

# DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEST FOR VOCATIONAL SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL

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## **Abstract**

*This paper is aimed at revealing the role of communicative language test in enabling and measuring student's English achievement at Vocational School (SMK). Its coverage will be the considerations and procedures to construct communicative language test. This test is intended to be a measure of how the testees are able to use language in real life situations. There are several models of communicative competence, grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence. This test has three steps; identifying objectives, developing the test, specification, and developing the communicative test.*

**Key Words:** *Communicative test, vocational school, linguistics, sociolinguistics, discourse, strategic,*

## **A. INTRODUCTION**

The Communicative Approach of teaching English at Vocational School (SMK) in Indonesia has been adapted since the implementation of 1984 curriculum, 1994 curriculum and 2004 Competency-Based Curriculum. The objective of communicative language teaching is to develop communicative competence as stated in the curriculum of SMK. While, the basic competence of teaching English at SMK is in order that the students are able to communicate in English orally or written at the pre-intermediate level.

Communicative language teaching methodology views language use as communicative, interactive process taking as the starting point the notion of communicative competence. Since the development of communicative competence is the main objective for teaching, determining what to teach, how to teach, a model of communicative competence would help us identify testing objectives and kind of test we give to the students. In fact, the communicative language tests have not been developed and used properly.

Testing language traditionally shows the form of testing knowledge about language, usually the testing of knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. In fact, it should be much more than that. That is being able to use language. English teacher has to exploit the positive link between teaching and testing effectively. The teacher needs to analyze the objective of the test and to select appropriate materials and procedures these objectives.

This paper will try to discuss the communicative language test with the considerations and procedures to construct it.

What is communicative language test? The term "Communicative Competence" originated in sociolinguistic with Dell Hymes (1972). He argued that a speaker can be able to produce grammatical sentences that are completely inappropriate in communicative competence. He included not only the ability to form correct sentences but also to use them at appropriate times.

Since Hymes proposed the idea in the early 1970s, it has been expanded considerably and various types of

competences have been proposed. Communicative teaching is guided by the model put forward by Canale and Swain (1980) and revised by Canale in 1983. They say that communicative competence describes the learners' abilities to use the language in listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Several models of communicative competence have been proposed. Chomsky, for example, proposed the concept of grammatical or linguistic competence and highlighted cognitive aspects of human language acquisition and learning. He distinguished between competence (one's underlying knowledge of the language) and performance (the realization of language in specific situations). On the other hand, Hymes (1971), who coined the term 'communicative competence', emphasized social, interactive, and negotiating process of language. Hymes expanded Chomsky's notion of competence into communicative competence by including both grammatical rules and rules of language use.

Canale and Swain (1980) identified three distinctive components of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammatical competence includes one's knowledge of lexical items, morphology, syntax, semantics, and phonology in a language. Sociolinguistic competence encompasses the knowledge of rules governing the production and interpretation of language in different sociolinguistic contexts. Lastly, strategic competence is defined as one's capability to sustain communication using various verbal or nonverbal strategies when communication breakdowns occur. This model was updated by Canale (1983). He proposed a four-dimensional model of communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competence.

Bachman (1990) suggested a theoretical framework for communicative language ability. It includes knowledge structures, strategic competence, psychophysical mechanisms, context of situation, and language competence.

Language competence is further divided into organizational competence (grammatical and textual competences) and pragmatic competence (illocutionary and sociolinguistic competences). In other words, in his schematization of 'language competence' takes a broader view of the role of strategic competence than Canale and Swain do. Bachman separates strategic competence from what he calls 'language competence'. On the other side, Bachman (1990) adds two more competences namely *organizational competence* and *pragmatical competence* which covering illocutionary and sociolinguistics competence. Bachman defines language competence as "a set of components that are utilized in communication through language."

