ABSTRACT

Introduction

Language testing is an important, integral part of the complex process of language learning and teaching. It has been considered as one of the four interdependent elements of a rudimentary model of a curriculum, the other three being: purpose or objective, content or knowledge, and methodology or learning experiences (Hooper, 1971, cited in Murphy 1985:02). Testing is as important as any other constituent of the curriculum. It is so important that the success or failure of the overall language teaching programme is assessed on the basis of learners’ performance in tests. That is, the effectiveness of tests is perceived as instrumental to the effectiveness of a language teaching programme. A language test, therefore, is expected to be well framed depending on and achieving the aims and objectives of the prescribed syllabi. This means that testing in a course of study is a ‘part of potentially continuous process’ (Murphy 1985:03), giving its feedback on the learning and teaching process, the effectiveness of materials and methodology, the parameters of tests, and other planning and policy matters. Hughes (2003:01) asserts the same view when he says that “the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash, and can be harmful or
beneficial. If a test is regarded as important, if the stakes are high, preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities. And if the test content and testing techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash”.

There was a time when ‘a large number of examinations encouraged a tendency to separate testing from teaching’ (Heaton, 1988:05), but off late it has been realised that language teaching and testing go hand in hand. While Davies (1968:05) observed that “a good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching”, Hughes (2003:02) considers testing as having both harmful and beneficial backwash on teaching programmes and claims that “the proper relationship between teaching and testing is surely that of partnership. It is true that there may be occasions when the teaching is good and appropriate and the testing is not; we are then likely to suffer from harmful backwash.” Heaton (1988:05) finds a stronger bond when he states that “both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other”.

A well-framed language test, therefore, can help teachers and learners in many ways. According to Heaton (1988:05) such tests can help create positive motivational attitudes among learners for an efficient instruction
which in turn will help them in mastering the language. A good test can also help the teachers in the assessment of their own teaching targets. On the basis of test results the teachers can evaluate the following:

- How far are the curricular aims and objectives met?
- Are the instructional materials effective? Or is there any need for modification, supplement or adaptation?
- How about teaching methods, techniques and strategies?
- Where is the root of problems in achieving the teaching objectives?

Responses to such queries as above can guide the teachers and the administrators in redefining or modifying the teaching programmes. In the same way even learners can do their self-assessment on the basis of the results of any type of test, they undergo. They can ask themselves:

- How far has (s)he achieved the overall proficiency?
- How far is (s)he able to achieve the learning aims and objectives?
- What are his/her strengths and weaknesses?
- Where does (s)he need to pay special attention?
- What are the learning problems and their way outs?
Seeing such a constructive role of the language tests, the test setters are required to be very careful in framing the tests. They should know what content is tested, how it is tested, and what criteria will be used in rating.

In recent years the move towards communication-focused, learner-centered ESL pedagogy has resulted in an impressive research output in the areas of syllabus design (Wilkins 1976, Munby 1978, Widdowson 1979) and teaching methodology (Alwright 1979, Brumfit 1979, Reves 1980). In striking contrast, however, language tests, in general, have so far remained less sensitive to the theory and practice of communicative language teaching (Rea 1985, Weir 1990, Paltridge 1992), especially in the ESL and EFL contexts. But this would be grossly misleading if we suggest that research in language testing has remained totally static over a period of time. There have been significant research initiatives in the area of language testing, particularly in quantifying the concept of ‘communicative competence’ for the following purpose of tests:

- What is to be tested in a communicative syllabus?
- How to test communicative competence?
What, however, lacks is a systematic incorporation of these research insights into the construct and implementation of a communicative curriculum.


