

TESTING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCE IN THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF BATNA

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Abstract:

The following paper is an attempt to shed light on some practices in the department of English related to testing students' communicative competence and how teachers concentrate on testing listening at the expense of speaking. We found out that teachers rarely use interviews or turn-taking or classroom discussion as testing techniques and they often impose the topics for the classroom discussion which usually have bad consequences on the students' motivation to speak and be involved in classroom talk. The result is bad achievement from the part of students who develop negative attitudes towards communicating using the foreign language and being tested for their performances.

ملخص:

يهدف هذا المقال لتسليط الضوء على بعض الممارسات التي يقوم بها بعض الأساتذة في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية المتعلقة باختبار الكفاءة التواصلية للطلاب وكيف أن هؤلاء الأساتذة يركزون على اختبار الاستماع على حساب الكلام. وجدنا أن الأساتذة نادرا ما يستخدمون الحوارات وتبادل الأدوار والمناقشات كتنقيتات للاختبار وغالبا ما يفرضون الموضوعات على طلبتهم للمناقشة الشيء الذي عادة ما يكون له عواقب سلبية على تحفيز الطلاب على التحدث والمشاركة في القسم مما يؤثر سلبا على نتائج الطلاب الذين يطورون مواقف سلبية تجاه التواصل باستخدام اللغة الأجنبية وكذا الاختبارات التي تجري لهم

Introduction

Testing is a very important classroom activity because it helps the teachers know about the students' educational progress. Testing students' communicative competence is becoming very important because teachers need to measure students' achievement so that they are offered understanding of the extent to which students were able to master the linguistic material they were presented with in the language classroom. It is also an indicator to teachers to help them figure out the different queries their students suffer from to devise the appropriate remedial work and provide students the necessary feedback. In large groups, the task becomes more complicated for the teacher who is often required to introspect about all his students' achievement and know about their different skills and abilities through well-designed tests that need to reflect the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the students. When attempting to know about the students' level of achievement in the language classroom, we usually resort to the paper and pencil testing ignoring the oral aspect of the language. Nowadays, with the increase for the need to communicate, more awareness is grown among teachers to measure the students' ability to use the foreign language in authentic situations. In this respect, the following paper attempts to deal with testing the students' communicative competence.

1-Communicative Language Testing

Testing the students' communicative competence depends mainly on dividing the language into items. The focus while testing should be on is on the intended message when all the elements are used comprehend sively. Luoma (2004) discusses assessing speaking thoroughly. She claims that the best way to test the learners' ability is to get them to speak; hence, it is an important aspect in testing speaking. It can be carried out through scores or scales. Scores are numbers which reflect the quality of the performance of the learners in tests. This quality is not only tied to numbers, but it can be represented as verbal categories such as: 'excellent' 'fair and the criteria of testing in tasks. Weir (2005:192) argues that: 'Tasks cannot be considered separately from the criteria that might be applied to the performances they result in. Good assessment is based on the relation between tasks and the criteria of

the tasks represented in scales, on the other hand, are constructs meant to design and organize language tests. They divide language in to abilities to make testing happen. Luoma(2004) identifies scales as a series of statements which are made to distinguish between the highest and the lowest scores obtained in tests. McNamara (1996) explains that scales embody the test developer's notion of what abilities should be measured in the test.

2- Testing Speaking

Testing speaking is usually seen as one of the complicated tasks a teacher is required to perform in the foreign language classroom. This complexity is related to the fact that the test needs to be carried out quickly when the student is engaged in performing all the tasks required in the test. At the same time, the teacher is engaged in evaluating what the learner's is saying. The student's performance will be evaluated following two paradigms. One has to do with ideas and their organization and the second has to do with how these ideas are expressed; whether the student is producing them using the correct pronunciation, the correct grammar and the appropriate words. It is agreed that this period of time is usually not sufficient to obtain information for a thorough evaluation. Hughes (1989) regards testing speaking as the unification of elements including usage content which are 'operations', 'types of texts', 'addresses and topics'.

- 1- Operations: is to interact throughout the course of action, to achieve a number of different actions like: expressing thanks, apologies, and opinions, narrating, eliciting and advising.
- 2- Text Types: are dialogues and interactions with peers or group interaction which is characterized either as facet of telephone conversations.
- 3- Addresses and Topics: they are up to date topics chosen by both learners and teachers.

3- Characteristics of a Speaking Test:

A communicative language test is usually aimed at measuring the student's ability to take part in real life communication. It needs to cover the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

3-1 Reliability

According to Fulcher and Davidson (2007), test reliability refers

to the consistency which scores hold between their values without any discrimination. Bachman (1990) distinguishes between the reliability and unreliability of the scores as the extent to which testers produce errors in their scales, and the more mistakes produced the less reliable the scale is and vice versa. These can be unsystematic and unpredictable because of the lack of motivation or interest.

