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Ain Shams University
College For Women
Curriculum and Instruction Department

An M. A. Thesis in
Evaluating Secondary School English
Language Tests In The Light Of The
Communicative Approach

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Chapter I

The Problem

Introduction

Language does not occur in isolation, it occurs in a social context and reflects social rather than linguistic purposes. A child acquires knowledge of sentences not as grammatical, but as appropriate to the context in which they are made. "He knows when and when not to speak, what to talk about and with whom, where and in what manner⁽¹⁾". He has communicative competence as well as linguistic competence.

Communicative competence is a dynamic rather than a static concept. It depends on the negotiation of meaning between two or more persons who share to some degree the symbolic system. In this sense, then, communicative competence can be said to be an inter-personal rather than an intra-personal trait⁽²⁾.

The crucial question is how to bridge the gap between linguistic competence and communicative competence, how to develop a smooth transaction between "skill getting" and "skill using" (Rivers 1973-25) Rivers warns that a schizophrenic situation can develop between these two types of activity: in "skill getting" the emphasis is on the going, not on the destination,

(1) Jane Revel, 1979, "Teaching techniques for communicative English", 1979:4-5.

(2) Sandra J. Savignon, 1983, "communicative competence: Theory and classroom practice".

whereas in skill using "the students are aiming at the goal of communicative competence. The gap is too difficult to bridge because the classroom environment by its very nature makes genuine communication extremely elusive: communication stems from necessity and this element is usually absent in a classroom situation⁽³⁾ .

This derived the teaching process in classroom into serving the purpose of enabling learners to develop their communicative abilities, receptively, interpretatively, reconstructively and reproductively, through the following distinctions :

- 1- Exercises and tasks to, prepare for communication.
- 2- Exercises and tasks that develop communication.
- 3- Exercises and tasks that structure communication.
- 4- Exercises and tasks that stimulate communication.
- 5- Exercises and tasks that are communicative in themselves.

Theories of communicative competence imply that teachers must do more than just supply learners with a number of language structures to manipulate. There are cases of people being unable to use a language after years of formal teaching.

There is an interactive relationship between communicative needs,

(3) Jane Revel, 1979, " Teaching Techniques for Communicative English", 1979: 6.

language programmes and testing systems. Traditionally, programmes do not generally exemplify this tripartite congruence of needs, programmes and tests. Language programmes are devoted to the acquisition of lexical and syntactic items with little systematic consideration of the communicative aims of the individual learner. Unfortunately, in many language courses the end examination not only provides the learning motivation but dominates the content and pedagogy of the courses⁽⁴⁾.

Approaches to language testing are strongly influenced by the place according to usage and use in inter-personal communication. These two divisions, lucidly expounded by Widdowson (1978), echoes long discussed distinctions between competence and performance. Concentration on usage is concerned primarily with formal language patterns, whereas use is concerned with communicative function, with how the language is used. Pedagogies emphasizing usage build on the selection and sequencing of learning units expressed in formal linguistic terms (The definite article, plurals, the conditional tense), even if they do not actually employ these labels and give a good deal of importance to the formal correctness of the learner's usage. Programmes emphasizing use, however, base their pedagogues on effective communication, assuming that realistic communication will provide the learner

(4) Brendan J. Carroll, 1980, "Testing communicative Performance", 1980:6.

with meaningful practice, so that he will conform gradually to the norms of usage, the emphasis being on appropriacy rather than formal linguistic correctness⁽⁵⁾ . The use of language is the objective and the mastery of the formal patterns, or usage, of that language is a means to achieve this objective.

The distinction between usage and use is of great importance for teaching and testing. It implies that a test cannot be based on a selection of items chosen on linguistic grounds alone, and that to devise an effective test, it is necessary to specify how a testee requires to use the language. The criterion for success lies not in formal correctness but in communicative effectiveness.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM :

The pilot study and the analysis of the existing tests of 1st year secondary indicate that while teachers are helping their students to acquire the English language to be able to use it in performing in different situations, we find that tests are only assessing the usage of language patterns in the traditional way .

Moreover, the adoption of the criteria of communicative use presents many difficulties to the examiner and it is not claimed that as yet they have been overcome. This is the core problem of this study which we are

(5) Brendan J Carroll, 1980, "Testing Communicative Performance", 1980:7.

facing in building up objectively scored tests for students using communicative programmes.

In Egyptian secondary schools, our students have "Excel in English", which is based on the communicative approach, and by analyzing the existing tests of the first year secondary based on "Excel in English", they indicate that the tests are concentrating on the usage of the language; items are chosen on linguistic grounds only, whereas, teaching in classes is focusing on the use of the language. The present research will attempt to contribute in solving this problem.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY:

It is the purpose of the present study to evaluate 1st year secondary school English language tests according to the characteristics of communicative tests and to develop new tests; in other words the study will provide answers for the following questions:

- a) It is a participation on my part to give the reader an idea of what are the characteristics of communicative tests ?
- b) How far are these characteristics met in the existing tests of the 1st secondary ?
- c) What types of communicative tests could be designed or developed for 1st year secondary school students ?

HYPOTHESES OF THE STUDY:

- a- The existing tests of 1st year secondary based on "Excel In English 1" lack the main characteristics of the communicative tests.
- b- New developed tests will look radically different from the existing tests as they are going to assess each of the skill areas separately.

ASSUMPTIONS:

The above hypotheses are based on the following assumptions:

- 1- Traditional testing is dominating the system of evaluation in our secondary schools. (El Batrick (1987); spotlight on "Excel in English", Forum Volume XXV p. 15)
- 2- The current gap between exam specifications and course materials could participate in narrowing the gap between the approach, components and contents of the course.
- 3- Developing new tests will affect the evaluation of the students in a way to direct the process of teaching towards effective and desirable educational goals.

DELIMITATION OF THE STUDY

The study will be delimited to:

- 1- Specifying the characteristics of the communicative tests.
- 2- Evaluating samples of the tests administered to the 1st year secondary stage in the light of the communicative approach (Appendix 1).