

## Communicative language testing in ESP context

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### Abstract

Language tests have always been important to people. Language is the most important means of communication, and only through it we can convey and receive messages, as well as test our cognitive abilities in different fields of knowledge. But while testing other cognitive areas of human knowledge is considered relatively easy, testing language itself has resulted rather difficult. Language testing theory has undergone several phases of development, from being completely uninterested in reliability and validity, to becoming obsessed with statistical formulae, which would have catered for the much wanted reliability. Swaying from one extreme to the other, communicative language testing seems to have found a balance between reliability through statistical analyses on the one hand, and validity through closely observing elements of language competence and performance, as well as ethical issues which bring tests closer to the social dimension. This article will give a general overview of how communicative language testing came in place, the theory and pertaining elements of such tests, as well as issues that have yet to be answered.

**Keywords:** communicative competence, communicative testing, real-life situations, specific purpose test, target language use.

### Introduction

Efforts of language theorists to define the communicative ability have been rewarding in terms of concepts, principles, terminology and understanding. As a result, their focus and scope of language testing is clearer, thus bringing forth a holistic testing structure in which its three components: design, research, and interpretation of performance are considered as very important and are very closely observed.

Fulcher (2000) believes that Hymes theory on communicative competence further expanded on understanding concepts of language and the ability to use it in different social contexts. Hymes realised that to know a language meant more than knowledge of grammatical rules. Some of these rules include specific cultural knowledge linking the use of language with communicative features of context; for example, the appropriate style in conversational communication with friends in oral or written texts is not the same as that in formal training, or when addressing to strangers. Although Hymes theory gave a full picture of the context of testing and was accepted immediately by the theorists of testing circuits, it took more than a decade since its fruits be seen in concrete form of communication tests (Fulcher, 2000).

Although theorists of communicative testing attributed themselves the advent of "breaking new ground," Fulcher asks: "was this all so new?" (2000, p. 485) According to him, many of the calls to change the way acquisition of language was perceived and how tests were drafted, were echoed decades before communicative approach

took shape. Likewise, the concern that communicative testers had about multiple choice questions was not new either. Mercier (as cited in Fulcher, 2000) was among the first makers of early tests to say that the format of the multiple choice questions assessed “passive” abilities and not the “dynamic”, which could limit the extent of the use of language testing.

### 1. Emergence of communicative language tests

Communicative testing approach initially came as a response to the enormous importance that had gained reliability and validity in the previous stage. Morrow (as cited in Fulcher, 2000) stated that reliability was responsible for objectivity, whereas validity existed depending on the criteria that were based on questionable assumptions. Redefinition of these two concepts emerged as a task for communicative testing linguists. The latter saw the validity as a concept which would bring test tasks closer to real-life situation, whereas reliability could be achieved through multiple choice questions. But, as Underhill (1982) stated: “*there is no real-life situation in which we go about answering multiple choice questions*”. Therefore, when tests become more reliable, they lose some of their validity, and *vice versa*. Since the main focus of this approach was testing communication in real-life situations, reliability lost its ground and became second-hand. The communicative approach began to disregard statistical analysis in testing research underestimating the language testing experts. At the beginning of this stage, the perception was that statistical analysis depreciated the human side of the individuals who were involved in the testing, disregarding language acquisition and production. Morrow (as cited in Fulcher, 2000) talked about “ethical validity” and the impact of the tests on the quality of life of applicants. These developments may have gone too far, but shed light on the social dimension of the testing process, which was almost not mentioned absent in earlier stages. For the first time they discussed the problems of ethics and influence of language tests in the lives of individuals.

Particularly significant were the developments in Britain, where a series of language tests were based on this approach. Some of them underwent careful scrutiny about the roles of communicative tasks that students will face in their professional life, a process which is known as job analysis. Through this approach, language tests for employment purposes finally entered the stage, and after that, proper tests for specific purposes emerged. So it can be said that it was this stage of historical development in language testing that sealed the existence of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) tests (Douglas, 2000).

#### 1.1. Samples of Communicative Competence

The first model of the components of linguistic knowledge was brought by theorists Michael Canale and Meryl Swain in 1980, in their book “*Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to language teaching and testing*”. They stressed the distinction that should be made between the grammatical and communicative approach. Grammatical approach is based on grammatical forms including phonological,

morphological, syntactic and lexical unit forms. The emphasis here lies on ways of combining these shapes to form grammatical sentences. On the other hand, communicative approach is organized on the basis of communicative functions, such as to apologize, to describe, to invite, to promise, etc., that a student must possess in order to express these functions properly. This model defined some of the language elements that were not the focus of linguistic theories, such as grammatical competence, socio-linguistic competence, strategic competence and that of discourse. Although a great step forward, the model brought by the two authors lacked explicit explanation of key elements, which was later completed by other authors who had already become interested in the topic. Another important contribution in this issue is '*Fundamental considerations in Language testing*' a book by Bachman and Palmer, (1990). These authors have identified some sub-categories under the broader concepts of the competencies defined by Canale and Swain. Douglas (2000) further expanded these views and made an invaluable contribution for ESP tests by providing construct definition and performance interpretation as key elements of specific purposes ability.

