



Assessment In EAP Courses: A Communicative Approach

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Israeli institutions of higher education demand that their students graduate with an advanced knowledge of English. The rationale for such a requirement is the growing importance of English in today's global population.

In general, EAP (English for Academic Purpose) courses are mainly reading comprehension courses that do not include writing, speaking and listening skills. The exit level exam is usually an unseen (text that has not been seen before) with follow-up questions. In most cases and in most institutions, few if any, communicative skills, other than reading, are taught or tested. On the other hand, many professions prefer to hire employees who have mastered English communication skills, such as conversation, presentation, negotiation, and correspondence abilities.

Of 31 business professionals in various multinational companies questioned, 55% strongly agreed and 39% agreed that academic courses should include skills other than reading skills. When questioned as to whether employees need conversation skills in their profession, 71% strongly agreed and 26% agreed that they did. Thus, although a student may complete the obligatory English academic course with the highest of scores, s/he may lack the English skills that are indispensable for future professions.

The statistics of questionnaires given to teachers and students in seven colleges and universities in Israel concerning the assessment of English Academic courses shows the following results:

When asked whether students should be offered English language courses that include skills other than reading skills, only 13% of teachers and 8% of students do not want inclusion of these skills, whereas a great majority of both students and teachers are in favor of such courses. It is interesting to note that a higher percentage of students are in favor of these courses than teachers.

When asked whether the final exam should only consist of reading comprehension (which is currently administered in most institutions to date) only 6% of the teachers disagreed with this form of testing, while 34% of the students did not agree with this test format. However, when asked whether the final exam should reflect both reading and other communicative abilities of the student over half - 55% - of the teachers strongly agreed and 26% agreed, and 51% of the students strongly agreed and 38% agreed to this combination. This illustrates that there is a willingness on the part of both students and teachers to include other communicative skills aside from reading in the assessment process. When asked whether there should be an overall, ongoing assessment of the student's ability in speaking, reading and writing rather than a final exam, a process that would demand much more work on the part of the teacher, 45% of the teachers were opposed to this ongoing assessment, while only 26% of the students were opposed. It may be that many of the teachers are comfortable with the current unseen, which has a known format, is easy to administer, and fairly uncomplicated to mark. The prospect of familiarizing oneself with a totally new format, fairly unknown in the Israeli higher educational system, and more subjective and complicated to administer and mark, may be daunting to many teachers. Students, who are unaware of the pitfalls of such a test, and are more aware of the need for all communicative language needs in their future professions, may be more open to such a test.

As more institutions of higher education are beginning to introduce communicative skills, such as speaking, listening and writing, into course syllabi, current assessment methods



must be re-evaluated to include these skills. This will probably involve a new method of assessment other than the traditional unseen given at the end of the term.

Dell Hymes, in the early 1970's proposed the concept of communicative competence, which includes not only the ability to form correct grammatical sentences but also to use them both receptively and productively in real situations. In testing productive skills the student should be tested on appropriateness rather than on grammatical skills and on testing receptive skills the student should be able to understand the communicative intent of the speaker. Testing communicative skills should also be based on the situations and the language the student will be using, or future needs - in context specific situations.

A good test should measure the goals and objectives of the course. If the course's objectives are to teach communicative skills for students' future needs then, according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:210) assessment should test "how well learners fare when using English in their target situation." This may necessitate testing more than one skill at the same time and by formulating tests that deal with target situations.

Tests should be clear and explicit, and the students should understand what is expected of them when being tested. Since communicative tests may involve role-play situations, information gap activities, presentations, and so on, the student should be given precise instructions as to what he/she is to be tested on, what the nature of the assessment will be (a number or letter grade or an evaluation either written or oral) and whether items such as grammar and pronunciation will be taken into consideration. It is important to test what was emphasized in class. Therefore, if no previous emphasis was placed upon grammar and/or pronunciation, this should not be included.

Tests are meant to be objective. However, as Ellis and Johnson (1994:46) point out: "the assessment of oral communication skills - usually by giving an oral test - is by its very nature subjective." Testing communicative skills means testing the extent to which communicative language simulates real life communicative situations. There is no total objective means by which the tester can grade. Ellis and Johnson suggest two ways of overcoming this problem. The first is to create an oral test where the subjective element is minimized. It requires a very structured type of oral questioning where the tasks and questions are specified and ordered according to difficulty. There are precise levels, which are defined, that the students must attain and questions and answers are controlled. This limits the exam and precludes any free discussion that may occur. It also presumes that the tester must be familiar with the scale being used and the levels of difficulty being tested.

The second suggestion is to combine both the subjective communicative assessment with a more objective test, such as reading comprehension. This may be ideal for Israeli institutions of higher education, since it takes into consideration both the reading skills needed for both present and target situations and the communicative skills needed for target situations. An objective number or letter grading system can be used for reading comprehension, while a more subjective written or oral assessment can be used for the communicative skills.

