Interrogating the construct of communicative competence in language assessment contexts: What the non-language specialist can tell us

Catherine Elder\textsuperscript{a,*}, Tim McNamara\textsuperscript{a}, Hyejeong Kim\textsuperscript{a}, John Pill\textsuperscript{b}, Takanori Sato\textsuperscript{c}

\textsuperscript{a}The University of Melbourne, Australia
\textsuperscript{b}American University of Beirut, Lebanon
\textsuperscript{c}Sophia University, Japan

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\textbf{Abstract}

Models of communicative competence in a second language invoked in defining the construct of widely used tests of communicative language ability have drawn largely on the work of language specialists. The risk of exclusive reliance on language expertise to conceptualize, design and administer language tests is that test scores may carry meanings that are misaligned with the values of non-language specialists, that is, those without language expertise but perhaps with expert knowledge in the domain of concern. Neglect of the perspective of lay (i.e., non-linguistic) judges on language and communication is a serious validity concern, since they are the ultimate arbiters of what matters for effective communication in the relevant context of language use.

The paper reports on three research studies exploring the validity of rating scales used to assess speaking performance on a number of high-stakes English-language tests developed for professional or general proficiency assessment purposes in Korea, Australia, China, and the UK. Drawing on Jacoby and McNamara's (1999) notion of "indigenous assessment", each project attempted to identify the values underlying non-language specialists' judgements of spoken communication as they rated test performance or participated in focus-group workshops where they viewed and commented on video- or audio-recorded samples of performance in the relevant real-world domain.

The findings of these studies raise the question of whether language can or should be assessed as object independently of the content which it conveys or without regard for the goal and context of the communication. The studies' findings also cast doubt on the notion that the native speaker should always serve as benchmark for judging communicative effectiveness, especially with tests of language for specific purposes, where native speakers and second-language learners alike may lack the requisite skills for the kind of effective interaction demanded by the context.

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1. Introduction and literature review

For nearly 50 years, language specialists have conceptualized communicative ability for second-language (L2) communication, and have attempted to identify the components of knowledge and ability involved. Such attempts began in response to Chomsky’s (1965) competence/performance distinction in which competence is narrowly restricted to grammatical knowledge. Hymes (1972) proposed an influential theory of communicative competence looking at competence from a sociolinguistic perspective and adding various elements to those discussed by Chomsky. Subsequently, models building on Hymes’s work were developed by Canale and Swain (1980) and Bachman (1990) for L2 teaching and testing, a departure from the exclusive concern with traditional grammar which, as Joseph’s (this issue) reminds us, had dominated the foreign language curriculum and associated methods of assessing achievement for decades. These new models explicating the multiple components of language ability in detail and have served as a framework of reference for defining the construct of both specific- and general-purpose proficiency tests (Bachman and Palmer, 2010; Douglas, 2000).

In general, however, these models consist of detailed specification of language-related components (e.g., grammatical, discourse, and sociolinguistic knowledge) and have paid less attention, if any, to non-linguistic cognitive, affective, and volitional factors, seeing them as too complex to deal with, even though these factors were discussed extensively by Hymes as part of what he called ability for use. As a result, the construct of most L2 performance tests is typically defined purely in terms of cognitive linguistic ability, and assessment criteria used for performance tests normally include only language-related components. McNamara (1996) calls such performance tests weak performance tests, as opposed to strong performance tests, which assess performance based on real-world criteria or task fulfillment. He also claims that the majority of L2 performance tests are weak performance tests. This situation persists, although a more socially oriented model of interactional competence has been proposed (Kramsch, 1986 and elaborated by Jacoby and Ochs (1995) and Young (2008), and work on distributed cognition (e.g., Hutchins, 1995) deploys models which transcend the boundaries of individual actors to encompass complex social practices. While these social views of performance have been acknowledged in the language testing field (McNamara and Roever, 2006), most performance tests, even those focusing on the co-constructed nature of performance (e.g., see Taylor and Wigglesworth, 2009), tend to place greater emphasis on the underlying linguistic qualities of performance than on criteria reflecting the complexity of communication in the target language use (TLU) domain. Harding (2014), in a recent overview of communicative language testing, highlights the need to move beyond these narrowly linguistic criteria and ensure that test constructs are rich enough to reflect current communicative needs.

A further limitation of L2 theories of communicative competence is that theory construction to date has not invited the perspectives of non-language specialists. (This lack of attention to lay views of language stems perhaps from linguists’ dismissal of such views as unscientific (see Rajagopalan, 2017). As a result, the theories do not necessarily explain which features or behaviours of speakers are likely to be perceived as constituting competence in communication by those actually engaged in the communicative event. This could potentially undermine the validity of the theories and resulting test scores, since individuals with no specialized linguistic knowledge are in fact the ultimate arbiters of L2 speakers’ oral performance in real-world language use domains: that is, L2 speakers are more likely to communicate with non-language specialists than with applied linguists, and to be judged based on their perspectives (Barnwell, 1986; Brindley, 1991; Chalhoub-Deville, 1996).

We thus have a double narrowing of the criteria by which performance is to be judged: linguistic features of performance are privileged; and the criteria by which those actually involved in the communication judge its success have not been attended to. At what cost has this narrowing of the construct of communicative language ability by applied linguists and language testers, partly in the interests of test manageability, been achieved? A number of studies have investigated (a) the dissonance between language specialist and linguistic lay perspectives on communicative competence and (b) the assessment criteria underlying the judgements of domain experts (i.e., non-language specialists) in specialized TLU domains.

Empirical research comparing non-language specialist and language specialist perspectives has shown that the former group tends to judge the communicative competence of L2 speakers differently from the latter (Brown, 1995; Elder, 1993; Galloway, 1980; Hadden, 1991). The two groups have been found to attend to different speech features and to show different levels of sensitivity to language form. Language specialists are generally more sensitive to linguistic form and more severe on linguistic errors. Furthermore, while studies analyzing patterns in data from judgements by language teachers (Brown et al., 2005; McNamara, 1999; Zhang and Elder, 2011) have typically indicated that they are basing their overall judgment of communicative competence on language proficiency or grammatical accuracy, often to an extent of which they are unaware (Eckes, 2009), these features seem to play a less salient role in linguistic lay people’s evaluative judgments. Instead, non-language specialists are concerned more with successful communication and performance features influencing communicative success more directly.

Other studies have addressed the criteria used by domain experts in judging communication, including medical doctors, non-linguistics-related subject teachers, and professionals in various academic fields (Abdul Rauf, 2011; Douglas and Myers, 2000; Jacoby, 1998). For example, Jacoby (1998) explored the criteria used by a group of physicists in providing feedback on practice oral presentations of post-doctoral researchers and PhD candidates. Using a Conversation Analytic methodology she analyzed the physicists’ discussion of the presenters’ rehearsals for conference presentations and uncovered the implicit criteria indigenous to that communicative context. She found that the group appeared to orient exclusively to non-linguistic

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