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How "Communicative" are Language Proficiency Tests?

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Introduction

It is quite easy these days, in reading the research in language testing, to get the impression that tests of "communicative competence" are the vanguard of the future and that tests of "language proficiency" are somehow old-fashioned and of questionable validity. But this is a misconception that is largely due, I believe, to the failure to recognize that the notion of communicative competence is not something different from language proficiency, but comprises a redefinition, an expansion, if you will, of prior notions of language proficiency to include other areas of language use than the purely linguistic domains of phonology, morphology and syntax. This expanded definition of language proficiency includes both the discourse of which individual sentences are a part and the sociolinguistic situation which governs, to a large extent, the nature of that discourse, in both form and function. In attempting to characterize a given test as "communicative", then, one question that must be addressed is "What aspects of communicative competence does the test measure?"

A second question that must be addressed is "To what extent do the tasks required by the test involve communicative language use?" In this regard, I believe that both linguistic models of language proficiency and models of communicative competence are inadequate in that they have failed to distinguish between what has been loosely referred to as *knowledge* and *skill*. In my view, language proficiency involves both knowledge, or competence, and skill in implementing, or executing that competence.

Skills and components models of language proficiency such as those proposed by Lado (1961) and Carroll (1961) distinguished skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) from components of knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, phonology/grapho-

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logy), but did not indicate how these were related. It was not clear whether the skills were simply manifestations of the knowledge components in different modalities and channels, or whether they were qualitatively different in some other ways. For example, does reading differ from writing only in that it involves reception rather than production? If that were so, how can we account for the fact that quite competent and skillful readers are not always skillful writers? Chomsky's model (1965), with its distinction between competence and performance, permitted us to distinguish random "noise" from language proficiency, but in so doing limited language proficiency solely to competence. And neither of these models recognized the full context of language use--- the contexts of discourse at situation. Halliday's framework (1976), with its focus on functions, both illocutionary and textual, clearly recognizes the context of discourse, but again is limited to competence. Finally; although Hymes' (1972) notion of sociolinguistic appropriateness recognizes the interaction between language use and the context of situation, it does not address the distinction between competence and skill.

Recent framework of communicative competence (Munby, 1978; Widdowson, 1978; Canale & Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1983), provide a much more inclusive description of the knowledge required to use language, in that they incorporate linguistic competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence. All of these frameworks comprise what might be called descriptive rather than working models in that they focus on competence and either explicitly or implicitly ignore the implementation of that competence in language use. A more cognitive approach to language use has been taken in working models of language processing such as those proposed by Faerch and Kaspar (1983) and Bialystok and Ryan (forthcoming). But while such models distinguish planning from execution and charaterize varying degrees of cognitive control in language processing, they do not specify how language competence are distinguished from language skills.

In this paper I will outline a theoretical framework that distinguishes the knowledge, or competence aspects of language proficiency from the skills aspects, and that also addresses the factors in the language testing situation that affect proformance on language tests. I will then examine the nature of the performance tasks and language competencies required by some widely used testing procedures. Finally, I will discuss the implications that this examination suggests for psychometric theory and for language testing research.

A framework Describing Performance on Tests of Language Proficiency

Adrian Palmer and I have proposed a framework for describing the different factors that affect performance on language tests (Bachman and Palmer, forthcoming). This framework includes four types of factors: language trait factors, skill factors, method factors, and random factors. *Language trait factors* are those competencies

