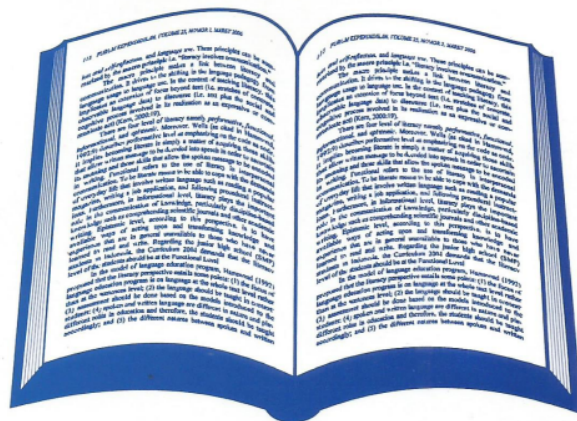


Communicative Language Testing How Teachers Understand and Apply It in Constructing Test Items

By Soni Mirizon

FORUM KEPENDIDIKAN



Diterbitkan oleh Fakultas Keguruan dan Ilmu Pendidikan
Universitas Sriwijaya

Forum Kependidikan	Vol. 29	No. 1	Hlm. 1-106	Palembang September 2009	ISSN 0215-9392
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FORUM KEPENDIDIKAN

ISSN 0215-9392

Volume 29, Nomor 1, September 2009, hlm. 1-106

1 Berkala terbit dua kali setahun pada bulan Maret dan September (ISSN 0215-9392) Berisi tulisan yang diangkat dari hasil penelitian dan kajian analisis-kritis di bidang pendidikan. Untuk tahun 2010 dan seterusnya terbit dua kali setahun pada bulan Juni dan Desember.

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FORUM KEPENDIDIKAN adalah **jurnal nasional terakreditasi** berdasarkan Keputusan Direktur Jenderal Pendidikan Tinggi Departemen Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan Nasional No:395/DIKTI/ KEP/2000, No:49/DIKTI/KEP/2003, dan No: 55a/DIKTI/Kep/2006 dengan Akreditasi B.

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Indeks Subjek Forum Kependidikan Volume 29, Tahun 2009

Indeks Pengarang Forum Kependidikan Volume 29, Tahun 2009

Daftar Nama Mitra Bestari sebagai Penelaah Ahli Tahun 2009

6 COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TESTING: HOW TEACHERS UNDERSTAND AND APPLY IT IN CONSTRUCTING TEST ITEMS

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Abstract: This research was aimed to find out how teachers of English understand the concept of Communicative Language Testing and apply it in constructing test items in junior high schools in Palembang city. The subjects were forty teachers of English from twenty junior high schools in Palembang city which were selected randomly. This research was conducted during five months from July to November 2008. Descriptive analysis design was used as the research method. The instruments used in this research were a questionnaire and a documentation sheet. The results showed that there were nine findings related to the teachers of English understanding towards the concept of communicative language testing. They were (1) all of the teachers of English had ever constructed test items for UAS/UAN; (2) instead of constructing the test items alone, they did it collaboratively with their colleagues who taught at the parallel classes; (3) the test items that they made only tested certain language skills—reading and writing; (4) most of those teachers still found difficulties in constructing good test; (5) the test items they made were not only in the forms of objective test but also in essay test; (6) they believed that competence is more important than the performance as reflected in the test items they made; (7) most of them had never heard communicative language testing term; (8) most of them did not know some tasks that were normally used in communicative language testing; and (9) most of them had no idea of whether the test items they made were in the form of communicative language testing or not. Furthermore, the respondents' application of the understanding the communicative language test was considered low. It can be seen from the documentation of the test items they had written. Mostly those test items were written in terms of discrete point test in which each skill of English was tested separately only in certain skills—reading and writing. In addition, the context of those tests was not related to daily real life.

Keywords: Communicative language testing, teachers of English, test items construction

Teaching and testing are two related and inseparable things in the teaching and learning activities. It is irrelevant if a teacher only focuses himself or herself on the teaching matters without giving proportional attention to testing or vice-versa. Giving test to the students is meant to (1) know the students readiness in studying, (2) monitor the students' progress or achievement, (3) diagnose students' difficulty, and (4) evaluate the learning outcome (Gronlund, 1977).

