LANGUAGE TESTING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE: AN INPUT-PROCESS-OUTPUT (IPO) FRAMEWORK

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Abstract

The notion of communicative competence emphasises the teaching and testing of every aspect of language to ensure the use of language appropriately by the learners. For sustaining the development of communicative competence in the learners, this paper suggested an Input-Process-Output (IPO) language testing/assessment framework formulated from the existing communicative/pragmatic competence models. The language components in the form of skills such as grammatical, discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic competencies received by the learners are regarded as the Input; learners are placed as a feature in the heart of the process; and learners' production/communicative performance is referred to as Output. The learners' level of competence may be high, intermediate, or low. Therefore, this framework seems to be applicable in the classroom language test/assessment and research activities.

Key Words: *Communicative Competence, Language Performance; Language Testing*

Introduction

Language Education aims to establish a measurable input of language traits in the learners for sustaining the development of their ability to use the language. In the process, the Teacher is carefully involved in enabling the learners to learn a language and use it appropriately. To ascertain effective teaching and learning as well as other variables that may be involved, there is a need for a test. An education test is a task, treatment, instrument, or procedure designed to elicit information

on the learners' behaviour or performance in learning. It examines what is considered important for examinees to know (Kern cited in Abdul-Hamid, 2021). It is a means of observation or assessment of specific attributes or characteristics such as abilities, knowledge, skills, or feelings of persons or things (NASEM, 2020). In this regard, a language test seeks to determine one's ability to use the language in its real and correct context. In other words, a test in Language Education examines the input of the skills of a language in the learners and determines the output of their level of communicative competence.

The progress made by learners in second language learning requires a technical test which would hold an attestation for the competencies that the learners may demonstrate in the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language testing serves as the means for determining the student's anticipation of the instructional programme; categorizing individuals in relevant language classes; investigating the individual's learning capability; measuring aptitude for learning, student's achievement, and instructional goals as well as evaluating the method of instruction. The major language test techniques that could be used to measure learners' communicative skills and performance are multiple-choice items; essay writing; composition; translation, dictation, scored interview or oral test, and short answer items (Abdul-Hamid, 2021).

Innovative Theoretical Models of Language Testing

The approaches to the construction of language tests follow the trends of linguistic and sociolinguistic theoretical views. From the linguistic point of view, the goal of language testing concentrates on linguistic competence of grammatical accuracy or structure and vocabulary. Perhaps Lado (1961, as cited in Abdul-Hamid, 2021) was the first to innovate a theoretical model of linguistic competence called the Discrete Point Proficiency Test (DPPT) approach. This approach is categorised as an indirect test because it suggests measuring what the learners know about the language (grammar) to make a judgment on their ability to use the language. In other words, it focuses on what the learners know about the language, and not the language itself. Another theoretical background that echoes this approach is Chomsky (1965) which emphasises the aspect of syntax for language development (Abdul-Hamid, 2021). Some of the weaknesses of this approach are that it does not test the learners in real life context and takes oral aspect of language for granted (Oller, 1979; Bachman & Palmer, 1996, cited in Abdul-Hamid, 2021).

In reaction to testing grammar as a determinant of the ability to use a language, Sociolinguists conceptualised language as a functioning psycholinguistic phenomenon of human socio-cultural activities (Hymes, 1972; Halliday, 1973; Canalé & Swain 1983 and Lawal, 2002). Therefore, a test of language should integrate the structure of the language into the culture and other related traits holistically. This approach was first informed by Hymes' (1972) theory of communicative competence. Based on this, Oller (1973) introduces the Integrative Proficiency Test Approach. This approach is communicative oriented, which is the most relevant to measure all the components of communicative competence in the learners. Specifically, it embraces the construction of direct interview, observation, and rating scales to establish the level of speaking or oral and written communicative competencies in the learners (Oller, 1973; David, 1969). Previous writers who developed communicative language test frameworks by the Integrative Proficiency Test approach include Canelé and Swain (1980); Canelé (1983); and Bachman and Palmer (1996). Canalé and Swain (1980) proposed a version of the communicative competence model of language competence. This model comprises Grammatical Competence; Strategic Competence; and Socio-Linguistic Competence (p. 27). Canalé (1983) more elaborative advanced four dimensions of communicative competence of Language Education, namely: Grammatical/Linguistic Competence; Strategic Competence; Socio-Cultural Competence, and Discourse Competence (p. 6).

