

PROFICIENCY TESTING

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***Abstract:** It used to be a very difficult challenge for LT teachers to prepare students for a proficiency test since there were no identified learning objectives that could serve as guidelines for selecting appropriate teaching materials and techniques. It is therefore essential that all teacher education programs contain a testing component.*

***Keywords:** testing, communicative competence, washback, skills.*

1. INTRODUCTION

EFL proficiency tests did not use to be based on any particular syllabus but were designed to measure different levels of language ability in general. This made it difficult for teachers to prepare students for a proficiency test since there were no identified learning objectives that could serve as guidelines for selecting appropriate teaching materials and techniques.

In recent years, however, research in the fields of testing has focused more on the relationship between testing and the teaching, which precedes the test – referred to in the literature as the “washback” effect. As a result, some proficiency test specifications – what language is tested and how it is tested – now more closely resemble syllabus specifications of ELT course books that reflect recent current methodological principles. This development brings proficiency tests more in line with what we expect of achievement tests, thus, reflecting teaching.

However, in order for teachers to exploit all positive link between teaching and testing effectively, they need to analyse the objectives of the test and then be able to select appropriate materials and procedures that will serve these objectives.

This is not an easy task for teachers who have not had recent training in the principles of testing. It may be helpful, then, to see in

practice how test objectives can be inferred from a close analysis of an actual language examination, and, from there, to see how these objectives relate to teaching.

2. TEACHING AND TESTING RELATIONSHIP

Current language teaching methodology views language use as a communicative, interactive process taking as its starting point the notion of *communicative competence*. Since the development of communicative competence is the main objective for teaching, determining what we teach and how we teach, it would appear that a model of communicative competence would help us identify testing objectives and serve as an appropriate framework for evaluating the washback effect, provided, of course, that the test under review has been designed on the basis of the principles of communicative competence.

2.1. COMPONENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

The term “communicative competence” originated in sociolinguistics with Dell Hymes (1972). Communicative teaching is guided by the model put forward first by Canale in 1983 and Swain in 1980 and revised by Canale in 1983. According to this model, communicative competence describes the learner’s ability to

use the language in listening, speaking, reading and writing in terms of the following competences:

- Linguistic competence (knowledge of form);
- Socio-linguistics competence (ability to use language appropriately in different contexts);
- Discourse competence (cohesion and coherence);
- Strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies).

Each of these components is tested in a variety of ways, both separately and in relation to one another.

Linguistic competence is tested with a multiple-choice format in the grammar section. This section tests the recognition of a wide range of basic grammatical structures including tenses, word form, propositions, etc. Linguistic competence is also tested indirectly in the listening and reading sections of the test where the candidates are required to produce grammatically correct basic sentences.

Teachers tend to over-emphasize the focus on controlled grammatical exercises because it is a more concrete way of teaching grammar and because it also easily lends itself to self-study.

Sociolinguistics competence is tested to some extent in the vocabulary section, where candidates are required to choose the word that best completes the sentence. Very often collocations are tested, i.e., words which are firmly associated with each other e.g. *make a mistake, apply for a job*.

Words are tested in a sentence context, which means that candidates can apply the strategies they have developed from classroom instruction using clues such as synonyms, antonyms, punctuation and discourse markers.

Discourse competence and linguistic competence are tested in the reading and listening sections.

Comprehending gists involves making connections between different parts of the text (discourse competence) while comprehending specific detail may involve linguistic contributory skills referred to earlier. It is an accepted pedagogical practice to break down

the comprehension process into separate skills for both teaching and testing.

All four competences are tested integratively in the writing and speaking sections, when the candidates need to produce language typically used in everyday contexts. The language must not only be accurate (linguistic competences) but also appropriate (sociolinguistics competence).

Last but not least, the candidate can demonstrate his strategic competence in the oral interview where he maintains the flow of communication.

2.2. HOW IS COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE TESTED?

Certain sections of the test make use of real life tasks as an appropriate vehicle for assessing communicative language ability.

In the first task of the listening section, the candidates listen to gist or specific information and respond to a set of pictures. There is no reading involved. This design is intended to enhance its authenticity as a communicative activity. In the second section candidates listen to a ten-minute interview presented in short segments followed by some questions after each section. Candidates are allowed to take notes, which is an appropriate task for this type of text. Note-taking is also an authentic sub-skill which most candidates need to develop.

The speaking section of the test is an interview in which candidates talk about personal background information and ask questions about a set of two or three photographs.