In the history of teaching and learning English in Indonesia, there have been many methods used, from the conventional one—Grammar-Translation Method—to the recently discussed one—Communicative Approach. The latter is the most popular one nowadays and has been considered as the one that can contribute optimal outcome in the teaching and learning

English. It is due to the fact that this approach is based on the use of language as a means of communication.

The consequence of applying Communicative Approach in teaching and learning English is that in testing the students, the test should accommodate the function of language as a means of communication based on the given contexts. In other words, the test format should contain communicative elements.

In order to make a language test successful in achieving its objective, the test performance has to be in line with the actual use of language in the real situation as a means of communication. The problem that is commonly faced by experts and assessment practitioners (like teachers) is that the tasks commonly used in a test tend to be artificial. In other words, the test

does not reflect the use of language in a real situation as a means of communication. Most of the tasks tested only assess students' linguistic competence and tend to ignore students' linguistic performance.

In constructing a communicative language testing, all parts of the tasks, especially pragmatic and strategic competence, need to be included so that the test reflects the use of language in a real situation. In this matter, a teacher needs to know what skill will be tested in communicative language testing and needs to be able to appropriately select the tasks that will be given according to the skill tested. For instance, in assessing students' speaking ability, a teacher may use *role play* as a task to see whether his or her students really possess speaking ability as it is expected (as it is stated in the lesson plan) and should not give another task that is unrelated to test speaking ability.

Since Communicative Approach has been applied in teaching and learning process for more than two decades, it is assumed that teachers of English have already known the concept of communicative language testing and have already applied it in constructing test. This research tried to prove the truth about the assumption by raising two problems (1) how is the teachers' of English at junior high schools in Palembang city understanding towards communicative language testing?; and (2) how is their competence in constructing communicative language testing items?

In teaching English, Communicative Approach is based on two theories—language theory and learning theory. In the former, it is stated that language is a system for the expression of meaning where the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication, while in the latter it is claimed that there are three principles that need to be fulfilled for successful learning so that it can contribute optimal outcome. These are (1) communication principle, that is activities that involve real communication promote learning; (2) task principle, that is activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning; (3) meaningfulness learning, that is language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process (Johnson, 1982 and Littlewood, 1981 in Richards and Rodgers, 2006).

Based on the two theories, the design of

teaching and learning in Communicative Approach is aimed to develop learners' functional skill in order that they are able to interact and communicate, while the syllabus of teaching English covers some elements such as *theme, task, language function* which are then set into some activities which require learners to do communicative activities such as information exchange, meaning negotiation, and interaction. Learners in this case get a bigger role than the teacher in teaching and learning activities, whereas the teacher plays a role as a facilitator whose primary function is to facilitate and maintain the progress of communication process among students.

The objective of Communicative Approach in teaching English is to develop communicative ability. According to Hymes (1972), a language user who has communicative ability possesses knowledge and competence to use the language competently in a language society. While the communicative competence consists of four elements: (1) grammatical competence, knowledge about grammatical rules, (2) sociolinguistic competence, knowledge about rules of language use in social context, (3) discourse competence, knowledge about the interpretation of meaning in discourse, and (4) strategic competence, knowledge about communication strategy both verbal and nonverbal (Canale & Swain, 1980).

According to Bachman (1990) communicative language competence consists of competence (knowledge about language) and performance (knowledge about language use in communication). However, somebody's language competence cannot be measured; rather the performance is the one that can be measured since it is the real evidence of the competence.

In Communicative Language Testing (CLT), what is measured is how far a student makes use of the language in a real life situation. In assessing the productive skills, like speaking and writing, the focus is devoted to the accuracy in using the language and not on the accuracy in the grammar mastery of the language, whereas in assessing the receptive skills, like listening and reading, the focus is given to the understanding towards the meaning conveyed by the speaker or the writer, and not on the detailed information finding. CLT usually integrates productive and receptive skills as a reflection of the use of language in daily life where there is no language

skills used separately. As an instance, in reading, a reader is normally asked to make a report or retell what has been read. In this case, the language skills used are reading and writing or speaking. Similarly it may happen in a discussion where a participant needs to use all the language skills integratedly. He or she does not only listen but also has to speak to express his or her opinion which has been encoded from reading, note taking, or writing important and relevant thing.

