IMPACT OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TESTING IN ENHANCING STUDENTS' CAPACITY

CZU: 37.091.26:81`243`233 **https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10652958**

Oxana Bashirov
Moldova State University
ORCID 0000-0002-1600-4941

The great economic, technological and political changes in the world made learners' need for mastering foreign languages even more acute than before. The present study focuses on the use of communicative assessments to evaluate language learners' capacity to use the target language in real-world contexts. This article highlights the fact that communicative tests aim to assess the learner's communicative skills and their ability to use the language in order to cope with actual communicative situations. The communicative language testing approach infers that a student is considered successful in learning the target language if he/she can communicate or use knowledge and skills by way of authentic listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Keywords: *communication, communicative competence, communicative tests, performance, language testing, traditional testing methods.*

Language testing, like all educational assessment, is considered a complex social phenomenon. It refers to the assessment of an individual's proficiency or competence in a particular language. These tests are designed to measure various aspects of language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language testing is used for various purposes, such as educational admissions, job placement, immigration requirements, and language certification. Communicative Language Testing (CLT) is an approach to language assessment that focuses on assessing a person's ability to use language for communication in real-life situations. The emphasis is on evaluating a person's proficiency in using the language to achieve specific communicative goals rather than just testing their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in isolation. Communicative language testing is an important instrument in the teacher's hand to promote learning. These tests are used with the aim of measuring language students' ability to take part in acts of communication or to use language in real life situations. Communicative tests, which cover the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, are designed on the basis of communicative competence. A wise proverb says: "*Not tested, not learned",* therefore with the help of various testing items, the learner practices the new material, both in class and as homework assignment, and finally learns it. From the perspective of a language user, Canale summarises the characteristics of communication, each of which is interrelated. (Canale, 1983)

Thus, communication:

(a) is a form of social interaction;
(b) involves a high degree of unpredictability and creativity in form and message;
(c) takes place in discourse and sociocultural contexts;
(d) is carried out under limiting psychological and other conditions;
(e) always has a purpose;
(f) involves authentic, as opposed to textbook-contrived language;
(g) is judged as successful or not on the basis of actual outcomes;

(h) is understood as the exchange and negotiation of information;
(i) involves the continuous evaluation and negotiation of meaning;
(j) involves a reduction of uncertainty.

Learning vocabulary and structures or developing writing abilities, does not infer enhancing students' capacity. It is only when the teacher can get the students to reproduce their own messages, that one can say that they are beginning to learn the language. It is very important that the students should have the desire to communicate. To achieve this, the teachers must find interesting texts or topics and involve students into attractive activities that should provoke them to share opinions.

Here are some key principles and features of Communicative Language Testing (CLT):

- **Real-life communication**: CLT aims to assess a person's ability to use the language in authentic, everyday situations. This may involve tasks such as participating in conversations, giving presentations, writing emails, or solving problems through language use.
- **Integration of skills**: CLT typically assesses multiple language skills such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. The idea is to evaluate a person's overall communicative competence rather than focusing on isolated language skills.
- **Task-based assessments**: Assessments in CLT often involve tasks that mirror real-world language use. These tasks require test-takers to apply their language skills to accomplish specific goals. For example, a task might involve planning a trip, solving a problem, or negotiating with others.
- **Authentic materials**: CLT assessments may use authentic materials such as articles, videos, or audio recordings that reflect the language as it is used in real-life contexts. This helps ensure that the assessment is relevant and mirrors the challenges of actual communication.
- **Interactive assessments**: CLT often includes interactive elements where test-takers engage in conversations or discussions with examiners or other test-takers. This reflects the interactive nature of real communication.
- **Focus on fluency and accuracy**: CLT recognizes the importance of both fluency (the ability to communicate smoothly and efficiently) and accuracy (using correct grammar and vocabulary). Assessments may consider how well a person can express themselves without undue hesitation, as well as the accuracy of their language use.
- **Cultural competence**: CLT may also consider a person's ability to navigate cultural aspects of communication, as language use is often intertwined with cultural norms and expectations.

According to Canale and Swain, communicative competence involves linguistic competence (knowledge of linguistic forms), sociolinguistic competence (the ability to use language appropriately in contexts), discourse competence (coherence and cohesion), and strategic competence (knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies). (Canale, Swain, 1980) In the past decades there has been a tendency to believe that testing is completely different from teaching. However, teaching and learning are so interrelated that it is unreasonable to imagine the former process without taking the latter one into account. The role of *testing* in the educational process should not be underestimated and the term itself must be considered in a wide sense, as the entire process the teacher uses to promote and evaluate learning.

