

Communicative language testing in the context of Delhi University

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Abstract: This paper discusses the issue of Communicative Language testing (Cltg) at the tertiary level in this case University of Delhi. The paper argues for Cltg at the tertiary level for a variety of reasons and supports the argument by the model propounded by Morrow. It justifies the English Language Proficiency Course (ELPC) program by giving examples of the various test items which support in improving the proficiency of the learner.

Keywords: language proficiency, communicative language testing, communication, language skills, levels of proficiency, wash back validity, criterion

Many students enrolled in various courses at Delhi University find that not being proficient in English acts as a stumbling block not only in their academic pursuits but also in their professional careers. Such learners are largely from the underprivileged sections of society, who cannot afford good English medium education. In response to this situation, a program known as the English Language Proficiency Course (ELPC) was launched in 2008 in Delhi University.

ELPC has been designed to teach and test students in the four language skills. ELPC runs at three levels, Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. At the end of the course, learners are administered a proficiency test for each level based on the objectives of that level) to measure their proficiency. On the basis of students' performance in the test, a Certificate of Proficiency is given. The overall grade a candidate gets is based on the total of the marks obtained in each of the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. There is no minimum pass mark for each individual section. The certificate of proficiency also defines the expected language ability of the students in all the four skills at the level at which the student is taking the course. These objectives, which define the expected language ability of the students at the three levels also help

the test maker to design integrated test items for the three levels. This kind of a certification gives a complete profile of the learner in terms of his language ability.

Morrow's (1979) model of Communicative Language Testing (CLTg) seems a viable option in the context of Delhi University, where we need to test the students' language ability in a variety of real life situations. Language tests at Delhi University need to be designed in such a way that it would help us assess the appropriate levels of proficiency of the students at the university and also help us to get information about the efficacy of the test items in the teaching learning process. The exams at Class X and XII levels demand very little by way of students' own language abilities in the four skills. Although they are required to write answers to questions in their exams, a large part of it is memory based and content driven. Moreover English is neither taught nor tested as a skill subject, and students are never or very seldom required to demonstrate their English language ability in the four skills.

Moreover, this kind of a proficiency test seems to be very close to Morrow's concept of a Communicative language test (Communicative tests similar to Morrow's model have been given below to demonstrate my claim) No doubt a lot needs to be done in terms of improving these tests to meet the standards of a good test but a first step has been taken in this direction . The student's language competence in the test is measured in terms of the objectives of the various levels of proficiency as well as the criteria/assessment scale (for writing and speaking) developed by ELPC. This test, which assesses a learner's language proficiency based entirely on their performance on the test is a model which is being tried out at the university for the first time and our experience of teaching on this programme suggests that the positives of this system are more than the negatives. To avoid subjectivity(because the test measures are qualitative) and which has also been a point of criticism in Morrow's model , an assessment scale to measure their ability in writing and speaking has been worked out and it defines what the different scores mean in terms of language performance on a scale of 1 to 5. Since most of the teachers teaching on this course are literature teachers with no training in language teaching or assessment they are also given training on assessment for the course. This scale also ensures that there is not much variance in the scores given to the students. Moreover, we have two assessors to assess the students' writing and speaking skills and an average of both the scores is awarded to the student. This also helps in taking care of subjectivity in assessment.

Unlike the ELPC test, most of the students in the university take a common test and certification at the end of every semester. The certification does not give any indication of the language competence of the learner. Moreover learners with varying levels of proficiency are clubbed together to take the same test only on the basis of the number of years they have studied English. The proficiency in different skills also may vary in every student, but this is not indicated in the test scores. I think in a second language situation and more so in a multilingual context having a common test for assessing language competence is not doing justice either to the test taker or the test maker. Moreover the test maker while preparing the test items has to take into account the heterogeneity of the learners language abilities' and therefore preparing the test paper becomes a very challenging task. Further, the concept of one size fitting all will be very unfair to students who have varying levels of proficiency. Therefore having a variety of test items with different levels of difficulty would be more appropriate. A test of the kind designed at ELPC will not only help the learner to measure his/her own level of proficiency it will also tell others (employers, teachers, professionals) the language ability of the student. This kind of test will also motivate students to improve their own language and try to aspire for a higher level of proficiency.

