

Testing of Listening in Communicative Language Teaching

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I . Introduction

It has been a long time since the development of the notion of communicative competence became one of the major topics language teachers and methodologists discussed. Naturally, in the field of testing various attempts have been made along this line.

This paper tries to survey some recent trends in testing the oral aspects (especially, the listening skill) of language in communicative language teaching.

II . Historical Trends in Language Testing

In testing the first thing to discuss would be what it means to know a language. However, it is a complicated problem and is far beyond the capacity of this paper. So let us shed some light on this subject from the standpoint of testing.

We can say that structural linguistics stimulated the development of an objective type of test, which is often called a discrete-point test. Behind this type of test lies the idea of "The Divisibility Hypothesis." The hypothesis postulates that if we add up the test results of components of language (sound, grammar, vocabulary, structure, etc.) (and language use), we can get an outline of the total language ability of a student. This type of testing has an advantage of making tests more objective and specific.

Then another way of thinking emerged; i.e., even if we test each component, skill, aspect or element of language (proficiency), a large part of the results is almost the same and show a common core shared by each subtest. Oller (1979:16-35) suggested to test the (pragmatic) expectancy grammar possessed by a student, which, he advocated, can be effectively assessed by a dictation and a cloze test. This was theorized as "The Indivisibility Hypothesis."

But the two extremes above have been revised. A certain common core of language proficiency can be measured by certain kinds of tests, but there exist some aspects of

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language proficiency which can be or must be measured individually. This theory lies between the two and is called "The Partial Divisibility Hypothesis."

Our teaching experience also tells us that there seems to be some common element in language use, e.g., if we teach one thing, students can apply it to other aspects of language use. However, even if we teach students reading quite efficiently, it does not necessarily follow that the students can listen or write well. In addition, statistical studies are said to indicate the same.

Madsen (1983:5-7) gives another picture of the development of testing. He suggests three stages: an intuitive stage, a scientific stage and a communicative stage. In the intuitive stage facts about language were examined, where translation, essay writing, dictation, and open-ended questions were used. In the scientific stage objective evaluation by language specialists was preferred. Then there is the communicative stage, where language use rather than language form is the examiner's main concern.

So we should probably regard language ability as something we may roughly seize both individually and holistically. In so doing it will be desirable to make test-items as similar to language behaviors in actual life situations as possible.

In addition, as Moller (1981) calls the recent phase of language testing 'psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic and sociolinguistic-communicative phases,' we need to make good use of implications from these disciplines.

Tests today try to assess real communication in a foreign or second language. The best examinations are thought to be those which test various subskills when we exchange ideas orally or with letters. We can now examine strong points of both subjective and objective tests.

III. Some Thoughts on Integrative Tests

Oller (1971, 1973) strongly advocated the use of a cloze test and dictation as a means to measure learner's total language ability. It is certain that the former assesses the learner's expectancy grammar to some extent, but the results yielded reflect the degree of the learner's familiarity with the content of the test passage. Moreover, it is possible that when the learner is taught by a method which heavily relies on reading, e.g. translation method, he or she may be good at answering a cloze test but not good at understanding spoken language.

As for dictation, it involves listening to sounds, understanding both what they mean and their written forms, and writing them down. Generally, we can understand more than we can speak and we can read more than we can write. Judging from even this one fact alone, dictation isn't said to assess listening and reading ability (receptive skills of language) properly.

Although scientific research has been done on what language ability is and what it is to

know a language, we are still in a primitive stage. It is more practical and valuable to follow Wilkins' suggestion (1974:60):

Methods and materials can differ on many dimensions, but what they contribute to learning depends on what they contain in their totality and not just on how they begin or end. This makes possible almost an infinity of possible arrangements, which could, none the less, ultimately add up to much the same whole.

This 'principle of representative proportions' has important implications for the balance of the four language activities (more conventionally, four language skills) of speaking, understanding speech, writing and reading. The relative place of these four activities is always one of the most important methodological questions. Our principle requires that the quantity of each activity in the classroom should reflect its place in the overall objectives. If we have to enable our pupils above all to read and write the language, most of the contact hours will be devoted to actual reading and writing. If their need is only for listening comprehension, then their time should be spent in listening, not in reading, writing or speaking.

As we see in this quotation, language use seems to be divisible into several components. At a macro level these four skills have their peculiar aspects, especially in foreign language teaching. So we should teach them as such. At a micro level phonemes and phonemes in connected speech, for example, are quite distinct, so that these aspects need to be taught individually. It is believable that one of the two aspects plays a major role, while the other minor. If we attach greater importance to language form than language use, then we tend to practice individual phonemes more than those in connected speech. In reality when we start by practicing phonemes one by one, we may often run short of time to practice connected ones.

