THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE TESTING AND EVALUATION IN DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

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Abstract: This paper emphasizes a hands-on approach to testing and evaluation presenting exercises and activities that can be used in a variety of ways within the English lessons having in mind that the most obvious characteristic of CLT is that almost is done with a communicative purpose. If we want our pupils or students to learn English we must put them in situations where they need to communicate in English.

Keywords: communicative, competence, authenticity, shift, everyday materials.

The centre of attention in learning English as a second /foreign language has shifted from the teacher and materials (the external) to the student (the internal).This shift is generally known as the move from teacher-centred instruction to learner centred instruction.

For real communication to take place there are three conditions:

1. we must have something that we want to communicate
2. we must have someone to communicate with
3. we must have interest in the outcome of the communication

In most language-teaching materials, and in most language teaching classrooms, these three conditions do not exist all the time. If a teacher is to provide students with the tools to learn language outside the classroom the main aim has to give students confidence in their ability to communicate despite difficulties to the point where they can:

a) initiate communicative events
b) persist with the attempted communication even when it becomes difficult.

The use of gestures, facial expressions, rewarding, questions, guesswork and approximations is a crucial part of such communication, and the ability to such strategies become an essential feature of student needs.

The most obvious characteristic of CLT is that almost everything that is done with a communicative intent. A speaker can evaluate whether or not his purpose has been achieved upon the information she receives from the listener. If the listener does not have an opportunity to provide the speaker with such a feedback, then the exchange is not really communicative.

Communicative methods work best if:

-the teacher uses realistic activities based on situations which students experience in their lives

-the teacher sets tasks and problems which interest and motivate the students

-the teacher includes everyday materials such as newspapers, timetables, interviews, etc. in their tasks.

The exercises and activities presented below can be used in a variety of ways, depending upon the particular situation:

SUGGESTED ACTIVITY
A Cultural Awareness Project

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The goal of this project is to develop learners' overall communicative competence in the target language by focusing specifically on the four skills, as well as to make them aware of cultural differences or similarities in different language communities. The project should be conducted in small groups so that learners can work collaboratively. It consists of four different stages:

1.preparation stage 2.collection stage 3.implementation stage 4.reflection stage

1. As a preliminary step, teachers should provide learners with a brief introduction about the nature of intercultural competence in order to make them aware of the importance of paying attention to different cultural frameworks.

Once the concept of intercultural competence has been introduced in class, the teacher explains to the learners that they are going to explore the English target culture in the language classroom. They are then presented with a list of cultural topics which may offer entry points to the English culture in order to focus on learners' intercultural competence. The topics could be: Family, Education, the World of Work, Regional Identity, Power and Politics.

In order to help learners with the topic orientation the five-word technique can be used. The students are asked to note down the first five words they think in relation to each topic presented by the teacher. In fact, making learners provide such words may be a useful technique to activate their background knowledge on the cultural topics to be covered. Once learners have selected the topic they are going to focus on, the next stage of the project is explained to them:

2. In this stage, it would be tempting for the teacher to make the collection of the materials him/herself about a particular cultural topic and bring them to the classroom along with prepared activities for the learners. However we agree with Marshal[1] that doing this would block one of the major aims of the project, which consists in raising learners' cultural awareness though having to question themselves what is culturally important and representative of the target language.

Taking this assumption into account, learners are given the task to collect materials in the English target culture in relation to the particular topic they agreed to work with.

Here, they are recommended to look for a variety of sources including photocopied information from different printed materials, photo-documentaries, video or DVD scenes, recorded material, like conversations with native speakers, excerpts from the Internet or the hard copy of conversations after having contacted English speaking partners through mail exchanges.

During the process of collecting such material learners are required to meet the teacher at appointed office hours so that the teacher can provide any help they might need. Once learners have collected all the material they are asked to hand it to the teacher in order to prepare the next stage of the project.

3. This stage involves several class sessions devoted to developing learners' communicative competence through the four skills while working in the cultural topics it was agreed they would deal with in the first stage. Here, learners are presented with structured activities on the four skills in order to increase their cultural awareness, intercultural imagination and context sensitivity on that particular topic.

4. After learners have worked on all activities prepared by the teacher in each of the four skills, a cross-cultural class discussion follows in order to elicit learners' opinions about the topics being dealt with. This discussion will allow them to take a critical and positive evaluative position in relation to the cultural awareness activities already carried out.

