

Evaluating Communicative Language Testing in Iraqi Ministerial Examination

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Abstract

The present research is conducted to investigate the communicative language testing in Iraqi Ministerial Examinations in terms of Bachman and Palmer's framework of task characteristics. The study is divided into two parts: theoretical background and methodology. The former deals with communicative competence, authenticity, approaches to testing, and, most importantly, it presents the framework of the study. It is a historical background. The latter is the methodology of the study, that is the practical analysis of data according to the framework applied to the research. The purpose of the study is to check whether students' communicative competence is appropriately tested or not.

Key words: Language testing and Bachman and Palmer's framework.

تقييم الاختبار التواصلي في الاختبار الوزاري العراقي

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الخلاصة

تركز الدراسة الحالية على استقصاء الاختبارات الوزارية وفق إطار باكمان وبالمير . الجزء النظري من البحث يتناول القدرة التواصلية ، وأنواعها ، أصالة الاختبار ، طرق الاختبار وإطار الدراسة . اما الجزء الثاني فهو يعني بمنهجية الدراسة وهي عبارة عن تحليل عملي للإطار الذي تم تطبيقه في البحث . حيث يتم تحليل الأسئلة الوزارية تحليلاً نقدياً . ان الغرض من الدراسة هو التحقق مما إذا كانت تلك الاختبارات تختبر القدرة التواصلية لدى الطلاب بشكل مناسب . تخلص الدراسة إلى أن تلك الاختبارات غير معدة لتقييم القدرة لتواصلية لدى طلبة المرحلة الإعدادية .

كلمات مفتاحية: إطار باكمان وبالمير و الاختبار اللغوي

Section one

1.Introduction

This part of the study is a theoretical background to the study. It provides an insight on some issues raised in the research. It explains the problem of the research. The basic concepts are introduced such as authenticity, communicative competence, different approaches to testing. The framework of the study is presented to illuminate how the research is conducted.

2.Communicative Assessment

In 1980, the language-testing field had begun to focus on designing communicative language testing tasks. Bachman and Palmer include among fundamental principles of language testing the need for a correspondence between language test performance and language use. Test performance must correspond in demonstrable ways to language use in non-test situations so that a particular language test could be useful for its intended purposes (Brown 8).

In addition, it is sometimes associated with the integrative approach because the two focus on the importance of the meaning of an utterance. Language is a means of communication and the need of the most of learners is not only for the theoretical knowledge of the target language (Al-Juboury 29).

3. Communicative competence

Communicative competence is a term used in linguistics to denote the language user's knowledge of grammar and the social knowledge about how to use a utterance appropriately. Besides, it is dependent on both knowledge and ability to use language. Certainly, it may be noticed that individuals differ in terms of their ability to use language, to interpret and differentiate utterances. For example, a child acquires the knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He / she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner (Pride and Holmes 283).

Furthermore, Widdowson ((135) remarks that it is much more a matter of knowing a stock of patterns, formulaic frameworks, and rules. Accordingly, it is

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mainly a matter of adaptation. Besides, it is the ability to put language for communicative purposes. It considers language as a means of communication. It does not only aim to focus on the development of four language skills, but also it depends on the correlation between the skills.

4.The Concept of Authenticity

Bachman and Palmer comment (23) that " we define *authenticity* as the degree of correspondence of the characteristics of a given language test task to the features of a target language use task. Authenticity as a critical quality of language tests has not been discussed in language testing textbooks, even though it has been debated among language testing researchers now for over a decade".

Authenticity is a term that is used in testing to refer to assessing students' ability to use language in real world. From a historical point of view, authenticity has an ancient history in language learning and there are three main approaches: first, there are communicative approaches based on the idea that communication is the means through which the language is taught. Second, there are materials-focused approaches according to which learning is principally centered on the text. Third, humanistic approaches that are concerned with the whole learner and emphasize the value of a personal development. In language-teaching contexts, authenticity was mainly applied to texts (spoken or written). A distinction has been drawn between authenticity as it applies to texts viewed in isolation (which he called genuineness), and texts in their pedagogical context, including learners' responses to them, thereby extending the focus of the term to include classroom activities (Mishan 2)

Section Two

Framework of the Study

Bachman and Palmer provide a framework of tasks characteristics that offers a set of characteristics that distinguish five aspects of tasks: setting, rubric, input, expected response, and the relation between input and response. The tasks characteristics have subdivisions.