The above wide range of research over the last half a century and a continuous shift in approaches to ESL pedagogy, with language being perceived as ‘communication’ has brought in new ideas about language testing and new ways of evaluating the performance of second language learners. Yet much the greater part of this shift is still to be incorporated within the framework of communicative curriculum and practice. In the actual classroom practice, it is very often believed by both teachers and learners that testing is the last item to be completed at the end of an academic year and so it is often casually conducted. One major reason in making testing one of the most neglected areas in the field of language
learning and teaching is the lack of proper application of the theories into practice. This is why perhaps most of the tests produced so far are of poor quality.

**Chapter-wise Discussion**

The present study, therefore, attempts to investigate these issues in the following five chapters:

Chapter I, besides providing the statement of intent of this thesis and a tentative chapterization, expresses its concern over the state of affairs regarding the practice of language testing in an English language programme. This chapter, at the very outset, claims that though testing has always been viewed in principle a cardinal constituent of a language curriculum, it has remained neglected due to the lack of proper application of testing principles into actual practice. In addition, this chapter also makes an attempt to define and distinguish such related terms like – ‘evaluation’, ‘assessment’ and ‘testing’ – which are generally used interchangeably by the stakeholders of English language teaching programmes.

An historical overview and the review of the available literature with regard to language testing are provided in Chapter II. The historical overview of the developments in language testing, in the present chapter,
A sufficiently detailed discussion is made on the Communicative language testing and its theoretical backdrop in Chapter III. It starts with the background to Communicative approach where the major shifts, since 1960s in English language learning and teaching, like the ones from ‘mastery of language structure to language use’, from ‘perceiving language as a set of rules to a means of communication’, from ‘Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis to Inter-language Hypothesis’, and from ‘linguistic competence to communicative competence’ have been seen as the contributing factors for the emergence of Communicative language testing. In addition, this chapter summarizes the principles, characteristics, content and marking criteria of the Communicative language testing. Another major aspect of this chapter is a discussion on the stages of Communicative test construction, under the heading ‘Mechanics of Communicative Test Construction’ where it is suggested to decide on the purpose, techniques, wash-back effect, content, format, and operations of the language tests for the four basic skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing – are elaborated in terms of Pre-writing, while writing, and post writing activities. This section raises the issue of sampling, piloting, moderation and providing scoring key/marking criteria for a
communicative language test. This chapter sums up with a discussion on the problems pertaining to the Communicative language testing.

Chapter IV analyses the actual language test in practice of BA, B. Sc. and B.Com first and second years Compulsory English Course at AMU in order to identify the reasons for the gulf between the principle and practice of Communicative language testing. This chapter explores that English has occupied a central position at AMU since its establishment in 1875 and that it’s various syllabi of the English language has generally followed the ELT principles of the time. An analysis of the present syllabus of 2009 – 10 helped in identifying its objective as aiming ‘to make the learners proficient enough to use the basic language skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – in their everyday life for various purposes’. This brings the objective of the course closer to the aim(s) of the Communicative language teaching as achieving communicative competence for purposeful language use or developing learners’ ability in the target language to take part in acts of communication in real life situations. The course objective at both first and second year levels was found to be the same. The syllabi for both the years are mainly skill-based where the language functions are categorized and spread over five units under the headings – Reading Comprehension, Writing Skills and Oral
Communication (Listening and Speaking). A major portion of this chapter deals with an analysis of the actual language test in the light of the ‘Format for Communicative Test Specifications’. The following finer points with discussion can be listed here with regard to tests in reading, writing and oral communication at the **first year** level:

**Reading Comprehension:**

i. Two questions (questions 1.1 and 1.2) out of three in Unit I, entitled ‘Reading Comprehension 1’, fail to be a test in reading by any means. That is, they fail to be a valid test because they do not test what they are intended to do under the unit of reading comprehension.

ii. These tests (questions 1.1 and 1.2) are not even reliable because they do not make the learners perform the task in reading comprehension.

iii. These tests do not even provide real life situation for the students.

iv. They do not match the specifications of a communicative language test, because they cease to be performance-based, context-based, interactive, or authentic text-based.
v. Questions 1.1 and 1.2 do not even apply the typical techniques of testing reading comprehension.

