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EFL LANGUAGE TESTING SHOULD GO BEYOND THE SENTENCE LEVEL-THE ROLE OF
COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE IN LANGUAGE TESTING

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ABSTRACT

This article, firstly, discusses how assessment methods used in the EFL domain of language testing have undergone changes in line with the Communicative Language Teaching approach (CLT). Secondly, the article explores what factors need to be considered when it comes to make decisions concerning individual learner's achievement in foreign language skills in a fair manner. The article also emphasizes the outcomes-based education system and continuous assessment procedure to which many parents, teachers, and general public in Asian countries still show a great dissatisfaction. Finally, it attempts to answer two questions: Why should the testing procedure be changed? And on what ground should it be changed to cater for the EFL/ESL learners' present linguistic demands in a globalized world?

Key words: Communicative competence, assessment, criterion-referenced, norm-referenced, context specific.

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INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that with the advent of Communicative Language Teaching method in the 1970s, many changes in the teaching and learning process of foreign or second language have begun to surface as a result of new thinking and contributions from various scholars, linguists, researchers, administrators and teachers who took interests in language acquisition process. This transformation appears to have occurred mainly due to the fact that a large body of empirical studies in respect of language teaching and learning has been carried out and discovered factors that help learners to acquire a second or a foreign language. This kind of understanding about second language acquisition has led to the rejection of the earlier postulated theories and the methodologies recommended for teaching and learning a second or a foreign language such as English which has now become the global language of wider communication in the world.

In this review paper, we shall first discuss and describe how the assessment methods have changed from the traditional ones to performance-based assessment which is meant to measure what the test takers can actually do with the language related to real world situations. Traditional tests which are commonly known as paper-and-pencil tests (multiple choice, gap filling and completion items) were meant to assess what McNamara (1996, p. 6) calls "the abstract demonstration of knowledge" while Wesche (1983) argues that language testing should take into account propositional and illocutionary development beyond the sentence level. Wesche, moreover, observes that interaction between language behavior (verbal and non-verbal) and real-world phenomena are important aspects of communicative competence and they should be taken into consideration if we want to assess EFL/ESL learners' language proficiency effectively. Since communicative competence is central to language assessment in EFL/ESL contexts, the section below will discuss the concept with reference to published literature in the second language acquisition domain.

Communicative competence

Wesche's (1983) view with regards to EFL/ESL assessment appears to be sound and straightforward on the part of language testing which should take into account communicative competence of learners whose ability in the use of language should well be reflected basically in all major language skills. (Listening, speaking, reading and writing). Otherwise, one may find it difficult to claim that someone is competent in using the target language. It is evident that the type of objective tests, which are still used to evaluate ESL/EFL learners studying either at school or tertiary level, do not measure their real performances since objective tests are more norm-referenced than criterion-referenced. As the term communicative competence has a close association with the communicative language teaching approach since the time it was coined by Hymes (1974) up to Bachman (1990) who took further step in its development with the presentation of a new model. It is appropriate for one to define communicative competence. Davies, Brown, Edler, Hill, Lumley and McNamara (1999, p. 25) define communicative competence in their book - *Dictionary of Language Testing. Studies in Language Testing 7as*, "an attempt to make linguistic competence situationally appropriate". But this definition is inconclusive because it does not explain on what aspects the appropriateness of the language should be required. An answer to this question is found in what Hymes (1974) has proposed concerning the appropriateness of language use in that he has specified that a language user requires four kinds of awareness such as "whether something is possible; whether something is feasible; whether something is appropriate in context and whether something is ever actually performed" (Davis et al., 1999, p. 25).

However, from sociolinguistic perspective, Savignon (1983) points out that communicative competence is the identification of behaviors of those considered successful at what they do, specially, identification of the good communicators. Stressing on the importance of communicative competence, she, furthermore, assumes that communicative competence is interpersonal rather than an intrapersonal trait and it is context specific where communication can take place in an infinite variety of situations, and success in a particular role depends on one's understanding of the context and on prior experience of a similar kind. Therefore, given the abstract nature of competence, it can be said that competence is what one knows and performance is what one does and only performance is observable, whereas competence is not.

As indicated by Chomsky (as cited in Halliday, 1993) competence is the tacit knowledge of the rules of a language. Any speaker-hearer of a language knows all rules of his language; more precisely; the rules of grammar which makes the system and by applying these rules, the speaker-hearer can produce many sentences which he/she has not heard before. But he will not be able to talk about the rules because his knowledge is tacit which means that the rules are in the subconscious mind. Performance is the actual use of language in concrete situations. Performance is based on competence, but it does not directly reflect competence and competence deviates owing to memory limitations and distractions. Consequently, there will be errors, false starts and other confusions in performance.