Agreement on what components should be included in a model of communicative competence is never unanimous (Weir, 1993). In spite of many disputes by applied linguists, the notion of communicative competence outlined above has proven useful in suggesting specifications for content, formats, and scoring criteria in communication-oriented language proficiency assessment (Bachman, 1990). However, "it must be emphasized that they are still themselves in need of validation" (Weir, 1990:8).

Savignon in Zainil (2005) discusses the four components of communicative competence; grammar competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence and strategic competence. Grammar competence should be developed through the students' grammar that is internalized, not through the teacher's complete description, explanation and drill. Sociolinguistics competence should be developed through the students' understanding the appropriate meaning in social and cultural context in a certain communication. Discourse competence should be developed through the students' understanding to interpret the units of meanings in natural communication. Strategic competence should be developed through students' good language learners strategies to sustain their natural communication in English.

The main implication of this model had for communicative language testing was since there was a theoretical distinction between competence and performance, the learner had to be tested not only his/her knowledge of language, but also on his/her ability to put it to use in a communicative situation (Canale and Swain, 1980).

In the line with the experts' ideas about competences, it could be concluded that:

1. Grammatical competence refers to the extent that mastery of the language code has occurred, including vocabulary knowledge, word formation, syntax, pronunciation, spelling and linguistics semantics. A person demonstrates grammatical competence by using a rule not by stating a rule.
2. Sociolinguistic competence requires an understanding of the social & cultural context in which language is used which involves:
  - The role of the participants
  - The information they share
  - The function of interaction
3. Discourse competence concerns with the interpretation of isolated sentences but the connection of a series of sentences or utterances to form a meaningful whole such as:
  - Speaking (dialogues, conversation and monologues)
  - Writing (memos, letters, ads ,etc)It also refers to mastery of "how to combine grammatical forms and meanings to achieve a unified spoken or written text.
4. Strategic competence refers to mastery of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies we employ during the breakdown in communication or when we lack any of the competences to communicate effectively, also used to enhance the effectiveness of communication

#### **How do we relate these competences to the language test?**

Some experts in language testing tried to discuss the relation of communicative competence and language

test. Canale and Bachman provided a useful framework for designing communicative competence (Weir, 1990). According to Spolsky (1989) language tests involve measuring a subject's knowledge of, and proficiency in, the use of language. A theory of communicative competence is a theory of the nature of such knowledge and proficiency. One can not develop the test without a method of defining what it means to know a language for until you have decided what you are measuring, you can not claim to have measured it. Namara (2000) says that communicative language test ultimately came to have two features:

1. They were performance tests, requiring assessment to be carried out when the learner or candidates was engaged in an extended act of communication, either receptive or productive or both.
2. They paid attention to the social roles candidates were likely to assume in real world settings, and offered a means of specifying the demands of such roles in details.

According to Weir (1990), communicative language test should be as direct as possible (attempt to reflect the real life situation) and the tasks candidates have to perform should involve realistic discourse processing. Furthermore he says that communicative language test should be assessed qualitatively rather than quantitatively.

Communicative language tests are intended to be a measure of how the testees are able to use language in real life situations. According to Kitao and Kitao (1996) in testing productive skills, emphasis is placed on appropriateness rather than ability to form grammatically correct sentences. In testing receptive skills, emphasis is placed on understanding the communicative intent of the speaker or writer rather than on picking out specific details. And in fact, the two are often combined in communicative testing, so that the testee must both comprehend and respond in real time. In real life, the different skills are often used entirely in

isolation. Furthermore, they suggested that communicative tests are often very context specific. If at all possible, a communicative test should be based on a description of the language that the testee needs to use. In cases where the testee does not have a specific purpose, the language that they are tested on can be directed toward general social situations where they might be in position to use English.

The above assumption influences the task chosen to test language in communicative situations. A communicative test of listening, then, would test not whether the testee could understand what the utterances "Would you mind putting the groceries away before you leave" means, but place it in the context and see if the testee can respond appropriately.