Thus, *testing* has two major aims:

1. to enhance students' capacity;
2. to give teachers feedback on the performance of their work.

Testing is not separated, but rather an intrinsic part of the learning process. By testing their

students (orally or in writing), teachers want to see if, how much and how well the learners have acquired the new material, what their typical mistakes are, the deficiencies of their own work. Furthermore, testing is a complex achievement that aims to assess not only the acquisition by the students of the new material, but also the way they can use this material creatively and realistically. Widdowson makes a distinction between usage and use as aspects of language performance. In normal circumstances in which we engage in conversation, we manifest simultaneously both aspects of performance. Usage is referred to as the *"citation of words and sentences as manifestations of the language system."* On the other hand use is referred to as *"the way the system is realised for normal communicative purposes."* (Widdowson, 1978)

Communicative competence becomes functional through performance, i.e. actual usage of the language and active participation in communicative exchanges. Communication relies on productive (rather than receptive) skills, as well as on the mastery of other communicative strategies: the skills to negotiate meaning, to adapt one's discourse according to the situational context, the ability to use appropriate paralanguage, etc. As a matter of fact, communicative testing is a great challenge for test planners. It should be noted that those who are involved in writing communicative language tests are more interested in what the candidate can do with the language rather than what knowledge of the language the candidate possesses. One reason is the issue of predictive validity. When designing a test of communicative competence, identifying test takers' needs based on communicative encounters that they are likely to experience is one of the essential principles. However, it is not certain if test makers can guarantee that examinees performing well on a test in class are also able to do well outside the classroom in a real life situation. One reason for this is that real life communication is characterized by unpredictability. Studies have proved that test designers have tried to make real-world tasks, but encountered difficulties from the varied or diverse nature of contexts. (Brown, 2003; Katsumasa, 1997)

Morrow distinguishes seven basic features of a communicative situation:

1. communication is *interaction-based*:

➢ communication is a *two-way* process between at least two participants; even written interactions (e.g. letters, newspaper articles) involve an addressee, even though the latter is not physically present;

➢ the speaker/writer takes into account the addressee's social status and expectations and adapts his message accordingly, both in terms of content and form;

2. *unpredictability:*

➢ communication is generally triggered by an information gap between the interlocutors: one person has to communicate information that is unknown or new to the other;

➢ the interactants cannot foresee how the interaction will develop, they do not know what the other will say; time pressure is a relevant feature of language use: the language user needs to process the information he receives and formulate an appropriate response in an extremely short time;

3. *context:*

➢ the language produced by the interactants must vary (in terms of choice of vocabulary and level of formality) according to the role and status of the receiver, the activity type, etc.;

➢ communicative tests must assess not only the linguistic accuracy of the message, but also the appropriateness of the language produced ;

4. *performance:* conveying one's message is the most important element of communication:

➢ focus on linguistic competence based on semantic and grammatical well-formedness

limits knowledge of the language considerably; linguistic inaccuracy is unimportant as long as it does not prevent the message from being meaningfully conveyed;

➢ the meaning of one's message is negotiated between the interlocutors; repair strategies (repetitions, clarifications, corrections, etc.) are signs of negotiation, not evidence of linguistic inadequacy;

5. authenticity:

➢ communication is an essential element of human society; in the real world there are countless types of interactions, and countless types of discourses;

➢ communicative tests must also assess the testee's capacity to deal with and pro-duce authentic (or rather, authentic-looking) written or spoken material: language adapted to the discourse type, appropriate format (e.g. of the letter, of the newspaper article), etc.;

6. purpose: people speak/write for a reason; therefore, communicative tests must assess the learner's ability to exploit the functional potential of the language, i.e. to perform speech acts with the help of the language: to request or command, to apologize and express gratitude, etc.;

7. communication is behavior-based, it has a purpose and an outcome, and the success or failure of an interaction must be judged according to its results; therefore, communicative tests must also assess:

➢ the testee's strategic competence, e.g. his/her ability to deal with memory limitations, shifts of attention, matters of politeness; his/her ability to manipulate the language so as to obtain real-world aims;

➢ the effectiveness of the interaction: whether the message is convincing enough to trigger the expected result (e.g. whether the speaker has convinced the audience to vote for him). [7]

To respect these requirements, Morrow submits that:

➢ communicative tests must be *integrative*: in the real world, language comes in a continuous flow, not in isolated (discrete-point) items;

➢ the learner's ability to use the language must be tested in "ordinary situations", i.e. situations which sample or simulate *real-world communicative situations* (plausible ones, situations one may actually encounter in the outside world);

➢ communicative tests must test linguistic performance, and not merely the underlying ability *(linguistic competence)*; the learners must *produce* and *functionalize* language, not merely recognize appropriate forms;

➢ *spontaneous* production of language (especially oral production) is essential for testing the learners' knowledge of the language;

➢ communicative testing must address *all four skills*; therefore, the task must activate simultaneously several of the learners' linguistic and communicative skills. (Morrow, 1977)

Thus, communicative language testing relies on various assignments that imitate *real-world linguistic exchanges*. To achieve this, the teacher must set the interaction in a well-defined context, e.g. situational, temporal, social environments, etc. The interaction must also have a well-defined purpose, and there must be an information gap. Moreover, communicative language testing must assess not only the accuracy of the output text (its grammatical and semantic well-formedness), but also its effectiveness (i.e. how well the testee managed to convey his/her meaning, caught the audience's attention and attained his/her communicative aim). Similarly, communicative items must test not only the content of the output (what is being said - its coherence and accuracy), but also its form and presentation (e.g. its fluency, for oral exchanges; its layout and tidiness, for written items). In order to achieve such aims, the teacher can make use of a wide range of testing techniques: role play, oral interview, letter writing,

telephone conversation, group discussion to solve problems are typical communicative class activities. Such tasks are skill-based, and they exploit simultaneously several of the learners' language skills, both receptive and productive: e.g. their ability to decode a text and interpret its social and discoursal context, to formulate an appropriate response, to make inferences and read between the lines. By using such techniques, the teacher/tester can also assess the students' communicative effectiveness, i.e. how efficiently they can use the various resources of the language to get their message through and attain their communicative goal. (Vizental, 2008)

There are a variety of reasons, for which some students do not perform well on traditional tests. Due to the fact that language competence depends on the purpose for language use and the context in which it is used, it makes sense to provide students with evaluation opportunities that reflect these practices. In the real world, students must manifest that they can implement tasks using the English language effectively, both at studies and in social settings; e.g. a birthday party, paying a visit, shopping for a present, medical appointments, university activities, extracurricular activities, etc.

Conclusions

Implementation of communicative language testing is feasible and it promises positive effects on enhancing students' capacity. Language testing plays a crucial role in ensuring that individuals have the language skills necessary for their academic, professional, or personal goals. These assessments help institutions and organizations make informed decisions about language proficiency. Overall, CLT seeks to provide a more comprehensive and authentic evaluation of the learners language proficiency, assessing their ability to use the language effectively in real-life situations. This approach contrasts with traditional testing methods that primarily focus on discrete language skills and knowledge. It is essential to strike a balance in the use of tests and consider various assessment methods to cater to diverse learning styles and preferences. Additionally, fostering a positive and supportive testing environment contributes to the effectiveness of assessments in enhancing students' capacities. In summary, communicative language tests contribute significantly to enhancing students' language capacities by emphasizing real-life application, integrating skills, promoting contextual learning, fostering problem-solving skills, increasing motivation, encouraging interactive learning, providing feedback for improvement, developing cultural competence, and preparing students for lifelong language learning.

Bibliographic references :

BACHMAN, Lyle, F. (1990), *Fundamental considerations in language testing,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

BROWN, H. Douglas (2003), *Language assessment: Principles and classroom practices,* White Plains, NY: Longman.

CANALE, Michael, & SWAIN, Merrill (1980), *Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and learning,* Applied Linguistics, 1(1), p. 1-47.

CANALE, Michael (1983), *From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. Language and Communication,* New York: Longman.

HEATON, John (1988), *Writing English language tests,* United Kingdom: Longman.

KATSUMASA, Shimada (1997), *Communicative language testing: Principles and problems.* English Review, 12, p. 3-24.

MORROW, Keith (1977), *Techniques of Evaluation of a Notional Syllabus,* London: Royal Society of Art.

OLLER, John (1979), *Language tests at school,* London: Longman.

VIZENTAL, Adriana (2008), *Strategies of Teaching and testing English as a foreign language*, București : Polirom.

WIDDOWSON, Henry, G. (1978), *Teaching language as communication,* Oxford: Oxford University Press.