Commenting on the weaknesses inherent in Chomsky's theory of competence, Hymes (1974), rejects Chomsky's idea of a homogeneous speech community in which all speakers of a language possess the same perfect competence. Hymes (1974) introduced the concept of a differential competence in a heterogeneous speech community and presented a revised model which he called communicative competence. He pointed

out that communicative competence means the total language competence of a person in which grammatical competence is only one aspect and argued just as there are rules of grammar, there are rules to use them. One's grammatical competence will enable him/her to produce and understand grammatically correct sentences which are contextually appropriate. This is true about language acquisition as well. A child acquires the rules of grammar and rules of use simultaneously. He acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and what to talk about, with whom, when and where, in what manner. And this knowledge is in the subconscious and just as the knowledge of the rules of grammar.

Later, based on Hymes model, Canale and Swain (1980), proposed another model which came to be dominant force in language testing theory (Skehan, 1991). According to these authors, communicative competence consists of four components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax and sentence-grammar, semantics, and phonology while sociolinguistic competence deals with the knowledge of the socio cultural rules of language and discourse. The learner should be able to understand the social context in which the language is used and the rules of participants. Discourse competence means "the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse to form meaningful whole out of a series of utterances" (Brown, 2000, p. 24). And the next subcategory is strategic competence which Canale and Swain (1980, p. 30) define as, "The verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdown in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence".

Of all models, Bachman's (1990) model is regarded to be comprehensive since it attempts to meet important issues in theoretical views of language learning and further, it has been subject to empirical data validation. Therefore, a brief discussion about this model appears to be relevant in order to have an insightful understanding into why we need to consider the application of communicative language testing in L2 rather than resorting to the traditional testing methods. Although the skills and knowledge were incorporated into the earlier framework proposed in the 1960s for measuring language proficiency, Bachman's (1990) main argument was that the framework did not indicate how the skills and knowledge are related on one hand, and on the other it failed to recognize the full context of language use including socio cultural factors in a given speech situation. Given the weaknesses of the language proficiency measurement framework stated above, Bachman (1990) presented a refined model which demanded that the knowledge of how language is used to achieve a particular communicative goal, in addition to the knowledge of grammatical rules, should be included in a communicative language testing procedure. In the following sections, we will briefly explain the approaches to language testing since they are an integral part of this discussion with an example to show how a norm-reference (A Paper-and Pencil) test is different from a criterion-referenced (Performance-based) test.

Approaches to language testing

Approaches to language testing have been formulated based on language learning theories and four main approaches can be found in the literature. As per (Heaton's, 1995) categorization, they are: the essay-translation, structural, integrative and communicative approaches.

1. The essay translation approach: This approach appears to be the pre-scientific stage of language testing. Therefore, there is no need to have a special skill or expertise in testing. The subjective judgment of the teacher is regarded to be very important while the tests generally consist of essay writing, translation and grammatical analysis.

2. The structural approach: The structural approach is viewed language learning as a process which is mainly concerned with the systematic acquisition of a set of habits. Here, it is expected that a learner should have a mastery of the separate elements of the target language: phonology, vocabulary and grammar and these components are tested using words, sentences which are completely out of any context so that a larger sample of language forms can be covered in the test within a short time. From the point of psychometric view, reliability and objectivity are thought to be an integral part of this kind of test.

3. The integrative approach: Under this approach, language testing is concerned in context and primarily with the meaning and the total communicative effect of discourse. These tests do not separate language skills into

divisions in order to improve test reliability; instead, they are designed to assess the learner's ability to use two or more skills simultaneously so that integrative tests are concerned with a global view of fluency.

4. The communicative approach: This approach places emphasis on the importance of the meaning of utterances rather than their form and structure. Communicative tests primarily focus on how language is used in communication so that the test of this kind aims to incorporate tasks as close as to the real life situations which learners encounter in their day-to-day life. Performance is judged in terms of the effective use of language in a given task. In communicative tests, all major language skills are tested and the learner's profile concerning his/her performance is obtained.

Paper-and Pencil- tests vs. Performance-based tests

Given below is an example of testing procedure applied in a traditional "Paper-and-pencil test" items and a "Performance-based test" tasks used in communicative testing (Puppin, 2007).

Traditional test items	Performance-based test tasks
<p>1. Fill in the blanks. Complete the givensentences below with the correct personalpronouns or possessive adjectives. Choose from the following: (he/she/we/our/they/it/his/her)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Ahmed is Omani. _____ last name is Al Balushi. Amani and I are in the same college. _____college is very nice. Rani and Sumitha are sisters. _____ are from India. 	<p>1. Oral performance Skill: Speaking Level: beginner- College students Task: You have 5 minutes to prepare abrief presentation about yourself. In oneto two minutes, state in completesentences:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> Your name and how you spell your last name. Your age and phone number. Where you come from. Your majoring subject. <p>This can be extended by including somemore information depending on thelearners' level and interests.</p>
<p>2. Complete the dialogue. Write the questions for the following responses.</p> <p>A. _____ Yes, I do. I play badminton.</p> <p>B. _____ I usually spend about 2 hours a day.</p> <p>A. _____ I play with my friends.</p>	<p>Writing Task Skill: writing Level: intermediate Task: What famous celebrity/politician/football playerwould you like to interview? Say why? In about two paragraphs, prepare yourinterview plan. In the first paragraph,mention who you would like to interviewand say why. In the second paragraph,prepare five questions you would like toask this person that may be interesting toother people too. In this manner, for other skills we wantto test, a teacher can prepare tasks integrating two or more skillstogether and use them in theperformance-based assessment procedure.</p>

