APPLICATION OF KEITH MORROW`S FEATURES OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TESTING TO A TEST OF "COMMUNICATION SKILLS" AT MBA LEVEL

Abdul Baseer, PhD candidate

Lecturer in applied linguistics, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

Sofia Dildar Alvi, MA

Lecturer in English, Government College University, Faisalabad, Pakistan

Abstract

Since the 1970s, an innovative theory regarding language and language use exerted a noticeable effect on language teaching and language testing. Testing is essential in the learning process and is a crucial aspect of teaching. But language testing has traditionally been taken the form of testing knowledge about language, usually the testing of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However, language testing is much more than simple testing of vocabulary and grammar. So, communicative language tests are designed to measure the ability of the testees to use target language in real life situations. However, language testing in Pakistan in not based on Communicative Language Testing approach. The present research evaluates a test of 'Communication skills' module taught at MBA (Master of Business Administration) level (Appendix-A). Keith Morrow's (1979) Seven Features of Communication, based on Holistic approach to language testing, has been used as criterion to evaluate the appropriateness of the above mentioned test. A revised test of reading and speaking skills in the light of Morrow's features has been proposed in the end (Appendix-B).

Keywords: Testing, communicative, language, holistic, reading, speaking, Morrow

Introduction

Communicative language testing is designed to provide the tester with information about the testee's ability to perform in the target language in the tasks contextually specified. Appropriateness rather than the formation of grammatically correct sentences is emphasised more in testing productive skills. In testing receptive skills, emphasis is placed on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than on picking out specific details. In communicative testing, both are combined so that the testee must comprehend and respond in real life situations. ''Assessment is about several things at once …It is about reporting on students' achievements and about teaching them better through expressing to them more clearly the goals of our curricula. It is about measuring student learning; it is about diagnosing misunderstandings in order to help students to learn more effectively. It concerns the quality of the teaching as well as the quality of the learning'' (Ramsden, 1992*)*. Hence, assessment is central to the learning process and is a crucial aspect of teaching. It is the most significant factor that influences student learning. This paper focuses on the description of the present testing/ teaching situation regarding communicative skills to the Master's level students in Pakistani universities. It describes and analyses a 'Communication Skills' test at MBA (first semester) level in the light of Morrow's (1979) Seven Features of Communication. It also explains, as Morrow proposes, that these features are not measured in 'conventional' language tests, thus a new test (of testing reading and speaking skills) will be devised according to these seven features.

Background to the Teaching / Testing Situation

Most of the English language learning/ teaching mainly happens in the language classroom. A language teacher usually teaches in an acquisition poor environment in Pakistani context. In our English language classrooms teachers teach everything found in the textbook including texts, tasks or exercises, texts for extensive reading, group assignments, projects (especially teaching methodology at MBA level), which are best left to the individual or in-groups learner efforts. As a result teachers are often obliged to equate a year's successful teaching with covering all the portions of the textbook. In current teaching/ testing situation in Pakistan, although, the sufficient library support, newspapers, magazines and other supplementary sources of authentic target language are available (this through different

sources of electronic and print media in English language), the teacher relies more and exclusively on the textbook. Moreover, in the teaching/ testing environment where the terminal examination becomes the main focus and the sole judge of teaching, mastery of the contents of the course book often becomes the most important thing.

Nevertheless, every individual learner comes to learning with different personality traits and varying economic/linguistic background, having different learning styles and strategies, variety of aptitudes for acquisition and dissimilar motivation. All this makes heterogeneity true of every class. Teachers being mostly incompetent while teaching in heterogeneous classes face problems whose answers they readily have no access to.

In our teaching/ testing situation students of almost every faculty are provided with English language learning material which is conventional in nature. On contact for inquiry regarding the syllabus and objectives of MBA 'Communication Skills' Module, the concerned teachers responded that they rely mostly on the following teaching material:

Essentials of Business Communication (Guffey, 2004)

Communicating in Business and Professional Settings (Hanna and Wilson, 1998)

Technical Communication: Principles and Practice (Raman and Sharma, 2004)

Business Communication (Chaturvedi and Chaturvedi, 2006)

The Writer's Compass (McWhorter, 1995)

The concerned teachers had no block syllabus and weekly plan in hand. On inquiry they disclosed that they teach parts of speech, English grammar, sentence basics, paragraph basics, sentence & paragraph problems, business letters and memos, report writing, dialogue writing, write up of CVs, nature and process of communication, nature of non-verbal communication, the nature of negotiation, reading comprehension etc.