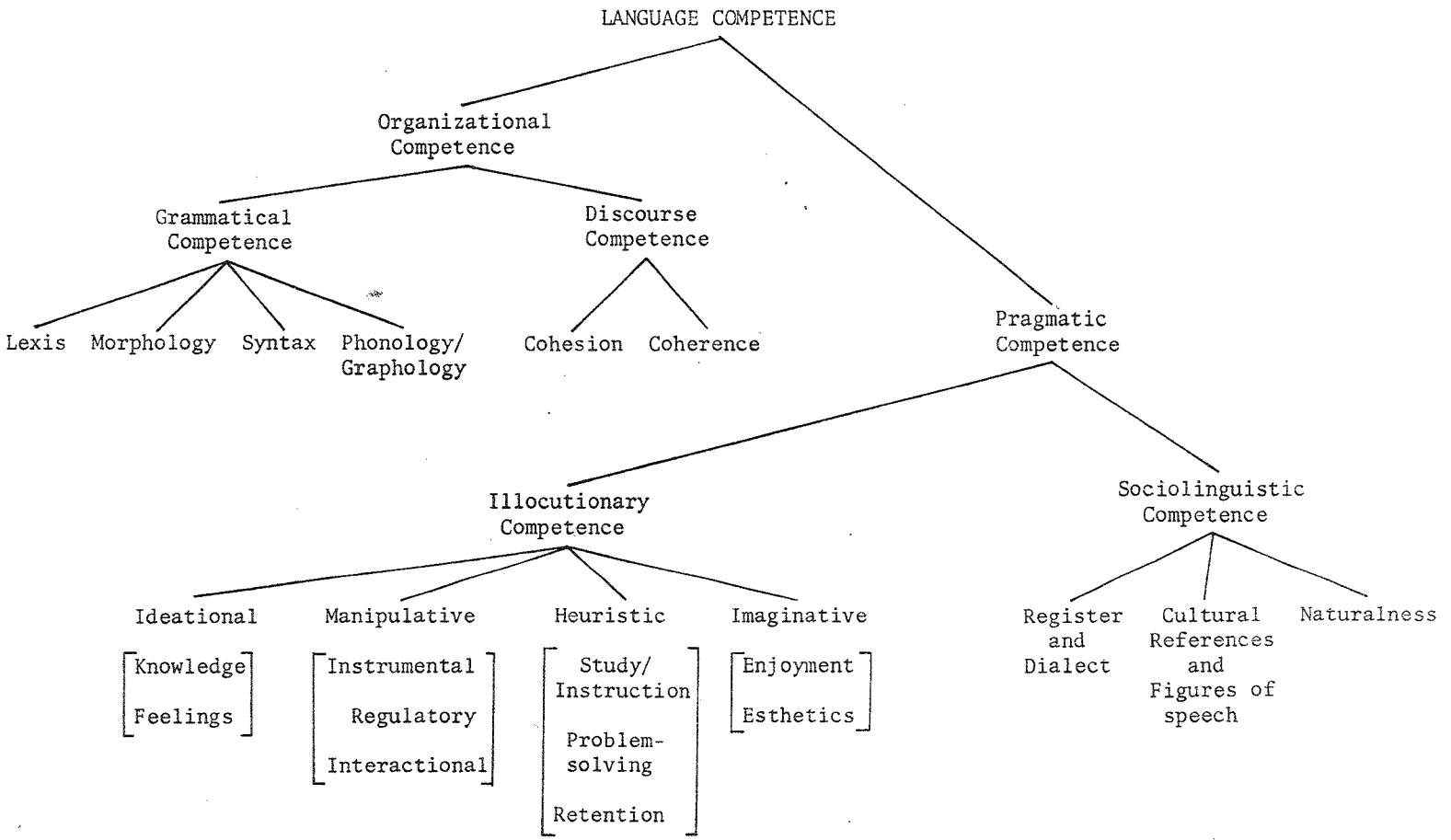


Figure 1. A Framework for Describing Language Competence.

or mental abilities that are specific to language use, and are of two main types: organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence, which includes grammatical and discourse competence, pertains to the formal characteristics of language usage. Pragmatic competence, which includes illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence, pertains to the functional and social characteristics of language use. These traits or competencies of language proficiency are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Skill factors are those general characteristics of the individual that affect test performance. These consist of 1) psycho-physiological skills, which are distinguished in terms of mode (productive/receptive) and channel (aural-oral/visual), 2) forms of representation that determine the extent to which language competencies are available for use, and 3) strategic competence, which consists of a set of general abilities that affect how language competencies are implemented for maximum/effectiveness in processing information.