When dealing with language testing tasks, it might be appropriate for an EFL/ESL teacher to examine another area of evaluation which can explicitly and effectively be used in school-based evaluation systems where norm-referenced testing fails to inform us what actually our children can do with the language.

'Report card' at the end of each term or 'Continuous assessment'?

When it comes to school-based assessment procedure, it seems equally important to discuss here our assessment methods which are still extensively exploited to evaluate our children's performances in relation to EFL/ESL context.

As we all know that the global changes in the 21st century influence our lives directly. No country or nation can keep away from the global changes which take place in the global economy, technology and education. So when the concept of globalization is applied to education, it is apparent that our educational concepts, theories and principles used in the past do not coincide with the current changes as well as cannot cater to the diverse needs of a given society. Therefore, it seems mandatory for every country not only to reform their educational systems but also to transform them to suit their present demands. It is to this concept we now turn to examine.

What is outcomes-based education?

As has been mentioned earlier, as a result of global changes and transformations, our educational policies too have changed. Now we are inclined to talk about an outcomes-based education system which is not a new concept. Outcome means a result or effort of an action. Therefore, outcomes describe the results of learning over a period of time. This means that the results of what is learnt, rather than what is to be taught. In outcomes-based education, teachers need to plan their lessons and units to develop student's skills or understanding rather than covering a content area. Moreover, outcomes-based education expects that learners should be equipped with certain abilities or attributes. A learner should be a knowledgeable person with deep understanding, a complex thinker, a creative person, an active investigator, an effective communicator, a participant in an interdependent world, and a reflective and self-directed learner. Outcomes-based education asserts that no child is weak or incapable of learning. Therefore, in outcomes-based learning assessment, continuous assessment (CA) procedure seems more effective than the traditional methods because continuous assessment enables the teacher to assess over a period of time some aspects of a student's performance which cannot generally be assessed as satisfactorily by means of a test (Puht, 1997). In this sense, continuous assessment is an alternative assessment in which a teacher can gather and integrate information about learners from various sources. Furthermore, CA appears to be beneficial to learners who may be weak in some topics or lessons because the tests are generally prepared along with the lines of principles of continuous assessment and it will not be the end of line but there is still time to change what learners and teachers have been doing to increase the changes of achievement. Another aspect of CA is that it deals with the attention of people who are interested in what goes in the classroom but in traditional practice, teachers concentrated on the product of instruction which is the test and teachers usually have to go by the test and say how students have performed. In contrary to the traditional method of assessing, CA focuses on how well the learner completed learning projects and tasks during the course.

Traditional educational practice

It must be emphasized that in traditional educational practices, students are exposed to a segment of curriculum over a specified period of time. At the end of the unit, an examination is usually given, and grades are assigned regardless of whether all students have achieved mastery of the material. This appears to be unfair on the part of children because this is the one and only way they have to show their performances concerning their skills (Puppini, 2007). The test may be a writing one. This kind of test which is commonly known as paper-and-pencil test (Norm-referenced) does not reflect students' actual potentials nor it tells us anything about what the student is capable of doing in the language, whereas a criterion-referenced test provides a teacher/parent with information about what a student can actually do in the language such as expressing opinions, making requests and suggestions using the target language. In outcome-based education,

it is suggested that teachers should use criterion-referenced tests rather than the norm-referenced tests to evaluate language proficiency of EFL/ESL learners.

Devices used in Continuous Assessment

There are number of devices that are effectively used in continuous assessment relating to EFL/ESL. To name a few; student journals, reading logs, videos of discussions, role plays, work samples, dramatization, teacher observation, anecdotal records, interviews, learner profiles, progress cards, self-evaluation, peer evaluation and portfolios. Portfolio is a purposeful collection of students' work that demonstrates others about the students' efforts, progress, and achievements in given areas of a subject (Puht, 1997). However, a word of caution for teachers is that CA does not meet all the needs of different learners in different teaching contexts but it does offer many benefits while it works towards developing the full potentials of our students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it would be appropriate to state that language testing, as discussed above with specific reference to communicative competence, is a very responsible task on the part of teachers because testing in line with the principles of communicative competence allows test takers to show their true performance and knowledge relevant to what they can do and how well they can do an assigned task. In addition, if properly conducted, the performance-based tests will benefit the individuals as well as their community or country at large in the end.

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