Based on the above mentioned account of the syllabus and objectives of teaching material it is obvious that the teachers are following no communicative approach to English language teaching/ testing. Students are being taught about language in isolated form not the language in real life situations. They even do not know of four language skills and the importance to be

competent at all of them. Hence the objective is not to achieve the communicative competence of the learners. Since the teachers are not concerned with developing four language skills collectively for the purpose of real life communication, the tests they construct do not measure students' communicative competence keeping in view Morrow's seven features of a communicative test.

Objectives

Analyse and evaluate an existing English language test in Pakistani context under Morrow's (1979) features.

Develop a reading and speaking test under Morrow's features of communication.

Relate reading and speaking skills of the learners to real life communication.

Marrow's Seven Features of Communication

KeithMorrow (1979) is of the view that in 'conventional' language tests, seven features of communication are not measured, whereas use of such features in a test makes the assessment of a language test authentic. He stresses that conventional language tests measure the competence rather than performance of language users in real life situation. They test the knowledge of the language, not the ability to use it. Morrow's seven features are as follow:

Interaction based

According toMorrow a language test should be interaction based. He states that a sender of a message establishes an involvement with his receiver while taking into account the receiver's requirements. Moreover, receiver's expectations often affect both the content and the medium of the message.

Unpredictability

Morrow states that a test should not be predictable because the candidates' previous knowledge about the test affects the real purpose of conducting a test. Thus, formulating, processing and responding to unpredictable data/test are likely to be an extremely relevant feature of language use.

Context

According to Morrow, the use of a language takes place in a context. The forms of language vary according to the context. A language user must be able to handle the situation appropriately according to role, attitude, age, interest, formality, level, and status of participants. It means that a test should be appropriate and restricted according to the situation.

Purpose

An apparent feature of communication is that every word is uttered for a function. There is not even a single utterance made without a purpose. Thus a language user must be able to recognize why a certain remark has been addressed to him, and he should be able to encode appropriate utterances to achieve his own purposes.

Performance

Keith Morrow criticized the conventional testing techniques on the grounds that they tested competence rather than performance, in other words, they tested knowledge of how the language worked rather than an ability to use it in real life situations. Competence has been the basis of the most language tests, but Morrow asserts that test of communicative ability should be criterion based against the operational performance of a set of authentic language tasks. In other words, it will set out to show whether or not the candidate can perform a set of specified activities.

Authenticity

An important feature of a language test is authenticity. For measuring the learner's ability, giving a paragraph made simplified for basic reading shows us nothing about his actual communicative ability, since a main feature of such ability is exactly the capacity to come to terms with what is unknown. Hence input and prompts in language test should not be simplified for the learner.

Behaviour based

According to Morrow, more emphasis needs to be placed in the communicative context on the notion of behaviour as the success or failure of an interaction is judged by its participants on the basis of its behavioural outcomes. A test of communication must take as its starting point the measurement of what the candidate can actually achieve through language.

Taking into account the seven features of Morrow's Communicative Model, the selected test (Appendix-A) has been analyzed, and a new test (Appendix-B) has been developed.

Description of the Test (Appendix-A)

Test Purpose

The purpose of the test administered to the students of MBA (first semester) (attached as Appendix-A) seems to test nothing. It asks some questions about the nature of language, not tests the ability to communicate appropriately in real life situation.

Test Description

Test consists of only the subjective type questions, which are five in number. It is a four credit hours 'Communication Skills' test constructed for the students of MBA (first semester). Maximum marks of the question paper are 80. The rubrics of the test state that students have to attempt all the questions, and all carry equal marks. All of the questions are memory based, asking about the nature of the communication, not measuring students' communicative competence in English language in real life situation. No interactive and communicative tasks have been chosen by the tester.

