COMMUNICATIVE TESTING IN THE EFL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

While the communicative approach has come to predominate in EFL classrooms around the world, its logical corollary—communicative testing—has not followed suit as it seems it should have. Instead, teachers who use the communicative approach in their regular classes often revert to older styles of testing when it comes time for midterms and finals. This paper will define what a communicative test is and why it is a better option than older forms of testing—especially in communicative classrooms, where it is a natural partner. It will then discuss how to assess communicative tests. It will also discuss how communicative testing can be a part of a variety of learning environments Finally, it will give concrete examples of communicative tests that can be used in EFL classrooms from English for Specific Purposes to Content-based Instruction—and even in classrooms that are constrained by administrative mandates so as not to be primarily communicative—demonstrating that communicative testing can be profitably administered in almost any learning environment.

Keywords

Communicative Testing, Communicative Approach, Testing, Assessment, EFL Assessment, Classroom Applications, Fluency, Accuracy, Pair Tests, Speaking Tests, Group Testing

1. Introduction

If there exists a consensus on anything in the world of teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), it is that some form of the communicative approach is more effective in facilitating language acquisition than the old, outdated methods of grammar translation, memorizing, and endless drilling. The communicative approach is defined by the British Council as one that is "based on the idea that

learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning." So "when learners are involved in real communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language." (British Council 2017) One of the best explications of the principles and practices of communicative teaching was given by Rod Ellis (2005) who clearly lays out ten principles which direct the communicative approach, such as that "instruction needs to ensure that learners focus predominantly on meaning" and that "successful instructed language learning requires extensive L2 input," in direct opposition to classes that are conducted primarily in the learners first language with only a smattering of use of the language being studied.
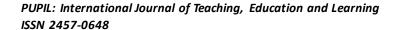
But while most educators in the field embrace the principles of the communicative approach for *teaching* language, when it comes time for *testing* learner knowledge, what often ends up on the students' desks is something straight out of the mid-20th century with grammar-focused fill-in-the-blank or multiple choice questions where students have to produce the correct verb tense, choose the correct preposition, or fill in the correct article. In cases where the instructor is not a native speaker of English, they sometimes even employ the old and now largely discredited technique of having students translate a passage from English into their own native language, thus saving the instructor the work (and often embarrassment) of negotiating the intricacies of a language of which they themselves are not native speakers. This paper will address how the work students have done in the communicative classroom can be assessed through testing which is also communicative.

Figure 1: *The Communicative Approach Requires Actual Communication, as does Communicative Testing*

2. Traditional Tests and their Limitations

Before defining and discussing communicative tests, I will review other common types of tests traditionally used in the EFL context and their limitations. A classic division of testing movements was formulated years ago by Hinofotis (1981) and is still referred to today.

2.1 "Pre-scientific" Testing

The first movement is referred to as the *prescientific* period in which tests were developed and administered by individual instructors largely on an intuitive basis with no research done to evaluate their efficacy. They were often administered in the context of the grammar-translation method, "a method…which makes use of translation and grammar study as the main teaching and learning activities." (Longman 2010) As this method did not foster actual communication, it was criticized as early as the 19th century and then waned considerably by the early 20th century—though it still persists in some parts of the world today. Its tenets were critically dissected in illuminating detail by Skehan (1998) in a seminal work on cognitive language learning, and have since been shown to be inferior to modern language teaching approaches by numerous studies such as by Tan (2016) who compared it directly to task-based learning and teaching (TBLT), finding it inferior.

2.2 Psychometric-Structuralist Tests

The next movement Hinofotis called *psychometric-structuralist*, which came to prominence starting in the mid-twentieth century and was mostly a reaction to the subjective, non-research-based techniques of the prescientific educational environment. This movement's educators collaborated with scientists and statisticians in an effort to find more objective criteria in assessing language ability. Out of this movement arose tests like the TOEFL. Brown (2005) comments that "such tests, usually in multiple choice format, are easy to administer and score and are carefully constructed to be objective, reliable and valid."

2.3 The Integrative Movement

But while these tests were, and indeed are, reliable and relatively valid, they did not in the eyes of a growing number of educators encompass the full range of communicative competencies possessed by people actually using language. This led to the *integrative movement*, which began in the 1960s with work by theorists like Dell Hymes (1967) who stated that "diversity of speech, within the community and within the individual, presents itself as a problem in many sectors of life" asserting that it is not possible to divorce language from the social settings in which it is used and that both teaching and tests should reflect this. Hymes and others advocated test formats such as the cloze, which gives the context in which language is used. Importantly, the integrative movement, while utilizing test formats different to the psycho-structuralists, kept in place the psycho-structuralist methods of evaluating the reliability and validity of tests and used them to justify their new methods and improve their tests.

