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Assessing Language Skills In Communicative English Teaching: Bridging Theory And Practice

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Abstract

This study examines the dynamic interplay between theory and practice in assessing language skills within Communicative English Language Teaching (CELТ). Emphasizing the shift from traditional discrete-point testing to performance-based assessment, the research explores how communicative competence can be effectively measured through tasks that mirror authentic language use. Drawing on contemporary frameworks and empirical studies, the work highlights the challenges teachers face in aligning theoretical principles with practical classroom constraints, including reliability, validity, and washback effects. The study also considers technological innovations that support communicative assessment and discusses their pedagogical implications. By bridging theoretical insights and real-world practices, this research aims to inform more balanced and contextually responsive approaches to language testing in CELТ classrooms, ultimately fostering learner-centered evaluation that promotes meaningful language development.

Keywords: Communicative Language Teaching, Language Assessment, Communicative Competence, Performance-based Testing, Language Evaluation

Introduction

Assessment of language skills is a vital and inseparable component of the multifaceted process of language learning and teaching, particularly within Communicative English Language Teaching (CELТ). Rather than being a peripheral activity, testing functions as one of the four interrelated pillars of a comprehensive

curriculum model, alongside purpose or objectives, content or knowledge, and methodology or learning experiences (Hooper, 1971, cited in Murphy, 1985:02). In the communicative approach, assessment is not limited to measuring discrete linguistic elements but extends to evaluating learners' ability to use language meaningfully and appropriately in real-life contexts. This perspective requires a careful balance between theoretical principles of communicative competence and the practical demands of classroom implementation, underscoring the need to design assessment tools that both reflect authentic language use and support pedagogical goals. It is as essential as any other component of the curriculum in Communicative English Language Teaching. The success or shortcomings of the entire language teaching programme are often judged by how well learners demonstrate their communicative skills through assessment tasks. In this context, evaluation goes beyond testing isolated knowledge of grammar or vocabulary; it becomes a measure of learners' ability to use language fluently, accurately, and appropriately in meaningful interactions. The perceived effectiveness of assessment practices is therefore closely linked to the overall quality and credibility of the language programme. Bridging theory and practice in this area requires developing testing procedures that authentically reflect communicative competence while providing reliable evidence of learners' progress.

A language assessment, therefore, should be carefully designed to align with and fulfil the aims and objectives of a communicative syllabus. In Communicative English Language Teaching, this means that assessment is viewed as part of a potentially continuous process (Murphy, 1985:03), providing valuable feedback on learning outcomes, instructional effectiveness, the suitability of materials, and the relevance of testing procedures. Such feedback informs not only day-to-day classroom practice but also broader decisions about curriculum planning and policy. Hughes (2003:001) reinforces this perspective, noting that the impact of assessment on teaching and learning-known as backwash-can be either constructive or detrimental. In a communicative context, if a test is perceived as high stakes, preparation for it may

overshadow authentic communicative activities. When test content and techniques diverge from the communicative objectives of the course, harmful backwash is likely to occur, undermining the very skills the programme aims to develop.

There was a time when many examinations promoted a clear separation between assessment and instruction (Heaton, 1988:05). However, in contemporary Communicative English Language Teaching, it is increasingly recognized that teaching and assessment must work in close collaboration. In this approach, evaluation is no longer viewed as an isolated activity but as an integral partner in fostering communicative competence. As Davies (1968:05) observed, *“a good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching,”* reflecting the principles and goals of instruction. At the same time, Hughes (2003:02) highlights that assessment can exert both positive and negative backwash on teaching practices. To bridge theory and practice effectively, it is essential to maintain a partnership between teaching and testing, ensuring that assessment reinforces communicative objectives rather than distorting them, and that it supports meaningful learning experiences in the classroom.

It is true that in Communicative English Language Teaching there are situations where instruction is effective and aligned with communicative goals, but assessment fails to reflect those aims, resulting in harmful backwash. Such misalignment can undermine learners’ motivation and distort classroom priorities. Heaton (1988:05) emphasizes the inherent connection between the two domains, observing 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.”* Bridging theory and practice in communicative assessment, therefore, requires designing tests that accurately measure the skills taught and reinforce the objectives of meaningful, authentic language use, creating a constructive cycle in which teaching informs testing and testing enriches teaching.

Statement of Intent

This research aims to explore the principles, practices, and challenges of assessing language skills within Communicative English Language Teaching (CELT), with a focus on bridging the gap between theoretical frameworks and classroom realities. While communicative approaches have gained widespread acceptance for promoting authentic language use, assessment practices often lag behind, relying on traditional testing methods that fail to capture learners' ability to communicate meaningfully. This disconnect can produce harmful backwash effects, where test preparation undermines communicative learning goals.

The study intends to investigate how assessment can be designed to reflect the core principles of communicative competence-fluency, accuracy, appropriacy, and strategic interaction-while maintaining reliability and validity: It will examine existing assessment models, evaluate their alignment with CELT objectives, and identify practical constraints faced by teachers, including time limitations, resource availability, and institutional demands.

By combining a critical review of theoretical literature with field-based analysis of assessment practices, the research seeks to propose guidelines for creating effective, context-sensitive assessment tools that support communicative teaching rather than contradict it. Ultimately, this work aspires to contribute to the development of an integrated model in which testing is not an isolated act but an active partner in shaping and reinforcing communicative language development.