Testees' Level

MBA (first semester) students were given this test. The class consisted of 32 male/female students, aged around 20 years. More than half of the students were from rural areas in the suburbs of Faisalabad, Pakistan. So a gap of English language competence

existed between the students from rural and urban areas. A communicative test is difficult to administer, so, in such situation.

Analysis & Evaluation of the Test (Appendix-A)

The selected test is for the students of Masters in Business Administration (first semester) in the Faculty of Management Sciences. The title of the course is 'Communication Skills', credit hours of the course are four, maximum time allowed is 3 hours, and it has maximum 80 marks. Pass marks are 50%. Number of question is five. Candidate is required to attempt all the questions, as all questions are compulsory. The aims and objectives of the test are not specified regarding testing specific skill/s or testing overall communicative ability of the candidates. Although it is a progress test, the questions of the test show that the tester is not clear of the objective of the test: what ability and/ or language skill/s he wants to test. Moreover, for a course of 04 credit hours maximum 80 marks seem insufficient, as convention in testing supports 100 marks for a standard test.

The test under study consists of 5 subjective questions testing nothing regarding language skill/s under Marrow's features. The major points of the test are as follows:

Communication Process

Business Letter

Business Report

Speaking Skill

Dialogue Writing

In the first question of the test, students are asked to explain communication process. This kind of the questions are based on checking candidate's knowledge and memory about the nature and process of the communication rather than concentrating on testing his/her ability to appropriately communicate in real/ authentic target language environment. Further, it completely ignores Marrow's features of Interactivity, unpredictability, context specificity, purpose, performance, authenticity andelicitnessof behaviour.

The next question given in the test shows that the tester wants to test the knowledge of the various styles of a Business letter, not the skill to write a business letter in the appropriate style required for the specific communication context. Writing a business letter has practical function in real communication, but this item fails to check such writing ability. Focus is on memorized knowledge rather than the skill of writing business letters in various situations changing from context to context. According to Morrow's features letter writing becomes an interaction based activity as well as unpredictable, yet this item ignores Marrow's all communicative features including interactivity and unpredictability.

Same critique applies to third question as it is synonymous to question 2 in nature. In this question, testees have been asked about business report in the format of a definition without realizing that a definition without practical work is useless in real communicative life setting. This question does not fall in any category of Morrow's features of communicative language. Here this test fails to meet the principles of communicative language. Such type of testing gives encouragement to rote learning.

The fourth question about speaking skills is asking the different ways of improving speaking skill---- demanding a copy pencil expression rather than providing real situations to elicit candidates' speaking ability. Hence check the knowledge instead of the skill.

The fifth question of the test, dialogue writing, shows Morrow's features of 'unpredictability' and 'interaction based' but this question has no 'purpose' relevant to the communicative needs of the business administration students. Being not a 'context based' item, it seems completely out of place. Moreover, the topic of the question has no link regarding practical life. It presents the function of a fake situation outside the real communicative life in business world. Hence fails to meet Morrow's feature of authenticity.

Since all the items of the test are constructed blindly of Morrow's features of unpredictability and authenticity, it seems that test mostly checks student's memorized knowledge of the taught syllabus. The danger is that it might encourage rote learning which promotes the students from one semester to next semester but practically this type of test tests no real communicative ability. A good communicative test requires testing language skills as well as overall communicative ability.

The analysis of the test shows that Morrow's seven features of communicative language test are not fully applied in the conventional language test. So the given test, being a conventional language test does not cover all the features of Morrow's communicative test, yet some of its parts are in agreement with Morrow's features.

Now a new test will be devised which may cover all the features of Morrow's model of communicative language.

A Proposed Test of Reading and Speaking (Appendix-B)

The revised test (see Appendix-B) aims at accessing reading and speaking skills of the testees. Since it has two sections of 100 marks (reading and speaking; 50 marks each), it does not have the problem of insufficient marks weightage (80 marks, as with the paper attached to Appendix-A) for a four credit hours module. Both sections have three questions each, and the number of marks assigned to each question is mentioned against it.

