



From Beginner To The Skilled Language Learner: A Primary Analysis Of Testing Spoken English By The Written Mode

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Abstract

A language 'test' is a systematic procedure for observing a person's behavior and describing it with the aid of a numerical scale or category system (Cronbach LJ 1971: 26). A test cannot be based on a selection of items chosen on linguistic grounds alone, and that to devise an effective test, it is necessary to specify how an examinee requires to use the language. "The criterion for success lies not in formal correctness but in communicative effectiveness" [Carroll: 1980, 8] Tests of spoken English usually give priority to language aspects of performance highlighting vocabulary, grammar, syntax and lexicon and pronunciation features, rather than the effectiveness and appropriacy of communication. It is no secret that the testing of oral proficiency is one of the weakest items in our testing battery, the ability to write an essay is looked on as the sine qua non of language courses, whereas the ability to speak that language is rated much lower.

Key Words Test, Linguistic grounds, formal correctness, communicative effectiveness, oral proficiency, appropriacy.

I. Introduction : Some basic assumptions on language test

Daniel Defoe's protagonist Robinson Crusoe was perhaps one of the greatest English teachers. His version of how and why he taught Man Friday English is one of the first published descriptions of English teaching the -motivation for a shared language and the power relationship between two people.

"I was greatly delighted with my new companion, and made it my business to teach him everything that was proper to make him useful, handy and helpful; but especially to make him speak and understand me when I spoke, and he was the aptest scholar that ever was."

Defoe (1719) Robinson Crusoe

Like Robinson Crusoe, the English teacher uses the exploratory classroom atmosphere, the resources of time and specialist knowledge available, by embarking on a piece of research in the classroom in the classical quantitative,

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psychological mode, through gathering of verbal reports, finding answers to questions without losing focus on methods or objectives. Getting the students perceptions, their strategies and component skills of learning and communication help us feed back into decisions about methods, materials, organization testing procedures and the language programme. Most of the information available has a communication focus inferring the learners ways of managing their linguistic products, rather than how they came to say it or their linguistic processes. A language 'test' is

“ a systematic procedure for observing a person's behavior and describing it with the aid of a numerical scale or category system”.

(Cronbach LJ 1971: 26)

A test cannot be based on a selection of items chosen on linguistic grounds alone, and that to devise an effective test, it is necessary to specify how an examinee requires to use the language. "The criterion for success lies not in formal correctness but in communicative effectiveness" [Carroll: 1980, 8] Tests of spoken English usually give priority to language aspects of performance highlighting vocabulary, grammar, syntax and lexicon and pronunciation features, rather than the effectiveness and appropriacy of communication. It is no secret that the testing of oral proficiency is one of the weakest items in our testing battery, the ability to write an essay is looked on as the sine quonon of language courses, whereas the ability to speak that language is rated much lower.

II Testing Spoken English: the state of the art

Keeping in view the meaning or relevance of speech in the learning/teaching of language skills, Acharya Nagarjuna University had introduced the teaching and testing of Spoken English through a prescribed text Spoken English For You edited by Radhakrishnan Pillai, Rajeevan and Bhaskaran (1990). While the present Board of studies for Foundation English prescribes the development of Oral Proficiency according to the Andhra Pradesh State Council for Higher Education recommendations, it has done away with the testing of spoken English. Autonomous institutions within the Acharya Nagarjuna University system, have retained the teaching and testing of Spoken English. In the KBN College, for Foundation English teaching of Spoken English is based on Success with Spoken English II: for undergraduates by Dr. V.Saraswathi & Dr.Noor Jehan Kother Adham. Commonwealth University Book Publishers Chennai, 1998. {Units 1-3, for Semester 1}. The testing of Speech skills is based on 2 items which is as follows:

On Transparency

Item 1 Imagine that you are waiting for the Grand Trunk Express at the Central railway Station Write a dialogue of five exchanges between yourself and the station master regarding the delay in the train's arrival. (5 marks)

Item 2 The following dialogues have errors in concord Correct the mistakes.(5 marks)

a. 1. Your new gold bangle is pretty

2. I'm afraid it's not gold. All that glitter is not gold.

b. 1. Look at those boys playing marbles

2. What about them

1. One of the boys are naughty

c. 1. Who do you think is to blame? Rajesh or Suresh

2. Rajesh as well as Suresh are at fault

d. 1. The librarian wants to see you.