Tests should have reliable scoring systems. One such scoring system advocated by Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) is the use of the band scales or band descriptors. As Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998:217) describe: "The descriptors can be specific to a particular skill or give an overall assessment. For marking and for maximum information, skill based descriptors are desirable. For simplicity of reporting, a final overall descriptor may be appropriate." Shown is an edited version of the ESU language descriptors used in the U.K. These band scales would emphasize the student's ability for the specific communicative skill tested, such as give and receive information, express opinions, present business plans and so on. It would probably not emphasize grammar and pronunciation to the extent that it did not interfere with the overall communication of the testee. It is also important to stress that the examiner should be an observer so that nothing can interfere with the evaluation. It is also recommended that the activity be tape recorded so that it is not evaluated in 'real time' and the examiner can review the activity properly.



Testing can involve continuous assessment rather than time limited testing. Continuous assessment, according to Dudley-Evans and St. John (1998) is more flexible and formative. This type of assessment includes learner involvement, where the student suggests goals and objectives over a period of time. For instance, role-play with pair or group work may be done over a period of a semester, where each role-play requires a more difficult situation with more difficult vocabulary. The student will be assessed continuously, not only on the final outcome, but also on the progress he/she has made. Continuous assessment also gives the student a feeling of accomplishment from one task to another, and shows progress. It also allows the student to feel that the final grade is composed from a series of progressive tasks, rather than on one final test.

As in all types of assessment and testing it is important to ask essential questions so that the objectives and reasons for the test are clear both to the tester and the testee.

1. What is the purpose? The purpose should be apparent to both the tester and the testee. Communicative assessment should test progress, achievement and proficiency. The communicative skills being assessed should be evident to those being tested, and the reason for the assessment of these skills should be explained. Skills that have not been taught or are not essential to future needs should not be tested.
2. What sort of learner will be assessed? The level of the learner, his/her future needs, progress to date and other variables should be taken into account. For instance, it is unrealistic to demand of intermediate learners to perform a complicated problem-solving situation involving corporate structure problems if they are studying computers.
3. How long should the assessment be? It is important to keep in mind that the attention span of a learner dealing with communicative activities in a foreign language may not be able to last over fifteen to twenty minutes. Assessments, which are too long, only frustrate the testee. Assessments, which are too short, do not allow the testee to show what she/he has learned.
4. What language skills should be assessed? As mentioned before, it is important to stipulate exactly which language skills will be assessed. Once this is established the tester must concentrate on assessing only these skills. For instance, functional rather than lexical skills.
5. What tasks are required? Tasks can include authentic tasks, presentations, descriptions and so on. It is important that the testee know the nature of the task before being assessed.
6. What test methods are used? These can include cue cards for role play, question-answer sessions, pre-prepared talks and presentations, story telling, problem solving and so on. Here, too, it is important to inform the student beforehand what methods will be used.
7. What instructions should be given to the learners? The tester must decide how much information the learner should receive before and during the test. However, once instructions are given, it is important that they be clearly explained and understood. It is also important that the testees know how to follow instructions.
8. How will the test be assessed? The method of assessment should be discussed beforehand. If the use of band scales is employed, it should be explained to the students.

Since communicative assessment is subjective it is important to deal with all these questions so that the tester will have a concise idea as to what and why he/she is testing,



and how to give a final assessment. It is also of utmost importance that the student be aware of the above, since this will lead to less frustration, less altercation and a clear idea as to what was supposed to be accomplished.

Communicative skills assessment is thus much more complex and possibly more problematical than traditional testing. It requires flexibility, ingenuity and is very time consuming both in formulating and marking. However, if communicative skills are being taught in institutions of higher education it is incumbent upon the pedagogical community to start rethinking how we are to devise and administer these assessments.

QUESTIONNAIRE TEACHERS

Please indicate how far you agree with each idea.

1=strongly agree

2=agree

3=disagree

Students should take communicative language courses in college/university.	1	2	3
The final exam should consist of reading comprehension.	1	2	3
The final exam should reflect both the reading and communicative ability of the student.	1	2	3
There should be no final exam, but an overall, ongoing assessment of the student's ability in speaking, reading and writing.	1	2	3
When students complete my course they know how to read.	1	2	3
When students complete my course they know how to take an exam.	1	2	3
When students complete my course they know how to communicate.	1	2	3



QUESTIONNAIRE STUDENTS

Please indicate how far you agree with each idea.

1 = strongly agree

2 = agree

3 = disagree

Students should take communicative language courses in college/university.	1	2	3
The final exam should only consist of reading comprehension.	1	2	3
The final exam should reflect both reading and communicative abilities of the student.	1	2	3
There should be no final exam, but an overall, ongoing assessment of the student's ability in speaking, reading and writing.	1	2	3
When you complete this course you know how to read.	1	2	3
When you complete this course you know how to take an exam.	1	2	3
When you complete this course you know how to communicate.	1	2	3

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