Communicative Language Testing

Communicative language testing is intended to provide the teacher with information about the learners' ability to perform in the target language in certain context-specific tasks. It is commonly agreed that, ***"By the mid-80s, the language-testing field had begun to focus on designing communicative language-testing tasks"*** (Brown, 2003, p. 10). However, there is an overt and manifested mismatch between teaching practices and testing activities. In this very specific context, Inbar-Lourie (2008) notes that

> *The move from an atomized view of language knowledge to what is known as communicative competence, and to communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching has accentuated the incongruity of existing assessment measures. Calls for matching language learning and evaluation have been repeatedly made since Morrow (1979) urged language testers over three decades ago, to bridge the gap between communicatively focused teaching goals and the testing procedures used to gauge them.*

<div align="right">(Inbar-Louri,e 2008, p. 289)</div>

As a case in point, speaking, the most active productive skill and the most common focus of Communicative-oriented language teaching and the hallmark *par excellence* of Communicative Language Teaching, is not tested at all. That's a fundamental paradox in the sense that the communicative approach, as its name implies, originates from the theory of language as communication and the main objective of language teaching activities is to develop communicative competence as put forward first by Hymes (1972), then elaborated by Canale and Swain (1980), extended by Canale (1983) and revisited by Bachman (1990) and Bachman and Palmer (1996). Understanding the different components that come into play in the elaborate model of communicative competence is necessary and helpful for developing communicative language test.

Arguably, most teachers claim to teach 'communicatively' in one way or another, and it is hardly surprising that no one wishes to be called a non-communicative teacher (Karavas-

Douglas 1996). In the same line of thought, Richards (2007: 1) notes that ***"Perhaps the majority of language teachers today, when asked to identify the methodology they employ in their classrooms, identify 'communicative' as the methodology of choice"*** In the context of English language education, the label 'non-communicative teacher' may be debasing and may be taken to mean a teacher who is mindless of his duties vis-à-vis his learners. Savignon (2002) confirms the fact that there is a low correlation between what teachers state and what they do in terms of their classroom practices. Communicative Language Teaching has had its heyday in the 1980s and was viewed as a banner under which language teachers would march. However, many teachers have incomplete and imprecise notions of what CLT entails and what a communicative language test should incorporate. In overall terms, one can call into question the teacher training scheme, both pre-service and in-service.

With this presumption in mind, we may allow ourselves to formulate the following questions: Have our teachers been sufficiently trained to teach and to assess along the lines of the communicative approach? Have they been properly and adequately prepared to lend themselves to the quality label of communicative language teachers? While most teachers confess to make their teaching draw on the principles developed in the literature of Communicative Language Teaching, however, in practice they tend to be much more traditional and structural to the extent that they measure their progression in the programme in purely grammatical terms instead of notional-functional categories, an easy way to spot their way on the teaching/testing continuum. This reflects that there is somewhere some form of resistance to change that is deliberately expressed and manifested by teachers, not least long-experienced teachers, let alone many novice teachers whose pre-service training leaves a lot to be desired.

Requirements of Communicative Testing

A central tenet of communicative language testing is that the tasks are designed to represent authentic activities which test learners are to be expected to encounter in the real world outside the classroom.Brown (2005) identifies five requirements that make up what is to be called a communicative test. The requirements in question are 1) meaningful communication, 2) authentic situation, 3) unpredictable language input, 4) creative language output, and 5) integrated language skills.

1. *Meaningful communication,* i.e. the test needs to be based on communication that is meaningful to students, that is, it should meet their personal needs. It should promote

and activate language which is useful for them. Making use of authentic situations can increase the likelihood that meaningful communication will be achieved.

2. *Authentic situation*, i.e. communicative test offer students the opportunity to encounter and use the target language receptively and productively in authentic situations to show how strong their language ability is.

3. *Unpredictable language input,* i.e. the fact that in reality it is usually impossible to predict what speakers will say; this natural way of communication should be replicated in a communicative test.

4. *Creative language output*, i.e. the fact that in reality language input is largely dependent on language input to prepare for one's reply.

5. *Integrated language skills,* i.e. a communicative test will elicit the learners' use of language skills integratively, as is the case in real life communication.

(Brown, 2005, p. 21)

Communicative Test versus Discrete-Point Test

Unlike communicative language tests, discrete point testing, based on an analytical view of language, assumes that knowledge of the language system can be divided into a number of independent elements: grammar, vocabulary, spelling and punctuation, pronunciation, intonation and stress. These can be tested through the following formats:

Phoneme recognition

Yes/No answers

True/false statements

Spelling

Word completion

Grammar items

Multiple choice questions

Discrete point tests have been severely criticized for handling only recognition knowledge and facilitating guessing and cheating. The discrete point approach has always had the lion's share in the language tests in general and the Baccalaureate EFL exam in particular. Each test item is devised to give clues about the candidate's mastery of a particular point of language.

Admittedly, the main advantage of the discrete point tests is that they yield easily-quantifiable data, and can be accurately and objectively marked even by mechanical scanning methods. However, one of the main drawbacks of the approach is that ***"an atomistic***

approach to test design depends utterly on the assumption that knowledge of the elements of language is equivalent to knowledge of the language" (Morrow, 1981, p. 11). Such a view does not hold true in the context of communicative language testing and discrete point testing is no longer felt to provide a sufficient measure of language ability. What matters most is not how a language works, but rather the ability to use it in meaningful communication and authentic situation in an integrative way.

The implementation of communicative language test has always been viewed with a purely positive ring to it. Few educationalists and test designers have grown dissatisfied with communicative language testing. Most of the criticisms made to communicative language testing are directed towards the form. Communicative tests virtually incorporate real-world situations where the language learners experience and strive to produce language creatively with an integrated approach of the language skills. They help teachers measure their learners' language ability more accurately. They also help learners become familiar with some testing types they are likely to encounter when taking tests that are internationally acknowledged have a worldwide fame, such the TOEFL or the IELTS. Finally, from the standpoint of innovation and change, implementing communicative tests represents a radical shift away from the oft-grammar based traditional tests.