[1] Marshal, Bethan. 2011. *Testing English*. Continuum International Publishing Group, p.55

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In short, by engaging learners in a project such as the described above they become active participants in their own process of language learning. They are provided with opportunities to develop their overall communicative competence in the target language by increasing their ability to communicate in each of the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Additionally, they become aware of the importance of understanding how cultural issues influence our perception of the world.

This development of learners intercultural competence, thus turns out to be an essential part of foreign language teaching.

ORAL INTERVIEW FORMAT

When "oral production assessment" is mentioned, the first thing that comes to mind is an oral interview: a test administrator and a test taker sit down in a direct face-to-face exchange and proceed through a protocol of questions and directives.

The interview which may be tape-recoded or re-listening, is then scored on one or more parameters such as accuracy in pronunciation and/or grammar, vocabulary usage, fluency, sociolinguistic/pragmatic appropriateness, task accomplishment and even comprehension. Interviews can vary in length from perhaps five to forty-five minutes depending on their purpose and content. Placement interviews designed to get a quick spoken sample from a student in order to verify placement into a course, may need only five minutes if the interviewer is trained to evaluate the output accurately. Every effective interview contains a number of mandatory stages. Two decades ago, Michael Canale [2] proposed a framework for oral proficiency testing that has withstood the test of time. He suggested that test-takers will perform at their best if they led through four stages:

1.WARM-UP: In a minute or so of preliminary small talk, the interview directs mutual introductions, helps the test-taker become comfortable with the situation, apprises the test-taker of the format, and allays anxieties. No scoring of this phase takes place.

2. LEVEL CHECK: Through a series of pre-planned questions, the interviewer stimulates the test-taker to respond using expected or predicted forms and functions. If, for example, from the previous test information, grades, or other data the test taker has been judged to be a "Level 2" (see below) speaker, the interviewer's prompts will attempt to confirm this.

The responses may take very simple or very complex form depending on the entry level of the learner. Questions are usually designed to elicit grammatical categories (such as past tense or verb agreement) discourse structure (a sequence of events), vocabulary usage, and/or sociolinguistic factors (politeness conventions, formal/informal language).

This stage could also give the interviewer a picture and the test-taker's extroversion readiness to speak, and confidence, all of which may be of significant consequence in the interview's results. Linguistic target criteria are scored in this phase. If this stage is lengthy, a tape-recording of the interview is important.

3.PROBE: Probe questions and prompts challenge test-takers to go to the heights of their ability, to extend beyond the limits of the interviewer's expectations through increasingly difficult questions. Probe questions may be complex in their framing and/or complex in their cognitive and linguistic design.

Through probe items, the interviewer discovers the ceiling or limitation of the test taker's proficiency. This need not be a separate stage entirely, but might be a set of questions that are interspersed into the previous stage. At the lower levels of proficiency probe items

[2] Canale M., Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approach to Second Language Teaching and Testing, Applied Linguistics,1 (1980), p.11

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may simply demand a higher range of vocabulary or grammar from the test-taker than predicted.

4. WIND-DOWN: This final phase of the interview is simply a short period of time during which the interviewer encourages the test-taker to relax with some questions, sets the test-taker's mind at ease, and provides information about where and when to obtain the results of the interview. This part is not scored.

Sample questions for the four stages of an oral interviewer

1. Warm-up

How are you?
What's your name?
What country are you from? What city/town?
Let me tell you about this interview

2. Level-check

How long have you been in this (country, city)?
Tell me about your family.
What is your (academic major, professional interest, job)?
How long have you been working at your (degree, job)?
How do you like your home (city, town)?
What are your hobbies or interests? What do you do in your spare time?
Have you travelled to another country beside this one and your home country?
Tell about your country.
Compare your home (city, town) to another (city, town).
What is your favourite food?
Tell me how to (make, do) something you know well.
What will you be doing ten years from now?
I'd like you to ask me some questions.
Pretend that you are……..and I am a……(guided roleplay follows).

3. Probe

What are your goals for learning English in this program?
Describe your (academic field, job) to me. What do you like and dislike about it?
What is your opinion of (recent headline event)?
Describe someone you greatly respect, and tell me why you respect that person.
If you could redo your education all over again, what would you do differently?
If you were (president, prime minister) of your country what would you like to change about your country?