Though these tests added the real world element of social context to the EFL testing suite, scholars in the *communicative movement* pointed out that, while they corrected some of the errors of the past and added essential elements to second-language testing, they did not go far enough in assessing the full range of communication that speakers of language actually engage in.

3. What is Communicative Testing?

Now that we have discussed other types of tests, we can turn to communicative testing and how it differs from traditional tests. Communicative testing is assessment which actually tests learners' ability to communicate, as opposed to testing discrete language points out of context or reciting memorized dialogs and other similar techniques. It also includes more elements than forms like the cloze used by the integrative movement. The best formulation of communicative testing comes from James Brown (2005) of the University of Hawaii Manoa. He lays out five criteria that have to be met for a test to be considered communicative (all emphases Brown's):

1) *Meaningful* communication

2) *Authentic* situation

3) *Unpredictable* language input

4) *Creative* language output

5) *All language skills* (including reading writing, listening, & speaking)

3.1 Meaningful Communication

A communicative test must involve actual communication. That excludes test items like fill-in-the-blank or multiple choice items involving grammar; asking comprehension questions about a reading passage; or similar items that do not require learners to actually communicate. It also excludes other testing methods that do not involve actual communication, like reciting a memorized dialog, reading a passage of text aloud, or translating a text from one language to another. Learners must actually communicate to complete the test successfully.

3.2 Authentic Situation

The second criterion of a communicative test is that, as far as possible, the test should mimic an authentic situation that learners may encounter in real life. I will give some concrete examples of tests that cater to authentic situations in a later section. But in general tests should match as closely as possible the communication goals of learners in situations that they will be using the target language. So students studying to go into the hospitality industry can be given situations dealing with hotel guests. Those going into international business might be given a situation where they have to make a business proposal. And so on.

3.3 Unpredictable Language Input

Third, a communicative test should involve unpredictable language input. Students should not know beforehand what language they will encounter on the test. That may seem self-evident, but there are educators who assert that having students read a passage from a text that students have worked with during the class is a communicative endeavor. Not so according to Brown's criterion, which mandates that the input learners receive must not be something which is known to them, such as a memorized

dialog. Of course students should be given a general idea of what aspects of the course that have been addressed in class will be on the test, but the specifics of the language input should be new to them.

3.4 Creative Language Output

Fourth is creative language output. Again, it seems obvious that creative language output should be a requirement for a communicative test. But the practice of reciting memorized dialogs or delivering prepared speeches is common. And instructors who give those sorts of tests often believe they are giving communicative tests. Language output should be situation-specific, it should be in response to unpredictable input, and require output which is creative and unscripted.

3.5 Use as Many Skills as Possible

Finally, as far as possible a communicative test should involve as many of the four basic skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. A test for someone looking to work at a hotel could involve reading a reservation confirmation, listening to and speaking with a hotel guest, and giving the guest some information in writing. It is not always feasible to include all four skills, but efforts should be made to include as many as possible.

Christopher Candlin (1986) gives a definition of a communicative test that has not been improved upon since he published it, neatly summarizing a commutative test as "…a coming together of organized knowledge structures with a set of procedures for adapting this knowledge to solve problems of communication that do not have ready-made and tailored solutions."

4. Assessing Performance on Communicative Tests

Now that I've defined what a communicative test is, I will outline criteria for assessing learner performance on a communicative test. Brown (2005) lists three main considerations for rating communicative tests: 1) Success in conveying ideas; 2) focus on *use* rather than *usage*; and 3) which aspects of overall communicative competence to test.

4.1 Focus on Success in Conveying Ideas

The first is success in conveying ideas. The main characteristic that differentiates a communicative test from other common types of EFL tests is that the main emphasis in a communicative test is on learners' success in getting their meaning across. So instructors can rate performance on the basis of whether or not the learner has conveyed their ideas clearly, efficiently, and in such a way as not to confuse their interlocutor rather than on being able to do something like fill in the blank with a particular grammatical form.