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1. Setting

Physical characteristics

Participants

Time of the tasks

2. Rubric

Language (target, foreign)

Channel (visual, aural)

Specification of the procedure and tasks

Structure of rubric

Number of tasks

Salience of tasks

Relative importance of tasks

Number of tasks per parts

Time allotment

Scoring method

Criteria for correctness

Procedure for scoring the response

Explicitness of the criteria and procedure

3. Input

Format

Channel (visual, aural)

Form (language, non-language, both)

Language (native, foreign, both)

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Length

Type (item, prompt)

Degree of speededness

Vehicle (live or reproduced)

Language of input

Characteristics of language

Organizational characteristics

Grammatical

Textual

Pragmatic characteristics

Functional

Sociolinguistic

4. Characteristics of expected response

Format (language, non-language)

Language (target, foreign)

Channel (visual, aural)

Length

Type (selected, limited production, extended production)

5. Relation between input and response

Reactivity (reciprocal, non- reciprocal, adaptive)

Scope of relation (broad, narrow)

Directness of relation (direct, indirect) (Bachman and Palmer 47, 48).

Section Three

Practical Part

This part of the research presents a systematic analysis of Iraqi Examinations that is carried out in terms of Bachman and Palmer's framework of task characteristics. Three papers of Iraqi Ministerial Examinations are carefully analyzed. In addition, the three papers that are taken are not of the same year. The purpose is to check how far they have changed in terms of authenticity.

1. Analysis of Iraqi Ministerial Examination for Sixth preparatory

Serious criticism is provoked against October, 2015 examination. Reading and writing are tested. Speaking and listening, on the other hand, are not assessed. Communication is not facilitated. It is not intended to measure testees' ability to use language in real life situations. The focus of items shifts toward structures rather than application. One can see that there are ten points that are based on the former while two are based on the latter.

Fierce criticism is raised against the traditional techniques that are followed. They involve transformation, completion, multiple-choice items, gap filling and writing. The techniques of authentic assessment are not adopted to assess whether they are able to use language in real situations or not. However, the unpredictability in language use is provided in two points only. The testees were provided with little opportunity to use language in an unpredictable way. They had to suggest and express regret.

Discrete point methods are followed rather than the integrative ones. In this examination, language is assessed as discrete elements. For example, question one is entitled as reading, question two is about grammar, question three is concerned with vocabulary and spelling and the last question is intended to assess writing. They are individually tested. On the opposite, language is not collectively assessed; cloze test and dictation are not considered. It is a undeniable fact that discrete point methods never measure the communicative ability. Rather, they can be used to

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examine linguistic structures.

The findings of rubric reveal that the foreign language is used rather than the native one. The channel in which the instructions are given is visual. The aural channel is not established. The number of the tasks is ten. Nine tasks have to be done. There are two tasks in question one : task one is a reading passage. There are six points about it. The second task requires the testees to answer sentences from the textbook. Question two is prepared to assess grammar. It has two tasks: in the first task, testees have to transform sentences into grammatical structures as indicated by the instructions. The second task is a multiple-choice question. It is about grammar. Besides, question three is designed to assess vocabulary and spelling. The task that is entitled as (a) is given to complete sentences with the suitable words from the box. The task that is entitled as (b) is set to match sentences. In the third task, spelling is assessed. The fourth question is related to literature focus in which they have to answer five questions. In the last question, there are two tasks. Both of them are assigned to assess students' writing skill. There is no single task; there are different tasks. The criteria of correctness are said to be established. In addition, they are claimed to be explicit. However, the tasks are not given due to their significance. Time is not allotted for each task ; rather, it is allotted for the full examination.

The discussion of input shows that the score on test task never depends on how quickly the testees process the material. Accordingly, it could be stated that the examination lacks the degree of speediness. Language knowledge is not fully tested. Syntax and vocabulary that are basic components of grammar are tested. Question two is done to test grammar. In this question, the testees were asked to transform sentences into grammatical structures using the instructions between the brackets. Vocabulary is assessed by filling the blanks with suitable words. In this way, they were not asked to define the meaning of each item. The gap filling technique is adopted to test structure only. Thus, vocabulary is not tested in terms of communicative language testing. In addition, pragmatic competence is challenged in two points. In question two, there were two sentences in which the testees were

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supposed to understand what the speaker implies and intends to express. They have to suggest and regret. The third component of language knowledge is sociolinguistic competence in which culture is reflected in question one that tells a series of events about Marry and her husband, Harry. All the proper names used are from the foreign culture. However, this does not mean that the main events are culture-specific.

The last characteristic is the relation between input and response that can be described as non-reciprocal. There is neither feedback nor interaction. It has a narrow scope: students do not need to process a huge amount of input. Instead, they have to choose, fill in the blank or transform. Besides, it is described as direct and indirect. The response is based on information that is found in the input. A good example is question one that can be answered by reading the passage. However, the response includes information that is not supplied in the input. In question three task c, the testees were supposed to provide the words that they need to recall.