4. Wind-down

Did you feel okay about this interview?
What are your plans for the weekend, the rest of the day, the future?
You'll get the results from this interview (tomorrow, next week).
Do you have any questions you want to ask me?
It was interesting to talk to you. Best wishes.

DIALOGUE COMPLETION TASK

In a department store:
Salesperson: May I help?
Customer:……..

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S: Okay, what size do you wear?
C……
S: Hmmmm. What about this green sweater here?
C:……
S: Oh. Well, if you don't like green what colour would you like?
C:……
S: How about this one?
C:……
S: It's on sale today for £39.95
C……
S: Sure, we take VISA, MATERCARD, AMERICAN EXPRESS.
C:……

DISCOVERING MISSING INFORMATION

Learner A has information represented in tabular form. For example, he may have a table showing a summary of each team's results so far (how many games they have played/won/lost/drawn, how many goals they have scored, etc.)

However, some items of information have been deleted from the table. Learner B has an identical table except that different items of information have been deleted. Each learner can therefore complete his own table by asking his partner for information that he lacks.

The teacher may (if he wishes) specify what language forms are to be used. For example, the distances table would require forms such as: " How far is……from?" "Which town is……miles from?" while the league table would require forms such as "How many games have……

played?" and "How many goals have……scored?"

POOLING INFORMATION TO SOLVE A PROBLEM

Learner A has a train table showing the times of trains from X to Y. Learner B has a timetable of trains from Y to Z. For example:

Learner A's information

Newtown dep.: 11.34,13.31, 15.18 ,16.45
Shrewbury arr:12.22, 14.18, 16.08, 18.25

Learner B's information

Shrewbury dep: 13.02, 15.41, 16.39, 18.49
Swansea arr.: 17.02, 19.19, 20.37, 22.32

Together, the learners must work out the quickest possible journey from Newton to Swansea. Again, of course, it is important that they should not be able to see each other's information.

The last two activities illustrate functional communication activities. The idea behind the is that the teacher structures the situation so that learners have to overcome an information gap or solve a problem. The activities are intended to help the learner find the language necessary to convey an intended message effectively in a specific context.

ROLE PLAYING CONTROLLED THROUGH CUES AND INFORMATION

Two learners play the roles of a prospective guest at a hotel and the hotel manager.

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STUDENT A: You arrive at a small hotel one evening. In the foyer, you meet the manager (-ess) and:

Ask if there is a room vacant.

Ask the price, including breakfast.

Say how many nights would you like to stay.

Ask where you can park your car for the night.

Say what time you would like to have breakfast.

STUDENT B: You are the manager (-ess) of a small hotel that prides itself on its friendly atmosphere. You have a single and a double room vacant for tonight. The prices are: £ 8.50 for the single room, £15 for the double room. Breakfast is £ 1.50 extra per person. In the street behind the hotel, there is a free car park. Guests can have tea in bed in the morning for 50 p.

CITY ACCOMODATION SERVICE

Address	16-th April Place	14-th North Road	6th Elm Street	2 Cambridge Square
Own room	x	v	v	v
Shared room	x	v	v	v
Good public transport	v	v	v	x
Garden	v	v	v	x
Cooking facilities	v	v	x	v
Furnished	v	v	x	v
Unfurnished	v	v	v	v
Number of people in a house flat	4	3	6	8
Price	£ 16	£ 20	£ 12	£ 10
Notes	No telephone Non smokers only	Gets cold in winter.	No animals allowed	Please provide your own bed linen

LETTER

You are going to live in England. Write to an estate agent to ask for some suitable accommodation for yourself and your family. Use the information that you have in the table above CITY ACCOMODATION AGENCY to help you compose your letter. Start your letter like letter 1:

Letter 1

Dear Sir,

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I shall be coming to live in England from….. and I would be extremely grateful if your agency could find

me somewhere suitable to live.

I would like to have……

Change letters with your partner and write a reply making an offer of suitable accommodation.

Start your letter like letter 2:

Dear Mr/Mrs/Miss/Ms……..

Thank you for your letter of……about accommodation. I have considered your requirements carefully and find that I have the following suitable accommodation available. The address is…… and it is……..