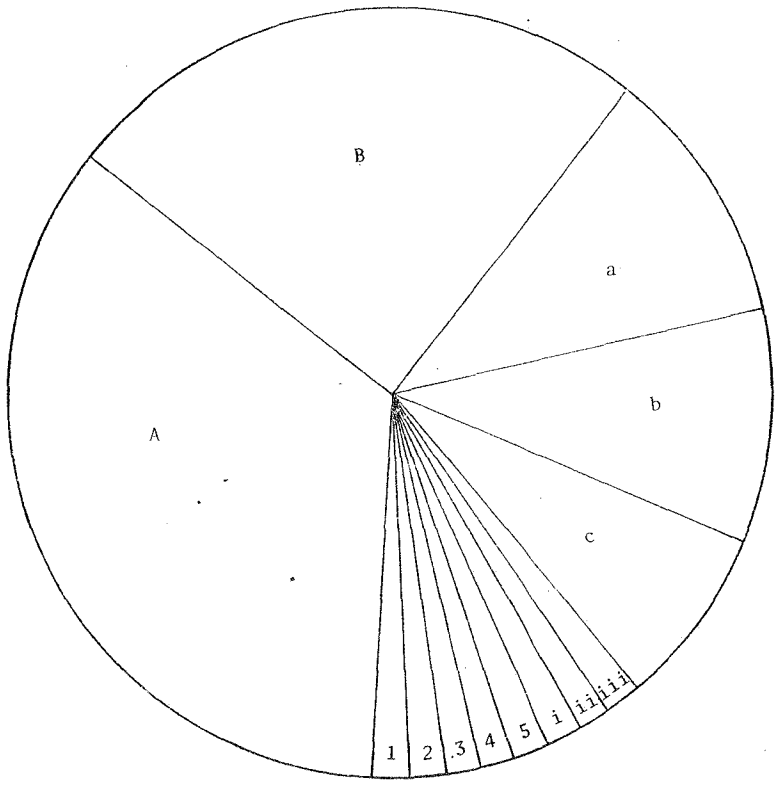
Method factors are those characteristics of the test method that affect performance. These factors consist of 1) the type of language use situation (reciprocal/nonreciprocal), 2) the amount of context (embedded/reduced), 3) the distribution of information (compact/diffuse), 4) the type of information presented (concrete/abstract), and 5) the type and degree of restrictions on language performance; these include restrictions on the organization of discourse, the language use situation, propositional content, illocutionary force, forms, participants, mode, channel and time/length.

Finally, *random factors* consist of 1) cognitive and affective characteristics of the individual, such as field dependence/independence, inhibition, tolerance/intolerance of ambiguity, and motivation, 2) interactions among specific combinations of trait, skill and method factors, and 3) measurement error.

We believe that this framework is useful in explaining sources of variation in performance on tests, as illustrated in Figure 2 below. The relative contribution of trait, skill, method and random factors to test performance will, of course, vary from test to test and from individual to individual. For example, Bachman and Palmer (1982) found that a multiple-choice test of grammatical competence loaded much more heavily on the method factor than did multiple-choice tests of either pragmatic or sociolinguistic competence. The effect of the task on test performance has generally been dealt with psychometrically as systematic error variance associated with the test method (Campbell & Fiske, 1959). The framework described here specifies in more detail the factors that comprise test method and at the same time recognizes the relationship between the demands set by the task and context of the test and the competencies required to successfully meet these demands.

I. Trait Factors :
   A. Orgamizational Competence
   B. Pramatic Competence

II. Skills Factors :
   a. Psychophysiological
   b. Forms of Representation
   c. Strategic Competence



III. Method Factors :
   1. Language Use Situation
   2. Amount of Context
   3. Distribution of Infermation
   4. Restrictions on Language Performance
   5. Soures of Variance in Language Test Scores

IV. Random Factors :
   i. Cognitive and Affective Qualities
   ii. Interactions among other Factors
   iii. Measurement Error

Figure 2.

This framework may also be useful in clarifying some misconceptions regarding the terms "direct" and "indirect" as they have been applied to language tests. The term "direct test" is often used to refer to a test method in which performance resembles "actual" or "normal" language performance, while an "indirect test" is one in which test performance is perceived as somehow different from "actual" or "normal" performance. Thus, writing samples and oral interviews are referred to as "direct" tests, since they presumably involve the use of the skills being tested.

By extension, such tests are often regarded, virtually without question, as constract valid and therefore as legitimate criteria for the validation of "indirect" tests.