Heaton is of the view that in a communicative test the material should be authentic, like some newspaper article, instructions for using appliances, public notices, etc. (Heaton, 1991). In this proposed test of reading and speaking, question 1 is based on an instructional manual provided with an iron, question 2 is based on an editorial of a magazine, and text of question 3 is taken from a history book. Section on speaking skills has three parts (equal to three questions) carrying different marks. Heaton proposes that a language test which aims to find out what testees can do with language, contains purposeful, everyday communication activities in it (1991).

Since the 'Communication Skills' test, described and analyzed above, could not meet the seven features of communicative testing proposed by Keith Morrow, and, moreover, it was based on sheer unawareness of what language skills and/or language elements it intends to test, a proposed test for testing reading and speaking skills for the students of MBA is described and analysed here. Every effort has been taken to follow all the seven features proposed by Morrow while developing this test. All the items reflect interactivity, purpose, performance of the testees. Items are context oriented, unpredictable, based on authentic material.

Question '1' checks the reading skills of testees while providing them a task based on matching the information. The rubrics simulate the real life context. Based on a real life situation, the authentic manual of instructions (owner's manual) has some instructive passages for smooth and safe use of an iron, the manufacturers provide with every item they sale. This piece of instructions is authentic material, reflects the real life context, unpredictable to the testee's expectations. It is purposeful, as understanding of such instructions is necessary for the testees in real life. Also, the answers to the instructions check the quality of performance of the testees in authentic situation, not their competence of the language. It is also interactive passage as the use of second person pronoun 'you' is constantly developing an informal contact with testees, reducing the distance between the manual instructor and the testees. Since after providing the right answers, the testees' behaviour regarding the use of that appliance will be improved, this question is behaviour based, having a purpose as well.

Question '2' is based on the situation and context in which the testees are taking off for London. The situation explained and the task demanded needs the answers in open- ended form. But, since it is a reading comprehension test, the rubrics explain that no complete sentences are required for answering the ten questions which precede the editorial. All these questions are based on authentic (McLoughlin, 2000), unpredictable, contextual, interactive, purposeful and behaviour based text. Authentic as it is a real editorial of a magazine, Cosmopolitan. The selected piece of editorial is unpredictable for testees, as it is from the editor of a women magazine. It is context based as reflects the real English language in real life. A Pakistani learner of English language can find a context like this when going to Europe. First question demands right understanding of the combined information provided by the situation/ task and the title of the passage. The good reader has to infer the answer to this question, since it is nowhere explicitly told that it is an editorial. This question requires a holistic understanding of the text. Same is true of the second question. Third question checks the understanding of testees' ability to recognize the 'mood' and 'voice' of the text writer. The answer to this and next two questions (4 and 5) require the overall imaginative understanding of the text. Hence holistic in nature. Fourth question asks whether testees get any hint of some expectations the editor had about his/her audience: whether he/she had some correct guess of what the readers might be expecting before he/she wrote the editorial? Hence this question checks how much testees can read through the lines about the nature and extant of interaction between the readers and the editor. Sixth question also fulfils the

requirement mentioned in the previous question. Seventh question requires plain understanding of the nature of article written by certain writer. Eighth question aims at a communicative understanding of the testees in real life situation. It reflects interactivity, the mood of the editor and his/her friendly tone. Answer to this question requires much of holistically communicative understanding of testees. Ninth question demands, since it is an advanced level communicative test, much of the argumentative understanding of the text, involving the presentation of testees' personal view and experience of the world. Last question again is interactive in nature.

Question '3' is based on authentic text (Findley and Rothney, 2002) telling about the process of decolonization in South Asia, hence is based on our context. The testees are required to fill the information in the blanks of the flow chart. Since the information provided in the text is step-by-step, a flow chart suits for the purpose of testing reading comprehension. The passage is authentic text and unpredictable for the testees, reflecting our context, our history.

Section two has three parts (50 marks). It tests testees' speaking skills in real life situation. This section fulfils all of Morrow's features of communicative testing. Part I (question 4) provides some possible questions to be asked to the testee during his/her interview. Since it simulates real life communication, it is interactive, unpredictable for the testee, all the questions are context based having the purpose to check oral ability. It is performance in itself. The behaviour of the testee will, no doubt, get improved after this test. All this equally applies to the other two parts of this section.

