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Communicative Language Teaching and Testing

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Chapter One

Communicative Teaching

1- Introduction

The communicative approach to EFL teaching has become increasingly accepted in Japanese schools and universities in recent years. With the Ministry of Education actively promoting Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), a great deal of time and energy has been expended by both researchers and teachers in developing materials and techniques to help achieve what has been termed 'Communicative Competence'.

However, relatively little has been published regarding development of techniques in which this communicative competence may best be tested and evaluated by the classroom teacher. In fact, an informal survey of colleagues involved in CLT at Japanese colleges and universities suggests two very clear problems. One, that there is little in the way of standardized testing and evaluation in many institutions, i.e., each individual teacher has his/her own completely independent method of evaluating their own students in a communicative manner, and thus nullifying both the aims and principle of the course. After a review of some of the methods currently employed and of the difficulties in designing suitable testing methods this paper aims to offer suggestions for designing and implementing a fair successful method for testing students involved in communicative courses.

1-1 Definition

Communicative language teaching or (CLT), is an approach and philosophical orientation that connects classroom-based language learning with the language that learners need in order to communicate outside the classroom (Nunan , 2003) as cited by (Linse , 2005: 56).

1-2 *Origins and Theoretical Background*

The goal of most methods that existed until the 1970 was to enable students to communicate in the target language. However, in the 1970, educators began to question if they were going about meeting in the right way. Some observed that students could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 121). Many educators noted, as Widdowson (1978: 3) points out, that being able to communicate required more than mastering linguistic structures.

Students may know the rules of linguistic usage, but be unable to use the language. Such observation contributed to a shift in the field in the late 1970s and early 1980s from a linguistic-centered approach to a communicative approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 121). Hadley (2003: 104) states that CLT has developed from the writing of British applied linguists such as Wilkins, Widdowson, Brumfit, Candlin, and others, as well as American educators such as Savignon (1983), all of whom emphasize notional-functional concepts and communicative competence rather than grammatical structures, as central to language teaching (Harmer, 2007: 50). Says that CLT was a reaction to what had gone before-namely the grammatical patterning of structural-*situationalism* made varying use of.

According to Cook (2003: 36), the essence of CLT is a shift of attention from the language system as an end in itself to the successful use of that system in context; that is to say from an emphasis on form to an emphasis on communication. Language-learning

Success is to be assessed neither in terms of accurate grammar and pronunciation for their own sake, nor in terms of explicit knowledge of the rules, but the ability to do things with the language, appropriately, fluently and effectively. Consequently, communicative pedagogy shifted its attention from the teaching and practice of grammar and pronunciation rules, and the learning of vocabulary lists, to communicative activities.

According to Harmer (2007: 50), CLT has two basic principles: the first is that language is not just patterns of grammar with vocabulary items slotted in, but also involves language functions such as inviting, agreeing and disagreeing suggesting, etc., which students should learn how to perform. The second principle of CLT is that if students get enough exposure to language and opportunities for language use and if they are motivated-then language learning will take care of itself.

1-3 Major Characteristics of Communicative Approaches

1-Classroom goals are focused on all the components (grammatical, discourse, functional, sociolinguistic, and strategic) of communicative competence. Goals, therefore, must intertwine organization aspects of language with the pragmatics.

2-Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus, but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.

3-Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use (Brown, 2001 :43).

4-Judicious use of the native language is acceptable where feasible, and translation may be used when students find it beneficial or necessary.

5-Attempts by learners to communicate with the language are encouraged from the beginning of instruction. The new language system will be learned best by struggling interaction with others (Hadley , 2003 : 104).

1-4 Learner Roles

The emphasis in communicative language teaching is on the processes of communication, rather than mastery of language forms, Breen and Candlin (1980: 110) as cited by Richards and Rodgers (2001 : 166) say that the learner's role within CLT is that of a negotiator-between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning. This role emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group undertakes. The implication for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in an independent way .