vi. Question 1.3 comes closer to the parameters of a communicative language test because it is based on an authentic text from everyday life and is directly performance and task based relating the reading skill. But this test could have included various other techniques – like True-false, Gap-filling, Multiple-choice, Sequencing statements, etc. – to elicit students reading abilities.

vii. Question 2, a test based on reading passage, also fails to be an effective comprehension check test, because it lacks in varieties of questions based on such techniques as True-false, Gap-filling, Multiple-choice, Sequencing statements, etc. The passage here is followed by four general comprehension based questions, which are generally answered by students by picking lines from the given passage rather than answering them in their own words. Hence these questions fail to be valid and reliable in testing reading comprehension.

viii. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators/examiners for the above tests in reading comprehension.
Writing Skills:

i. Question 3-A fails to be valid and reliable in the sense that it does not involve learners into tasks and activities, relating making notes. It just asks students to make notes without providing any format. In such a situation, students will either make the notes in a format that was taught in the class (if he remembers it) or they will use different formats (which will affect the marking criteria). Hence such an open ended question will be answered based on memory or in multiple formats.

ii. Question 3-B appears to be convincing, but it needs a neatly designed marking criteria / scoring key, which is missing in this test.

iii. Question 4-A has a lot of scope for becoming an effective communicative language test. This question could have designed various interactive activities in the form of pre-writing and while-writing tasks, but they are missing here. Hence this question ceases to be reliable and is not found to be task-based where students get an opportunity to participate. There is sufficient scope here to provide the students with verbal and/or non-verbal inputs. Or even the students could have been asked
to prepare or complete a box, table or a chart (as a pre-writing task), to be used for writing the description.

iv. In contrast, question 4 B provides a context in which the students have to write a letter and also prepare a CV. Hence it involves the learners in doing the task as per the requirement of the question given. Nevertheless, this question could have carried some verbal inputs to be used by students for writing the answers.

v. the test does not involve students in any sentence level activity, such as sentence completion, combination, expansion.

vi. No marking criteria / scoring key is provided to the evaluators with this test.

**Oral Communication:**

i. Question 5, Unit V, entitled ‘Oral Communication’ totally fails to meet the criteria of a communicative language test. In fact, in no way it is a test in oral communication. No oral communication takes place. Hence this test ceases to be either valid or reliable by any means.

ii. The tests (the given three options) under question 5 resemble those tests in writing which are designed on some situations
with no verbal input, like questions 4-A and 4-B. Here too students are supposed to write, rather than communicate orally.

iii. What is taught or what is intended to be taught through this unit is not being tested here. That means this test ceases to be either valid or reliable.

iv. Since the test is assumed to be answered in written mode, it exploits no technique of oral communication, such as ‘limited response, picture cues, task response, multiple-choice, short lecture or social context, guided techniques, explanation, paraphrasing, and others’.

v. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators.

At the second year level, the following observations were made:

**Reading Comprehension:**

i. Q1-A (a) and 1-A (b) – two questions out of three in Unit I, entitled ‘Reading Comprehension’ - fail to test reading comprehension. Rather they directly test knowledge of linguistic / grammatical forms.

ii. They are neither valid nor reliable.
iii. They do not match the specifications of a communicative language test, because they are not interactive, context-based, or activity-based.

iv. Question 1-B intends to test reading comprehension by giving a reading passage with a merely limited number of two (02) comprehension questions and one (01) grammatically motivated, vocabulary question. Here the number of questions should have been more, besides including a variety in asking questions / techniques of testing reading comprehension, like True-false, Gap-filling, Multiple-choice, Sequencing statements, etc.

v. All the three questions, under Unit I, fail to exploit the techniques of the communicative language tests. Hence they cease to involve students in task-based, performance opportunities in communication, while testing.

vi. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators/examiners for the above tests in reading comprehension.

