

Chapter 2 Approaches to language testing (J. B. Heaton)

2.1 Background

Language tests can be classified according to four main approaches to testing:

1. The essay-translation approach
2. The structuralist approach
3. The integrative approach
4. The communicative approach

A useful test generally includes features of several of these approaches.

2.2 The essay-translation approach

This approach is commonly referred to as **the pre-scientific stage of language testing**. There is no special skill or expertise in testing required. The subjective judgement of the teacher is the most important aspect of testing.

Tests usually consist of

- (a) essay writing
- (b) translation
- (c) grammatical analysis (in the form of comments **about** the language being learnt)

These tests have a heavy literary and cultural bias. Public examinations (for example, secondary school leaving examinations) are constructed with the essay-translation approach. Sometimes they may have an aural/oral component at the upper intermediate or fairly advanced levels. But this component is not an integral part of the syllabus or examination.

2.3 The structuralist approach

This approach depends on the view that language learning is the systematic acquisition of a set of habits. This approach makes use of the descriptions of language elements as developed by structural linguistics. Contrastive analysis and the need to **identify and measure the learner's mastery of separate elements of language** such as **phonology, vocabulary** and **grammar** are important.

The tests measure the mastery of language elements through words and sentences **in isolation**, that is, **without any context**. Listening, speaking, reading and writing skills are also tested separately as much as possible because it is considered essential **to test one thing at a time**.

The structuralist approach is still valid for certain types of tests and for certain purposes.

The psychometric approach to measurement with its emphasis on reliability and objectivity forms an integral part of structuralist testing.

2.4 The integrative approach

This approach involves **the testing of language in context**. It is concerned with **meaning** and **the total communicative effect of discourse**.

Integrative tests

- **do not separate language skills** into divisions to improve test reliability.
- are designed to assess the learner's ability to use two or more skills simultaneously
- are concerned with a global view of proficiency in language
- involve '**functional language**' but **not the use of** functional language.

Integrative tests include mainly

- cloze testing and
- dictation

but oral interviews, translation and essay writing are also included in many integrative tests.

The principle of cloze testing is based on the Gestalt theory of 'closure' – closing gaps in patterns unconsciously. Thus, cloze tests measure the reader's ability to decode 'interrupted' messages by making the most acceptable substitutions from all contextual clues available.

Study the sample cloze test in your course book (p. 16).

Dictation is another major type of integrative test.

The integrated skills involved in tests of dictation include:

- (a) auditory discrimination
- (b) the auditory memory span
- (c) spelling
- (d) the recognition of sound segments
- (e) a familiarity with the grammatical and lexical patterning of the language, and
- (f) overall textual comprehension

Study the procedures in conducting a dictation test and the sample in your course book (p. 18).

Procedures in conducting a dictation test:

1. Read through the whole dictation passage at approaching normal conversational speed.
2. Begin to dictate (either once or twice) in meaningful units of sufficient length to challenge the student's short-term memory span.
3. After the dictation, read the whole passage once more at slightly slower than normal speed.

2.5 The communicative approach

Although there are some similarities between the integrative approach and the communicative approach to language testing, there are nevertheless fundamental differences between the two approaches. They both **emphasize the importance of meaning of utterances** rather than their form and structure.

Communicative tests are concerned primarily with **how language is used in communication**. The tasks in communicative tests are constructed as closely as possible to those facing the students in **real-life situations**. Success is judged in terms of **effectiveness of the communication** which takes place **rather than formal linguistic accuracy**. Language 'use' rather than 'usage' is emphasized. Language 'use' is concerned with how people use language for a variety of purposes, while 'usage' is concerned with the formal patterns of language described in prescriptive grammars and lexicons. However, some communicative tests include the testing of usage due to the argument that communicative competence cannot possibly be achieved without a considerable mastery of the grammar of a language.

The attempt to measure different skills in communicative tests is based on a view of language referred to as the **divisibility hypothesis**. **Communicative testing is an attempt to obtain different profiles of a learner's performance in the language**. The learner may have a poor ability in using the language in informal conversations but may score quite highly on tests of reading comprehension. Communicative testing, in this sense, depends on recent work on aptitude testing. In recent work on aptitude testing claims that most successful tests are those which measure separately such relevant skills as the ability to translate news reports, the ability to understand radio broadcasts, or the ability to interpret speech utterances. In this case, the score obtained on a communicative test will have several measures of proficiency rather than one overall measure.

➔ Study the table indicating different levels of students' performance in your course book (p. 19).

Communicative tests must reflect the culture of a particular country because of their emphasis on context and the use of authentic materials in teaching.

Communicative tests should be based on precise and detailed specifications of the needs of the learners.

Communicative testing has introduced the concept of qualitative modes of assessment in preference to quantitative ones. Language band systems are used to show the learner's level of performance in the different skills tested.

➔ Study qualitative modes of assessment the descriptions of performance levels given in examination brochures and guides in your course book (pp. 21-23).