Conclusion

Language is not considered as accumulating knowledge about language but using language in the real situation. It is evident from above discussion that communicative language assessment is based on communicative competence where the language learner should act appropriately according to the situation. In fact the activities of the communicative language assessment are based on the real life situations which are of practical use to the learner. Communicative testers include contexts and tasks based on authentic material, reflecting real life. It is necessary that there may be maintained a balance among all the four skills while assessing the language. Hence, use of language should be appropriate, both receptive and productive in real situations.

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Appendix- A (A Conventional Language Test)

MBA (1st Semester).   Max.Marks:80

Communication Skills.   Pass Marks:40   Time

Allowed: 3Hours   Credit hours:04

Note: All questions are compulsory. All questions carry equal marks.

Q. 1. Define and explain communication process.

Q. 2. What are the different styles of a business letter?

Q. 3. What is a business report? Explain the qualities of a   good
        Business report.

Q. 4. Write about different ways of improving the speaking
        skill.

Q．5．Write a dialogue between two friends discussing the value of   examination.

Appendix- B (A Proposed Test of Reading and Speaking)

Course Title: Communication Skills   Time allowed: 3 hours

Class: M.B.A. 1st Semester   Credit Hours: 04

Total Marks: 100   Pass Marks: 50

Note: The test has two sections; reading and speaking. Both sections carry 50 marks each. All questions are compulsory.

Section 1 (Reading)

Question No.1

Situation: You bought a new iron and the manufacturing company has provided you the following information/ instruction manual.

Task: The manual has 6 paragraphs (A-F). State which paragraph discusses each of the points below. Write the appropriate letter (A-F) in front of the questions (1-5) on your answer sheet.   [10]

Your iron is designed to function using tap water. However, it will last longer if you use distilled water.

Always unplug the iron before filling the reservoir.

Always empty the reservoir after use.

Your iron has two buttons which control the intensity of heat produced by the iron. You can, therefore, adjust the temperature of the iron and the amount of steam being given off depending upon the type of fabric being ironed.

Turn the steam control to the desired intensity.

Turn the thermostat control to the desired temperature.

Important: *If your iron produces droplets of water instead of giving off steam, your temperature control is set too low.*

Spray button activates a jet of cold water which allows you to iron out any unintentional creases. Press the button for one second.

Pressing button activates a super shot of steam which momentarily gives you an additional 40g of steam, when needed.

Important: *Do not use this more than five successive times.*

It is possible to use this iron in a vertical position so that you can remove creases from clothes on coathangers or from curtains. Turning the thermostat control and the steam button to maximum, hold the iron in the vertical position close to the fabric but without touching it. Hold down the pressing button for a maximum of one second. The steam produced is not always visible but is still able to remove creases.

Important: *hold the iron at the sufficient distance from silk and wool to avoid all risk of scotching. Do not attempt to remove creases from an item of clothingthat is being worn, always use a coathanger.*

In order that your iron does not become furred up, your iron has integrated an auto-clean system and we advise you to use it very regularly (1-2 times per month)

Turn the steam control to the off position.

Fill the reservoir and turn the thermostat to the maximum.

As soon as the indicator light goes out, unplug the iron and, holding it over the sink, turn the steam control to auto-clean. Any calcium deposits will be washed out by the steam. Continue the procedure until the reservoir is empty.

Questions:

Turning the steam control to the off position.

Adjustment of the amount of steam, depending upon the type of fabric.

Super shot of steam giving additional steam.

System for washing out calcium deposits.

Button for unintentional creases.

Question No.2

Situation: During your flight to London, you come across a women's magazine 'Cosmopolitan'.

Task: Read "from the editor" of Cosmopolitan and answer the following questions.

Note: Your answers need not be written in full sentences.

Who is speaking to whom?

What identity does the editor construct for herself?

Is she confident or hesitant what she says?

Are there any presuppositions about the reader which the editor already knows?

Is the text producer being friendly?

Pick out the conversational feature used by the editor.

What the Roland White's article is all about?

What you understand by the word 'Cosmo' written in the first line ?

What is the need to devote eight pages long article to the mysterious world of men?