3-2 Validity

(Hughes, 1989:22) believes that validity is related to the extent to which a given test measures accurately what it is intended to measure. Henning Cited in Fulcher and Davidson (2007) defines validity as: ‘the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measure of what it is purposed to measure’. Test validity is seen as the end result of the test and it reflects what should be tested at the end of the test. The requirements and objectives of the test are related to the intention of measuring something specific. The components of a language are identified precisely to achieve validity in testing. Validity is not only an abstract concern of testing, but it is also a practical quality that is part of test development. Validity in a wider sense is the interpretation of scores and performance of learners represented in scales to measure language skills. If we consider that test validity is what the test is intended to measure, we can start asking ourselves the following question: can the intended performance be tested similarly in different conditions and environments? Hughes (1989) distinguishes between four types of validity: ‘construct validity’, ‘content validity’, ‘criterion-related validity’ and ‘face validity’.

3-2-1 Construct Validity

Construct refers to any language skill which is the ability to hypothesize in a theory of language ability (Hughes, 1989). Testing listening, for example, takes the form of construct validity because it is based on understanding sentences when they are used in a given context. The meaning of sentences is understood via the construct (components) of speaking.

3-2-2 Content Validity

Content validity has to do with the extent to which a given test demonstrates in its content as a representative sample of the area in which it is used (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). Content validity is related

to context; what should be included in a given test should be closely dependent on its context. The context determines the test's needs, level, and the tasks suitable for content validity.

3-2-3 Criterion-Related Validity

Criterion-related validity is based on two major items which are 'prediction of the criterion' and 'measurement of the criterion' with the relationship between them. Fulcher and Davidson (2007) refer to the relation between the criterion we wish to make in a particular test and predictions as 'ability to cope with' or 'ability to predict measurable scores for success or failure in tests'. They confirm that 'the validity is the strength of the predictive relationship between the test scores and performance on the criterion.'

The test needs to be set to predict a criterion which can be measured. There is another type of criterion-related validity to relate a test with its criterion. In such a test, students achieve a number of functions as part of the same component of a skill. Hughes (1989) exemplifies concurrent validity in an oral test, the main objective of which is to test one component of speaking through a number of functions like 'apologizing' or 'requesting'. Learners are tested twice; a short test and a long test (the same test with a short version and a long version). The reason is that, if learners have the same scores in both tests, they are both valid, but if they have different scores, this test is not valid.

3-2-4 Face Validity

Face validity refers to the degree to which a test subjectively appears to measure the variable or construct that it is supposed to measure. In other words, face validity is when an assessment or test appears to do what it claims to do.

4-Types of Speaking Tests

4-1 The Interview

The interview is one of the oldest ways of testing speaking, and it is guided by the speaker because he is responsible for asking questions to elicit language performance. However, many researchers are against this type of test because they believe it is a one-way information source and the examiner is in full control of the conversation. He initiates and concludes, and he shapes the

conversation. During the interview, processing information is not mutual, and the interviewee gives all the information and does not receive any. While in real life communication we want to give and get information in response.

4-2 Role Play

Role play usually carried out by improvising a scene and relating it to a real life situation. The idea is that students are required to exchange information. It has the advantage of being flexible in the sense that the teacher control it or leave it semi-guided with a variety of locations and interpretations. Richards(2006)calls all of role plays as information gap activities; it assimilates learners' actions to real life they exchange information they do not have. He emphasized by summarizing that the authentic communication is likely to occur in the classroom if students go beyond language forms for their own sake and use their linguistic and communicative skills in order to obtain information.

4-3 Discussion

It is an open task with many participants, and it is divided into two phases: 'the preparation phase' and 'the conversation phase'. Learners are given five to ten minutes to prepare for the discussion, and when they proceed, they do not receive any kind of instruction to structure the discussion. The teacher does not intervene in the discussion, but should insist that the learners participate and have enough time to assess their performance.

4-4 Turn-Taking

Turn-taking is a discourse strategy where learners exchange roles from speakers to listeners or from producers to receivers. This task is a two-way information both speaker and listener exchange new ideas. After the teacher decides on the topic to be discussed, turn taking starts. The most important element to take into account in conversations is to know when it is acceptable or obligatory to take the turn. This knowledge involves such factors as knowing how to recognize appropriate turn-exchange points and knowing how long the pauses between turns should be. Since not all conversations follow all the rules

for turn-taking, it is necessary to know how to address a conversation that has been affected by an undesired or misunderstood comment.

