
A Proposed Design and Rationale of Task-Based Activity as a Learning Assessment

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Abstract

Language assessments are tests used to evaluate student communication ability. They are employed to source information critical to making decisions for education programs. Furthermore, language assessment can indicate a person's level of ability to acquire, learn and use a new language (Bachman 1990 p. 94). The current article aims to design an English language assessment test to assess the language skills of listening and writing of fourth year students in a senior public secondary school in Iraq. First, the teaching context in which the assessment is designed for will be explained. Next, an illustration of the test's purpose in language evaluation will be given. Following, the rationale underling the assessment will be addressed, with reference to theory of language and language learning. Furthermore, construct validity of the test through analysis of the outcomes of the test will be presented. Finally, the detailed procedures and the rubrics of the assessment shall be summarized.

Introduction to The Context of the Proposed Assessment

The present task-based English test is designed for the fourth-year students in a public senior secondary school in Iraq. For the majority of students their English learning is ongoing throughout senior school. A senior English education will facilitate them to enter the workforce or university.

The national English teaching syllabus focuses on communication skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Furthermore, senior English course introduces theoretical thought and analysis, to train students for the National Matriculation English Test.

As one of the compulsory subjects in Iraqi senior secondary curriculum, English has experienced a teaching approach transition from grammar-translation, to audiolingualism, to the now advocated *communicative* language teaching approach. The latest version of the national English teaching syllabus in Iraq (issued in 2004 by the Ministry of Education) promoted the communicative teaching approach as the norm in Iraqi education (Alseady 2004, p. 157). This

approach is given preferential treatment in the national English text for this year level, *Book 6*. Yet, the National Matriculation English Test, focuses on discrete grammar knowledge. Also, the NMET consists mostly of multiple choices items.

The teaching approach in senior secondary school in this context in Iraq is partially communicative whilst traditional grammar-translation prevails (Alseady 2004, pp. 187). The textbook is designed into Units with different topics. Each Unit covers vocabulary, grammar and functional practice on the four language skills. Around 25 study hours are suggested to complete a Unit. Students are provided with a practice textbook in which daily practice and Unit testing is carried out. Furthermore, paper-and-pencil tests of language assessment will be conducted in the middle and at the end of each semester.

Assessment purpose

As well as using traditional test evaluations of language ability, the present essay will illustrate the usefulness of a task-based test to assess communicative language ability of secondary students. This is a more practical exercise and so measures a real-world communication need for functioning in a predominantly English-speaking environment.

Whether or not the students can use the knowledge learnt in this Unit and previous experience to solve a real-life problem is revealed through narrative. Story-telling is utilized as a formative evaluation measure for the purposes of improving learning and teaching (Ellis 2003, p.312).

Formative assessment is an ongoing process, carried out after each Unit and is intended feedback to students their strengths and weaknesses in English communication. Bachman and Palmer state that, ... information from language tests can be useful for the purpose of formative evaluation, to help students guide their own subsequent learning, or for helping teachers modify their teaching methods and materials so as to make them more appropriate for their students' needs, interests, and capabilities (1996, p. 98).

Planned formative task-based assessment is curriculum-driven (Spolsky, cited in Ellis 2003, p.312), and can be conducted in harmony with the syllabus. Especially, when the syllabus is based on functional topics, e. g. (*New product advertising*), formative task-based assessment is highly suitable.

With direct language assessment, students' communicative performances can be fully elicited and evaluated (Ellis 2003, p.279). In turn, when language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks and

is tested in the same way, it will greatly promote learning motivation and learning process.

The formative test task is planned for the students in senior secondary school who have finished their study in the First Unit, *New products advertising*. Students are delivered a topic on description and critical analysis, using an advertisement. Particularly, how to inquire about a new product and expressions to use with regards to the topic.

For this study, the test task focuses on listening and writing and will be conducted at the end of the First Unit. The purpose of the test is to assess the communicative performance in real-life situation, and intends to show the positive impact on measuring English learning.

Rationale for the assessment

Task-based language assessment uses real world activities such as inquiry, buying, etc., as the core of planning and instruction in English language learning processes (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.229). A task, defined by Ellis (2003, p.16) is a 'work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed.

It is intended to result in language use that bears a resemblance to the way language is used in the real world. Consequently, the communicative and meaningful nature of tasks has received a large amount of theoretical and empirical support in second language acquisition discourse.

Some argue that engaging learners in task work provides a better context for the activation of learning processes as compared to form-focused activities, because it prepares students to solve real life problems by making them, students, participating in such activity and consider it as a real life an activity.

This provides better opportunities for language learning to take place (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.229). Three arguments especially support the use of this type of assessment for the current context.

Know language and language learning

In second language education, a phenomenon which is widely experienced is that of students who do well on a paper-and-pencil test but still unsuccessful when they use the English language social situations. Thus, knowing a language rule does not mean one will be able to use it in communicative interaction (Lightbown 2000).