2. Yes, I saw her. She wants me to pay Rs.20/ fine

1. Twenty rupees are a big amount

e. 1. What did she have for breakfast?

2. She have bread, butter and jam. They are so tasty.

The aim of the test [end of Semester 1 examination] is to assess the learners' ability to display language skills to perform certain functions such as greeting, introducing people and seeking information in formal and informal situations. The basic premise is that language is a system for the expression of meaning, the primary function of language is to interact and communicate, the structure of language reflecting its functional and communicative use. The performance test assumes that it is communicative competence that is being assessed and that communication is the starting point of measurement of what the learner can actually achieve through language. Communicative Competence may be defined as "the ability to function in a truly communicative setting" (Savignon 1972: 8). The overall communicative effectiveness (Item 1) and resources of grammar and expression (Items 1 & 2) form the basis of the subjective evaluation by the examiner. The scores, in terms of marks, try to provide an objective approach to consolidate the examiners subjective assessment.

III Testing Spoken English by the Written Mode - the paradox

The testing of Spoken English by the written mode (TSW) assumes that the examiner is able to establish clearly what activity the student is expected to perform, how far the dynamic communicative characteristics associated with these activities can be incorporated into the tests, and what the task dimensions will be in terms of the complexity, size, referential and functional range of the discourse to be processed or produced. The teacher-examiner is better aware of the students deficiencies than of their success he assumes their level of ignorance. Then he highlights her students problem area, and thus tends to define language ability from the experience of its breakdown rather than of its success, in negative rather than positive terms. Item 2 (identifying mistakes in concord) is in terms of discrete structures and is related to grammar, structure and vocabulary. We all know that testing Spoken English involves skills other than those to measure linguistic competence Item 2 does not provide the opportunity for the student to select on his own, which is an essential component of communication skills. The examiner may not have actually assessed any aspect of how 'communicatively effective' the performance was. It also demands an error based scoring for measuring success in using the formally correct aspects of the language and ignores the required information based' scoring for measuring success in using the language to communicate effectively. The student-speaker cannot see a reasonable purpose for performing the task at hand. These two items may be said to measure linguistic competence

while actual use of the language for communication requires communicative competence. The evaluation in terms of the traditional discrete points of language proficiency passes for an evaluation of communicative competence while, in fact, it is an inaccurate reflection of the students ability to function in an authentic communicative context. Perhaps these two items satisfy the criterion of reliability in that the numerical scores awarded force the examiner to be as objective as possible. In Testing Spoken English through a direct oral performance we may have the subjectivity element the personality factor. There is the interaction between the examiner and the student which is more direct, continuous and personal than it is in writing. We are often strongly influenced by the paralinguistic features of the language which are often hard to distinguish from personality.

The greatest advantage in TSW is in administration of the test. It is easily administered as part of a larger language test. Any ideal test of oral performance should be recorded on tape for reliability purpose because the interaction is fleeting and cannot be checked unless recorded on cassette. TSW's saving grace is that the performance is on paper, in black and white, for the examiner to assess holistically as well as analytically and pass comments for improvement of the skill. It purports to test the students' knowledge of language and develop the learners competence by laying emphasis on the functional and communicative potential of the language.

Language test designers should concern themselves with validity. They should ask themselves whether they are "actually testing what they think they are testing, and whether what they think they are testing is what they ought to be testing" (Morrow K 1981, 13). Testing Spoken English by the written mode does not test pronunciation auditory comprehension as other oral performance do. Item 1 demands the meaningfulness of responses and the completeness of sentence structure for the examinee to receive her score. This may tend to elicit artificial language that is not representative of a student's communicative competence. The scoring procedure does not encourage the creative use of language and may even discriminate against sophisticated language users in real life, dialogues (Item 1) include disjunctures pauses, hesitations and words such as um, er, well, I mean (Wilkinson 1971, 49). These used to be thought faults and children were often told not to say 'er'. We are now realizing that to 'er' is human.

Stabilizers such as this occur particularly when we are thinking aloud, defining more precisely, seeking a vivid expression.

Any communicative act and especially speaking has a function with respect to both the structure of the interaction of which it forms a part and with respect to the attitudes feelings and beliefs of the speaker.

