Transferability: A Missing Link Between Language Testing and Language Teaching

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Abstract: In almost all countries, there are always complaints about the difference between the materials on language tests and the materials in the language teaching and learning process. How can this happen? Isn’t the language test valid? Test developers will argue that the test they develop is valid. Do teachers teach the materials not found in the test? Teachers will also argue that they have taught well. So, what is wrong? In this opinion paper I present my opinion about the missing link between language testing and language teaching. Teachers and test developers usually talk about the validity of a test while validity is a very general term. An item testing the use of the expression of ‘How’s life?’ is said to be a valid item for testing greeting. If, in such a case, the teacher teaches the expression of ‘How are you?’ as an example of greeting, there is no guarantee that students will be able to know the use of ‘How’s life?’ although both are examples of expressions used for greeting. This is what I mean by ‘transferability’. The knowledge of the expression of ‘How are you?’ cannot be transferred to the knowledge of the expression of ‘How’s life?’ In this paper, I will present my further arguments about the importance of transferability in developing test items.

Keywords: transferability, validity, language testing

Introduction
Teaching a foreign language is not an easy job. It involves a lot of knowledge, such as the knowledge of the foreign language, the knowledge of learners and the learning process, the knowledge of teaching methods and techniques. It also involves a lot of skills, such as questioning skills and pedagogical skills. It also involves a lot of activities, starting from planning, teaching, and testing.

It is very important to keep in mind that testing is not a separate process. Testing is a part of the teaching process. Testing cannot be separated from teaching and, the same is true, teaching cannot be separated from testing. These two can be considered as the two faces in a coin. One supports the other. This can be seen from the fact that one of teachers’ jobs in the teaching learning process is giving a test to measure how well their students have mastered what they teach.

Another argument that supports the importance of testing as a part of teaching is that the result of testing is used in many kinds of decisions, for example: decisions about the students, decisions about the materials, and even decision about the teaching itself, whether there need to be a kind of improvement in the teaching learning process. From the result of testing, people can judge whether the teaching learning process is effective or not. From the result of testing also, efforts to improve the teaching effectiveness can be made. This means that testing has a great influence on the teaching learning process.
As stated before, testing or evaluating students’ achievement is one of teachers’ jobs. Teachers will have to know many aspects of evaluation. They will have to know the characteristics of a good test, how to write good test items, how to score the students’ responses, and how to report the result to related parties.

One of the characteristics of a good test which has to be taken into account when teachers develop a test is the validity of the test. To put it simpler, the test must measure what it is supposed to measure (Hughes, 2003). It seems that this term is very simple and can be applied directly in the development of a test. Unfortunately, it is not as easy as it seems to be. Some teachers are not fully aware whether the test they develop actually measures what it is supposed to measure. Or, they believe that their test measures what it is supposed to measure while actually it does not.

So, what seems to be the problem? There are some possible problems related to this. One of the possible problems lies in the fact that the term ‘validity’, which is used as the basis for developing a test, is a very general term. When teachers are asked about whether their test is valid or not, they will say that it is valid.

This paper tries to propose one dimension of validity which needs to be taken into account when teachers develop a test. This dimension is, I will call, ‘transferability’. The discussion here is limited to classroom testing, not general language proficiency testing.

**Literature Review**

**Validity**
There are some criteria for constructing good test items. One of the most important criteria is that there must be a high degree of congruence between a particular test item and the key objective of the total test (Osterlind, 2002: 41). To put it simpler, a test must be valid.

Validity can be said to be the most important consideration in language testing. The concept refers to the appropriateness, meaningfulness, and usefulness of the specific inferences made from test scores. Test validation is the process of accumulating evidence to support such inferences (AERA, 1985).

According to Fulcher & Davidson (2007: 3), validity is precisely what teachers have to do so that they can make a kind of reasoning of what a test score means. This will also useful for making decisions about the skills or abilities that the test takers have. In their view, validity is not a property of a test but the degree to which teachers are justified in making an inference about test scores.

In language testing, validity is also an important concept. There are at least three kinds of validity: content validity, criterion-related validity and construct validity. Not all these kinds of validity will be discussed in this paper. This paper will focus only on the content validity. More
specifically, the content validity will be related to the classroom testing, that is, the testing carried out by teachers.