## 2. General overview of ESP and EGP tests

Assessment in English for specific purposes (ESP) is in principle no different from other areas of language assessment. ESP tests are based on our understanding of three qualities of specific purpose language: *first*, that language use varies with context; *second*, that specific purpose language is precise; and *third*, that there is an interaction between specific purpose language and specific purpose background knowledge (Douglas, 2013)

### 2.1. Definition of ESP tests

*'A specific purpose language test is one in which test content and methods are derived from an analysis of specific purpose target language use situation, so that the test tasks and content are authentically representative of tasks in the target situation, allowing for an interaction between the test taker's language ability and specific purpose content knowledge, on the one hand, and the test tasks, on the other. Such a test allows us to make inferences about a test taker's capacity to use language in the specific purpose domain.'* (Douglas, 2000, p. 19)

### 2.2. Theory of ESP tests

Developments in language testing have contributed to stronger theoretical foundations of communicative testing, which, by default, would be translated in '*a fairly well established construct of specific purpose English ability among assessment practitioners*' (Douglas, 2013, p. 368). Still, there are two issues that this author raises: *first*, existence of the construct of specific purposes language ability, and *second*, deriving criteria for assessing this ability.

Widdowson (1983) notes that all language courses and tests have a purpose, but they differ in the way this goal is determined. Sometimes, these goals are unclear, and therefore, he thought that teaching the language for specific purposes lacked theoretical

motivation and turned into an exercise with the very narrow focus of training, in which students were taught specific behaviours, but not strategies enabling them to adapt to new unspecified situations. Similarly, Douglas (2000) does not forget to mention that, although today more and more ESP courses are oriented strategically, language teachers tell anecdote after anecdote about students who are able to perform the language functions required in the context of the class, but once they leave out the door, cannot transfer their skills to the requirements of communication outside the classroom. Often, it seems that there is a gap between what students can do in class and what they can do in the real world.

When Davies (1990) speaks about ESP tests, he argues that they are possible but are distinguished from each other on non-theoretical terms, therefore, cannot be generalized. On the other hand, Douglas (2000) tries to prove that ESP tests are motivated by a theoretical framework, in which he explains the components and theoretical arguments. These elements are discussed in details below.

### 3. Elements of communicative tests

There are three important aspects of communicative tests: first, the candidate must know the purpose of communication and responds appropriately; secondly, the test tasks should not be simplified to the candidate; and thirdly, the linguistic context is different from situation to situation, therefore the candidate must demonstrate the ability to adapt to situations of linguistic contexts, to status of the participants in communication, degree of formality, etc.

English for Specific Purposes has taken full and direct benefits from these aspects. Real-life situations can be tested rigorously, only if their elements become part of communicative tests and this is realized primarily through test content analysis. This content should be tailored to the needs of learning and communication purpose.

#### 3.1. Performance

Testees must produce language. In this case, greater attention is paid to the social role of the testee in real life and the detailed specifications of this role. The latter is based on oral interaction, which includes not only the modification of habits and the contents of the conversation, but also "*an amalgam of receptive/productive skills*" (Morrow, as cited in Fulcher, 2000, p. 488). The theory of communicative competence represents a fundamental shift from a psychological perspective into the sociological language, the focus of external social functions of language. Another aspect of performance is the unpredictable nature of linguistic interaction.

As mentioned above, some elements of communication tests have been in use in the discussion of earlier centuries. What is new according to Fulcher (2000) is the observation of behaviours that reflect real-life communication and evaluation schemes that will really show how successful the testee is in real-life performance. To accomplish this, elements of interaction unpredictability and combination of skills need to be analysed, together with test content and evaluation criteria. However, Fulcher reminds us that language testers need to make assumptions about real life

performance only after a series of tasks in a specific and concrete situation. So the communicative tests aim at testing sample performances to build a bigger picture of specific language abilities of the testee.

### 3. 2. Authenticity

Authenticity is an important concept in testing language for specific purposes, it is therefore necessary to consider its meaning accurately. Kramsch (1993) indicates that the term is used to distinguish between artificial language of the course books and respective tests and language use outside the classroom context; so, authenticity is an element of the natural non-teaching, non-testing language.

Widdowson says that authenticity is not a quality *per se*, of the language units; rather, it lies in the reaction of the receiver of the message. In this view, '*authenticity is the function of interaction between readers/listeners and text, which includes the goal of writers/speakers: Authenticity is about the right answer*'. (1979, p. 166)

Bachman (as cited in Douglas, 2001) proposes two aspects of authenticity: the aspect of the *situation* and *interaction*. The first aspect involves authentic features derived from an analysis of the target language use situation. This analysis will make it clear which test methods to use to make tests authentic. On the other hand, the interactive aspect includes the interaction between specific knowledge of the student and test tasks themselves.