As is mentioned above, language use is emphasized today and so, starting with connected speech or the communicative use of language in pronunciation practice will be advisable. This type of teaching, of course, doesn't apply only to the area of pronunciation.

To consider such a complicated subject as a partial or whole problem, it may be helpful to look at Canale and Swain's framework (1980), which indicates the elements of language ability, cited by Weir (1981). For our means, the framework can be viewed as one for the communicative testing process itself. The following is its outline:

Communicative Competence includes:

grammatical competence (knowledge of the rules of grammar)

sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of the rules of use and rules of discourse)

strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and nonverbal communication strategies)

On the other hand, Weir points out that Moller (1981) stresses a further distinction between communicative competence and communicative performance, the latter being the realization

of competence by Canale and Swain. More globally, Wilkins (1984) observes that language form, meaning and language use should be treated equally no matter what approach we use in foreign language teaching. We can easily make a more detailed picture of communicative competence or performance, but what is expected is only to grasp the fundamental or indispensable components of that competence (or performance) for our language use.

Language teachers have been putting too much emphasis on the teaching of language form, especially the knowledge about it, and not how to use it in actual situations. Now we are trying to concentrate on the teaching of the latter. It is natural that language testing should also take a parallel direction.

IV. Language Tests: From Structure to Communication

As one of the examples representing the structural linguistics era, let us quote Lado's *Language Testing* (Lado, 1961). In this book many pages are devoted to testing elements of language, e.g., pronunciation, stress, intonation, grammatical structure and vocabulary to be tested separately. However, not much is discussed on auditory comprehension as an integrated skill. True-False questions or multiple choice tests are mainly used. Pictures, the goal language and the native language of the students are mentioned as types of answers in multiple-choice tests. In addition, 'action response' is used as a device in testing linguistic items.

Example:

Instructions: Perform the actions you are told to perform: Remain still if no action is requested.

Items: It's warm in the room. (Pause)

The window is closed. (Pause)

Open the door. (Pause) (p. 152)

In this example the aim of the question is grammatical structure.

As for context Lado says:

In testing, the context must be carefully restricted so as not to provide a by-pass to the answer. (p. 218)

and he shows a bad example:

...if we say "The house dog ate its food" we have given too much context to check comprehension of "house dog" versus "dog house." (p. 218)

He also cautions against giving long paragraphs and essays, which may constitute a test of memory rather than one of comprehension, and even says, "if the problem is one of pronunciation or of grammatical structure, a single sentence will usually suffice." (p. 219)

Brown (1987: 11-15) offers a description of the development of listening comprehension teaching. In the Oral Approach, which derived from the structuralist tradition, she noted

that the levels of language structure were clearly isolated. In those days students were only exposed to words or sentences in isolation. Then they came to be exposed to continuous texts. But listening materials did not reflect the distinction between spontaneous spoken language and written language read aloud. To use 'authentic' materials in teaching a language became popular soon afterwards.

The term 'authentic' has two implications, one being for teaching materials and the other for learning activities. Concerning the latter, Brown explains "A further dimension of "authenticity" lies in the response that the student is expected to make to the taped text." The most significant shift in the late '70s is the use of context, according to her. Children learn a language in context, and appropriate meaning cannot be elicited without context when we communicate.

These changes have influenced language testing on one hand and the advent of communicative language teaching has modified it on the other. To some extent the changes mentioned by Brown can also be the result of the influence of communicative language teaching.

Let us quote some features of communicative language teaching from Johnson (1981: 1-12):

...that ability to manipulate the structures of the language correctly is only a part of what is involved in learning a language. There is a 'something else' that needs to be learned, and this 'something else' involves the ability to be appropriate, to know the right thing to say, at the right time. (p. 2)

...we should use his [Wilkins'] semantico-grammatical and functional categories as the means of listing concepts and uses in our syllabus. (p. 3)

It is by looking at the situations in which our students will want to use English that we shall be able to decide which functions and notions, (and which language forms associate with each) it will be most useful to teach. (p. 6)

Concerning principles of communicative methodology, the following are some of the points raised by Morrow (1981: 19-66):

Know what you are doing

Role-playing, for example, can only be communicative to the extent that the students (and the teacher) see it as contributing to the performance of some real and specific task in the foreign language. Otherwise, it, too, can become merely empty mouthing. (p. 61)

The whole is more than the sum of the parts

...a crucial feature of a communicative method will be that it operates with stretches of language above the sentence level, and operates with real language in real situations. Interestingly, the principle may lead to procedures which are

themselves either synthetic or analytic. (ibid.)