If students are going to be tested over communication tasks in an achievement test situation, it is necessary that they are prepared for that kind of test, that is, the teaching materials cover the sort of tasks they are being asked to perform. For example, we can not expect students to correctly perform such functions as request and apologies appropriately and evaluate them on it, if they have been studying from a structural syllabus. Similarly, if they have not been studying writing business letters, we can not expect them to write a business letter for a test.

In other words, many of the features that contribute to the creation of real life tasks have the characteristics, such as: (1) They are contextualized and relate to every day situations, (2) They test authentic skills, (3) They provide a purpose for communication, (4) They are appropriately matched to text type, and (5) They have outcome.

According to Weir (1990) there are communicative characteristics which are considered important in the design of communicative tests. They are:

1. *Realistic context*- the test tasks should be regarded as appropriate to the candidates' situation.
2. *Relevant Information gap* – candidates should have to process new information as they might in the real life situation

3. *Intersubjectivity* - the tasks should involve candidates both as language receivers and language producers.
4. *Scope for development of activity by the candidates*- the task should give candidates the chance to assert their communicative independence
5. *Allowance for self monitoring by candidates*- the tasks should allow candidates to use their discourse processing strategies.
6. *Processing of appropriately sized input*- the size and scope of the activities should be such they are processing the kind of input they would normally be expected to.
7. *Normal time constraints operative*- the task should be accomplished under normal time constraint.

In constructing the communicative language test, we should involve all characteristics above. In conclusion, we can say that communicative language tests are those which make an effort to test language in a way that reflects the way language is used in real life situations. As the consequence of communicative language testing, the tests have to be communicative as well. The test has to measure the communicative competence realized in the four language skills. If the students are going to be tested over communicative tasks in an achievement test situation, it is necessary that they are prepared for that kind of test, that is, that the course material covers the sorts of tasks that are being asked to perform.

## B. METHODOLOGY

The procedures used to develop the communicative language test is adapted from the model developed by Weir (1990) which consist of four major steps such as: designing the test, developing the test, operating the test and monitoring the test. In this paper, the real steps are:

1. Identifying objectives
2. Developing the test specification
3. Developing the communicative test drafts which consists of ten minor steps:

- determining what language skills tested
- selecting suitable source materials
- determining the suitable test format
- determining the coverage of the test and the number of test items
- writing the test items writing the scoring guide and grading
- submitting the test materials for critical examination from experienced teacher.
- studying the comments and suggestions
- rewriting the test drafts

### C. DISCUSSIONS

As discussed before, that in constructing the communicative language test, we have to consider the communicative competence which involves four skills; listening, reading, speaking and writing

Linguistic competence is tested with a multiple choice format in reading section (incomplete sentence and error analysis). This section tests the recognition of a wide range of basic grammar structures including tenses, word forms, prepositions, and conjunction. The grammar is also tested and is contextualized in short conversation or in sentences that reflect spoken discourse. Students need to understand the meaning of the items and be able to recognize the correct from. It is shown in the followings.

#### Incomplete Sentence

Example:

Jhon : *How about going to the beach tomorrow morning, Nancy?*

Nancy : *What time?*

Jhon : *At eight o'clock*

Nancy : *I am sorry I am busy preparing for exam*

Jhon : *If I were you, I... to the beach*

- would go
- will go
- goes
- am going

#### Error Recognition

Tom : I got terrible headache yesterday

A

Mary : Did you? How are you feeling

B

C

today?

Tom : I feel better after took an aspirin

D

Fuji Xerox has launched new high tech

A

laser printers, three monochrome

Printers, the phasers 3115, 3120, and 3130 and a color printer, the phaser 6250.

The monochrome series come at most

B

reasonable price with upgradeable specs.

C

The monochrome series are perfect for

D

home users

Sociolinguistic competence is tested to some extent in the vocabulary, where candidates are required to choose the word that best completes the sentence. Words are tested in a sentence context, which means that the candidates can apply the strategies they have developed from classroom instruction.