1-5 Teacher Roles

The teacher facilitates communication in the classroom. In this role, one of his major responsibilities is to establish situations likely to promote communication. During the activities he acts as an adviser, answering students' questions and monitoring their performance. He might make note of their errors to be worked on at a later time during more accuracy-based activities (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 128).

Richards and Rodgers (2001 : 167) identify five roles for the teacher in CLT. These roles are:

- 1- Facilitator of the communication process between all participants in the classroom,
- 2- Independent participant within the learning-teaching group,
- 3- Needs analyst. The CLT teacher assumes a responsibility for determining and responding to learner language needs.

- 4- Counselor. to exemplify an effective communicator seeking to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation through the use of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback,
- 5- Group process manager. For organizing the classroom as a setting for communication and communicative activities.

1-6 *Tolerance of Students' Errors*

Errors of form are tolerated during fluency-based activities and are seen as natural outcome of the development of communication skills. Students can have limited linguistic knowledge and still be successful communicators. The teacher may note the errors during fluency activities and return to them later with an accuracy-based activity (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 132).

1-7 *Evaluation*

A teacher evaluates not only the students' accuracy, but also their fluency. The student who has the most control of the structures and vocabulary is not always the best communicator (Richards and Rodgers 2001: 1). A teacher can informally evaluate his students' performance in his role as an adviser or co-communicator. For more formal evaluation, a teacher is likely to use an integrative test which has a real communicative function

In order to assess students' writing skill, for instance, a teacher might ask them to write a letter to a friend (Larsen-Freeman, 2000: 132). Johnson and Johnson (1998: 74-75) say that in a communicative test the items relates directly to language use, tasks in the test are as authentic as possible, knowledge of language function and appropriateness of expression to social situation are tested as well as knowledge of structure and word meanin

Chapter Two

Communicative Testing

2- Introduction

The term test construct refers to those aspects of knowledge or skill possessed by the candidate which are being measured. Although this term is taken from psychology, we should note that the knowledge or skill being assessed does not have to be defined in psychology term. (McNamara, 2000: 3).

Performance on language tests is effected by a wide variety of factors, and an understanding of these factors and how they affect test scores is fundamental to the development and use of language tests. Although language testing specialists have probably always recognized the need to base the development and use of language tests on a theory of language proficiency (for example, Carroll 1961a, 1986; Lado 1961), recently they have called for the incorporation of a theoretical framework of what language proficiency is with the methods and technology involved in measuring it (Upshur 1979; Henning 1984; Bachman and Clark 1987).

The frameworks presented in this chapter and the next constitute an initial response to this call, and reflect my conviction that if we are to develop and use language tests appropriately, for the purposes for which they are intended, we must base them on clear definitions of both the abilities we wish to measure and the means by which we observe and measure these abilities (Bachman, 1978: 81).

2-1 What is a Language Test ?

Testing is universal feature of social life. Throughout history people have been put to the test to prove their capabilities or to establish their credentials; this is the stuff of Homeric epic, of Arthurian legend. In modern societies such tests have proliferated rapidly. Testing for purposes of detection or to establish identity has become an accepted part of sport (drugs

testing), the law (DNA tests, paternity tests, lie detection tests), medicine (blood tests, cancer screening tests, hearing, and eye tests), and other fields.

Tests to see how a person performs particularly in relation to a threshold of performance have become important social institutions and fulfil a gatekeeping function in that they control entry to many important social roles. These include the driving test and a range of tests in education and the workplace. Given the centrality of testing in social life, it is perhaps surprising that its practice is so little understood.

In fact, as so often happens in the modern world, this process, which so much affects our lives, becomes the province of experts and we become dependent on them. The expertise of those involved in testing is seen as remote and obscure, and the tests they produce are typically associated in us with feelings of anxiety and powerlessness (McNamara, 2002: 3).

2-2 What is Communicative Language Testing ?

Communicative language testing is intended to provide the tester with information about the testee's ability to perform in the target language in certain context-specific tasks. It has to be recognized that given the constraints of time and practicality, only

a small sample of the testee's language can be collected, and that however realistic the tasks may be intended to be, the testee's performance will inevitably reflect the fact that s/he was performing under test conditions.