It is necessary to note that Communicative Language Testing can be seen as a continuum. In other words, a language test which is really communicative is hardly found, whereas the one that has communicative value in it is quite common. For instance, listening test which requires one correct response from four options answer provided towards a given utterance is considered more communicative than the one which requires the test-taker to translate the utterance. However, interview test is considered more communicative since both the interviewer (the tester) and the interviewee (the test-taker) sit face to face where the test-taker is asked to give direct response.

CLT is very specific and depends on the context. This kind of test has to be constructed based on the description of language competence which must be needed or used by a student in a real situation. For example, an utterance like "Could you open the door?" What needs to be noticed here is not the student's understanding of the meaning of the utterance, but his or her response towards the utterance which he or she proves by opening the door. So, this kind of test tries to test to what extent somebody's communicative competence is put into reality based on situation he or she encounters.

Tasks that are normally given to test listening and speaking skills in CLT are in the form of 'information gap' and 'role play'. In the former, a pair of students is exposed to some information which some of it is deleted and need to be obtained from his or her partner, whereas in the latter a pair of students is given the similar task without deleting the information. In this case, test-takers are really required to play a role asked such as a teacher and a student.

To test reading and writing skills, there are two ways that can be applied by giving some tasks such as writing a letter, memo, summary, or answering certain questions based on the

information given. In addition, students can also be asked to read a 400-word passage for example, and are required to summarize the passage in 100 words. To make this task have communicative nuance, students should also be provided with realistic reason to do the task. For instance, a student who is working in an institution as an employee should ideally be tested by giving him or her a long reading passage in which his or her boss wants him or her to summarize in such a way that his or her boss can understand so that he can accommodate what he wants to present in a seminar.

This research was aimed to find out the understanding of the teachers of English of junior high schools in Palembang towards the concept of CLT and to find out to what extent the application of their understanding in constructing test items. The significance that can be drawn from the result of this research is that it can figure out and contribute valuable input about the teachers of English understanding towards CLT and the application of their understanding in constructing test items. Thus, related parties such as the Regional Department of National Education, Sub Teacher Consultative Group (MGMP), and Faculty of Teacher Training and Education as the teachers of English producer can take the findings into account in upgrading the teachers' competence.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research was a descriptive analysis which tried to gain the fact from the field and described them as they were. This method was used to collect the data related to a certain topic in a certain condition as detail as possible (Woolfolk, 1993:15; Wiersma, 1991:25; Best dan Khan, 1993:137). In this case, it was used in order to describe teachers of English understanding towards the concept of CLT and its application in constructing test items.

The population of this study was teachers of English in Palembang in the academic year 2008/2009. The sample consisted of 40 teachers of English selected randomly from 20 public and private junior high schools in Palembang. Two teachers of English were taken from each school.

The data were collected through questionnaire and documentation. The questionnaire was constructed based on the concept of CLT

and was used to obtain the data about the teachers' understanding towards CLT, while the documentation¹⁷ as used towards the test papers constructed and used by the teachers in evaluating the teaching and learning process. In analyzing the data, they were classified into two—the one from questionnaire, and the other from documentation. After the data had been obtained, they were analyzed using percentage. Then they were interpreted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based on the data obtained from the doc-

umentation of the test items constructed by the teachers, it was found that those test items did not reflect the CLT. It could be seen that not all the language skills (*listening, speaking, reading dan writing*) were tested integratedly. Moreover, the tasks given did not reflect the use of English in daily life, but tended to be the evaluation of language use.

Based on the data gathered from the questionnaire, it was found out that those teachers generally had not understood the CLT concept. This can be seen from their response shown in the following Table 2.