Another issue that I would also like to examine is the positive washback of any of these tests on language teaching. Do these tests anyway support or improve the teaching – learning binary or are the tasks in the tests simply an indicator of the language competence of the learner. According to Alderson (1986), one should not only try to bring in innovations in language testing but to bring in 'innovations through language testing'. These tests can also become resources to teach language in the classroom. Morrow in a later essay (1986) argued that all tests to be considered valid should also fulfil washback validity i.e. have a positive washback on teaching and learning in the classroom. He further suggested that 'an examination of washback validity would take testing researchers into the classroom in order to observe the effect of their tests in action'.

Tests at the University are generally summative tests which are held at the end of the semester. These tests are the traditional paper, pencil test which test a student on reading, writing and grammar, based on a prescribed textbook for the course. The tests focus on testing the students' understanding of the content and most of the test scores reflect a student's ability to

memorize the content and respond accordingly. This is especially true of the reading test. No effort is made in the tests to test the language ability or competence of the student in English. I will demonstrate the various kinds of tasks that students' encounter in their exams, beginning with the traditional reading test which has questions from a seen text to testing reading by giving an unseen passage and questions based on the passage to communicative reading tasks which students at ELPC are exposed to. The writing tasks given below also move from the traditional, to tasks which have some relevance for the learner to the communicative tasks at ELPC. Samples of reading and writing tasks from a test which students take at the end of the semester.

Reading task: (questions from a prescribed textbook)

- How does reality and fantasy come together in the story in 'Maniben alias Bibijaan'?
- What do the sons do out of "half-love, half-duty" in the poem 'Photographing Mother'?
- What are the key faults that Dinesh Kumar finds in the youth of today?
- How does society encourage violence? Discuss in the context of the play "Her Name is Bharati."

Moving on I will now discuss a sample of a reading task which attempts to assess the learner's ability in reading. The questions given at the end of the passage have different levels of complexity, beginning with the factual and progressing to inferential, evaluative and referential, as well as expecting the learner to understand the meaning of words in context. They are successful in testing the learners' skill and sub-skills in reading. The only problem that I see in this kind of a question is that the learners do not have a purpose nor a context which they can relate to while doing the task. The only purpose for doing the task is to pass in their English exam.

Reading task (Unseen passage)

Read the following passage and answer the questions that follow. For each question four possible answers are given. Choose the correct answer and circle the letter corresponding to the answer.

Shashi came to live in London with his father, mother and three sisters after President Amin expelled the Asians from Uganda. The family first lived with one of Shashi's uncles who

had migrated to England some years before. They now live in their own house in Tooting. Shashi goes to a South London high school. Shashi's father, already suffering from a heart complaint, died soon after arriving in England. It was after his father's death, says Shashi, that he felt like writing a book about his life. 'Small Accidents' is the story of his childhood in Uganda and his family's first experiences as Asian immigrants in England.

1. In the family described in the passage there are
 - A. three daughters only.
 - B. four daughters only
 - C. one daughter and three sons.
 - D. one son and three daughters
2. The place called Tooting is most probably
 - A. a village or town in India
 - B. a village or town in Uganda
 - C. a town somewhere in England
 - D. a part of the city of London.
3. Shashi's family moved to England because
 - A. Asians were forced to leave Uganda
 - B. they wanted to settle in a foreign country
 - C. Shashi's father needed special medical treatment
 - D. the parents wanted to give their children a good education.
4. 'They' in line 3 refers to
 - A. Shashi's uncle and aunt
 - B. Shashi's family
 - C. Asians from Uganda
 - D. some years
5. 'Small Accidents' is
 - A. a history of Asians in Uganda
 - B. a humorously written book on the dangers faced by travellers.
 - C. a book written by Shashi about his experiences

- D. an account of Shashi's father's illness and death.
6. The members of Shashi's family are Asians who are now
- A. settled in Uganda
 - B. settled in England
 - C. visiting England as tourists
 - D. in Asia after visiting Uganda and England.