Authenticity of October, 2015 Examination can be checked by calculating the percentage. Al-gharib's measurement is carried out to check how far the examination is authentic.

$$\frac{\text{partial}}{\text{Total}} \frac{20}{35} 100 = 57$$

There is a fall of percentage. This explains the fact that the examination of October 2015 is not prepared enough to assess communicative ability of testees for some reasons. First, the communicative competence is not measured. A communicative test is based on the principle that it should test the communicative competence. Second, traditional techniques of testing are followed instead of the communicative ones. Third, it lacks the characteristics of a communicative test such as authentic situation and the integration of the four skills.

2.Examination in English for Preparatory Schools. (August 2016).

Speaking and listening are not tested. On the opposite, reading and writing are assessed. Thus, a severe criticism centers on the lack of the oral skills. They are not

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integrated .Communication is not established. Another serious criticism is that the focus of items shifts towards more structures than application: there are ten points to assess grammatical structures and two to examine application. Traditional techniques are employed such as transformation, multiple-choice items, completion, gap filling, matching, and writing. This explains the fact that traditional techniques are followed while the communicative ones are neglected. Testees were encouraged to use language in an unpredictable way. For example, they had to give advice. The integrative methods are not utilized. On the contrary, the discrete point ones are implemented.

The characteristics of rubric include language, channel, task number, salience of the tasks, criteria of correctness, explicitness of criteria, task importance and time allotment. The language in which the instructions are presented is foreign. Native language is never used. However, there is only one instruction that is presented in the native language to tell testees to turn the page over. There are ten tasks .Testees were required to do nine tasks only. Question one has two tasks. Task one is a reading passage. There are six questions about it . The second task requires the testees to answer sentences from the textbook. Question two is based on grammar. It has two tasks: the first task requires them to transform sentences into grammatical structures as indicated by the instructions. The second task is multiple-choice one assigned to assess grammar too. Question three is designed to assess vocabulary and spelling. Task a is given to complete sentences with the suitable words from the box. Task b, on the other hand, is set to choose the best selections. In the third task, spelling is assessed. The fourth question is about literature focus in which they have to answer five questions .In the last question , there are two tasks .Both of them are assigned to assess students' writing skill. The salience of the tasks is not stated. They are presented one by one. They are not presented as one task.

Further, criteria of correctness are said to be determined. Ministry of education adopts them. They are claimed to be explicit. Task importance as a characteristic of rubric is not stressed. This means that they are not given due to their significance.

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Reading comprehension as a skill is given at the beginning of the examination followed by grammar, vocabulary, spelling and writing. There is no time allotment; however, the total time for the full examination is determined. The total time is three hours and a half.

Another fierce criticism singled out is that the communicative knowledge is not fully assessed. For instance, syntax and vocabulary are tested. In question two task a, testees were instructed to answer the sentences and transform them. In task b, vocabulary is tested by following the gap-filling technique. Phonology that is the study of how speech sounds are organized is not tested. Like phonology, graphology that is concerned with the handwriting of speech sounds is not evaluated. Pragmatic knowledge is never assessed. They were not asked to give advice, suggestion or offer. There is no task set to challenge it. The sociolinguistic characteristics such as cultural reference is given. Question one describes a series of events that creates a foreign culture. It tells a story about a man whose name is Mr. John who had holidays and went to the mountain. It is worth mentioning that the proper name such as Jones, relates to British culture. To go to the mountain by train is an activity that is performed in the foreign culture rather than the native one. Dialect that is a basic component of sociolinguistic competence is not tested.

In addition, the last criticism provoked is about the relation between input and response that can be described as non-reciprocal one because there is neither interaction nor feedback. Testees' response never determines the next task; hence, the relation is not adaptive. Besides, it is shown as broad. In other words, testees are supposed to process a huge amount of material. A good example is question one, point six, in which testees are instructed to give a title to the passage. On the opposite, there is a narrow scope relation born in question two in which they were required to choose an item among others. Finally, it can be considered as direct and indirect. In question one and two, students' response is based on information that could be found in the input. On the opposite, in some tasks students' response is not based on information from the input. A good example of indirect relation is question five.

Evaluating Communicative Language Testing in Iraqi Ministerial Examination**Statistical Analysis**

Authenticity is checked by calculating the percentage. Al-gharib's measurement is carried out to check how far the examination is authentic.

$$\frac{\text{partial}}{\text{total}} \times 100 = \frac{21}{35} \times 100 = 60$$

The rate of percentage is reasonable. In other words, there is authenticity; however, it is not high. The 2016 examination is not prepared in such a way that it would test students' ability to use language. It is based on assessing structures rather than communication. It lacks tasks in which students are engaged using the foreign language. In addition, one can conclude that the focus shifts towards structures rather than communication.