Writing Skills:

i. Question 2-A, Unit II, entitled ‘Paragraph Writing / Expansion’, could have been designed in a better manner by involving
students in some performance activities, like listing and sequencing the points or completing a given table, box or chart, as a pre-writing activity, to be used for writing the paragraph. Besides this, the students could have been asked to write ‘topic sentence’ and ‘supporting sentences’, as a part of paragraph writing. In addition to this some activities in sentence level expansion could have also been designed.

ii. Question 2-B is a better test in comparison to Question 2-A, because here the students are first supposed to read the given chart and on the basis of their understanding of the chart, they will write a paragraph.

iii. Question 3-A appears to be a very flat question based on a given situation with no input. Like question 2-A, even here either some verbal/non-verbal input could have been provided or the students could have been made to be involved in some pre-writing activity like filling the box or completing a table.

iv. Question 3-B is a test in writing processes. Here the test-setters does give a context/situation along with verbal inputs, but this could have been more innovative by involving students in step-wise sentence building activities.
v. Question 4-A is an activity in report writing based on the given verbal inputs. Reports are written in a given format. In the absence of any format, here the students will be either using their memory for writing a report in the format that was taught by the teacher in the class, or they will use different formats, which will create a problem of scoring. Subjectivity of examiners are certainly going to interfere the marking criteria. However, what is positive in this test is that it provides the learners a familiar situation along with a set of verbal inputs.

vi. Question 4-B provides merely topics expected to be exploited by the students in order to write an essay. Though it can be considered an example of a test in free writing, here too, the setter can give points to be elaborated for completing the essay.

vii. Tests in Writing skills in general are beyond sentence level. That is, they do not test students for sentence completion / building, sentence combination, expansion, or even reduction.

viii. There are generally two types of questions: with verbal inputs (questions 2-A, 2-B, 3-B & 4-A) and without verbal inputs (questions 3-A & 4-B). This means that other techniques of
testing writing like picture cues, guided-writing, building a paragraph outline, etc are missing.

ix. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators.

**Oral Communication:**

i. Question 5, Unit V, entitled ‘Oral Communication’ totally fails to meet the criteria of a communicative language test. In fact, in no way it is a test in oral communication. No oral communication takes place. Hence this test ceases to be either valid or reliable by any means.

ii. The tests (the given three options) under question 5 resemble those tests in writing which are designed on some situations with no verbal input, like questions 3-A, 4-A and 4-B. Here too students are supposed to write, rather than communicate orally.

iii. What is taught or what is intended to be taught through this unit is not being tested here. That means this test ceases to be either valid or reliable.

iv. Since the test is assumed to be answered in written mode, it exploits no technique of oral communication, such as ‘limited response, picture cues, task response, multiple-choice, short
lecture or social context, guided techniques, explanation, paraphrasing, and others’.

v. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators.

Findings

These observations in the tests helped in identifying the following lacunae in the test construction, listed below jointly for both first and second year tests, under the headings of following language skills:

Reading Comprehension:

i. Majority of tests in Reading comprehension fail to be valid, because they fail to test reading abilities of students. In other words they fail to test what they are intended to do under the unit of reading comprehension.

ii. These tests are not even reliable because they do not make the learners perform the task in reading comprehension; rather they test students’ knowledge in linguistic / grammatical forms.

iii. These tests do not even provide real life situation for the students.

iv. They do not match the specifications of a communicative language test, because they cease to be performance-based, context-based, interactive, or authentic text-based.
v. These tests do not even apply the typical techniques - like True-false, Gap-filling, Multiple-choice, Sequencing statements, etc. - of testing reading comprehension.

vi. These tests in general have a problem of designing an appropriate test of reading comprehension. These tests do not appear to have followed properly the pre-writing, writing and post writing stages of test construction.

vii. Absence of a scoring key / marking criteria is a major drawback of these tests in reading comprehension.

