely that different observers have different interpretations for a candidate's performance. The testers involved in the writing of communicative tests must establish scales and criteria for assessment so that judges can rate performances on several dimensions separately (Morrow, 1979; Alderson, 1981). Alderson (1981) points out that "it is undesirable to add scores on the separate dimensions together in order to arrive at some global assessment", and "what is required is the reporting of some sort of profile" (p.61).

A communicative test is criterion-referenced in that to what extent the candidate can perform well in each of the dimensions set up in



advance.

4.2.5. Principle five: Mistakes are not always a mistake.

While learners attend to form more than meaning in audio-lingualism, in communicative language teaching, meaning is paramount. As has been cited in 2.1, communication is judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes. Indeed, we can get message across and successful communication takes place, even if our utterances have some grammatical mistakes. This implies that we should take a flexible attitude toward grammatical errors, especially local ones that affect single elements (constituents) in a sentence and that do not usually hinder communication significantly. Grammatical accuracy alone is not criterion for successful communication. What is important is the balance between accuracy and fluency. It is possible for successful communication to take place with some grammatical errors. Let us take an example.

If a student says, 'Could I have spoon, please?', gets it and says, 'Thank you', with reasonable intonation, communication has been successful. It does not matter at this [beginners'] stage whether the articles and 'some' are handled correctly. (Scott, 1981 : 73)

If communication is judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes, the problem with how to deal with a mistake arises. It appears that different judges have different interpretations for the same mistake of a candidate. This is again the issue of subjectivity. The example above shows that it is necessary to establish scales and criteria for assessment of performance tests.

## 5. Conclusion

Since both teaching and testing are so closely interrelated, there should not be a mismatch between what is to be taught and what is to be tested. In the last two decades, 'communicative language teaching' has been a key word in the field of English language teaching. Along with the movement in language teaching, it has been an urgent need to develop communicative tests.

As communicative language teaching pays more attention to use as opposed to usage (Widdowson, 1978), so does the communicative approach to testing. It is, therefore, concerned primarily with how language is used in communication. It aims to incorporate tasks which approximate as closely as possible to those the students will face in real-life situations. It should be noted that those who are involved in writing communicative tests are more interested in what the candidate can do with the language rather than what knowledge of the language the candidate possesses.

By incorporating into a test the characteristics observed in a real-life communication, we can make it more communicative in terms of both what to test and how to test. What to test is concerned with the goal of language teaching and testing. Being affected by the sociolinguistic point of view of language, it has been expanded into the acquisition of communicative competence, which consists of four components: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence (Canale, 1983). How to test is concerned with testing methods, which put more emphasis on the task-based language use in real-life situations.

## Communicative Language Testing

### Notes

1. Morrow's original slogans are as follows:  
Principle one: Know what you are doing.  
Principle two: The whole is more than the sum of the parts.  
Principle three: The processes are as important as the forms.  
Principle four: To learn it, do it.  
Principle five: Mistakes are not always a mistake.

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## **Communicative Language Testing: Principles and Problems**

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Since both teaching and testing are so closely interrelated, there should not be a mismatch between what is to be taught and what is to be tested. In the last two decades, 'communicative language teaching' has been a key word in the field of English language teaching. Along with the movement in language teaching, it has been an urgent need to develop communicative tests.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the principles and problems entailed in the communicative approach to language testing.

As communicative language teaching pays more attention to use as opposed to usage (Widdowson, 1978), so does the communicative approach to testing. It is, therefore, concerned primarily with how language is used in communication. It aims to incorporate tasks which approximate as closely as possible to those the students will face in real-life situations. It should be noted that those who are involved in writing communicative tests are more interested in what the candidate can do with the language rather than what knowledge of the language the candidate possesses.

By incorporating into a test the characteristics observed in a real-life communication, we can make it more communicative in terms of both what to test and how to test. What to test is concerned with the goal of language teaching and testing. The goal of communicative

testing, communicative competence, will be discussed in Canale's (1983) framework. How to test is concerned with testing methods, which put more emphasis on the task-based language use in real-life situations. Some suggestions to testing methods will make under Morrow's (1981) modified slogans.