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## ASSESSING DISCOURSE COMPETENCE

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### ABSTRACT

*Despite the ever-increasing amount of work on developing and testing FL learners' communicative competence, there remain, nevertheless, some constraints enshrouding assessing types of competence coming under this general concept. This is accounted for by the fact that the very nature of the concept does not lend itself as easily as it may appear to those modes of measurement that are applicable to formal aspects of language. Indeed, the current study attempts at presenting a testing model growing from the idea that contextual features, at the base of discourse competence do not allow for the same assessing rationale and procedures as those found with tests of formal accuracy. In this paper our concern will be to present a brief account of some test features and problems involved in evaluating discourse competence.*

**Key words:** CLT, competence, discourse analysis, discourse competence, cohesion, coherence

### INTRODUCTION

Testing within CLT has been the topic of a large body of literature, in particular by the proponents of the communicative approach to teaching (Morrow 1979, Canale & Swain 1980, Canale 1983, Swain 1984, Shohamy 1985, Davies in Hughes 1988, Mendelsohn 1989, Bachman & Palmer 1982, Bachman 1990, Celce-Murcia & Olshtain 2000, McNamara 2000, etc.). A lot of the mystical aura surrounding the components of the communicative competence has been removed, accordingly thanks to extensive endeavours. There remains, yet, a lot to be done.

The questions that haunted experts in the matter were (and still are): how can such tests be constructed? And once they are constructed, how can they be carried out?

### THE NATURE OF COMMUNICATIVE TESTS

Many suggestions have been made to devise communicative tests and to surmount problems attendant upon the issue of testing within the communicative approach (Canale and Swain 1980, Swain 1984, Davies in Hughes 1988, etc.). In this connection, test designers have to care about what a communicative approach to testing holds. Once the rationale is set clearly, all other components of a test will spring naturally.

For a test to achieve its designer's intended purposes and to satisfy the requirements of validity (face, construct and content validity) (Bachman 1990,

Frith and Macintosh 1984) it should be, above all, appropriate to the objectives set by the designers. A major step in developing assessment procedures is to operationalize what is at the theoretical background. This will contribute greatly to the validation of what is to be assessed.

A communicative test requires that testees should be engaged in acts of communication (Canale and Swain 1980, Swain 1984, Davies in Hughes 1988, Mendelsohn 1989, McNamara 2000). Specific roles and tasks are the characteristic features of such communicative tests. The success or otherwise of the testee depends, accordingly, upon the extent to which (or how well) he/she manages to perform those roles and tasks set by the test-designers.

Tests within a communicatively oriented tradition are mainly meant to assess learners' degree of coping with the communicative situation in hand (Bachman 1990). This will involve also the strategies the learner uses at different levels to achieve that purpose.

To begin with, let us state some distinguishing features of communicatively based tests which are applicable to the present study. A test of communicative competence, in fact, addresses the following main questions (Mendelsohn: 1989).

a-To what extent are testees able to produce and comprehend language in various appropriate contexts?

b-To what extent are testees able to handle larger pieces of connected discourse, receptively and productively?

c-To what extent are testees able to understand and make choices from among items in their linguistic potential to serve communicative purposes?

Unlike discrete-items<sup>1</sup> tasks, communicative tasks, it should be said, are much more difficult both to administer and to test. To cope with any assessing difficulty, communicative testing is rather qualitative (Hubbard *et al* 1983) in the sense that it focuses on how and to what extent students can cope with a particular task or activity. There is, accordingly, no entirely right or false reply. Answers are rather taken as appropriate or not. Another characteristic of a communicative test is that it relies rather on a continuous mode of assessment (CA). Along the course of instruction, students' progress is, accordingly, being checked and their deficiencies being diagnosed and remedied through activities.