But Bachman draws our attention on a very important concern. Although the testees may interact successfully, this is no guarantee that the test task is authentic. Success in language performance depends on an array of factors, such as personal interest for example. On the other hand, although the test tasks may be authentic, interaction results faulty due to lack of interest on the side of the testee. Therefore we must not forget that the mere imitation of the target language situation does not guarantee communicative language use (as cited in Douglas, 2001).

### 3. 3. Real life generalization

The second aspect of communicative testing brings real life situations to the tests, which becomes a daunting task for test design. Accurate prediction of real life in test tasks is very difficult. Fulcher (2000) reminds us that in many cases, testees perform successful communicative acts with very little linguistic competence. This happens, in part, because of the inaccurate prediction of real life situation to be used in language tests.

The third issue is the generalization of real life, which Douglas (2000) considers essential in ESP testing, as it is virtually impossible to represent all the situations in which the testee will face in real life. ESP testers' goal should be to avoid the potential problem of designing a test in which performance is interpretable only in relation to that test. This happens when the target situation features are overlooked. Also, tests may contain tasks that faithfully reflect those of the target situation and these tasks can involve language proficiency of the examinees, but still the test in general may not be truly representative of the target situation. Therefore, only taking such features

into account and comparing them with the test tasks, we can be somewhat confident about generalization we are looking for. For this reason, the LSP tests should be based on a detailed analysis of the characteristics of the context and language use situation that we intend to test. Having conducted this analysis we will have a clearer idea of the language proficiency in specific areas.

Some authors maintain that language tests are neither specific purposes, nor general; in fact, tests have a scale of specification. Using this scale, Douglas (2000) considers a test more or less specific purposes, first, depending on the degree of background knowledge needed to answer to test tasks and secondly, to what extent is generalization of target situation through these tasks.

### 3. 4. Specificity

While we accept that all tests have “a purpose”, in testing ESP, the notion of specificity distinguishes these tests from those with more general purposes (Douglas, 2000). Each study or professional field has linguistic features of vocabulary, semantics, syntax, rhetoric, pragmatics and sociolinguistics that are specific to that area, which allow professionals to speak more precisely, as they understand the jargon and technical language of the test content. This language precision distinguishes specific language use from general use and serves as the main argument in favour of ESP tests. However, defining all language forms that belong to one professional field is certainly not an easy task. This difficulty is then reflected on generalizing test performances.

When we begin to think how much specific language should be used in the test, the problem becomes more difficult since professional fields are divided into categories and subcategories which require representation in the test. For example, if we want to develop a test for military English, we begin to think about the linguistic elements of the field, which will be included in the tasks. However, how will text, terminology and other elements be selected? Which material content is suitable? Also, if one is selected, are some testees put at a disadvantage?

Douglas (2000) reinstates the issue of linguistic samples represented in the test. Also, predicting a successful performance of candidates in real life based on their performance in test tasks is quite difficult. This is because success on a task does not automatically translate into success in the outside world. Bachman (as cited in Douglas, 2001) brings an example to illustrate the above problem, in an attempt to produce an English language test for taxi drivers in Bangkok creating list of all sentences and phrases that they produced during their work, it was found that it was impossible, even in that seemingly limited field of discourse acts. Conversational exchanges were endless and unpredictable. ESP tests therefore may contain tasks that best reflect those of real life, but the inclusion of all those in the test is virtually impossible.

Douglas suggests that we can use the context and characteristics of tasks arising from the analysis of the specific language target situation. From this we can come to some conclusions about specific language ability with common characteristics. So, we first need to describe the target language use situation and the characteristics of the context of the tasks related with this situation, and then to clarify how to turn them into a test method.

### 3. 5. Inseparability

According to the definition given by Douglas (2000, 2001) linguistic ability for specific purposes in language testing is the language construct that results from the interaction between background knowledge and linguistic knowledge. The problem that ESP testers have is establishing a relationship between linguistic knowledge and background knowledge that affects the use of specific language in the appropriate context. Consequently, we need to understand this interaction and mutual influence of these two aspects of knowledge in language use. The question is whether we can distinguish and separate them. For Douglas they appear interwoven and the separation is 'not only impossible, but also absurd, because the language that we obtain is affected by the context in which we have learned that often is part of our overall training. Therefore, the specific language test language ability must be defined as a bearer of both types of knowledge.' (p. 48)

As part of the theoretical framework of communicative language testing, LSP tests should come as a result of interaction between the characteristics of texts and language knowledge and background knowledge.

### Conclusion

Communicative language testing has brought important issues in the spotlight. Many linguists were engaged in tackling the issues, providing the field with their invaluable expertise and deepening concepts, defining terms, and offering models of linguistic competence and performance. One important by-product of these developments was ESP testing. Although there are still doubts about the theoretical motivation of such tests, they profited to a large extent from CLT.

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