What does she mean by 'We'?

From the editor

We at Cosmo pride ourselves on bringing you the information and inspiration you won't find in any other women's magazine, which is why 26 years after our launch we're still the best selling young women's magazine in Britain. And we know from your letters you can't get enough of your unique insights into men; not only what makes them tick, but all their deep-rooted idiosyncrasies. That's why, this month, we've devoted eight pages to the mysterious world of men. We cajoled the best and the bravest male writers to divulge the kind of information they would never spill to any other publication. And I'm delighted to announce their secrets make eye-opening, provoking reading. Instead of the usual mag-stuff, like why men watch indecent movies (which, d-u-u-r-r-r, doesn't take a genius to figure out), Ben Edison delves deeper and explains why your man wants you to watch indecent movies with him. Rather than another article on Why Men Fear Commitment, Phil Robinson divulges the secret psyche of the single man. And if you're convinced what a man really wants for his birthday involves lots of tongues, don't go anywhere near him until you have read Roland White's wonderful piece on page 92.

Question No.3

Situation: Your father gave you a passage to read from Findley & Rothney's book 'Twentieth Century World'.

Task: The flow chart below outlines the stages of decolonization in South and East Asia. Complete the flow chart.   [20]

Weakened by two world wars and the -----------, challenged by ----------, and economic development efforts, Western dominance collapsed.

↓

Japan seized many European colonies: ------------- (New Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), Burma, Malaya, ------------- (now Indonesia).

↓

-------------- also controlled much territory: Taiwan, Korea ---------- and parts of China.

↓

The ------------- gained independence from the -------------- in 1946.

↓

> The British in 1947 lost ------------, India, and --------------.

Decolonization in South and East Asia

Weakened by two world wars and the Depression, challenged by Asian nationalism and economic development efforts, western dominance collapsed in Asia in the 1940s and 1950s, except in outposts such as Britain's Hong Kong. Decolonization began during World War II. Japan seized many European colonies ------French Indochina (now Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos), Burma, Malaya, the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia), and other Pacific Islands ------ as well as the US controlled Philippines. To this day, many Japanese regard themselves as liberators of these countries ------- a view not widely shared in the countries in question. Japan also had or took control of much territory ------ Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria, parts of China -------- that had not been under European control. After 1947, former colonial powers' attempts to regain control of some countries, such as Indochina and the Dutch East Indies, proved short-lived. The Philippines gained independence from the United States in 1946. In 1947 the British lost Burma, India and Pakistan (including East Pakistan, which became independent as Bangladesh in 1971).

Section 2 (Speaking)

Part 1(Question No 4):

Introduction based interview   (5 minutes)   [10]

Introduce yourself.

To which family do you belong? Tell something about your parents and siblings?

What are your hobbies?

Who is your most favourite person in your family and why?

What are your eating habits? Any special food item, you do like the most?

Part 2(Question No 5):

Uninterrupted talk before the assessor.   (5 minutes)   [20]

Sample Topics

Describe the visit to any industrial set up that you have done in this semester.

Describe any character in a film you have recently seen.

Describe any birthday party that you have attended.

Describe any dream, you saw and still remember.

Lassi is better than coke.

Wedlock tames the man.

Part 3(Question No 6):

Two way discussion linked broadly to the Part 2   (5 minutes)   [20]

Industrial Set up

Explain the value of industrial visits at M.B.A. Level.

What is the role of instructor / teacher during such visits?

Do the study visits help in overall training of an M.B.A. professional?

Character in a film

Why did you choose this specific character?

Would you like to be like this character?

Does this character influence you with its personality traits?

Birthday party

What has made this party memorable for you?

Are these types of functions prevalent in your family?

What have you missed in this party and which you do not want to miss in your own party of such type?

Dream

Why do this specific dream you still remember?

What dreams usually you see during your bed time?

What feeling do you have on getting up or coming out of your dream?

Lassi vs. coke

What is your favourite drink?

What is more important for you, taste or food value?

How does the modern man's sense of fashion govern the selection of food items?

Wedlock

Is there any drawback of being married?

What is a bachelor's dilemma in Pakistan?

Explain a Pakistani wedding.