Example:

Tom : *Peter, do you know the meaning of "recognize"?*

Peter : *I am not sure. Why don't you ... the dictionary.*

- look at
- look up
- look after
- look inside

Julie : *What does your boss look like?*

Sony : *Well, ... about 180 centimeters and has dark brown hair*

- he is heavy
- he is short
- he is nice
- he is tall

Discourse competence and linguistics competence are tested in the reading and listening sections.

Comprehending gist involves making connections between different parts of the text (discourse competence) while comprehending specific details may involve linguistic skills referred to earlier.

Besides that, as suggested by language testing experts, the test should be analyzed in terms of validity, reliability, and practicality of the test.

### 1. Reliability of the test

One prime concern of the test users is test reliability. A test is reliable if multiple administrations of an identical or near identical test consistently yield highly similar results within one group (Bachman 1990; Weir 1990).

As it is impossible to produce a test which is 100% reliable, the aim of test-writers is to produce a test that provides highly similar scores between administrations with the same examinees. The more similar the scores, the more reliable the test (Hughes, 1989).

### 2. Validity of the test

Validity refers to the issue of whether the test measures what it is intending to measure. Test validity can be evaluated from four different but related perspectives; construct validity, face validity, content validity and criterion-related validity (Bachman 1990; Hughes 1989; Weir 1990). These aspects can be defined as follows:

- a. Construct Validity is concerned with whether or not the test is actually testing the criteria it claims to test.
- b. Content Validity is concerned with the appropriateness of the tasks to test the desired criteria.
- c. Faced Validity is the degree of the acceptability the test possesses in the eyes of the administrators and the testees, as such, is a qualitative evaluation.
- d. Criterion-Related Validity consists of both concurrent and predictive validity. If the result from one test format agree with the results on a

different test format. They are said that to have concurrent validity. The predictive validity of a test is the degree to which the test accurately and consistently predicts the testees' future performance or behavior.

### 3. Practicality

It is concerned to the extent to which the test is useful for their intended function.

The following test is the kind of achievement test applied to the third year students of SMK who will join the English national exam next April. The test consists of 60 items. It is a 90 minute test which only involves the receptive skills (listening and reading).

The test techniques used in the test is multiple choice items, consisted of 4 options (A, B, C, and D). Hughes (2002) concludes that there are many advantages of using multiple choice items:

1. Scoring can be perfectly reliable
2. Scoring should also be rapid and economical
3. It is possible to include more items
4. It will give the greater test reliability
5. It allows the test of receptive skills without requiring the test taker to produce written or spoken language.
6. It is the best situated to relatively infrequent testing of a large number of candidates.

According to Harsono (2005), in order to correctly measure the students communicative competence in the four language skills, there are four things should be considered:

1. Before using the tests, the teacher should realize and choose that/those having the best characteristics as expected such as having construct and content validity, reliability and practicality.
2. Considering the characteristics of the communicative language tests: validity, reliability and practicality, English teachers or test constructors should not just think of the

practicality of the test but, the most important thing is that they should think of the validity and reliability of the test.

3. The communicative language tests should not be conducted just once at the end of semester or year, but they should be conducted any time necessary, for example, at the end of every topic of discussion or during the teaching learning activities which is called process assessment. In this process, teachers can prepare a form/list of students in the class and students' activities or performance being assessed and during the teaching learning process; this form is completed based on each student's performance.
4. Test formats should be chosen by considering the characteristics of communicative competence; assessing the dynamic negotiation of meaning, including measures of both written and spoken language, being context specific, and assessing performance that observable rather than competence.

### **Receptive skills (Listening and Reading)**

The test consists of two sections:

1. Listening Section (15)
  - Pictures (3)
  - Question and Response (4)
  - Short conversation (4)
  - Short Talk (4)

The first task in the listening section, candidates need to listen for gist or specific information and respond to a set of pictures by matching the pictures with the statements.