4.2 Focus on *Use* rather than *Usage*

The second is focusing on *use* rather than usage (emphasis Brown's). He generally follows the classic distinction between use and usage as one of fluency vs. accuracy, stating that "in some cases the
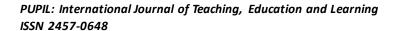
focus is on fluency rather than accuracy." Therefore, in a communicative test, successful communication is more strongly weighted than accuracy of form. There is a wide body of literature presenting evidence that a focus on communication over accuracy is generally better for classroom language acquisition. And the main assertion of this paper is that it is also superior in testing language competence. Manfred Pienemann in his processability theory has long held that there is an order of acquisition of language points and that explicit instruction focusing on different language forms is at best counterproductive and at worst harmful to learner language acquisition. (Pienemann 1989, 2012 and Pienemann, and Lenzing 2015). Lightbown and Spada (2013) evaluate the evidence from studies on a variety of methods of language teaching and suggest how Pienemann's theory can be put into practice through naturalistic language learning. Others, such as Marianne Celce-Murcia (2002) hold that within a communicative and generally naturalistic context, some focus on specific language points can be beneficial to the learner. Swain (2005) stresses more than Pienemann or Krashen (who place a large emphasis on the input learners receive) the importance of the production of language in furthering overall competence. The important thing for a communicative test is that evaluation be based mostly on success in getting ideas across in a fluent and coherent (Thundercliff 2015) manner rather than a checking off of boxes on a list of linguistic forms in the target language.

4.3 Which Components of Language Competence to Test?

Brown's third assessment consideration concerns which particular components of communicative competence should be rated. Instructors need to set assessment criteria on both the sound theoretical foundations of the most current research and what skills are most relevant to the needs of the students in their communication goals. These will vary according to educational situation.

While Brown makes successful communication the primary criterion for success on a communicative test, he does not jettison all the traditional criteria of learner competency like vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation. These should also be part of an overall assessment in his estimation. He also advocates including other less often factored in components "like suprasegmentals, paralinguistic features, proxemics, pragmatics, [and] strategy use." (Brown 2005). Some useful rubrics of communicative competence that instructors may draw upon include Canale and Swain's classic and still relevant breakdown of communicative competence into grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. (Canale and Swain 1980) An even more detailed—and also classic and still relevant—model was laid out by Lyle Bachman (Bachman 1990). He divided language competence into organizational and pragmatic competence and further subdivided those into grammatical, textual, illocutionary, and sociolinguistic competence. A detailed discussion of research underlying the application of these frameworks was undertaken in yet another still-relevant article by Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zotán Dörnyei, and Sarah Thurrell. (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, &Thurrell 1993) Individual

instructors can decide which components to include and how to incorporate them according to their particular teaching situations.

5. Examples of Communicative Tests

Now that we have discussed what communicative test are, why they are usually the best kind of tests, and what their assessment criteria are, we can now give some concrete examples of communicative tests that might be given in the classroom and how they fulfill the communicative testing criteria of authentic situation, meaningful communication, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and use of as many of the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking as possible.

- **Executive Assistant:** The learner assumes the role of an executive assistant. A recording simulating the executive leaving a voicemail message is played requesting that the assistant find a hotel for the executive's upcoming business trip. The executive gives a price range and a list of amenities desired and requests written confirmation via email and a voicemail summarizing the hotel booked. The student must then look at a variety of hotel brochures given by the instructor or go online to find a hotel that meets the requested specifications and report back on what they have selected. This is an authentic situation which involves meaningful communication, unpredictable language input, and creative language output. Listening is required to understand the voicemail message and speaking is required to leave a message for the executive. Reading is required to select the hotel and writing is required when the student sends an email to the executive.

- **Hotel Reception:** The learner assumes the role of a clerk at the front desk of a hotel. A guest (the instructor, a colleague, a teaching assistant, or even another student) plays the role of a hotel guest who has been given a specific set of questions and requests for the hotel clerk. This is an authentic situation; it involves meaningful communication; it has unpredictable language input; and it requires creative language output on the part of the student who is playing the role of the clerk. It also utilizes the skills of listening and speaking. Reading can be added if the guest presents a printout to the clerk with a list of things they need their room to have (air conditioning, fast internet, a workspace, etc.). Writing can be added if the guest asks the clerk to jot down some recommendations about attractions in the area of the hotel along with directions on how to get to them.

- **Airport Check-in Counter:** The learner is a check-in counter employee for an airline. A customer checks in for their flight. Again, this is an authentic situation; it involves meaningful communication; it has unpredictable language input; and it requires creative language output.

Listening and speaking are involved. And again, reading can be added if the customer comes with some written requests that the clerk has to read and understand. Writing can be added if the customer requests information in writing.

- **Bank Teller:** The learner assumes the role of a bank teller. A customer needs to make an international wire transfer and the learner must process it. This is an authentic situation which involves meaningful communication, unpredictable language input, and creative language output. Both listening and speaking are required for the interaction. Reading may be a component if the instructor chooses to have the customer present some written details about the transaction.

