Communicative Language Testing: Do School Tests Measure Students’ Communicative Competence?

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Abstract

Testing and assessment help monitor student’s educational progress and evaluate the quality of school systems (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). Especially, in the context there are up to 50 students in a classroom and group work is not easy to organize as in Vietnam, this becomes necessary to measure students’ achievement as teachers cannot understand the knowledge, abilities and skills of the learners in their classroom without formal tests.

This paper reports on findings of a study which focuses on analyzing the contents of five 45 minute tests and five end-of-term tests which were given to grade 6 students in the first semester of 2011 – 2012 school year. Its purpose is to find out whether these contents helped measure students’ real communicative competence. Five tests of each type were collected from five schools in different districts of four provinces in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. The results showed that they could test students’ language focus but failed to measure their real communicative competence.

The present paper also considers the implications for the development of language tests for measuring examinees’ real communicative competence.

1. Introduction

Language assessment or testing is an important stage in the process of language teaching and learning as it helps monitor students’ educational progress and evaluate the quality of school systems (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). Especially, in the context of big classrooms with up to 50 students in each and group work is not easy to organize as in Vietnam, this becomes necessary to measure students’ achievement as teachers cannot understand the knowledge, abilities and skills of the learners in their classroom without formal tests. Language testing is ‘the act of collecting information and making judgments about a language learner’s knowledge of a language and ability to use it’ (Chapelle and Brindley, 2010: 247). There are two main types of language assessment: traditional assessments (paper-and-pencil language tests and performance tests) and alternative assessments (checklists, journals, logs, videotapes and audiotapes, self-evaluation, and teacher observations, etc.) (Brown & Hudson, 1998, McManara, 2000). This study focuses on only the traditional assessments. This type of assessment was chosen as it is the unique one in the general education system in Vietnam.

In traditional assessments, paper-and-pencil tests tend to be used to assess either separate language components (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, etc.) or receptive skills (listening and reading comprehension). Test items in such tests are usually in fixed response format (multiple choice, true-false). Performance tests, however, are used to test commonly productive language skills (speaking and writing) and tend to assess language skills in an act of communication (Mcmanara, 2000). In reality, not all tests can measure what they are
supposed to measure. The present paper is an attempt to see whether these kinds of school tests can measure learners’ communicative competence. It will first explore what communicative competence is and what communicative testing is like. Then, it will analyze the contents of five 45-minute tests and five end-of-term tests students had to take in the first semester of 2011-2012 academic year to see to what extent they could measure learners’ communicative competence.

2. Communicative competence
Communicative competence, according to Canale (1983), includes four components: grammatical, socio-linguistic, discourse and strategic competence. Chomsky (1965) states that grammatical competence is a language competence which reflects the knowledge of vocabulary, rules of word formation, pronunciation and spelling, and sentence formation. Socio-linguistic competence is the appropriateness of language use in social contexts based on the social status of the participants (Alptekin, 2002). Discourse competence is ‘… an understanding of how spoken and written texts are organized and how to make inferences which cover the underlying meaning of what has been said and the connection between utterances’ (Skehan, 1998: 158). This strategy is about the way how to tackle the context well to make meaningful inferences of what has been said. Lastly, strategic competence or compensatory competence is used when other competences fail to cope with the situations such as lack of words or structures in communication (Canale and Swain, 1980). This consists of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies used to compensate when communication is broken down (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007).

The above-mentioned four components mingle with each other to form knowledge of a language and ability to use it. So it is important to find out a suitable type of tests which can measure one of the four components to be able to assess learners’ real communicative competence.

3. Communicative language testing – Principles and characteristics
A communicative language testing system requires tests which are devoted to testing not only learners’ knowledge of a language and how to use it (competence) but also to what extent learners apply their knowledge to meaningful communicative situations (performance) (Fulcher and Davidson, 2007). In order to measure both the language competence and performance, tests should be based on the following principles and characteristics:

Principles
When making a communicative language test, test makers should clearly state what they expect test takers to perform when they use the target language in a particular context – what is tested. Then test makers should establish scales and criteria for assessment which can measure exactly the stated features of testees’ performance to ensure the validity of the test. This principle is called ‘start from somewhere’ by Phan (2008) because it is felt that assessment criteria need to be established.

The second principle is ‘concentrate on content’. It is important that test makers pay attention not only to topics and but also task types. Both the topic and task type should be suitable for test takers’ age, proficiency level, interests and needs. According to Carroll (1983), ‘... the language tasks our learners are expected to perform in their future jobs will guide us with the tasks we will set them in our tests’ (p. 37).
‘Bias for best’ is the third principle, which, according to Brown (2006), is ‘a term that goes little beyond how the student views the test to a degree of strategic involvement on the part of student and teacher in preparing for, setting up, and following the test itself’ (p. 34). In other words, test makers should make sure that test takers are well prepared or test takers are familiar with the test.