Grammatical competence is the understanding of language parts and codes. It includes the knowledge of pronunciation, vocabulary, and other aspects of syntax as well as their appropriate linguistic situational uses. It concerns the ability to construct acceptable sentences. Sociolinguistic Competence is the awareness of socio-cultural principles of language function. It concerns the ability to use and comprehend applicable utterances and vocabularies of politeness, greeting, request, and various styles in each context. Furthermore, discourse competence denotes the talent to produce and combine various parts of the language in conversation, in many cohesive situations, such as public speeches, politics, arguments, and academic papers. While strategic competence has to do with the talent to communicate effectively using of verbal and non-verbal strategies.

Based on the above model, many elaborative models were further developed to indicate knowledge ofthe language and to facilitate its teaching, learning, and testing. For example, Bachman (1990); and Bachman and Palmer (1996) proposed a model of communicative

competence consisting of two distinct components: organisational and pragmatic. This model is an advancement of the Canale and Swain model. The organisational knowledge was employed to serve as grammatical competence in vocabulary, morphology, syntax, phonology, and graphology. In addition, textual knowledge was used to serve as discourse knowledge. Furthermore, pragmatic knowledge is adopted to mean the Lexicology of words, the talent to use figurative language; functional knowledge, which is the knowledge of the relationships between utterance and the mind; it also includes the knowledge of society and language, which is sociolinguistic competence of situational language use that interacts with meta-cognitive strategies of planning, goal setting, implementation, and assessment.

Celce-Murcia, Dornyei and Thurrell (1995), in relevance to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and testing, presented a framework of communicative competence with a pyramid enclosing a circle and surrounded by another circle. The circle within the pyramid means 'Discourse Competence', and the other three parts of the triangle refer to 'Socio-cultural Competence', 'Linguistic Competence' and the latest is 'Action Competence' which appears as an addition to the Canale and Swain framework. It is framed to capture the talent of performance and interpretation of communicative acts. Thus, the framework advocates discourse competence as the major component of language use and places it in a position where the lexico-grammatical knowledge, the action organising skills of communicative intent, and the sociocultural context come together. In turn, the 'Discourse Competence' also outlines each of the other three components. The circle enclosing the pyramid establishes strategic competence as an ingredient that allows a strategically competent language user to use the language and resolve problems through communication (Abdul-Hamid, 2021).

Pedagogically, Lawal (2002) perceived levels of competence as goals of Language Education. After establishing the interrelationship among aims, goals, and objectives, he also proposed a model of aspects of a pragmatic theory (of teaching and testing) in a five hierarchical cumulative order. The first aspect is linguistic competence; it comes as the base and subsumes lexis, phonology, syntax, morphology, and semantics. The second aspect is situational competence which refers to the knowledge of discourse and context. The third aspect is psychological competence which refers to an awareness of, and sensitivity to the mood, attitudes, and points of view of the other interlocutor(s). Another level is social competence, which deals with

sociolinguistic factors; the next before the last is cultural competence; the knowledge of historical and cultural background to the situation of language. Cosmological competence is used to mean the ultimate level which describes the language user's knowledge of the general world (Lawal, 2002).The aspects of pragmatic competence correspond to receptive and productive behaviours in meaningful situations or contexts. The learner perceives language traits through listening and reading and makes competence of production by speaking and writing.