**Writing Skills:**

i. These tests in writing skills fail to be valid and reliable in the sense that they do not involve learners into actual tasks and activities.

ii. These tests cease to be even reliable because they fail to make learners perform the task due to inappropriate designing of the test.

iii. These tests in general have a problem of designing an appropriate test of writing skills. They do not appear to have followed properly the pre-writing, writing and post writing stages of test construction. For example, some times while these
tests lack in providing verbal / non-verbal inputs, they also lack in involving students in prewriting activities / tasks. Besides this, the students could have been asked to write ‘topic sentence’ and ‘supporting sentences’, as a part of paragraph writing.

iv. These tests are not found to be task-based where students get an opportunity to participate in communicative activities. There is sufficient scope here to provide the students with verbal and/or non-verbal inputs.

v. The tests in writing skills do not involve students in any sentence level activity, such as sentence completion, combination, expansion.

vi. There are generally two types of questions: ‘with verbal inputs’ and ‘without verbal inputs’. This means that other techniques of testing writing like picture cues, guided-writing, building a paragraph outline, etc are missing.

vii. No marking criteria / scoring key are provided to the evaluators with this test.

**Oral Communication:**

i. Tests in Oral Communication are a total collapse. They fail to meet the criteria of a communicative language test. In fact, in no
way they are tests in oral communication. No oral communication takes place. Hence these tests cease to be either valid or reliable by any means.

ii. These tests in oral communication resemble the tests in writing which are designed on some situations with no verbal input. Here too students are supposed to write, rather than communicate orally.

iii. What is taught or what is intended to be taught through this unit is not being tested here. That means this test ceases to be either valid or reliable.

iv. Since the test is assumed to be answered in written mode, it exploits no technique of oral communication, such as ‘limited response, picture cues, task response, multiple-choice, short lecture or social context, guided techniques, explanation, paraphrasing, and others’.

v. No scoring key / marking criteria are provided to the evaluators / examiners.

Chapter IV, besides listing these weaknesses in the existing tests at AMU, also provides couple of sample tests / exercises with proposed marking criteria for reading, writing, listening and speaking.
Chapter V concludes this study along with the following recommendations and suggestions:

**Recommendations:**

Based on the above observations, the present study recommends the following:

i. Communicative language test should test communicative skills, rather than aspects of language. In other words, the test should carry hidden linguistic / grammatical forms and the communicative / functions of language should be made obvious.

   In brief, there should be a focus on communicative process

ii. Students should get an opportunity to perform communication in the test, for which the test needs to be context specific. The test thus should test the ability to deal with discourse.

iii. A communicative test tests what the course wants to encourage among students, so that it could help learning through a Positive wash back based on a proper scoring criteria.

iv. It should be criterion referenced, i.e. whether students can perform a certain task.

v. It should be Valid, i.e. whether the test measures what it intends to test; that is, it should carry high content validity.
vi. It needs to be Reliable, i.e. whether the test makes learners perform the task that it intends.

vii. A communicative test should have purpose of test, context, performance, interaction, authenticity, unpredictability, task-based exercises.

viii. Awareness-raising, regarding designing tests, at the level of test-setters is required.

ix. More professionalism and seriousness is to be brought among test-setters.

x. In-service trainings, workshops and seminars should be conducted in this direction.

xi. Testing needs to be considered for positive wash-back effect.

xii. Testing of oral communication must be introduced in a valid and reliable manner in the form of internal assessments like small quizzes, sessionals, and viva-voces.

Suggestions:

More analytical studies (like the present one) of various tests conducted by colleges, universities and state and central board agencies are suggested to be conducted for awareness raising and making language testing an integral part of English language teaching programmes.
Initiatives made by CIIL, Mysore in the form of NTS need to be encouraged and its recommendations need to be followed by other institutions.

The present study, thus, focused on inferring the mismatch between principles and practice of Communicative language testing. The findings emanating from this study would certainly help in bridging the mismatch and improving the overall quality of language testing in English Language Teaching Programmes.

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