- **Mobile Phone Customer Service Representative:** The learner assumes the role of a mobile phone customer service representative. A customer wants to make changes to their service plan. This is also an authentic situation which involves meaningful communication, unpredictable language input, and creative language output. Both listening and speaking are required for the interaction. Reading can be added if the customer comes in with a written set of things they would like to be included in their new plan. Writing can be added if the representative writes a summary of the plan for the customer.

These are only five examples, but the possibilities are as varied as the myriad goals foreign language learners have and situations they may encounter in their interactions after they finish their studies. Instructors can and should tailor tests to the individual needs of their students.

Table 1: *Examples of Communicative Tests and the Communicative Testing Criteria they meet*

Authentic Situation	Meaningful Communication	Unpredictable Language Input	Creative Language Output	Listening	Speaking	Reading	Writing
Executive assistant	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Hotel reception	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	possible	possible
Airport check-in counter	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	possible	possible
Bank teller	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	possible	possible
Mobile phone customer service representative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	possible	possible

6. Communicative Tests in Various Learning Environments

6.1 Communicative Testing and Content-Based Instruction (CBI)

Not every classroom is geared towards English for Special Purposes (ESP) such as international business or hotel management. But communicative testing can easily and profitably be implemented in virtually any learning environment. Here I will discuss how I give communicative tests for classes in which I teach content-based instruction (CBI). In another article I described CBI thus:

In CBI students learn "naturalistically" through negotiating meaning in contexts not specifically geared towards a "focus on form" (practicing specific grammar points, for example). Students study ideas of academic importance from art and literature to science and technology and, with meaning-focused engagement with the content of that material, improve their proficiency in the target language without specifically working toward that goal though language-focused practice. (Hull 2018).

Communicative tests in my classes center on topics we have discussed in class in the areas of history, science, politics, and a number of other issues and areas of academic interest and importance. The format of my tests is as follows: In groups of three or four, students are given an opinion relating to a topic discussed in class (e.g. "Immigration benefits the economy of my country."). They then have five minutes to respond to the opinion in writing. After that, each student relates their opinion to the group while group members take notes. Their speaking ability is assessed using an analytic rubric and then their comprehension of group member ideas is checked by comparing notes the students took during the presentations to the written responses given to the opinion.

How does that fit with Brown's criteria for a communicative test? While the tests do not involve the classic authentic situations of ESP learning environments such as hotel reception or making a transaction at a bank, they mirror conversations learners may have about academic issues in the future. Most importantly, the tests constitute meaningful communication in that students actually have to communicate and comprehend real ideas about real things (as opposed to reciting a passage from a text, etc.). Having to take notes on interlocutors' utterances both uses the skill of writing and also focuses learners' attention on the language they are encountering. The tests fulfill the other criteria Brown lays out in that they involve unpredictable language input (group members do not have prior knowledge of what each of them will say in their presentations) and creative language output since students have to formulate their own ideas on the given topic. Finally, it requires speaking, listening, and writing. The only skill not involved is reading. So they definitely qualifies as communicative tests.

In my classes, students agree or disagree with an opinion related to a topic we have addressed in class and then present their opinions to classmates. But communicative tests can also be done where students simply present ideas on an area of study addressed in class. They do not necessarily have to

involve giving opinions about various topics. In a CBI science class, each student in a group could be given a piece of information about a theory or experiment studied in class and explain it to the group who has to take notes. In a literature class, students in a group could be given a theme or character from a work studied and present their ideas to the group. In an art class, a work could be put in the middle of the group and each member could present their ideas and impressions of it based on aesthetic theories they have studied in class. This method can be adapted to almost any CBI classroom. In all of these examples, learners engage in meaningful conversation where they have to negotiate unpredictable language input, produce creative language output, and use all or many of the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. So they certainly qualify as communicative assessments.

6.1.2 Issues to be Aware of Concerning Intragroup Dynamics in Pair/Group Communicative Tests

There are a few issues about oral tests conducted in pairs or groups that need to be considered. One is that interlocutor effects on test takers—e.g. power dynamics that age and social status can have on an interaction—need to be taken into consideration. (Makarchuk 2010). A related concern is whether anxiety in test takers caused by interlocutors in paired test-taking may affect the results. (Hyun 2017). A third consideration is that when there is miscomprehension or miscommunication in a pair or group speaking test, the assessor must be able to accurately pinpoint the cause so as not to unfairly penalize a speaker who may not be its source. (Van Patten 2015)

6.2 Communicative Testing and Task-Based Learning and Teaching (TBLT)

Communicative testing is also a perfect match with TBLT, the principles of which are best described in Harmer (2001) who stresses that tasks are given by teachers but fully negotiated and completed using authentic communication by learners. A more specific definition of a task is given by Lee (2000):

> A *task* (emphasis in original) is (1) a classroom activity or exercise that has (a) an objective attainable only by the interaction among participants, (b) a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and (c) a focus on meaning exchange: (2) a language learning endeavor that requires learners to comprehend, manipulate, and/or produce the target language as they perform some set of workplans.

