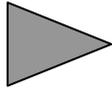


## EVALUATING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Maria ENACHE

### Introduction

Testing language has traditionally taken the form of testing knowledge about language, usually the testing of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However, there is much more to being able to use language than knowledge about it. Dell Hymes, who proposed the concept of *communicative competence* (1972), argued that a speaker can be able to produce grammatical sentences that are completely inappropriate. In communicative competence he included not only the ability to form correct sentences, but to use them at appropriate times. Thus for Hymes the term *competence* covers more elements than Chomsky's narrow use of it (1965), ranging from grammatical competence to sociolinguistic competence. The notion of *sociolinguistic competence* is much larger than Chomsky's *pragmatic competence*, as it includes societal factors as well. Since Hymes proposed the idea in the early 1970s, it has been expanded considerably, and various types of competencies have been proposed. However, the basic idea of communicative competence remains the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations.



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## Communicative language testing

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Communicative language tests are intended to be a measure of how the testees are able to use language in real life situations. In testing productive skills, emphasis is placed on appropriateness rather than on ability to form grammatically correct sentences. In testing receptive skills, emphasis is placed on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than on picking out specific details. And, in fact, the two are often combined in communicative testing, so that the testee must both comprehend and respond in real time.

In real life, the different skills are not often used entirely in isolation. Students in a class may listen to a lecture and take notes to record major points and relevant information; they may later need to use information from the lecture in a written assignment. In taking part in a group discussion, they need to use both listening and speaking skills. Even reading a book for pleasure may be followed by recommending it to a friend and telling the friend why you liked it. In the same way, communicative tests are meant to mirror actual communication, assessing the testees' ability to use the various skills in an integrated way, by doing tasks similar to those they need/will need to perform in real-life situations beyond the classroom.

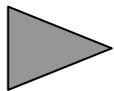
The "communicativeness" of a test might be seen as being on a continuum. Few tests are completely communicative; many tests have some element of communicativeness. For example, a test in which testees listen to an utterance on a tape and then choose from among three choices the most appropriate response is more communicative than one in which the testees answer a question about the meaning of the utterance. However, it is less communicative than one in which the testees are face-to-face with the interlocutor (rather than listening to a tape) and are required to produce an appropriate response.

Communicative tests are often very context-specific. A test for testees who are going to British universities as students would be very different from one for testees who are going to their company's branch office in the United States. If at all possible, a communicative language test should be based on a description of the language that the testees need to use. Though communicative testing is not limited to English for Specific Purposes situations, the test should reflect the

communicative situations in which the testees are likely to find themselves. In cases where the testees do not have a specific purpose, the language that they are tested on can be directed toward general social situations where they might be in a position to use English. As Heaton (1990) points out: "Communicative tests [...] must of necessity reflect the culture of a particular country because of their emphasis on context and the use of authentic materials. Not only should the test content be totally relevant for a particular group of testees but the tasks set should relate to real-life situations, usually specific to a particular country or culture."

This basic assumption influences the tasks chosen to test language in communicative situations. A communicative test of listening, then, would test not whether the testee could understand what the utterance, "Would you mind putting the management books away before you leave" means, but place it in a context and see if the testee can respond appropriately to it.

If students are going to be tested over communicative tasks in an achievement test situation, it is necessary that they be prepared for that kind of test, that is, that the course material cover the types of tasks they are being asked to perform. For example, you cannot expect testees to correctly perform such functions as requests and apologies appropriately and evaluate them on it if they have been studying from a structural syllabus. Similarly, if they have not been studying writing business letters, you cannot expect them to write a business letter for a test.



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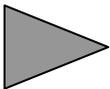
### Reliability of communicative tests

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Tests intended to test communicative language are judged on the extent to which they simulate real life communicative situations rather than on how reliable the results are. In fact, there is an almost inevitable loss of reliability as a result of the loss of control in a communicative testing situation. If, for example, a test is intended to assess the ability to participate in a group discussion for students who are going to a British university, it is virtually impossible to control what the other participants in the discussion will say, so not every testee will be observed in the same situation, which would be ideal for test reliability. However, according to the basic assumptions of communicative language testing, this is compensated by the realism of the situation.

As regards assessment, communicative testing introduced the new concept of qualitative modes of assessment, which are preferred to the traditional quantitative ones. There is necessarily a subjective element to the evaluation of communicative tests. Real life situations do not always have objectively right or wrong answers, and so band scales need to be developed to evaluate the results. When presented in the form of brief written descriptions, qualitative judgements are of much use to the students as they familiarise them with guidance concerning performance and problem areas. Each band has a description of the quality (and sometimes quantity) of the receptive or productive performance of the testee. Each student's performance is evaluated according to his/her degree of success in performing the language tasks set, rather than in comparison to the other students.



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## Conclusion

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Communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects how language is used in real communication. It is, of course, not always possible to make language tests communicative, but it may often be possible to give them communicative elements. This can have beneficial backwash effects. If students are encouraged to study by doing more communicative tasks, this can only have a positive effect on their language learning. Therefore, teachers should make efforts to design such tests to be used in the classroom.

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