Tabel 2. Result from the Questionnaire

No.	Aspect that are Asked	Yes (%)	No (%)
1.	Have participated in constructing test items for semester exam & national exam	100	0
2.	Frequency in constructing test items every semester	55	45
3.	Test items constructed collaboratively with other teachers of English in the school	75	25
4.	Test items constructed tested all the language skills	30	70
5.	Language skills which were seldom tested were listening & speaking	75	25
6.	Encountered difficulties in constructed test items	45	55
7.	In constructing test items, test items mostly written was in the form of objective test	80	20
8.	In constructing objective test, the dominant form was Multiple Choice form	100	0
9.	In constructing essay test, the dominant form was Guided Essay	70	30
10.	Checking validity and reliability before using the test items in the real test	25	75
11.	Test items constructed had already fulfilled the criteria of good test	55	45
12.	Testing students using test items relevant to teaching material taught in the class	95	5
13.	In assessing students English ability, competence is more important than performance	80	20
14.	Have ever heard the term CLT	60	40
15.	Know the difference between CLT & other kinds of test	30	70
16.	In CLT students are tested in the use on language in real situation	30	70
17.	All the language skills can be tested using CLT	30	70
18.	Task like role play can be used in testing <i>speaking/listening</i> in CLT	65	35
19.	Task like <i>information gap & letter writing</i> can be used in testing <i>reading/writing</i> in CLT	60	40
20.	All language skills test items in English that you have constructed for semester exam and national exam can be classified as CLT	40	60

Table 2 shows that in question number 1, 100% (40 teachers) had ever participated in constructing test items for semester exam and/or the national exam. They were involved in constructing test items for some reasons such as: having ever been trained in constructing test items, instructed by the school principal or instructed by the Department of National Education of Palembang city.

In question number 2, 25% (10 teachers) had occasionally participated in constructing test items for semester exam and/or the national exam, 20% (8 teachers) had ever participated in constructing test items for semester exam and/or the national exam more than three times, and

55% (22 teachers) had been asked to construct the semester test items in every semester.

In question number 3, 25% (10 teachers) constructed the test items themselves since there was no parallel classes in their schools, while the other 75% (30 teachers) constructed the test items collaboratively with other teachers of English who taught in parallel classes of the schools.

In question number 4, 30% (12 teachers) said that they tested all the four language skills in the test items they constructed, 70% (28 teachers) said that they did not since only reading and writing could be tested in writing, whereas listening and speaking were tested during

teaching and learning process. In contrast, in question number 5, 100% (40 teachers) said that they only tested reading and writing skills. It seems that there was an inconsistency in answering questions number 4 and 5 where only 70% of teachers admitted that they only tested some of the language skills, while in question number 5, 100% teachers admitted that they tested only some of the skills. However, it can be concluded that most of them did not test all the language skills in the test items they constructed.

In question number 6, 45% (18 teachers) confessed that they encountered difficulties in constructing test items due to the ignorance of the good criteria of constructing test items since they had never had any training in constructing good test, while 55% (22 teachers) told that they did not face such difficulties since they understood the criteria in constructing good test items and had ever been trained in constructing good test items.

In question number 7, 20% (8 teachers) only constructed objective test items, while 80% (32 teachers) wrote both objective and essay tests. Those who wrote objective test said that they only did what the principal instructed, while those who wrote both kinds said that they were asked to write objective test more than the essay test.

In question number 8, 100% (40 teachers) stated that in constructing objective test, they only wrote *Multiple Choice* form and none of them wrote other forms of objective test such as *Matching*, *Fill in*, or *True-False*. They said that it had been recommended by the Department of National Education of Palembang city. Besides, this form of test could be checked and scored relatively easy.

In question number 9, 70% (28 teachers) had ever constructed guided essay test items, while the other 30% (12 teachers) constructed only restricted essay items and none wrote open essay items. This former was relatively easy to checked that the latter.

In questions number 10, 25% (10 teachers) did validity and reliability tests before they decided to use the test items because it was very important to do, whereas 70% (30 teachers) did not do the validity and reliability in advance since they did not know the way how to.

In question number 11, 55% (23 teachers) claimed that they had constructed test items which fulfilled the criteria of good test in line

with the criteria stated in the curriculum, while 21% (18 teachers) said that they had no idea whether the test items they constructed were good or not. The reason behind this was that the test they constructed had never been checked by anyone else. In addition, they had never been trained on how to construct good test.

In question number 12, 95% (38 teachers) argued that they constructed test items based on the teaching materials that had been taught, whereas the other 5% (2 teachers) did not since they sometimes added test items that they never discussed in the class.

In question number 13, 80% (32 teachers) stated that to test students' ability in English, it could be seen from their competence since it was more important, while 20% (8 teachers) argued that through performance the students' ability could be identified more because through performance students' ability in using the language could be proved.