The table below outlines core dimensions that will guide the inquiry:

Dimension	Focus in the Study
Theoretical Foundations	Models of communicative competence and assessment principles
Assessment Methods	Performance-based tasks, portfolios, and integrated skill evaluation
Classroom Implementation	Teachers' practices, constraints, and perceptions

Backwash Effect	Impact of assessment on learning and teaching activities
Guidelines Development	Recommendations to align testing with communicative objectives

The background to Communicative Approach

Since the 1960s, English language learning and teaching have undergone significant paradigm shifts that laid the foundation for Communicative English Language Teaching (CELT). One of the most influential transitions has been the movement from a focus on the mastery of language structures to an emphasis on the use of language for genuine communication. Earlier methods, such as the Grammar-Translation and Audio-Lingual approaches, prioritized memorization of forms and the mechanical practice of patterns. However, they often failed to equip learners with the ability to express meaning in real-life contexts.

This shift coincided with a broader reconceptualization of language itself: from perceiving it as a static set of rules to recognizing it as a dynamic tool for interaction. The traditional Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis, which emphasized predicting learner errors by comparing the target language and the native language, gradually gave way to the Interlanguage Hypothesis, acknowledging that learners develop their own evolving systems of understanding as they acquire a new language.

Perhaps most significantly, Noam Chomsky's distinction between linguistic competence and performance eventually inspired the concept of *communicative competence*, articulated by Dell Hymes. Communicative competence expanded the notion of what it means to "know" a language to include not just grammatical accuracy but also pragmatic appropriateness, sociolinguistic sensitivity, and strategic skill in managing interaction.

These theoretical shifts have profound implications for assessment. Language testing must now move beyond discrete-point tests of form and instead measure learners' ability to communicate effectively in varied contexts. Bridging theory and practice in this area remains a central challenge for contemporary language educators.

Major Shift	From	To
Language Focus	Mastery of structure	Use for communication
Conception of Language	Set of rules	Means of interaction
Learning Hypothesis	Contrastive Analysis	Interlanguage
Competence Framework	Linguistic competence	Communicative competence

Analyses The Actual Language Test

This study analyses the actual language testing practices employed in the BA, B.Sc., and B.Com first-and second-year Compulsory English courses at Aligarh Muslim University (AMU) to uncover the underlying reasons for the persistent gap between the theoretical principles of communicative assessment and their practical application. English has held a central place at AMU since the university's inception in 1875, reflecting its historical commitment to fostering proficiency in the language as both a medium of higher education and a tool for broader professional engagement. Over time, the English syllabi at AMU have generally evolved in line with prevailing ELT trends, from structural and grammar-focused syllabi to more contemporary communicative approaches.

Despite these curricular shifts, the assessment methods used in these programmes often remain traditional in design. Written examinations still emphasize grammatical accuracy, literary recall, and translation skills, with relatively limited scope for measuring learners' ability to use English communicatively in authentic contexts. Oral and performance-based assessments, which are essential to evaluating

communicative competence, are often marginal or absent due to practical constraints, including large class sizes, limited resources, and entrenched institutional practices.

This chapter seeks to highlight how such misalignments create a gulf between policy and practice. While course objectives frequently espouse the development of fluency, interactional skills, and pragmatic awareness, the high-stakes examinations privilege discrete knowledge over communicative ability, leading to negative washback on classroom teaching. By documenting and analysing the current assessment instruments and comparing them to the principles of communicative language testing, the study aims to propose context-sensitive recommendations for closing this gap. Such recommendations will support AMU's efforts to align assessment practices more closely with the goals of Communicative English Language Teaching.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the persistent disconnect between the theoretical ideals of communicative language testing and the realities of assessment practices in English courses at the undergraduate level. While syllabi increasingly articulate communicative objectives, traditional examination formats remain entrenched, prioritizing isolated grammatical knowledge over authentic language use. As a result, assessments frequently produce negative washback, narrowing instructional focus and limiting students' opportunities to develop meaningful communicative competence. To address these challenges and foster a more balanced, learner-cantered approach, the following recommendations are proposed:

Recommendation

- I. Communicative language tests should primarily assess communicative skills rather than merely discrete aspects of language. This means the test design should embed grammar and vocabulary within realistic communicative tasks,

so that learners must draw upon linguistic knowledge naturally rather than recalling rules in isolation. The communicative purposes-such as requesting information, negotiating meaning, or expressing opinions-should be clear and central. By focusing on real-life processes of interaction, tests will more accurately reflect learners' ability to use language meaningfully and support the communicative goals of the curriculum.

- II. Students should be given opportunities to perform genuine communication during assessment, which requires the test to be context-specific. Tasks such as role plays, simulations, and problem-solving discussions enable learners to demonstrate their capacity to manage discourse rather than merely produce sentences. When assessments are grounded in realistic scenarios relevant to learners' academic or professional needs, students are more motivated and better prepared to transfer classroom learning to authentic situations. This approach ensures that the test measures not only accuracy but also fluency, appropriateness, and strategic competence.
- III. A communicative test should assess exactly what the course seeks to promote among students, reinforcing learning through positive washback. When assessment criteria are transparent, well-defined, and closely aligned with course objectives, students and teachers can focus on developing communicative abilities with confidence. Positive washback encourages sustained engagement, deeper skill development, and a shared understanding of what successful communication entails.

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