



Testing Grammar in ESL/EFL Classroom

Dr. J. JOHN LOVE JOY¹, ADIBOINA THIRUMALA DEVI²

¹Assistant Professor of English, St. Joseph's College, Tiruchirappalli 620 002

Email: johnljoy@gmail.com

²Lecturer in English, AlRayan Campus, Imam Abdurahman Bin Faisal University, Dammam, KSA



Article Received: 27/11/2020

Accepted: 16/12/2020

Published online: 31/12/2020

doi: [10.33329/elt.8.6.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/elt.8.6.1)

ABSTRACT

The widening perspectives of language proficiency have weakened the importance of linguistic competence in the testing arena. Nowadays, the tests consider grammar as a means to a communicative end. Nevertheless, in some contexts, the linguistic factor seems to hold its place firm as ever before in language tests irrespective of the purpose which the tests are put to. Despite strong evidence favouring the language use in the post-method era, discrete testing of knowledge about structural items has been in vogue. This paper tries to put linguistic competence in proper perspective, so as to make language test more communicative in nature.

Keywords: communicative language testing, communicative competence, language proficiency

Introduction

Testing the language proficiency of a student has been in vogue since long. Right from the past to date, teachers have been testing students' language proficiency use of language to assess their communicative competence. However, what is being tested in the name of language proficiency has undergone a sea change over the past few decades. There has been a shift in focus from the notion of language as *mere structures* to language as *a means of communication*. Consequently, the structural aspect presented either in context or in isolation has not been considered a useful indicator to assess students' ability to use the target language.

The concept of language proficiency

The insights derived from the widening perspectives of language proficiency have lead language testers to depend heavily on the models of language proficiency since better testing method depends on a better understanding of language proficiency. For this purpose, four prominent models of language proficiency are briefed below:

Unitary Competence Hypothesis: Oller (1983) has claimed that the design of language tests should cater to fulfil the notion of language proficiency holistically. He has hypothesised that language proficiency consists of a *single unitary ability* because *the whole had to be greater than the sum of its parts*. For him, comprehension is based on predicting the message we encounter by drawing upon our knowledge of the world. According to Purpura (1999), Oller's theory has "demonstrated the importance of cognitive factors in understanding second language proficiency" (p. 18).



Communicative Competence: In the revised version of Canale and Swain's (1980) model of CC, Swain (1983) has listed four components viz., (1) linguistic competence i.e., knowledge about language, (2) sociolinguistic competence i.e., appropriateness of utterance in a given situation, (3) discourse competence i.e., faculty to process beyond the level of a sentence in terms of cohesion/coherence, and (4) strategic competence i.e., strategies of communication employed either to enrich the effect of communication or to compensate communication failure. This model tries to classify the possible components of CC. This, in a way, has helped the testers to put linguistic competence in place while testing the students' language proficiency.

CALP/BICS: Cummins, J. (1984) has added another dimension to the notion of communicative competence. His notion of language proficiency consists of two components namely Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal and Communicative Skills (BICS). This concept ascertains the importance of language use in academic and non-academic settings for the formation of proficiency in any second language. Cummins reflects upon the role of negotiation in an academic set up as well as that of social interaction promoted by communicative language teaching.

Communicative Language Ability: Bachman's (1990) model of language proficiency has three components such as language competence, strategic competence and psychophysiological mechanisms. Language competence denotes knowledge of language. Strategic competence represents the cognitive ability which enables the students to use language for communicative purposes. The psychophysiological mechanisms relate to neurological and psychological processes involved in real communication. Skehan (1991) and McNamara (1995) feel that there is not much difference found when compared with Canale and Swain's model because it seems that the linguistic and discourse competences of their model have been rearranged within organisational and pragmatic competences. Nevertheless, Chalhoub-Deville (1995) opine that Bachman's framework gives an elaborate description concerning the nature of language proficiency and the language construct to the best of its appearance in the given context.