If knowledge of grammatical rules cannot guarantee the acquisition of a second language, then deeper research and analysis should be conducted. Task-based language assessment, as Richards & Rodgers (2001, p. 227) indicates, draws on language theories of both the interactional view and functional view.

To begin with, sociocultural approaches based on the work of Vygotsky provide a framework to explain the nature of language. Lantolf (2000, p.1) states that, ‘the most fundamental concept of sociocultural theory is that the human mind is mediated’. The theory seeks to explain how mediated minds are developed through *social* activity.

That is to say, a person is genetically endowed with learning capacities that can be modified and reorganized into higher or lower order forms. Individuals are able to exercise conscious control over various mental activities, such as attention, planning and problem-solving (Ellis 2003, p.176).

According to Vygotsky, mediation can occur with physical and or symbolic tools. Language is considered the most powerful mediation tool because, ‘language is viewed as both a means of accomplishing social interaction and of managing mental activity’ (ibid).

Consequently, language itself is the functional outcome of social interaction rather than an abstract linguistic grammatical structure. Learners first observe new linguistic forms and functions during their interactions with others. Subsequently, the learner internalizes linguistic forms and their functional rules so that they can use them independently of their social model (ibid, p.177).

This theory has had a profound influence on the interactional view of language, which regards language as a tool for the creation and maintenance of social relations. It provides a theoretical base for task-based teaching and assessment (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.22).

On the other hand, the communicative competence theory originally developed by Hymes greatly expands the scope of what was covered by an understanding of language and the ability to use language in context. Particularly, in terms of the social demands of performance, sociocultural theory contents that knowing a language is more than knowing its rules of grammar (McNamara 2000, p.16).

Culturally specific rules of use relate the language used to features of the communicative context. Therefore, this theory holds a functional view of language, in that language is a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.21). After further development by Canale and Swain, four dimensions of communicative competence were identified (Beale 2002, p. 12).

Communicative language ability is a theoretical framework of language competence, which consists of;

- Organisational competence: Grammatical and textual competence

- Pragmatic competence: Illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence Strategic competence (knowledge of language)
- Psychophysiological mechanisms (involved in language and are used to characterize the channel and mode in which competence is implemented) (Bachman, 1990, pp.107-108).

Such framework suggests that language is acquired as learners actively engage in attempting to communicate in the target language. Thus, language in a communicative task is seen as bringing about an outcome through the exchange of meanings (Willis & Willis 2001, p.173). The outcomes of tasks, which can be observed as the output of language, are believed to be key processes in language teaching (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.228).

In conclusion, current theories about language generally agree that language is primarily a means of *making meaning*. Language learning, therefore, is an interactive social process by which learners are engaged in meaningful and authentic language use. This nature of language can be said to underlie the current approaches to task-based language teaching and assessment.

Validity considerations in the assessment

Validity is the most important quality of test interpretation or use, or the extent to which the inferences or decisions the testers make on the basis of test scores are meaningful, appropriate, and useful (Bachman 1990, p.25). Thus, validity is one of the critical factors when designing a test task since the test scores should correctly reflect the language ability of the test takers in spite of the changes of context or tasks. In the same vein, Mcnamara (1996, p.17) argues that ‘the fundamental problem in test validation is the question of justifying inferences from test performance...Construct validation, remains a requirement of any test development process’. As Bachman and Palmer state (1996, pp. 21-22), construct validity is used to refer to the extent to which a given test score can be interpreted as an indicator of the language ability. To do this, both construct definition and the characteristics of the test task should be taken into consideration.

Firstly, the extent to which the test task corresponds to tasks in the domain of generalization, which is regarded as authenticity, should be determined. Secondly, the degree to which the test task engages the test taker’s areas of language ability, which is considered as interactiveness, should also be determined.

As described above, the test task is a syllabus-referenced assessment. The test task includes two parts which aims to test language skills in listening and writing. In the listening task, students are required to watch a video and then complete an information sheet.

In the writing task, students need to write an email referring to the information they have heard in the video. Based on the general framework of Ellis (2003, p.285), such a test task is a simulation of real-world task. Thus it can be defined as a direct performance-referenced task.

The construct validity of the test, authenticity and interactiveness will be discussed respectively. For one thing, if the characteristics of the test task highly corresponds to the characteristics of the target language use (TLU), then authenticity can be considered relatively high (Bachman & Palmer 1996, p. 23). In this case, most of the characteristics of the test task, including rubrics, inputs, and expected response, are the same as the TLU domain, while settings such as participants and time of task will be different. In other words, the test task could be carried out in real-life situation. Therefore, the authenticity is high of the test task.