There are two problems with this, however. First, we have no definition of "actual" or "normal" language use that is precise enough for us to determine the extent to which performance on a given test is similar to such language use. Indeed, the framework suggested here may at best permit us only to distinguish relatively "communicative" from relatively "non-communicative" language performance. A more serious problem, however, is that the use of the term "direct" confuses the behavioral manifestation of a trait or competence for the construct itself. As with all mental measures, language tests are "*indirect*" indicators of the underlying traits in which we are interested. The framework presented above captures this distinction by recognizing that there are factors in addition to trait factors that affect performance on all language tests, whether these require recognition of the correct alternative in a multiple-choice format or the writing of an essay.

An Examination of some Tests of Language Proficiency

As indicated above, in examining proficiency tests as measures of commu nicative performance, there are two questions that should be addressed. First, to what extent do the tasks required on the test involve communicative language performance? Second, to what extent does the test assess communicative competencies?

Multiple-Choice Tests

The multiple-choice test is one of the most widely-used techniques for testing language proficiency in the world. Such tests typically include parts aimed at measuring skills or components such as the following: listening comprehension, structure, or reading comprehension. The language performance tasks on such tests are almost always restricted to non-reciprocal situations, in which there is no potential for feed-back or negotiation of meaning. The amount of context generally varies considerably from part to part, as does the distribution and type of information. The format of these tests generally restricts the mode of performance to reception.

Listening Comprehension

Multiple-choice tests of listening comprehension typically include tasks such as 1) listening to a sentence and then identifying the correct paraphrase from several choices, 2) listening to short dialogues and then finding the correct choice to a question about the dialogue, and 3) listening to a short talk and then answering comprehension questions based on that talk. In the paraphrase item type two basic tasks are required: 1) comprehending a single spoken sentence (stem) and 2) recognizing the correct paraphrase of this sentence (key) from among four written sentences. The majority of the items of this type require only grammatical competence for successful completion. Most depend primarily on the knowledge of lexical signification, or of the propositional content expressed by syntactic structure.

Furthermore, these items can be regarded as context-reduced, in that they are generally unconnected with each other and their references are to fictitious persons, objects, place and actions. In general, the task of recognizing paraphrases is an extremely artificial one and requires virtually no communicative performance, in that this task focuses exclusively on propositional signification.

In the lecture, or short talk test type the basic tasks are 1) comprehending a spoken discourse and 2) answering direct information questions based on that discourse. In this type of test, the extent of the discourse is much more substantial than that in the paraphrase type, and the context is much more extensive. Unfortunately, however, the lectures are frequently highly artificial, in that they sound like "read" presentations and fail to include the kinds of hesitations and restatements that characterize oral discourse. There is little challenge to the test taker to interact with the text and consequently little opportunity for authentic language use.

Structure

The language performance on this type of test is typically restricted entirely to single sentences, and thus has little potential for involving discourse. In this test type the basic task is to recognize the syntactic form that will correctly complete an incomplete statement. The items in this type of test are generally context-reduced, in that they represent isolated propositions, although there is generally some attempt to contextualize them. Frequently, however, this context includes information that is totally irrelevant to the task posed by the item.

Reading Comprehension

Of the various types of multiple-choice test, the reading comprehension test has, in my opinion, the greatest potential for requiring communicative language performance. This is because it is the least restricted with respect to organization of discourse, propositional content, illocutionary force, and forms. There are basically two tasks in this test type: 1) comprehending a written text and 2) providing requested information based on the content of that text. The questions are generally of two types: incomplete statements and direct information questions. The type of information requested is usually both literal and inferential. Items in this test type may measure grammatical, cohesive, and illocutionary competence. Strategic competence, to the extent that this is involved in inference and drawing on relevant extra-textual knowledge, can also be measured, should this be desirable.

In general, while multiple-choice tests are highly restricted in terms of the type of performance required, I believe they can be used effectively to measure the receptive skills of listening and reading, and to measure the full range of ompectencies required in these two skills.

Oral Interviews

The oral interview is nearly the opposite of the multiple-choice test, in that it can require authentic language use, or communicative performance. While generally limited to the aural/oral channel, both receptive and productive modes can be measured, as can the full range of competencies involved in the skills of listening and speaking. The extent to which this test achieves its full potential, however, depends on the elicitation and rating procedures. The skillful interviewer will lead the candidate through a range of topics, elicit a variety of illocutionary acts, and present several different contexts. Indeed, in a well-conducted interview, the candidate may nearly forget that it is a test.