In question number 14, 60% (24 teachers) said that they had ever heard the term 'Communicative Language Testing' from various sources such as from campus, from their previous training, or from books, whereas 40% (16 teachers) admitted that they had never heard such term.

In question number 15, 30% (12 teachers) claimed that they knew the difference of CLT and other kinds of language test, while 70% (28 teachers) did not know since they had never heard this CLT term.

In questions number 16, 20% (8 teachers) thought that in CLT students were tested about their language mastery in language skills separately, while 40% (16 teachers) said that students were tested in their language mastery in language skills integratedly, 10% (4 teachers) agreed with the use of the skills in certain ways, and 30% (12 teachers) said that in CLT students were tested in using the language in a real situation.

In question number 17, 60% (24 teachers) argued that speaking skill could be tested in term of CLT, while 10% (4 teachers) agreed that writing skill could be tested using CLT, and 30% (12 teachers) said that all the four skills could be tested through CLT.

In question number 18, 30% (12 teachers) thought that the task which could be used in testing *speaking/listening* in CLT was *Information Gap*, 5% (2 teachers) suggested *summer-*

ing, and 65% (26 teachers) chose *role play*.

In question number 19, 40% (16 teachers) agreed that the task used in testing *reading/writing* in CLT was *letter writing*, 20% (4 teachers) referred to *information gap*, 35% (7 teachers) chose *summarizing*, and 5% (2 teachers) suggested *role play*.

In question number 20, 40% (16 teachers) acknowledged that language skills tested that they had ever constructed (semester test or national exam test) could be said as CLT, while 60% (24 teachers) did not since the items made did not test students in using the language in a real situation or the questions made did not test all the ²⁸ or language skills.

Based on the data obtained from the questionnaire and documentation, some ²² findings were found related to the analysis of the teachers of English understanding towards the concept of communicative language testing and its application in constructing test items in Junior High Schools in Palembang city. Those are (1) all the teachers had ever participated in constructing test items for semester exam and/or national exam; (2) the test items were constructed collaboratively with other teachers who taught at the parallel ³¹ classes; (3) the test items only tested some of the language skills (only *reading and writing*); (4) most of the teachers still encountered difficulties in constructing good test items; (5) the test items they wrote were not only in the form of objective test but also in essay test; (6) they considered that competence is more important than performance. This was reflected on the kinds of test items they made where most of them were not in the form of CLT; (7) most of them had not known that CLT measures students' ability in using the language in a real situation; (8) most of them did not know kinds of task that could be used in CLT; and (9) they did not know whether the test items they made so far were classified as CLT or not.

In relation to the application of the teachers of English understanding in constructing CLT test items, it could be said that there was no real application. This could be seen from the documented test items—the one used for semester and national exams—which they ¹³ did to making and using. Those items tended to be in the form of *discrete point*, where language skills were tested separately and merely tested some of those skills like reading and writing. Moreover

the context of the test items was not focussed on testing the skills in using the language in real situation.

⁹ CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Based on the findings ² of the research, it can be concluded that the teachers of English in junior high schools in Palembang city did not have sufficient understanding about the concept of CLT. This can be seen from (1) their opinion that competence is more important than performance which resulted in the kinds of test they constructed did not reflect CLT; (2) most of them did not know that there is CLT which can test students' ability in using the language in the real situation; (3) most of them did not know kinds of task that can be used in CLT; and (4) they did not know whether the test items they constructed were classified as CLT or not.

Suggestions

Viewing the fact as concluded above, the writer feels that it is necessary to offer some suggestions in order to find out solutions to this problem as follows.

- (1) teachers of English should be given sufficient knowledge of CLT in order that they can apply it in assessing students' English ability appropriately.
- (2) the use of test items which are not in the form of CLT needs to be reconsidered and changed to CLT based on the School ²⁶ based Curriculum (KTSP) which states that English ¹² is taught as a means of communication in real situation. Perhaps it is unfair if the teaching and learning process is directed to the use English for communication while in the evaluation it is not based on CLT.
- (3) Teachers of English need to be more proactive in searching for information related to their professional development in carrying out their job as teachers so that recent knowledge such as CLT could be gained without waiting other people or government institution (like Regional Department of National Education) to inform them.

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