The Present Framework

From the previously appraised models, the present communicative language assessment framework is a formulation of Input-Process-Output (IPO) language assessment from the concept of communicative competence and performance, which are regarded as the primary goal of Language Education (Canale & Swain, 1983; Lawal, 2002).
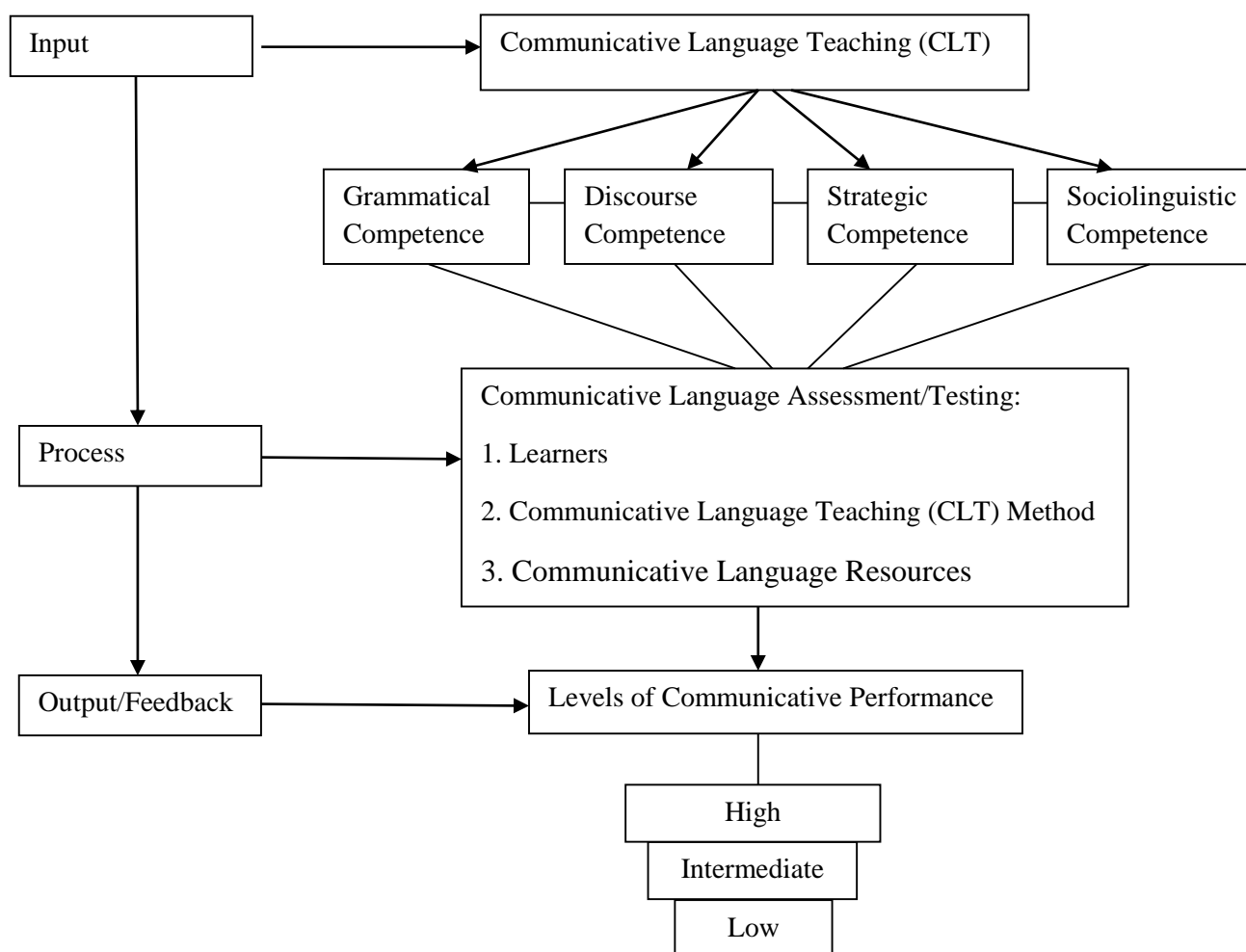
A Model of "Communicative Language Assessment"

The bi-directional arrows linking input, process, and output/feedback show the usefulness of Input-process-output (IPO) in the assessment of the learners' levels of communicative competence for language sustainable development. The first arrow on the left directing from input to communicative competence indicates that communicative competence which is the ability to use a language is the goal of Language Assessment as conceived by Halliday (1973 cited in Abdul-Hamid, 2021) and Lawal (2002). Furthermore, the downward arrows from communicative competence indicate that the incorporation of the various parts of communicative competence innovated by Canale and Swain (1980), Canale (1983), is the basic input for the process of communicative language assessment on the learners, instructional methods, and resources. These relate to another four lines from the components to indicate their relationship in the process of assessment.

Moreover, the second arrow on the left directing from the process of communicative language assessment and its variables indicates learners' performance as what determines the level of communicative competence. Finally, the third arrow in the left directing from the output to levels of communicative competence indicates the feedback of the students' levels of communicative competence, which may be high, intermediate, or low.

Recommendations

From the above framework, this paper is hereby recommending the following:

i.   Language should be taught and tested as a whole in a form of communication;

ii.   The teaching of language materials and tasks should be regarded as the input of communicative competence;

iii.   The learners; Communicative Language Teaching method; and resources should be adopted as the elements of process of facilitating communicative competence; and

iv.   The out-put of the test should indicate the learners' level of language use.

Conclusion

Development in Language Education could only be sustained using appropriate teaching and testing methods. In addition to the previous efforts on language testing and assessment, this paper suggests the Input-Process-Output (IPO) framework for measuring learners' ability to use a language as it helps to identify their level of communicative competence. It can also be adapted to test instructional methods and resources for sustainable development of communicative language teaching and learning.

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