There are some experts explaining about the definition of validity. For example, Henning (1987: 89) says that validity in general refers to the appropriateness of a given test or any of its component parts as a measure of what it is purported to measure. A test is said to be valid to the extent that it measures what it is supposed to measure. Meanwhile, Gronlund (1998: 226) provides the meaning of the term validity as ‘the extent to which inferences made from assessment results are appropriate, meaningful, and useful in terms of the purpose of the assessment’.

Another expert who also gives the definition of validity is Hughes (2003: 26). He argues that a test is said to be valid if it measures accurately what it is intended to measure. In his account on content validity, he adds that a test is said to have content validity if its content constitutes a representative sample of the language skills, structures, etc.

In her discussion about content validity, Kopriva (2008: 68) says that test specifications are one of the best indicators of content validity. The test specifications can be used by test developers to relate the materials on the test and those taught by teachers in the teaching and learning process. Test specifications form the bridge from the content standards to the assessment and provide a framework that identifies what the test will measure and what items will be included in the test.

From the different approaches and definitions of validity, we learn that validity theory is changing and evolving. And the same is true with the way we look at and investigate validity. It may change over time. One thing that can be concluded from what has been stated above is that validity an important concept in language testing. There must be evidence in the language test that it represents the materials taught by teachers.

**Transferability**

When we search the Internet for the word of ‘transferability’, we can find some information. For example, ‘transferability’ refers to the degree to which the results of qualitative research can be generalized or transferred to other contexts or settings (www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/qualval.php).

In another site, the word ‘transfer’ means ‘to convey or cause to pass from one place, person, or thing to another’ (www.thefreedictionary.com/Transferability). So, transferability means the extent to which something can be transferred, conveyed, or passed from one place, person, or thing to another.

In the ‘*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*’ (7th ed.), we can find the word ‘transferable’ meaning ‘that can be moved from one place, person, or use to another’. There is also an example of the expression of ‘transferable skills’ which means ‘that can be used in different jobs.’

In this paper, what I mean by ‘transferability’ is the extent to which the materials or the skills taught by teachers can be transferred for doing the test given by the teachers. In other words, the
skills or knowledge used by students in answering the test items must be able to be transferred from the skills or knowledge taught by teachers. Otherwise, the test cannot be said to be valid.

**The link between language teaching and language testing**

As has been stated in the previous part of this paper, there is a very close relationship or link between language teaching and language testing. The discussion on validity clearly shows that a close link exists between teaching and testing.

The close link between teaching and testing can be seen from the fact that a test cannot be said to be valid if it does not measure what it is supposed to measure. And the ‘what’ here must be related to the materials taught by teachers.

Some teachers are very proud when they can give a test whose materials cannot be found in their teaching. In other words, the materials (or skills) tested are not those taught in the teaching learning process. Such pride must be questionable. It is not fair to ask students materials which are not taught. Even Walvoord & Anderson (2010: 62) argue it is a criminal not to teach what to test.

It should be kept in mind that in most foreign language teaching contexts, the classroom is the only place where students learn, hear, and use the foreign language. So, the only foreign language input they get is that taught by their teachers. Outside the classroom, no other foreign language inputs can be obtained. It is true that there are television programs with films using the foreign language but, more often than not, the language used in the films is far beyond their proficiency level.

Teachers must keep in mind that testing also influences their students’ motivation. When students feel that they cannot do the test well, they will be demotivated. In line with this, Marzano (2006: 3) states that classroom achievement can have a dramatic influence on student motivation. Meanwhile, Walvoord & Anderson (2010: 9) give a reminder to teachers that the assignments, tests, and exams they give and grade will have to facilitate the acquisition of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes teachers want their students to learn.

To clarify what I mean by ‘transferability’, let me give a simple example taken from another subject, that Mathematics. In Mathematics, we have the term ‘addition’. Suppose a first year elementary school teacher gives a test on addition. It is not reasonable to give the students a test on: $37 + 59$. At a glance, this test also tests students’ ability to add numbers. However, this test is not appropriate (or not valid) for first year elementary school students for at least two reasons. First, although this mathematics problem ($37 + 59$) also belongs to ‘addition’, the skill needed to add these two figures has not been taught in the first year of elementary schools. To use the term ‘transferability’, the ability required to solve the mathematics problem cannot be transferred from what has been taught by the teachers in the first year of elementary schools. The second reason is that first year elementary school students have just learned numbers from 1 to 20. So, the numbers 37 and 59 are beyond their ability level. Ambrose et al. (2010: 12) says that
although students may have mastered some knowledge (or skill), it is still questionable whether they will be able to apply this knowledge (or skill) as required by the test items.