5- Method

A research was conducted in the Department of English where two questionnaires were administered to both students and teachers to know about their views and practices concerning the testing and evaluation of the students and how to optimize the students' performance in speaking using the foreign language. The study concerned four teachers in charge of teaching oral expression and 100 students from the first year classes. The students were chosen randomly and asked to respond to our questionnaire which contained a limited numbers of questions (5 for teachers and 5 for students) to know about the way the teachers test the students' speaking skills and how do students view this evaluation. The questions for teacher turned around the following:

- 1-For how many years have you been teaching oral expression?
- 2- How important do you believe testing oral expression is?
- 3-What techniques do you use to test your students' oral expression?
- 4-Do you test listening and speaking separately?
- 5-What would you suggest as far as testing oral expression is concerned?

As for the students, we asked the following questions:

- 1-Do you take part in classroom talk?
- 2-Are you familiar with the speaking and testing techniques?
- 3- How are discussion topics selected in your class?
- 4-Do you think that the marks you get reflect you real level of speaking proficiency?
- 5- What would you suggest as far as speaking testing is concerned?

6- Analysis of the Results

The majority of the teachers we have questioned said they taught Oral expression for more than 4 years in the department of English. They claim they were assigned the teaching of the oral expression module because there is a belief that it is one of the easiest modules. A belief which proved, soon afterwards, wrong since teaching students to speak appropriately and accurately is not that easy. It is very demanding to get students involved in classroom talk and it is not usually easy to select the most appropriate teaching materials. Choosing the motivating topics that would be appealing

to the majority of the students is very complicated. When asked about the way the evaluate their students' speaking skills in the oral expression session, the teachers said they subjected their students to listening activities and then leave them with gaps they have to fill in after they listen to tapes. Our first remark is that most testing in the oral expression session is more a listening than a speaking test. Teachers argue when faced with this criticism that listening is the first step towards speaking which is true to a far extent. When asked about the use of interviews, role play and turn taking as recognized efficient speaking testing techniques, our respondents claimed that overcrowded classrooms do not allow them to use these techniques because they are almost impractical. A very important skill is apparently not adequately assessed in the department of English namely the speaking skill. Although recognizing their drawbacks in assessment of their students, the teachers seem not to be willing to do something to remedy to his situation. On their part students seem to lack motivation to engage in classroom talk during the oral expression sessions simply because they are not evaluated for their performance and the marks they get during examinations do not usually reflect their level of achievement. Some claim that the oral expression course is not appropriately exploited by teachers to help them correct their misconceptions about the foreign language they are learning. When asked if they were to participate in classroom discussions if marked, the majority of our respondents answered positively because the reward is very important for them. As for the themes chosen for discussion, the students seem to be unanimous in the necessity of allowing them to choose up-to date topics that would be of interest to the majority of the class and that the teacher needs to leave them with the opportunity to deal with a variety of topics. Another concern for many students has to do with creating authentic communication situations where they can feel the need to engage in classroom talk and be part of the discussions. Teachers should not be very demanding in matters of correctness in order to avoid communication breakdown. Students believe that teachers need to value the ideas they put forward, not the way they express them. That is they refuse to be stopped after every single mistake they commit, their motivation and willingness to engage in the talk are at risk.

7- Recommendations:

The above research finding led us to draw the following recommendations:

1- Teachers need to vary the testing techniques in order to make sure that their evaluation of their students was valid and appropriately carried out.

2- Teachers should all the time make sure that the material they have presented their students with is reflected and could be assessed during the speaking tests.

3- Teachers should not make of the speaking test a mere evaluation of the students' capacity to recall passages they heard in the classroom. By so doing, they would be assessing memory and not their students' communicative skills.

4- Teachers need to show more tolerance with some minor errors that do not affect the students' intelligibility of the message or ideas they want to convey.

5- Students should be given the opportunity to decide on the topics they will discuss during the oral expression sessions or during oral tests.

6- Students need to receive guidance from the part of teacher to deal with the communicative tests as part of their learning process, not as a kind of punishment. A more positive view of testing should be grown in the students' minds to help them cope with the requirements of foreign language learning with fewer obstacles.

Conclusion:

We came to realize that developing the students' communicative competence in the department of English, University of Batna is highly dependent on the way teachers evaluate their students. The strong interrelation between teaching and testing urges the teachers not only to devise the appropriate teaching materials, but also the appropriate testing methods. The tests should really reflect the students' progress and good achievers need to be rewarded in order to motivate them. When the teacher varies his testing techniques, he is more likely to offer the chance to his students to achieve better and get more motivated to learn the foreign language.

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