Characteristics
Brown (2005) suggests five core characteristics for designing a communicative language test. These include meaningful communication, authentic situation, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated language skills (p. 21). First, the purpose of language learning is communication so language learners’ communicative ability should be measured. In other words, language tests should be based on communication that is meaningful to students and meets their personal needs. Authentic situations can help increase meaningful communication. The usefulness of authentic situations in increasing meaningful communication is emphasized by Weir (1990) when he states that, ‘language cannot be meaningful if it is devoid of context’ (p.11). By using ‘unpredicted language input’ and ‘creative language output’, Brown (2005) means that in real situations it is not always possible to predict what speakers say (unpredictable language input) so learners need to prepare for replying (creative language output). The last characteristic is integrated language skills. A communicative test should require test takers to show their ability of combining language skills as in real life communication situations. These above-mentioned characteristics should be paid attention to and included in communicative language tests.

4. The analysis and evaluation of the test contents
Types of tests regulated in the framework and their proportion in the result
In the framework issued by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) as a guide for teaching and learning, there are four types of tests (oral test, 15-minute test, 45-minute test and end-of-term test). The oral test is conducted at the beginning of every classroom lecture. According to the material for ‘regular fostering’ which is used for in-service training and issued by the MOET, it focuses on speaking skill and is conducted in form of conversations between student-teacher or student-student. The 15-minute test is conducted twice every semester by the class teacher and its content is up to the teachers to decide, but also in the material it focuses on one among the three skills (listening, reading or writing). For the remaining two types of tests, the 45-minute one is conducted twice and the other once a semester. The 45-minute and end-of-term tests focus on ‘language focus’, listening, reading and writing (MOET, 2008b). They are managed by the school head teachers and their contents are prepared by a panel appointed by the Office of Education and Training in each district.

The average for the subject is calculated after each semester based on the formulas below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Oral test + 15-minute test + (45 minute test) x 2 = regular test average</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>N (Regular test average) x 2 + end-of-term test = subject average</td>
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Figure 1: Formula for calculating subject average
Note: N = the total number of oral + 15-minute tests + (the total number of 45-minute tests) x 2
These formulas show that the 45-minute tests and end-of-term test are more important than the oral and 15-minute ones. In fact, as mentioned above, they include the testing of more knowledge and skills. In addition, they are managed more formally and marked under the control of the school head teachers, not the class teachers. It means the school head teachers assign teachers to mark the tests in such a way that teachers do not mark the classes they are teaching. Moreover, student names are cut and test papers are coded to make sure teachers mark the test fairly in order to get more reliable results.

For the above-mentioned reasons, this paper focuses on analysis of only 45-minute test and end-of-term test contents. Five 45-minute test papers and five end-of-term test papers were collected from five schools in four different provinces in Mekong Delta randomly for analysis. These two types of test papers will be summarized and presented separately to see what they have in common and how they differ from each other. A comparison between their contents and the theories about communicative language testing will be made to see to what extent they can measure learners’ communicative competence.

**Test contents**

In relation to the 45-minute tests, all of the test papers tended to test what is called ‘language focus’ including grammar, structures and vocabulary; they were much focused on reading and very little related to writing. Multiple-choice questions were the most common question types in the majority of the tests. In terms of the numbers of options in the multiple-choice questions, three of the papers gave only three options for each answer and the remaining two gave four. In general, the options they gave for each answer were closely related to each other in the field of parts of speech, grammatical points or structures to be tested. In other words, the options were very similar to each other to create confusions so it requires real understanding in order to choose the correct option for each answer. Below are some examples taken from different test papers collected.

| 1. My mother .......... television now. A. watch    B. watches   C. watches  D. is watching  |
| 2. Are there .......... trees near your house? A. a    B. an     C. any       D. some          |
| 3. Mai is a student. She is .......... grade 7, class 7A. on     B. of     C. at        D. in                                       |
| 4. There .......... four people in my family. are     B. is      C. am                                               |
| 5. What is ..........? It’s a table. A. these    B. this     C. those                        |
| 6. How many classrooms ........... your school have? A. does  B. do         C. is                        |

*Figure 2: Multiple choice items in the tests*

Source: The 45-minute tests collected from three Secondary Schools

These examples from the five tests show that they focused closely on grammar and structures and mainly on form rather than application. Another section which was common among the tests was the reading section. Reading was tested through a short reading text with no more than 80 words. Then there was a True/False task or a Question and Answer task. These two types of reading tasks were the most popular among the five papers to check students’ understanding of what they read. However, in True/False tasks there is a 50% possibility of being correct, whether they totally understand the text or not. So this type is sometimes not
very reliable for assessing students’ achievement in their reading skill. Below are the examples of reading tasks in the test papers.

**Example 1**: Read the following passage.

Mai lives in the city with her father, mother and brother. Their house is next to a temple.
On the street, there is a store, a restaurant and a bookstore. In the neighborhood, there is a hospital, a museum, a factory and a stadium.
Mai’s mother works in the museum. Her father works in the hospital.
Decide whether the statements are True (T) or False (F).
Mai lives in the country.
There are four people in his family.
Their house is next to a bookstore.
There is a store on the street.
Mai’s mother works in a hospital.
Her mother works in a museum.