Now let us talk about language teaching and language testing. In the genre-based teaching, for example, in the test specifications (or blueprint), teachers often make a very general concept about what the test will cover. For example, in the specifications, the teachers only write a procedure text as the text to be covered in the test. The question is, “What procedure text has been taught and what procedure text will be covered in the test?”

Suppose the teachers have already taught ‘how to make sandwich’. In such a case, teachers are usually encouraged to use a different text from the one they use in teaching. For example, the text covered in the test is ‘how to make fried rice’. Can we claim that this test is valid only because the test covers a procedure text while the teachers have already taught procedure texts? For advanced students, they will not have difficulty in understanding the text covered in the test because they have already mastered a lot of words. So, the ability to understand a procedure text of ‘how to make sandwich’ can be transferred for understanding a procedure text of ‘how to make fried rice.’ However, for students with limited vocabulary, it will not be easy to understand the new text because the ability to understand the text taught cannot be transferred easily although this may be caused by their limited vocabulary mastery.

Now let me give another example. Using the grammar-translation method, teachers teach the simple past tense. In the elementary level, these teachers only teach the simple past tense using the regular verbs. They explain to their students that to form a simple past tense, an ‘-ed’ ending must be added to a verb, and if the verb ends in ‘y’ preceded by a consonant, the ‘y’ changes to ‘i’ to form ‘ied’ such as in the word ‘studied’. Suppose in the test, the teachers ask students to change the verb ‘occupy’ into the past form. As the knowledge of the past form of the word ‘study’ can be transferred for forming the word ‘occupy’ into the past tense, the students will have no difficulty in doing this. What about if the teachers ask their students to use the verb ‘go’ in the past form? The knowledge of forming the verb ‘study’ cannot be transferred for forming the verb ‘go’ into the past form, and so it is understandable if the students cannot do this test correctly.

In such a case, when the students cannot do the test well, is it because the students have not mastered the knowledge about past formation or is it because the ability to form the verb ‘go’ into the past form or the irregular verbs has not been taught by the teachers? Again, the term ‘transferability’ can be used for explaining this phenomenon. Even if the teachers have already taught a certain skill (or ability), Ambrose et al. (2010: 117) warns teachers to be aware not to assume that because students have learned a skill that they will automatically know where and when to apply it.

From the explanation above it is clear that there is a close link between language teaching and language testing. And this link can be explained clearly with the term ‘transferability’, meaning that in order that a language test is said to be valid, the knowledge (or ability, skill) to do the test must be able to be transferred from what has been taught in the teaching learning process.
**Why is it important to link language testing to language teaching?**

It is important for teachers to keep in mind that language testing can have a great effect on their students. This will affect how the students study, what they focus on, and how much time they have to spend studying (Walvoord & Anderson, 2010: 2).

Another reason is that the result of testing may also influence the students’ motivation to learn. The success in doing a test will improve their motivation to learn while failure in doing a test may make them demotivated. It should be remembered that motivation is changeable. Teachers must create an environment which encourages student motivation to learning and one of the ways is to develop a test within their ability level. Students may get frustrated when they get bad scores. And this can even be worse when they know that this is not because they have not learned what has been taught by their teacher but because the materials on the test do not match the materials taught in the class. In other words, they cannot transfer the knowledge (or skill) which has been taught to do the test.

Still another reason, language testing has an important place in language testing. Some parties are concerned about the result of language testing, such as the school principals, the teachers, the students and their parents. These parties need to know how much the students have already got benefit from their study (Patel & Jain, 2008: 147). They also need to make decision based on the results of the testing.

**Closing**

It is important to note that language testing should be integrated with other activities happening in the classroom. Testing should not be considered as an isolated activity done at the end of the teaching learning process. This should be a part of the other activities including planning, teaching and testing. One final comment is that teachers should teach what they test and they should test what they teach, taking into account what can be transferred from what they teach in the class and the materials (or skill or ability) required to do the test.

**References**


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www.thefreedictionary.com/Transferability