All too frequently, however, the candidate's performance is rated solely in terms of grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, and perhaps fluency. Such ratings fail to evaluate aspects of either discourse competence, such as cohesion and rhetorical (conversational) organization, or of sociolinguistic competence, such as appropriateness of register and naturalness.

Another common characteristic of rating scales that have been developed for oral interviews is the definition of the scale points, or levels, in terms of specific contexts and subject matter. A well-known example of this type of scale definition is that of the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) oral interview (formerly the Foreign Service Institute (FSI) oral interview), which has been adopted and expanded by a wide variety of organizations all over the world. This type of scale definition has been used quite successfully in such specific situations such as those of the agencies of the U.S. government, foreign language departments in U.S. colleges and universities, and a large-scale migrant program in Australia.

Because of the effect of context on communicative language use, however, context dependent definitions limit both the use and interpretation of such scales to the specific situations for which they are designed. Some scale definitions may be quite general, while others are much more specific. The problem this creates for comparability of ratings is that one is not certain that interviewers using the different scales would try to elicit exactly the same language functions, such as narrating, describing, explaining, requesting or apologizing. Nor is it likely that the same content areas or social registers will be of equal relevance to, say, American college students, employees of U.S. government agencies, and immigrants to Australia. If there is this much potential for difference in elicitation and interpretation of ratings from scales such as these, which are very closely related in terms of their development, comparability of interpretation is even less attainable when quite different types of scales are used.

A more generalizable and interpretable approach to scale definition, I believe, is to define levels on separate scales in terms of the characteristics of the various components of communicative competence. In the *Oral Interview Test of Communicative Proficiency in English* (Bachman and Palmer, 1983), for example, levels are defined in terms of several components, such as grammar, and to register. Interviewers are instructed to elicit topics, illocutionary acts, and sociolinguistic registers appropriate to the context and to the candidate's needs and interests. Thus these factors do have an important effect on the communicative performance elicited in the interview. But since the scale definitions themselves are independent of context and subject matter, the interviewer is not constrained to elicit a particular set of discrete grammatical structures, vocabulary items, or speech acts. This is not to claim, however, that defining such scales is without problems. On the contrary, the identification and ranking of illocutionary acts in terms of appropriateness and level, for example, is extremely complex. Nevertheless, I believe that this approach to scale definition has a great deal of potential for providing a "common yardstick" for rating any given speech sample in terms of the components of communicative language proficiency.

Cloze Tests

The cloze continues to be an enigma. While it appears to approximate quite closely the kind of processing involved in reading, and thus to involve communicative performance, it nevertheless is generally perceived by test takers as a highly artificial task. Indeed, much of the research with variations in this procedure has been motivated, in part at least, by the desire to overcome its appearance of artificiality. I believe that this perceived artificiality is largely a function of the random deletion procedure, which frequently results in items that are nearly impossible to complete. One approach to this problem is the use of a rational deletion procedure, whereby words are deleted selectively, rather than at random, thus making it possible to avoid "impossible" deletions.

From my own research I am convinced that the cloze can measure the full range of competencies involved in reading. The key to this potential, however, lies in the specific words that are deleted. To assure that the specific competencies one wishes to measure are in fact measured, I believe it is essential to abandon the random deletion procedure for a rational one in which the test developer selects the words to be deleted according to criteria defined in the content specifications of the test.

Implications for Measurement Theory

Given the range of language performance required and the competencies measured by language proficiency tests, we might well ask whether such tests can be adequately analyzed by current psychometric theory. One assumption of test

theory, both classical true-score and latent-trait models, is that test items are locally independent (Rasch, 1960; Lord and Novick, 1968). This means that the probability of an individual's answering an item correct is a function only of his or her ability level and the difficulty level of that single item. For this assumption to be satisfied, test developers must write and arrange items so that they are as independent of each other as possible in terms of the tasks required and content included. This is clearly at odds with communicative language performance, in which the "items" of discourse are by definition related to each other and to a given context.