3.Examinations in English for preparatory. (August 2019)

The table above shows that listening and speaking are not tested. On the opposite, reading and writing are assessed. Accordingly, the examination is criticized for the lack of the productive skills that represent a big part of communication. Besides, the four skills are not integrated to establish communication. Another criticism is that application is not examined. For instance, eleven points are based on structures. There is only one point to test students' ability to use a grammatical rule in a situation. The basic techniques utilized are traditional ones. Thus, it reveals that communicative techniques are never followed. Criticism is raised due to the fact that the unpredictability in language use is not strongly stimulated : there are only three points in question two. Discrete point methods are followed rather than the integrative ones. Therefore, severe criticism is directed to the lack of integrative methods.

The findings of the rubric reveal that the foreign language is used. However, the native language, which is Arabic, is used to give one instruction , testees were instructed to turn the page over. The channel in which the instructions are presented is visual. There are nine tasks. Question one has two tasks ; the first is a reading passage, in which there are six points to be answered , the second task, on the other

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hand, confronts them to answer questions from the textbook .Besides , question two is concerned with grammar. In this question, there are two tasks. Task a requires them to change grammatical sentences using the instructions between brackets. Task b is a multiple-choice one: they have to choose among different items. Question number three is designed to assess vocabulary, collocation and spelling. They were directed to fill the gap using the words between brackets. The second task is entitled as collocation .It is tested by choosing one item among others. Spelling as the third task in question three is tested by filling the blanks with missing letters. The fourth question is about literature focus, there are six questions to be answered from the textbook. The last question is devoted for writing skill that is tested by writing a piece of discourse using the conjunctive adverbs.

The tasks are clearly distinguished one from another: a clearly defined number of tasks. There are nine tasks in the full examination. The first task is a reading passage which includes two tasks, followed by grammar, which is challenged in two tasks, vocabulary, spelling, literature focus and writing, on which there are two tasks. It is said that Ministry of Education establishes the criteria of correctness. However, testees are not informed of whether the criteria are determined or not. In addition, they are said to be explicit and accurate. This does not indicate how evident the criteria are in this examination. The tasks are not sequenced according to their importance. Time allotment is not determined for each task; rather it is allotted for the entire examination.

Another weakness is that language knowledge is not fully assessed. This knowledge is assessed in terms of syntax, vocabulary and pragmatics. The first is tested using the transformation techniques; testees were instructed to change the sentences into grammatical structures using the instructions between brackets. The second is challenged by using gap-filling technique. Thus, they were not asked to define a word. Instead, they were asked to fill the brackets. Such a way shows whether learners master the vocabulary items or not .Phonology and graphology are dropped. Culture is not produced in the reading passage.

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Finally, the discussion of the relation between input and response provokes criticism. There is neither reactivity nor a feedback of testees' response. The scope of relation is considered as narrow. The tasks require them to process a limited amount of input. Question two task b is a good example; it can be answered by filling the gap. The examination bears direct and indirect relation. The response of question one includes information from the passage and can be answered by reading it. However, in question three task c, which is entitled as spelling, the response includes information not supplied in the input. They have to provide the response although there is no information that is not explicitly stated in the input.

Authenticity is checked by calculating the percentage

$$\frac{\text{partial}}{\text{total}} \times 100 = \text{result} \quad \frac{21}{35} \times 100 = 60$$

The findings never prove authenticity on the percentage basis; the examination of 2019 is not prepared enough to assess students' ability to use language in real life situations. It is based on more structure than application. In addition, the communicative language testing is based on the traditional techniques of testing.

To check authenticity of the three examinations, it is necessary to calculate the percentage as follows:

The first examination has 57, the second is 60 and the third is 60.

$$\frac{57 + 60 + 60}{3} = 59$$

As seen above, the percentage is lower than it is supposed to be. The three examinations do not verify a certificate of authenticity.

Conclusion

The findings show that there is low authenticity. However, there is no certificate of it. The three examinations cast the doubt on authenticity of Iraqi ministerial examinations for preparatory schools. It has been concluded that students' communicative ability is not accurately assessed in Iraqi ministerial examinations

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that are based on more structures than application. Also, they lack the characteristics of authentic assessment such as the use of contextualized tasks: those tasks that are related to real life context. Another reason behind low authenticity is that traditional techniques are followed rather than the communicative ones. Communicative language testing is based on assessing structures rather communication. In spite of their difficulty, the oral skills, which represent half of communication, are not considered. Students' knowledge of language is not demonstrated in communicative language testing.

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