The writing task (task 1) given below expects the student to write an essay on a topic which is too abstract or which a student cannot relate to easily. Therefore s/he would struggle to respond to the question and this could be an impediment in writing a good answer and it may also reflect negatively on the learner's writing competence. The task does not give clear directions or support as to what kind of response is expected from the student. Moreover, this kind of a task makes assessment difficult, because the teacher has no clear guidelines as to what s/he should look for in the answer or what constitutes a good piece of writing. The second task has a contextual relevance for the student as compared to the first task, but if they have never been taught how to write an application or a bio- data, the task can be very challenging for them, both in terms of the context and the content.

Task 1: (Traditional)

Write an essay in about 200-250 words on one of the following topics:
What makes a good neighbour?

OR

How to improve our education system?

Task 2:

You saw an advertisement for the position of Sales Manager for India Finances Company in 'The News' dated 20 April, 2009. Write an application to the C.E.O. of the company for the position along with your bio-data.

At ELPC we try to make our tests communicative in nature by creating test items which focus on testing the students' language ability in a variety of real-life contexts. Moreover, at ELPC we do not have a prescribed text book, but a syllabus which focuses on teaching the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening and the tests also focus on testing the

language skills of the students. Thus, both teaching and testing become enabling factors in their language learning endeavours. The tasks try to create a context which a student is familiar with, so that when the student engages with it, s/he is able to respond to it in a way similar to how s/he would respond to in a real life situation (instead of giving stock responses which have been memorized earlier, to the questions) This familiarity helps the student to respond better and to be able to use the language in meaningful situations and contexts.

Samples of tests at ELPC:

Given below are samples of of a reading and writing task from our ELPC test.

Reading task: (communicative)

You are the Cultural Secretary of your college and have organized an outing for a group of 20 students of your college. You will all be spending a day in Gandhi park. You have planned a number of activities for the students at the park. Unfortunately, there are some rules you need to adhere to while you are in the park. Using the rules of the park as a reference, indicate by putting \checkmark or X whether *you* can or cannot do the following activities and mention the rule number that is applicable. If no rule applies, say *not applicable* (NA):

	Yes	No	Rule No.	NA
1. Can invite a well known speaker for a speech. 2. Once inside, you can stay as long as you want. 3. Can drink alcohol if you have a license. 4. Spreading a sheet for putting the food. 5. Playing on the lawn if there is ‘ <i>no trespassing</i> ’ sign. 6. No music, drama, dance, whatsoever. 7. Can pluck flowers after you have got permission. 8. Emptying unwanted water into the lake. 9. Collecting money for a college programme. 10. Bringing your own food.				

Rules and Regulations: Gandhi Park

1. No unauthorized person shall enter or remain in any part of the park at the time of closing.
2. No one shall make requests regarding donations or subscriptions for any cause and disturb the peace of the visitors to the park.
3. No one shall walk on any flowerbeds or lawns where a ‘No trespassing’ sign has been displayed.

4. No one without the permission of the Head Gardener may pluck flowers or small shoots of plants from the park.
5. No person shall destroy or injure any tree or shrub in the park.
6. Writing or sticking unauthorized posters on the walls of buildings or any trees is strictly prohibited.
7. No public speech of an unlawful nature shall be given in the park.
8. No performance – dance, song or drama shall be conducted on the premises without the prior permission of the Commissioner of the Park.
9. No alcohol is to be brought inside the park. People who are drunk shall not enter or remain in the park.
10. No person shall wash clothes or other things in the lake or do any act likely to cause water pollution.

For a student to be able to complete the task s/ he will have to scan through the rules which is a sub-skill of reading, then try to correlate it with the activities that the students propose to do at the park. The learner will also have to understand unfamiliar vocabulary in context, and on the basis of all these skills will have to complete the given task. This kind of a task gives us information about the learner's language ability in the various sub-skills of reading that s/he employs to complete the task and at the same time indicates her/his competence to use them for other similar tasks.