Example: On the cassette the candidates will hear

(Look at the picture marked number one on your test paper)

- a. *The basket is made of woven rattan*
- b. *They shoot the ball to the basket*
- c. *Some fruit is put in the basket*
- d. *We need the basket for this stuff*

The second task, the candidates will try to response to the question or statement listened and answers it on the answer sheet.

On the cassette, the students will hear a question or statement followed by three responses.

Example: *What is for dinner?*

- a. *We are having steak*
- b. *My wife and her mother*
- c. *After I get home*

The third task, the candidates listen to short conversation

Example:

On the test paper the candidates read:

*Where does the conversation take place?*

- a. *In a classroom*
- b. *In a store*
- c. *In an office*
- d. *In the post office*

On the cassette, the candidates will hear:

*Man : Can you type this memo for me?*

*Woman: I'll be glad to, but I must finish these letters first*

*Man : That is okay. I'll ask Mr. Brown to type it.*

The short talk related to everyday situations. Try to answer based on the questions given.

On the paper, the candidates will read:

*Who is the audience for this advertisement?*

- a. *Airline pilot*
- b. *Business people*
- c. *Tourist*
- d. *Students*

On the cassette, the candidates will hear:

*(Don't you hate to waste time waiting at the airports? On your business trip, put that time to use our new portable computer. It is small enough to fit your briefcase, and unfolds easily when you are ready to use it. Stop wasting the time. Call today.)*

2. Reading Section (35)
  - Incomplete sentence (15)
  - Error Recognition (10)
  - Reading Comprehension (10)

The first and second task in reading section, the candidates need to fill in the blanks based on the context given. This section will deal with grammar and vocabulary.

In the reading comprehension part, it requires the candidates to check their ability to understand the main idea, specific details and make inference. It also performs the topic of interest such as business issues and administration (letter, facsimile, instructions, etc).

### **Productive Skills (speaking and writing)**

#### *a. Speaking test*

One of the examples to test speaking is by using information gap activities. It is one in which two or more testees work together, through it is possible for a confederate of the examiner rather than a testee to take one of the parts. Each testee is given certain information but also lacks some necessary information. The task requires the testees to ask for and give information. The task should provide a context in which it is logical for the testees to be sharing information.

Example:

*Student A*

You are planning to buy a tape recorder. You do not want to spend more than about 80 pounds, but you think that a tape recorder that costs less than 50 pounds is probably not of good quality. You definitely want a tape recorder with auto reserve and one with a radio built in would be nice. You have investigated three models of tape recorder and your friend has investigated three models. Get the information from him/her and share your information. You should start the conversation and make the final decision, but you must get his/her opinion too.

*Student B*

Your friend is planning to buy a tape recorder and each of you investigated three

types of tape recorder. You think it is best to get a small, light tape recorder. Share your information with your friend, and find out about the three tape recorders that your friend investigated. Let him/her begins the conversation and makes the final decision but do not hesitate to express your opinion.

#### *b. Writing Test (Letter Writing)*

The following is an example of such a task. Situation:

Your boss has received a letter from a customer complaining about the problems with a coffee maker that he bought two months ago. Your boss has instructed you to check the company policy on returns and repairs and reply the letter. Please read the letter from customer and the statement of the company policy about returns and repairs. *Write a formal business letter to the customer!*

### **D. CONCLUSION**

The constructing of the communicative language test is critically needed in order to measure the ability of students to communicate. In order to correctly measure the students' communicative competence in the four language skills, there are ideas to follow:

1. Before using the test teachers should realize and choose the test having the best characteristics as expected such as construct and content validity, reliability and practically.
2. Test formats should be chosen by considering the characteristics of communicative competence.

The test activities can be exploited effectively as classroom activities which not only help the students to become familiar with the format of examination but also help them to develop useful language skills.



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