Communicative language tests should have high content validity. If they are to be used to make judgments about how an individual can function in a normal situation outside the test, the test has to be as accurate a reflection of that situation as possible. This means that the sample of language collected and the tasks the candidate is called upon to perform should be as

representative as possible of the language and skills needed to function in the real life context. Tests, therefore, need to be context-specific.

If, for example, the objective is to test candidates to determine whether their second language ability is adequate to undertake a course at a higher education establishment, conducted in that second language, the tasks included in the test should be a fair reflection of the type of tasks the candidate will be required to perform as part of the course itself.

As Weir (1990) points out, inauthentic tasks may interfere with the measurement of the construct which we seek. " Tests of communicative language ability should be as direct as possible (attempt to reflect the 'real life' situation) and the tasks candidates have to perform should involve realistic discourse processing " (Weir, 1990: 12). He advocates the use of genuine texts and that care be taken with regard to task length and processing in real time (Internet).

2-3 Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence

An earlier framework for describing the measurement of language proficiency was that incorporated in skills and components models such as those proposed in the early 1960s by Lado (1961) and Carroll (1961b, 1968). These models distinguished skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) from components of knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, phonology/ graphology), but did not indicate how skills and knowledge and related.

It was not clear whether the skills were simply manifestations of the knowledge components in different modalities and channels or whether they were qualitatively different in other ways. For example, does reading differ from writing only in that it involves interpretation rather than expression? If that were so, how can we account for the fact

that although few of us can write the sophistication and elegance of T. S. Eliot or William Faulkner, we can read and comprehend such writer? (Bachman, 1978: 81).

The performance of a person is not identical with a behavioral record It takes into account the interaction between competence (knowledge, ability for use), the competence of others, and the cybernetic and emergent properties of events themselves.

emphasis added (Hymes 1972b: 283).

2-4 Differences Between Communicative Language Testing and Other Forms of Testing

We will address this by first briefly indentifying other testing methods in the 'eras' preceding the emergence of communicative language testing, looking at what they were intended to measure and their theoretical basis. We will then turn to communicative testing and examine two of the communicative models on which it is based, and the characteristics which set it apart from other testing techniques.

Spolsky (1975) identified three periods of language testing: the pre-scientific, the psychometric-structuralism and the psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic. Although he has since (Spolsky 1995) offered an alternative view, we will use his original phases in this paper.

Spolsky first identifies the pre-scientific era. He recognizes it as dating back to the Chinese civil service exams two thousand years ago, but believes it took its present form from the 18th century Cambridge Tripos (Spolsky 1995). It was characterized by "the use of essays, open-ended examinations, or oral examining, with the results determined intuitively by an authorized and authoritarian examiner(Spolsky 1995: 353). As the name suggests, testing in the pre-scientific era did not rely on linguistic theory, and reliability was considered less

important than the production' control of those elements. After the pre-scientific era came the psychometric-structuralism era. The name was intended to reflect the joint contribution of the structural linguist, who identified elements of language s/he wanted testing, and the psychometric, who produced objective and reliable methods of testing the candidates' control of those elements.

The fact that discrete point and integrative testing only provided a measure of the candidates' competence rather than measuring the candidates' performance brought about the need for communicative language testing (Weir 1990). Before we look at the features which distinguish this form of testing. We will outline the methods of communicative competence on which it is based.

According to Spolsky (1989: 140), "Language tests involve measuring a subject's knowledge of, and proficiency in, the use of a language, A theory of communicative competence is a theory of the nature of such knowledge and proficiency. One cannot develop sound language tests without a method of defining what it means to know a language, for until you have decided what you are measuring, you cannot claim to have measured it" . The main implication this model had for communicative language testing was that since there was a theoretical distinction between competence and performance, the learner had to be tested not only on his/her knowledge of language, but also on his/her ability to put it to use in a communicative situation (Canale and Swain, 1980).