Writing: The context of this writing task is very real for most students. The task has a purpose, a well-defined audience, a context which students can relate to , interact and respond to.

Writing Task: (communicative)

The following advertisement appeared in the newspaper. You are very eager to join the course, but can do so only if you are awarded a scholarship. Write a letter (80- 100 words) to the Director of the Academy, explaining why you deserve the scholarship.

<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Vidyadaan Mahotsav 2012!!</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Genius Students Academy</p> <p style="text-align: center;">30-day Course in Personality Development.</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Become the best person you can!!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">There are a few scholarships for the deserving. Apply today !! Hurry!!!</p>
--

24 July, 2012

Dear Sir,

I am very eager to join the course but unfortunately.....

.....
.....
.....

I believe that both these tasks are valid in terms of content and construction. If the criteria or expected language ability has already been defined for the level at which the student is taking the test then the performance of the students' and their language ability can be assessed on the basis of this criteria laid down both for reading and writing at that level.

Discussion:

Although the model proposed by Morrow of communicative language testing seems suitable to be used in our context of second language learning and assessment, I agree with Pierce (1989), who says that knowing the rules of English while assessing the communicative competence of students for whom English is a second language is important, it is equally important to question them in one's own context. Knowing English as a second language should not be a limiting factor, rather it should open up the possibilities of how the learners perceive themselves, their role in society and what they can do to change society. I believe learning English as a second language should empower our students to question and debate on language use in their own social and cultural context rather than follow the rules of the language as laid down by the native speakers of the language or someone in power.

In my view the model proposed by Morrow of a communicative test will help the teachers to develop a test which will reflect a students' language ability realistically. These tests will also be high on face validity because the test will expect students to use language in realistic settings. This will also motivate them to perform better since they see a purpose and a context in the tests.

Moreover, Morrow's model talks of a test which helps in giving the profile of a student in terms of their language abilities. This kind of a profile of the student will not only help the

teacher but also inform the students of their own level of proficiency and motivate them to improve.

Morrow talks of having a criterion for assessing the language ability of students. In the context of Delhi University, it is extremely important to have this kind of a criteria because we have students who have studied English only for eight years and others who have studied it for twelve years. Moreover, even from amongst students who have studied English for the same number of years their language abilities vary and an appropriate criterion will help in assessing their language abilities correctly. The idea of having different tests for students at varying levels of proficiency will also take care of the issue of heterogeneity in a class. Though Morrow has been critiqued for stressing on testing only language performance and not language competence, yet the model suggested by him takes into account the assessment of language competence while assessing language performance in a test as discussed earlier in the communicative tasks on reading and writing which we administer at ELPC.

Since most students are not familiar with this kind of a test it is important to familiarize them with the structure of communicative tests. Another issue that needs to be addressed, is to acquaint the students with the rubrics of the various tasks. While attempting these tests, students will have to spend time in reading the instructions which could also become an impediment in the completion of the task. Moreover decoding and comprehending the rubrics can itself become a challenge for them. Therefore, we should look at the possibility of providing these instructions in the students' L 1 so that they are able to understand the instructions easily, and this may help them to perform better on the test.

In my opinion this kind of a test is based on and responds to the learner's communicative needs and also gives students an opportunity to use language in real life meaningful situations. The exposure to this kind of language use in realistic situations will also improve and increase the communicative confidence of the learner. But for this kind of a model to be successful, the role of the teacher is very crucial. S/he will not only have to have a fairly high level of competence in the second language but also be able to motivate and encourage the students to use the language in real life situations. Another demand of having this kind of a test, is training teachers to create test items for this kind of a model and also giving them training in qualitative assessment since most of them are familiar only with quantitative assessment. Although the

challenges in implementing communicative tests are many, I conclude by reaffirming that to help our students use the language better, we should design tests similar to Morrow's model, so that our students start using the language, initially, maybe incompetently with an intent to communicate and later progress to becoming proficient users of the language.

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