What is more, assessing language as communication is better conceived of as a continuous process (Celcia-Murcia & Olshtain 2000). An ongoing formative type of assessment will serve the purpose better, in the sense that the teacher will monitor and keep track of his/her learners' progress, and spot his/her students' weaknesses and strengths regularly along the learning process and

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<sup>1</sup> - Discrete-item tests are 'tests which aim to provide very specific information about learners' abilities in particular skills or in particular language areas (e.g. knowledge of irregular simple past forms). This type of test focuses on one item at a time and therefore tests knowledge of it rather than ability to use it in real situations.' (Cunningsworth 184: 87)

'prescribe' the appropriate remedy. Any remedial action, in this regard, should be taken in collaboration with students so as to raise their consciousness of assessing as a natural stage in the whole process of learning. Needless to say here that such a type of assessment is more in harmony with what has been taught. Also, scores will be more informative of students' performance if they are granted on qualitative grounds, i.e. the extent to which students are able to do the tasks, taking into account various aspects which fall under the concepts to be assessed i.e. learner's communicative competence. To fit into the administrative requirements, teachers are to provide quantitative (numerical) mid-term or term-marks.

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As a component of the whole communicative competence, discourse competence is no less difficult to assess than the other components.

The argument is that discourse norms that are certainly expressed through linguistic conventions do present assessment problems related to their indeterminate and unpredictable contextual and social features. This should not be held as a daunting factor in adopting a flexible and a non-algorithmic approach to assessing the type of competence in question. It is argued through the current investigation that discourse conventions can be developed through a methodological orientation, a range of activities, tasks and situations arranged for this purpose. Tasks are, accordingly, designed to test formal and functional aspects of language as a means used to communicate one's intentions. Whether taken separately, as units of sentence, or in an *organizational* fashion (Bachman 1990) – as units of discourse – these two aspects of language (the formal and the functional) are attended to. It is argued that both aspects constitute essential components in building discourse type of competence.

In the case of the present study, where students are taught to handle the two levels, cohesion, coherence, assessment process should aim at serving students' performance on these two levels. Students should display evidence of being sensitive to appropriateness of using formal devices in expressing and understanding various meanings in different contexts of language use.

To attend to the first discursual component, that is cohesion, students are assessed whether and to what extent they provide for and comprehend intra and inter-sentential relationships. As to the second component of discourse, coherence, students are assessed whether and to what extent they manage productively and receptively inter-act relationships. That is, the various underlying meaning relationships that utterances hold for the enactment of the whole discourse.

One should not think that because cohesion concerns formal items it requires some pure discrete-point type of assessment. Language is to be dealt with within a discourse view, allowing all such types of competence to be involved and giving, thus, each one its share of the communicative 'pie'.

### TESTING MATERIALS

Testing materials are selected in the same way as those selected for teaching. Materials (texts, dialogues, etc.) are chosen on the basis of their being suited to the purposes of the study *viz.* their providing motivating learnable sources and maximizing students' opportunities to get involved as active participants in the process of language use.

As far as activities and tasks are concerned, learners should be encouraged to play roles, to do tasks simulating participants presented to them by means of, say, a mini-dialogue or any segment which contains the item(s) under study. This cannot, obviously, be worked out unless the teacher introduces his/her learners to the newly encountered situation. Here, the teacher is not confined to one particular method to carry out his/her pre-task operation<sup>2</sup>. Rather, it is suggested that the teacher adopts an eclectic method provided it prepares learners for the following task. Then, learners are led step-by-step to identify the general organizational layout of the piece of discourse presented by means of the piece of language in hand.

Tasks lend themselves to both bottom-up and top-down types of processing. Once they are given the piece of discourse, testees could start at the level of providing for word and sentence meanings and then explore the functional and contextual worlds. Conversely, they could start by situating the text in its appropriate context and understanding its functional mood. Then, for each sentence and word, they are asked to provide for corresponding meanings. In broad terms, the criteria, here, require testees to demonstrate their abilities to provide for formal relationships (cohesion) on the basis of their understanding of the different meanings in the texts, and to relate those formal entities to their functional counterparts. The task aims at enabling students-testees to handle form-function relationship. It is by handling this relationship that their ability to proceed the text discursively will develop.

### CONCLUSION

It was our concern in this paper to suggest a testing procedure consisting of tasks relevant to the methodological model suggested. It is worthwhile to stress the rewarding pedagogical experience that learners gain from their being taught and assessed within a discourse-sensitive framework. Overall, assessing discourse competence should include, in addition to the ability to manage formal aspect, tasks that require students to interpret and infer relevant information beyond sentence and discourse to world context. Assessment scores are expected, accordingly, to be affected by students' degree of sensitiveness to discourse type of competence.

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<sup>2</sup>- The pre-task can be, for instance, an oral activity about a known experience of some kind.

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