The questions have a purpose: to help candidates come to a decision, which they must then explain. This role-play facilitates the use of certain features of spoken discourse that are prevalent in real communication such as asking for clarification and forming questions.

The writing task represents a real-life task, in that a purpose is created for writing. Candidates write a composition or a letter in response to a reading prompt.

Many of the features that contribute to the creation of real-life tasks have the following characteristics:

- They are contextualized and relate to every day situations.
- They test authentic skills.
- They provide a purpose for communication.
- They are appropriately matched to text type.
- They have an outcome.

On the whole, this way of testing reflects current methodology in teaching by focusing on testing components of communicative testing using all four skills. The test activities help students develop genuinely useful language skills.

3. TEACHING TOOL

Many teachers who are under the pressure to prepare students effectively for a particular test expose students to a number of practice tests in the hope that they will increase competency.

This is a misconception particularly if the students receive limited feedback from the teacher, such as simply, supplying the correct answer.

Here are just a few suggestions for using practice tests as a teaching tool that could lead to effective language skills building and development of specific test-taking strategies through active involvement of the learner.

3.1. LISTENING SECTION

Teachers can help students develop this skill by introducing the following procedures:

- Make students aware of the need to predict the content which will help them to process the information more easily. This can be done by discussing the pictures given to them before they listen.
- Provide a pre-listening question which will help students focus on the structure.

If the students have to understand the main points of a longer text, they should be provided with written statements related to the text.

This will help students follow the sequence of events and help them organize their notes.

3.2. GRAMMAR

Grammar is tested in a multiple-choice format and is contextualized in short conversations or in sentences that reflect spoken discourse. Students need to understand the meaning of the item and be able to recognize the correct form.

3.3. VOCABULARY

Vocabulary is tested at the sentence level with the focus on recognition of correct use. This test activity can be used to build up specific word attack skills which will also be useful for reading comprehension.

For example, students can be guided to guess words from the context by focusing their attention on clues such as synonyms, antonyms and reference words.

High frequency collocations in everyday contexts are tested. The best way to help students with collocations in exam preparation material is to do the following:

- Students try to complete the sentence before looking at the options
- Students then look at the options and make comparisons with their own choices.
- Students discuss the distractors with the teacher and come up with appropriate contexts for them.

3.4. READING

The purpose of the text given to the students is to inform them about a topic of interest such as environmental issues of human behaviour of the type they would find in a magazine or a leaflet. The multiple-choice questions check the students' ability to understand the main idea, specific details and to make inferences. Multiple-choice questions can be very effective for training interpretative skills if the teacher exploits them in the following way:

- Make students aware that distractors for reading items are written with students' likely mistakes in mind.
- By understanding the nature of the distractors, the students can then discuss the justification for their choices in groups

and then present their arguments to the whole class.

- The teacher can produce a number of statements that can be inferred from the text and a number of statements that can be true but are not stated in the text.

For more difficult tasks, such as skimming and scanning students will be guided and assisted to retrieve information quickly and accurately and not to waste time reading every single word.

3.5. WRITING

In the writing section students need to write a letter or composition in response to a prompt (letter or short article). They have only thirty minutes to write a coherent text so there is obviously no time for the students to write more than one draft. However, they can be trained to apply a process approach to writing in which they manage their time effectively by:

- Reading of prompt and underlining key words;
- Noting down ideas and useful language;
- Organising ideas into paragraphs;
- Writing of composition;
- Editing.

3.6. SPEAKING

The students' speaking ability is assessed through a role-play performed with the examiner which will later help the students to develop fluency and accuracy. The students also need to develop strategic competence for managing conversations more effectively and giving an impression of fluency. Practice with the following categories of words and expressions may help to achieve this end:

- Asking for clarification: *what do you mean exactly?*
- Hesitating: *let me see*
- Fillers: *OK, fine, right*

The above suggestions are by no means exhaustive. The important thing to remember, however, is that this approach for teaching exam practice test material is much more instructional and teachers should spend just as much time preparing these lessons as regular lessons.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis done in the article shows that objectives of the test resemble syllabus specifications of current ELT course-books which aim to develop communicative competence.

In order to maximize the washback effect, however, teachers need to be empowered with a greater understanding of the principles involved in communicative testing. It is therefore essential that all teacher education programs contain a testing component, which includes an analysis of various proficiency tests and practical ideas to illustrate the positive effects of the relationship between testing and teaching.

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