PICTURES

The choice of pictures is important. The more dramatic the pictures are, the more motivated the learners will be. You can find pictures in the magazines, on the internet, in holiday brochures and so on.

PREPARATION: Find or draw pictures of terrible and fabulous holidays. Make copies of the jazz chant or make a poster for the front of the class.

TIME GUIDE: 45 minutes

LEAD IN: Show the class on fabulous holiday picture and ask "What was the weather like?".

Show them a terrible picture and ask what it was like.

USE THE LANGUAGE: Put the class in pairs. Ask them to tell each other about the best and the worst holiday they have had. Ask them about the food, where they stayed, the weather, the people encountered, so on.

INTRODUCE LANGUAGE: Ask questions to individual learners "What was the food like?" "What was the weather like?" Put the adjectives they use on the board. Add a test of adjectives. Ask the class which words describe best or worst holidays.

BRAINSTORMING

It means thinking quickly about anything related to a topic, for example, brainstorming "Preparing for a holiday" might lead to the following ideas:

Passports, packing, sun tan cream, foreign money, locking the house, calling family and so on.

MIND MAPPING

It involves putting idea into a sort of order, for example, into separate categories:

Money	Security
Get currency	*lock the house*

Holiday

Travel

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buy tickets *check times*

By doing this kind of activity before a task (writing, speaking, reading, listening) helps activate any vocabulary learners already have and gives them the chance to add this by putting together words and phrases from other members of the class.

NEWSPAPERS ACTIVITIES

In some newspapers there is a place for letters from readers to be printed. Readers write in describing their relationship problems or other personal problems and an answer giving advice about their problems is printed next to each letter.

These letters and their answers can be used for class discussion. Hall[3] suggests these steps:

1. Read the letter to the learners, but not the answer. Unknown vocabulary and other difficulties

should be explained. The learners can take notes as they listen to the letter, ask questions, repeat it

aloud phrase by phrase, or write it as dictation.

2. After the letter is read, the learners discuss it in small groups and suggest advice of their own.

3. The last step is when the teacher presents the advice given in the newspaper. This advice can be

discussed and composed with the advice suggested by the learners:

Here is a typical letter:

Dear Belle,

My boss keeps inviting me to participate in various sporting activities with him, such as playing golf and squash. I am quite good at the sports and enjoy them. However, it is affecting my relationship with my wife .The time that we would usually spend together is now devoted to keeping my boss happy. I don't know what decision to make. Should I refuse my boss and risk my promotion, or should I continue with golf and squash and risk my marriage?

CONFUSED SPORTSMAN

IDENTITY CARDS

Aims: Skills-speaking (writing)
Language –questions about the personal data
Other- introducing someone else to the group, getting to know each other
Level Intermediate
Organization Pairs
Preparation: As many identity cards as there are students
Time: 10-30 minutes

[3] Hall R. –"*Innovation in English Language",* Teaching English Language Worldwide,p.13, 1995

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Procedure Step 1: The students are grouped in pairs and each of them receives a blank

Identity card

Step 2: The two students in each pair interview each other to fill in the blanks on the identity card.

Step3: each student introduces his partner to the class using the identity card as a memory aid.

The paired interviews can be conducted without identity cards. Each student must find out those things from his partner who he thinks are important or interesting.

1. The task "Find out five things about your partner that one could not learn by just looking can be given before the interviewing starts
2. Each student draws a portrait on the identity card. All cards are exhibited on the classroom wall.
3. If these interviews are done at the beginning of a course or seminar a question about individual expectations can be added.
4. With a simple identity card this activity is suitable for beginners as well. An appropriate card might look like this:

Name	Three things I like
Family	
Hobbies	Three things I don't like
Something I'd like to do	

CONCLUSION:

Language teachers must foster meaningful communication in classroom by using authentic language as a vehicle for communication in the class and by developing activities that integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing skills.

There are essentially three reasons why well-known authentic texts should occupy a central role in any second language learning process. First, because they have been written for a communicative purpose, they are more interesting than texts which have been invented to illustrate the usage of some feature of the target language, learners are thus likely to find them more motivating than invented texts.

Second, because they revolve around content rather than form, authentic texts are more likely to have acquisition. Third, if used in sufficient quantities authentic texts can begin to replicate the "language bath" in which the first language learner is immersed from birth.

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