"It is both an interactional and an illocutionary structure of an encounter, the acts, moves, exchanges and phases of which an encounter is composed"

(Goffman, 1971, 134)

A dialogue (Item 1) or a conversation is

"an interactional stretch of talk involving atleast two participants and taking place in a non formalized setting, such that no special rules or conventions may be said to operate"

(Edmondson 1981:4)

There may be conversation rules and conversational strategies, such as turn taking, the former demands communicative competence while the latter displays social competence without offending socially acceptable notions of what is and what is not acceptable behaviour. For example one can choose not to reply to a greeting and yet one has communicated. Speaking ought to be assessed in relation to the situation in which it takes place, the purpose it serves and the audience for whom it is intended. Consider the following exchange.

L: Do you want to play with me?
 V: You're younger than me. [Shuts door]
 L: (puzzled) She didn't answer my question.

(Coulthard M 1977:29)

If we have to choose between the linguistic response and the non-linguistic, it is the latter which is more important in terms of the successful development of the conversation. The 'paralinguistic' (Abercrombie 1968) such of those features that are relevant to a structural analysis (for example a cough) may be purposeful, directed and controllable behaviour which may accompany or substitute for linguistic communication. The 'extra-linguistic' (Abercrombie 1968) means of communicating information such as voice accent or tonal variations may interest a Sherlock Holmes to interpret them as clues. The real world contexts of use demand not only a mastery of lexical resources pronunciation (phonology supra-segmental features) required for comprehensibility, but also aspects of personality or interpersonal skills of the speaker- poise, naturalness, effort to communicate and how much information was exchanged, Intelligibility fluency, comprehension, appropriateness - in short overall communicative effectiveness is the name of the game.

The greatest disadvantage TSW displays is the loss of illocutionary force. Illocution is an indirect speech act. "It is possible for the speaker to say one thing and mean that but also to mean something else". (Searle 1975, 60)

The now famous examples of 'Can You pass the salt, please ?' or 'It's cold in here' (Searle, 1975) - the first one is not a question nor the second a mere statement - tell us clearly that language is not merely a mode of action but a means of interaction, a means of sharing experience through an act of negotiation. Negotiation is a two way process and sometimes even silence counts, that is saying nothing is doing. Look at the following dialogues.

A Speaker 1: John
 Speaker 2: Yes
 S1 : Have you got a moment, please
 S2 : Sure

B Speaker 1: John
 Speaker 2 : (looks up)
 S1 : Have you got a moment ?
 S2 : Sure

Language skills, and especially speaking, should be assessed in an act of communication.

Morrow K (1979:149) called this his 'performance criterion' that is the candidates ability to actually use the language, to translate the competence (or lack of it) which he is demonstrating into actual performance 'in ordinary situation', that is actually using the language to read, write, speak, or listen in ways and contexts which correspond to real life.

(Marrow 1979: 149)

Such a test of communicative ability should be criterion referenced against the performance of a set of authentic speaking tasks. In other words, it will set out to show whether or not (or how well) the student can perform a set of specified activities. In other words the examiner of Spoken English must be forced to think what can this candidate do? What is she capable of? In assessing the speaking abilities the test would have a valuable function in assisting the teacher to decide what to emphasize in her teaching, to elicit the required type of speech. The teacher would be able to spread the assessment over a period of time, say as part of internal assessment by maintaining a consistent record of the students performance and the idea of the once a year / semester test may become obsolete.

IV Conclusion : Quo Vadis

As system of assessment which fails to take account of talking fails to give an incomplete and misleading impression of the students competence in the language. The primary objective of a teacher of English should be to have a commitment to the speech needs of the students and a serious study of the role of oral language in learning. Perhaps there is no standard test for all occasions for assessing oral skills but the major concern in a spoken English test must be the people not the test or test task alone. Our students as human beings should be encouraged to talk and communicate with each other as naturally as possible. We are far from assessing accurately the skilled language learner as we are still in the domain of testing language skills with very limited scope, conceding the fact that the very introduction of Testing Spoken English is itself a good beginning.

'Language is like a living membrane; it provides a constantly changing model of reality. It is always growing as it undergoes changes. Rosario Ferre in *Destiny, Language and Translation* (p.41) says "Every civilization is imprisoned in a linguistic contour, which it must match and regenerate according to the changing landscape of facts and of time'. From an uncivilized brute Man Friday learned to speak to be called the "aptest scholar" May be he escaped answering tests in Spoken English, or did he?

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