The processes are as important as the forms

In real life, communication takes place between two (or more) people, one of whom knows something that is unknown to the other(s). The purpose of the communication is to bridge this information gap.

.....
 ...one of the main jobs for the teacher can be seen as setting up situations where information gap exist and motivating the students to bridge them in appropriate ways. (p. 62)

Choice

Another crucial characteristic of communication is that the participants have choice, both in terms of what they will say and, more particularly, how they will say it. (ibid.)

Taking those implications above into consideration, we have to devise a desirable test. We must be careful about the use of context and the length of texts. Authentic materials and learning activities should be used, and appropriateness must be also taken into consideration. Notions and functions of language need to be considered as well as linguistic items in making tests. As we cannot test all aspects of language and language use, it might be sensible to select the material according to the learner's aim of learning a foreign language. In addition, the information gap plays a crucial role in making learning activities real. On the other hand, learners should have freedom to use his or her own knowledge and ability to answer questions. If we emphasize the communicative function of language, then it is necessary to assess communicative performance—not grammatical competence nor just competence. However, it must be hastily added that we should not think it unnecessary to assess competence or linguistic aspects.

Here are some new types of listening or communication tests. It may be beneficial to examine them. Spratt (1985) lists open-ended question and answer, note taking and interviews as subjective methods of testing listening, and blank-filling, information transfer, multiple choice questions, true/false questions and jumbled pictures as objective methods. Note taking is a desirable testing method for advanced learners. This activity is authentic and valuable especially for students. Information transfer is often used in communicative language teaching. In this activity learners may answer in a way that does not require control of the written form of the foreign language—the response may be in the form of filling in a diagram, completing a graph, or drawing a picture, etc. There is a problem in answering in a foreign language when administering a listening comprehension test, because speaking or writing ability affects the result.

In using an interview the answer paper below makes the test more subjective, authentic and enjoyable:

- (a) You are going to listen to someone interviewing three people about their holidays.
 (b) You will only hear the interview twice.
 (c) Look at your listening comprehension answer paper and, when listening, write in the appropriate information to complete the table. Usually only one or two words are necessary for each answer.

Listening comprehension answer paper

<i>Question</i>	<i>Interview 1</i>	<i>Interview 2</i>	<i>Interview 3</i>
Where?	Greece	Italy	Scotland
When?	1.	5.	Late July
How long?	2.	6.	1 ½ weeks
Accommodation	3.	Hotels/camping	9.
Method of travel	4.	7.	10.
Weather	Sunshine/ some rain	8.	Fine/some rain

(Dangerfield, 1985: 164-65)

Hubbard et al. (1983: 284) presents the following activities, referring to Morrow (1977):

1. Setting

'The manager will see you now, sir.'

Where might you hear this? Put a tick by any of the following expressions you might hear in the same place.

- (a) Stop talking.
 (b) Would you care to take a seat?
 (c) I'm afraid he's not in at the moment.
 (d) Look, I've told you before. Don't do that.

2. Topic

Look at these comments. In some of them the speaker is talking about a train journey he has just made. Put a tick next to the ones which refer to this.

- (a) ...and we took off on time, despite the fog in New York.
 (b) So by the time we got there we were running over half an hour late.
 (c) The guard was very helpful. He found us a seat in the non-smoker.
 (d) The trouble was we got a puncture, so that held us up.

Besides these they show activities on Function and Status in more or less the same type of method. These aspects have been neglected in foreign language testing for a long time.

Judging from listening comprehension, these may be a test of knowledge rather than performance. We have to revise the activities so that these are authentic and valid methods of assessing listening comprehension.

V. Conclusion

Various motivating and interesting means of assessing listening comprehension and communication have been devised as we have seen in this paper. As long as we put priority on communication, we have to deal with the whole complicated process of communicative activity. This means that the results yielded tend to be rather subjective. If we let our learners listen to a foreign language and transform spoken form into a picture, a graph, a list or a behavior, we can judge their level of comprehension to a certain degree, but cannot get detailed and accurate information on how they comprehend. At this point we need both a discrete-point test and a test of knowledge or competence. However, we have to try harder to develop a better device for assessing communicative performance in listening to a foreign language. For a test to be practical and objective, it may be preferable to limit the area to be assessed according to the needs of the learner.

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