Models of language proficiency: Finding the core

A close look at these four models reveals that the perception of language has continued to widen with time. On the one hand, the testing language proficiency of the learners has become more accommodative of all aspects of language and importantly its use. On the other, linguistic competence has seen a dip in importance owing to the overwhelming support for the communicative language testing. So from being the sole component of language test, the relevance of grammar has found a new meaning for existence, that is, through language use.

The four models discussed above suggest that there are differences of opinion in terms of the components attributed to language proficiency but there seems to be a converging point where all the four models merge vis-à-vis language use. Therefore, the basic idea of language proficiency remains as the ability to use language appropriately, both receptively and productively, in real situations. Hence, primary thrust is given to the purpose of learning a target language, that is, communicative use of a language. The impact of this confluence is very much felt in communicative language testing.

Communicative language testing (CLT): an overview

CLT can be feasibly seen on a continuum as suggested by Davies (1988) to avoid divergence of thought. He gives CLT three continuum categories: firstly, discrete point and integrative test; secondly, direct and indirect methods of testing; and thirdly, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced positions. The degree of communicativeness of a test could be determined by the importance given to the categories of the continuum.



This conveys the fact that language tests have to have certain qualities which would place them nearer to the communicative end, that is, integrative, indirect and criterion-referenced, of the continuum.

We have discussed the plummeting hold of the importance given to linguistic competence in the definition of language proficiency. While the hegemony of linguistic competence has faded out, a holistic view of language proficiency has started gaining prominence in the shape of communicative competence. Therefore, CLT has rejected discrete testing of grammar items because the language proficiency of a learner is expressed communicatively and not linguistically because it has been increasingly felt that the ability to function in a given situation does not merely depend on linguistic accuracy. To stretch it further, a learner even requires cultural competence. As we know, language does not exist in a vacuum. It thrives in a society which is embedded culturally. To use Sercu's (2006) words, "Foreign language education is, by definition, intercultural. Bringing a foreign language to the classroom means connecting learners to a world that is culturally different from their own." (p. 16)

What ails language testing?

Increasing interest in testing the language proficiency of students in a communicative setting has given more room for testing the use of language either "in ordinary situations" (Morrow, 1977: 148), or in "genuine communicative function" (Swain, 1985: 40), or in "meaningful communicative situations (Weir, 1990: 9) or in "real-world performance" (McNamara, 1995: 13) or in "real life situation (Bachman, 2000: 13) or "interpret and produce appropriate and meaningful utterances in a specific situation" (p. 221) – all of which

Even though theorists have tried to bring testing on par with the developments in language testing which has resulted from the advent of theories of communicative competence, the feeling that the area of testing has failed to make use of the recent developments in a more systematic way. Often the language tests have discrete linguistic components as one of the test items. Especially, in English for generic purpose tests, components like 'Fill in the blanks with appropriate verbs', 'Supply appropriate preposition/articles', 'Spot the error', convert from active to passive or direct to indirect' are still in use, irrespective of the purpose which the tests are put to. This goes against Davies' (1988) claim that a test should present "the learner with a problem which is not itself a language problem but which requires language to work out a solution ..." (p. 14).

Everyone agrees to the fact that through grammar we express ourselves meaningfully but by merely knowing about grammar makes no sense since the use is what matters. So, grammar has to be tested in a context where the students are involved in meaningful interaction. The interaction could be with people, text, and context or with themselves.

Positioning grammar appropriately

The belief that better knowledge about grammar may guarantee effective communicative ability cannot hold good because knowing the rules of grammar is not equivalent to using grammar. Instead of testing grammar separately to surmise language ability in a roundabout manner, we could test grammar in the context of language use. This would mean testing the performance of the students which is essential in an educational set up.

However, grammar can be tested separately using the discrete testing methods when the purpose of testing is diagnostic in nature, for this ensures easy identification of students' problem with their grammar but not their performance. To sum, we need to tap the performance of the learners in a communicative context, so that, students' communicative ability is tested fairly, failing which, we may be testing what should not be tested to judge from what ought not to be construed.



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