**Figure 3**: Reading section
Source: The 45-minute test (Dong Thai Secondary School)

**Example 2**: Read the passage and then answer the questions.

Hi. My name is Huong Thao. I live with my grandparents in the country. We live in a beautiful house. There are a lot of trees around our house. There is a mountain behind the house. To the right of the house, there is a well. There is a yard in front of the house. There are a lot of flowers in the yard. There is a small river near the house. I often swim in it.

Where does Thao live?
………………………………………………………….

Who does she live with?
………………………………………………………….

What are there around the house?
………………………………………………………….

Is her house beautiful?
………………………………………………………….

**Figure 4**: Reading section
Source: The 45-minute test (Phan Van Tri Secondary School)

In testing writing, there were three out of five test papers which included writing. However, the writing tasks were often given in forms of ‘word rearrangement’ or ‘answer personal questions’. There was only one writing task which required students to use their integrative knowledge to complete it. That was ‘write a passage using the given words/phrases’. These types of tasks are illustrated below:
The three examples indicate that students do not have many free writing tasks in which they can freely express their own opinions on something or describe what happens around them such as: describe your own daily activities, describe your school, family, etc. These types of writing tasks, which were not included in the tests, are considered to be able to measure students’ real achievements as well as promote their creativity in using the target language.

Besides the common types of tasks in the tests mentioned above, there were some more types appearing in one or two out of the five test papers. They are: matching the words and their equivalent Vietnamese meanings; matching the beginning and the end (usually questions and answers); filling in the phrases with the given words; supplying the correct form of the given verbs; and filling in a letter to make a complete word. These types tend to test language knowledge discretely. This means they tend to test only meanings of vocabulary, grammar or word spelling. However, discrete point testing like this considered to focus only on ‘knowledge of the formal linguistic system for its own sake rather than on the way such knowledge is used to achieve communication’ (McNamara, 2000: 14). These can help measure students’ achievements in the specific field of language learning, but not their communicative competence, which is the focus of language learning and the stated aims of the textbook.

Regarding the end-of-term tests, there was no rigid test format to follow. The structure of those collected was similar to that of the 45-minute tests, including multiple choice, true/false, questions and answers, word rearrangement, gap filling, matching, etc.. However, the time allotted for each test was a little bit flexible, from 45 to 60 minutes.
It is said by the MOET that multiple choice tests are more objective in marking and tend to test more language knowledge at the same time. In addition to that long answers for questions are discouraged by the MOET in the seminar materials on testing (2008; 2010) in recent seminars, most test papers have focused on multiple-choice tests.

In general, the contents of the 45-minute test and end-of-term test papers can be said to be able to test what has been actually presented in the textbook. It means they are consistent with the knowledge introduced in the textbook. However, they contained mainly technical and theoretical tasks and tended to test students’ memorization of language knowledge not their creative application of it to communication. There were very few tasks which focused on developing communication. Another weakness of the test papers was that the small number of options in multiple-choice tasks may lead to a high possibility of choosing the correct answer randomly. In addition to that, pronunciation, listening and speaking were not tested, although the materials for seminars and ‘regular fostering’ programs suggest listening tasks should be included.

**Comparison with the theories on communicative language testing**

Through the examples and analysis of the tests, it can be recognized that the topics (family, school, community, etc.) and task types (multiple choice, true-false, matching, etc.) in the tests are quite familiar to students. In addition, the language and situations used are familiar to real life and reflect the knowledge and topics which have been introduced in the textbook. These above issues are called ‘concentrate on content’ and ‘bias for test’ principles in communicative language testing.

In the characteristics of the tests, while the theories on communicative language testing emphasize meaningful communication, these tests focused strongly on form and accuracy. They provided clear and familiar context for students. However, they did not create what is called ‘unpredictable language input’ and ‘creative language output’ to test students’ language knowledge. Moreover, these test tended to test discrete point of language knowledge not integrative point as encouraged in communicative language testing (Oller, 1976).

**5. Conclusion**

In sum, this paper has explored the communicative language testing with its own principles and characteristics. It has also analyzed 10 test papers including five 45-minute tests and five end-of-term tests. The result of the analysis has indicated that language tests do not always measure learners’ communicative competence in the target language. This poses several issues that need attention from language test developers and teachers who are involved in test making. Although communicative language teaching and its implications for developing ‘real-world communication skills’ have been available for more than three decades (Nguyen, 2011), the language testing system does not seem to require learners to reflect their real communicative competence appropriately.

Testing is a device which can be relied on for evaluating whether someone is qualified for a certain job in a particular discipline. Language testing, as its specific purpose, is considered a gateway to education, employment, moving from one country to another and making decisions on the placement of students on particular courses (McNamara, 2000). It is important that language test developers and teachers should think of new types of intensive tests to measure examinees’ real language competence and performance to make the tests more reliable.
References


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