A second assumption of currently available latent-trait models is that the test items comprise a unidimensional scale, that is, that they all measure a single trait or ability (Lord and Novick, 1968 ; Lord, 1980) This assumption would also appear untenable, not only in terms of current theories of language proficiency, but also in light of recent research in language testing, which indicates that language proficiency is multidimensional (e.g., Swinton and Powers, 1980; Bachman and Palmer, 1981, 1982; Dunbar, 1982; Carroll, 1983; Upshur and Homburg, 1983), As with the assumption of local independence, attempts by test developers to satisfy the assumption of unidimensionality may well result in items that are artificially restricted in their form and content. In fact, the quintessential "discrete-point" item might be regarded as unidimensional.

If current theoretical frameworks and research describe communicative language proficiency as comprising several distinct but related traits, and communicative language performance as occurring in the context of discourse, with interrelated illocutionary acts expressed in a variety of forms, it would seem that language tests would provide both a challenge and an opportunity for psychometricians to test the assumptions of current models and to develop more powerful models if necessary.

Implications for Test Development

There would appear to exist a similar challenge and opportunity for test developers to find more creative test procedures and formats. One such procedure, avariation of the dictation called the "copy-test" (Cziko & Lin, 1984), involves the visual presentation of material, and has considerable potential as measure of text processing. It is not unreasonable to expect that advances in microcomputer technology, along with its increasing availability, will provide the means for making this testing technique feasible for large-scale testing in the next few years.

Within the multiple-choice framework, I believe it would be useful to experiment further with items in which some of the distractors are partially correct. For example, the key response would be completely correct in terms of syntax, cohesion, coherence, and perhaps register, while the distractors might be syntactically

correct, but not cohesive, syntactically and cohesively correct, but not in the appropriate register, and so forth. From items such as these it might be possible to derive scores for these different aspects of communicative competence. This type of item has been examined by Farhady (1980).

Conclusion

In this paper I have presented a framework for examining performance on language tests and have attempted to demonstrate how this framework might provide some insight into the types of language performance elicited and the language competencies measured by such tests. At this point I would like to venture some opinions regarding the extent to which language tests can or must comprise measures of communicative competence. First, I believe that it is possible for tests that do not involve communicative *performance* to measure some aspects of communicative *competence.* Second, it is quite possible that not all the traits of communicative competence are equally relevant to the language use needs of a given group. The ability to use language to perform imaginative functions, for example, is probably of less importance to college students, unfortunately, than the ability to perform ideational functions such as defining, describing or arguing. Finally, it may well be that not all the relevant abilities of communicative competence are measurable within the limitations of any given testing program.

To return to our earlier question, "What makes a test communicative," I would argue that the same factors that affect the communicativeness of language performance in general affect the communicativeness of language tests. And just as not all language performance is equally communicative, not all language tests are equally communicative, so that rather than thinking in terms of a dichotomy between "communicative" and "noncommunicative" tests, it seems more appropriate to consider "communicativeness" a potential characteristic of all language tests, which may range from maximally to minimally communicative.

I would argue further that the communicativeness of a given test is largely a function of the test method. A test that measures any of the trait factors discussed above measures communicative competence to some degree, so that a test of vocabulary is as much a test of communicative competence as is a test of sensitivity to different registers, although neither of these tests could be said to measure more than a single aspect of communicative competence. Thus, it makes little sense to attempt to characterize the communicativeness of a test in terms of the spicific competencies tested. Similarly, performance on any language test must be in either the receptive or productive mode or both, and must use either the visual or audio channel, or both, so that we cannot characterize the communicativeness in terms of the skills employed.

The communicativeness of language performance depends upon the relationship between the context of situation and the functions to be performed and forms used. Likewise with language tests, where the tasks required by the testing method constitute the context of situation. The extent to which a given test is communicative, then, is determined by the appropriateness of the language performance tasks set by the test method to the forms and functions that are being tested. A maximally communicative test might thus be characterized as one whose test method involves relatively unrestricted, appropriately contextualized language performance.

I believe that we, language testing researchers and language test developers, must commit ourselves to assuring the content and construct validity of the language tests we use. Such a commitment requires the constant re-examination of the objectives of our tests and a reassessment of the techniques we employ for eliciting communicative language performance. The innovations that result from this re-examination will have implications for both test development and test theory, in that they will require creative applications of current models and technology, and may stimulate the creation of new models and new technology.

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