As to the interactiveness of a given language test task, this needs to be characterized in the ways in which the test taker's areas of language knowledge, metacognitive strategies, topical knowledge, and affective schemata are engaged by the test task (Bachman & Palmer 1996, p. 25). Since the test task is a syllabus-referenced formative assessment, students should have no difficulty with the language knowledge and topical knowledge. Meanwhile, they are expected to engage more with affective schemata due to the test form prompting curiosity and engagement. Yet to what degree the learner's will use their metacognitive strategies remains unclear. As far as interactiveness is concerned for the present test task, based on the criteria listed here it can be considered to be high. Therefore, the proposed test task possesses construct validity.

It follows that the conflict between construct validity and generalizability in task-based assessment could be minimized as Douglas suggests, 'the solution to this problem is to ensure that the test tasks and the TLU tasks share similar characteristics' (cited in Ellis 2003, p.308). This in turn verified the theory that language is a vehicle to exchange negotiating meanings.

Washback on EFL learning

Language tests are sources of evaluation that allow decisions to be made about people and programs (Bachman 1990, p. 54). No doubt, the tests have great impacts on society and educational systems and upon the individuals within those systems. As McEwen states, 'what is assessed becomes what is valued, which becomes what is taught' (Cheng & Curtis 2004, p. 3). In the view of Bachman and Palmer (1996, p.29) and other scholars such as McNamara (1996, p.23), impacts of tests should be taken into consideration as a quality of test

design rather than be valued after tests are implemented. Thus, when designing a test, an analysis of the nature of language and language of learning should be addressed to support the choice of test type and to estimate the impact the test will bring about.

At the micro level, the impact of test which is generally called washback. There are at least two major types of washback studies; those relating to traditional, multiple-choice, large-scale tests, which are perceived to have had mainly negative influences on the quality of teaching and learning; and those tests or examinations have been modified and improved in order to exert a positive washback on teaching and learning such as performance-based tests (Cheng & Curtis 2004, p. 3). Regarding the purpose and the construct validity of the present test task, it expected to have a beneficial washback on teaching and learning, as the process will focus on preparing students for the real-world communicative tasks beyond the test.

Moreover, the test is designed as a real task through which meaningful product can be produced and measured. Students are expected to respond in an authentic language setting in which the language is truly used rather than be tested. Therefore, students might be more motivated and so engage more in language learning (Richards & Rodgers 2001, p.229).

At the macro level the implementation of task-based or performance-based assessment intends to favor a communicative teaching approach in language education, which not only fulfills the requirements advocated by the national teaching syllabus, but meets the natural process of how second language is acquired.

In brief, when language is seen as means of social interaction and channels to convey functional meaning, task-based assessment can have a positive impact on language learning process.

Procedure and grading rubrics of the assessment

The test task is designed according to the testing framework demonstrated by Bachman (1990, p.119). It will be conducted in the final class of the study unit 'New product advertising'. It aims to test the communicative ability in real-life, hence the use of advertising as the topic. The test task contains two subtasks which are listening and writing skills. An overhead projector will be used during the test since the test input is predominantly aural and visual input will add to the context of a real-world scenario.

Students will be given a test paper and be instructed that no textbook or other study material could be used during the test. In the listening section, students are told that their task is to inquire about a new product through internet. They will then watch three videos from

YouTube twice. Three people from different companies are introducing their products in English. Students must listen carefully and complete the missing information in the test paper with no more than two words.

If the information is not provided from the video, they should leave a cross in the blank. There are 10 blanks in the test paper and each blank counts for 3 points. The total score of the listening section will be 30 points. Students' performance will be judged by the criteria that if they provide the correct information and if they spell correctly and write neatly.

After the listening test students will have the written test. They keep the test paper and use the information they have heard and recorded to write an email to one of the companies from the videos. They need to write 120 words within 30 minutes. This email needs to include information such as; how they got to know the product; product information; why they want to inquire further about the product with the company; the channels they would like to use to keep in touch with the company. The paper will be assessed in the following respects and the total score of written section will be 70 points:

- Content (30%): The content needs to be relevant and sufficient.
- Organization (30%): Content/Ideas should be presented logically and grouped together or separated in meaningful ways.
- Language (40%): Makes use of a range of grammatical and sentence structures accurately; uses a variety of vocabulary and expressions accurately; uses punctuation properly; spells correctly; writes clearly and neatly.

When the students receive feedback from the test they are encouraged to send their emails to the company they watched on YouTube to seek a reply from the real-world. By doing so, students' learning outcome could be assessed within a real-life situation and they would engage more in language studying.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the proposed theoretical assessment activity will focus on the potential usefulness of a task-based test to assess communicative language ability of secondary students. We theoretically assume that this is practical exercise and easy to measure a real-world communication need for functioning in a predominantly English-speaking environment. The task-based test will also potentially help to reviewing the characteristics of a good language learner Chamot (2001, p. 29), stated that they “are active learners, monitor language production, practice communicating in the language, make use of prior linguistic knowledge, use a variety of memorization techniques, and ask questions for clarification”. Sociolinguistically, second/foreign language learning is a socializing practice as well as a construction process.

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