Ellis (2003) gives four criteria that a language-learning endeavor must meet to be classified as a task: 1) It is meaning-focused; 2) There is some sort of "gap" that learners must attain knowledge about; 3) learners must choose the tools they will use to complete the task; and 4) the task must have an outcome that is non-linguistic. So a task in both Lee's and Ellis's definition cannot be something like filling in the blank with proper grammar. Communicative testing is meaning-focused, learners must negotiate the "gap" of unpredictable input, choose how to complete the task with creative language

output, and the outcome is usually non-linguistic (such as a hotel clerk successfully checking a guest in), making it a natural partner with TBLT.
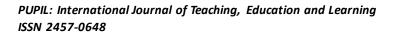

Figure 1: *Tasks Involve Authentic Communication amongst Interlocutors Rather than Individual Rote Activities such as Grammar Exercises*

6.3 Communicative Testing in Classrooms where the Communicative Approach is not Used

But what about those classrooms where instructors are mandated (or choose!) to use a grammar-focused or other non-communicative curriculum, often with a mandatory textbook? Communicative testing is possible even under these conditions and constraints. For example, to incorporate the *past tense* into a test, learners could relate a memorable experience from their past and group members have to take notes. For *countable and uncountable nouns*, students could be given a list of nouns, both countable and uncountable (e.g. food, vegetable, milk, meat, coffee, tea, pizza, hamburger, apple, lettuce), and be asked to weave a simple story in writing that incorporates as many of the nouns as they can, making sure to use them correctly according to their countable/uncountable status, for example by using the plural for countable nouns in general statements. Other students in the group would listen and take notes. *Comparatives and superlatives* could be practiced by having students describe friends, family, celebrities, historical figures and anyone else they might think of to their group using the target language.

Instructors who have incorporated some of the latest research on the compacting nominalization of what were once thought to be separate lexical units (Ibrahim 2019) can even incorporate that into their tests by including examples of the phenomenon in the unpredictable input to learners being tested. Finally, even in the most constrained curricula, teachers can incorporate *vocabulary* from their lessons into the language input phase of a communicative test, even when the

vocabulary has been studied in the course, for example by using the excellent word card methods elaborated by Martine Toriida (2018) building on Nation (2013). Though the vocabulary has been presented in class, the input here is unpredictable since students do not know beforehand which vocabulary will be included, where it will appear, or in what context it will be used. Of course these tests do not conform to the ideal of a communicative test as laid out by Brown and advocated here. But they still require meaningful conversation, unpredictable language input, and creative language output. They also use the skills of listening, speaking, and writing. So, while they are in the camp of making the best of a constrained curriculum, they do qualify as communicative and, most importantly, show that communicative tests can be used in virtually any learning environment, including those in which regular classes are not conducted according to the communicative approach.

7. Conclusion

7.1 Summary of the Scholarship Relevant to Communicative Testing

This article has discussed how language instructors who use the communicative approach in their classrooms (Ellis 2005; Lightbown & Spada 2013) can also assess their students using communicative testing rather than the traditional modes of testing such as fill-in-the-blank, multiple choice, or translation, none of which is communicative and has advocated the communicative test format laid out by J.D. Brown (2005). It has shown that constructing a test that revolves around an authentic situation; involves meaningful communication, unpredictable language input, and creative language output; and uses as many of the four skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking as possible can actually assess in a communicative manner learners mastery of the language and skills they have fostered in their classes.

7.2 Research Limitations and Future Challenges

While the body of scholarship supports both the communicative approach and thus its corollary, communicative testing, more research is needed on the intragroup dynamics of interlocutors in pair and group test-taking formats (Makarchuk 2010) and test-taker anxiety in pair and group formats (Hyun 2017). One area that is in particular need of future research is of the effect of high level speakers on lower level speakers in pair or group communicative tests. The challenge for the future is to smooth out inequities between interlocutors so that the language manifested in a test is the best that each test-taker is capable of. Future studies could compare groups of communicative test takers of similar abilities versus those of mixed abilities to determine the effect of proficient speakers on others in the group. Further studies could assess the effect of varying levels of high-proficiency users on the group. Groups tested could consist of average level users interspersed with one individual who is at a modestly higher level, another group with an individual at a moderately higher level, and finally another group

that includes a speaker at a vastly higher level. This would provide useful data to teachers who seek to create optimum testing conditions for learners in their classrooms.

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