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**RESEARCH PAPER**

**A Case for Communicative Language Testing for ESP Courses for Undergrad Business Students**

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**PAPER INFO**

**Received:**

June 08, 2020

**Accepted:**

August 25, 2020

**Online:**

September 15, 2020

**Keywords:**

Business ESP,  
Communicative  
Language  
Testing,  
Efficacy

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**ABSTRACT**

The present study was undertaken to estimate the efficacy of communicative language testing in the backdrop of Business ESP at a Pakistani university. To do that, we first administered a short questionnaire to 100 teachers teaching ESP courses at different universities in Pakistan. The questionnaire contained both the close-ended and open-ended questions. The results of the questionnaire gave rise to the need for developing a communicative language test. Hence, a 75-mark communicative language test, paying due regard to the prescribed text and grammar items in addition to the composition and aural-oral skills was prepared and administered to 35 business majors at a Pakistani university after validation by a panel of experts. Different rubrics for speaking and composition skills were developed after review of the relevant literature. The study makes a claim that due to the washback effect of testing, such a test might be a motivating factor for the students

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**Introduction**

A review of the outlines of various ESP courses at Pakistani universities shows that these courses are meant to teach the students communication skills that they will use in their practical lives. Majority of the courses, with a very few exceptions, will present the following contents:

1. What is Effective Communication?
2. What are different forms of communication?
3. Report Writing
4. Effective Presentations
5. Memorandums and Letter Writings

Language testing in Pakistan has traditionally focussed on composition, grammar and vocabulary. In Spolsky's (1975,1995) terms, this practice amalgamates the pre-scientific era, where essays and open-ended questions were used to assess the language ability by an intuitive and authoritative rater, and the psychometric-structuralist era, where the structural elements of language were reliably tested. This amalgamation, however, does not take into account the third historical era i.e. the psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic which resulted in communicative language testing. The fact that the students are not tested for listening and speaking skills makes teachers ignore these skills.

### **Communicative Language Testing**

Communicative language testing is a holistic approach to language testing in which a learner's ability perform is measured with reference to appropriate norms of pragmatic, social and cultural behaviour (Morrow, 2018). In simple terms, it assesses the students' ability to use language in context. Research on communicative language testing has been underway since communicative language teaching approach came to fore. Bachman (1990), and Canale and Swain (1980) before him, came up with the most influential models of communicative language testing. Developing on Hymes (1972) notion of communication competence, Canale and Swain (1980) added new dimensions to the concept. Hymes (1972) dismissed Chomsky's concept of linguistic competence for he believed that a conception of competence that excludes the role of socio-cultural features and is confined to ideal speaker listener in a homogenous speech community is quite narrow. He therefore suggested that there were rules of grammar that were useless without the rules of use (Hymes, 1972, p. 278). Canale and Swain elaborated and modified Hymes' concept of communicative competence. For them, grammar was as much important as the socio-cultural features and use. Canale and Swain opined that "there are rules of language use that would be useless without rules of grammar" (1980, p. 5). They postulated three components of communicative competence that included the grammatical competence, the sociolinguistic competence and the strategic competence. Canale (1983) revised this model and incorporated a fourth component namely the discourse competence. A brief discussion of these four components follows.

Grammatical competence denotes the knowledge of the rules of grammar i.e. lexical items, morphology, syntax, sentence grammar, semantics and phonology. Grammatical competence will be an inevitable element of any communicative theory since it enables the learners to accurately determine what the utterances literally means (Canale & Swain, 1980).

When sociolinguistic contexts come into play, we talk about sociolinguistic competence. This aspect of communicative competence entails production and comprehension of the utterances with appropriateness in terms of the sociolinguistic context. In this regard, the things to keep in mind is the use of language in accordance with participants' status, interaction's purpose and conventions. This competence, hence, requires understanding the language contexts that define

participants' roles, information sharing function that their interaction is performing (Savignon, 1983)

Strategic competence implies the use of the verbal and non-verbal tactics in order to recompense the communication breakdowns. Such breakdowns may be a result of the performance variables or insufficient competence. Two types of strategies, according to Canale and Swain are worth discussing i.e. those concerned with lack of mastery of the grammatical forms and the ones dealing with the sociolinguistic competence.

According to Canale (1983), discourse competence is a subdivision of the sociolinguistic competence. It covers proficiency in coherence and cohesion in writing and speech.

Canale and Swain claimed that since grammar and the use of language appropriately in a given context are both important considerations in language teaching and learning, language testing should focus on both these phenomena.

Bachman's model can be seen as an evolution of the Canale and Swain model of language testing (Bachman, 1991). Bachman (1990) considered language competence as consisting of two broad constituents i.e. the knowledge of the language and the strategic competence that Bachman and Palmer (1996, p. 67) elaborated as "a set of metacognitive strategies". Bachman (1990) believed and Bachman and Palmer (1996) concurred that a combination of these two constituents provides the students with competence to use language effectively in testing as well as in non-test language use.

Bachman and Palmer (1996) split the knowledge of language into organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge. While the former means the ability to communicate meanings by composing or uttering grammatically correct sentences, the latter is concerned with the ability to produce contextually appropriate discourse to communicate meanings.

Organizational knowledge is further categorised into grammatical knowledge, knowledge of text, knowledge of cohesion and that of rhetorics or organization of conversation. The grammatical knowledge pertains to the ability to organize a sentence or an utterance and includes the knowledge of vocabulary, syntax, phonology and geography. As against it, the textual knowledge is concerned with the ability to organize sentences and utterances into meaningful discourse. "Knowledge of rhetorical or conversational organization is involved in producing or comprehending organizational development in written texts or in conversations" (Bachman & Palmer, 1996, p. 69)

Pragmatic knowledge subsumes functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge. Functional knowledge "determines how utterances/sentences are related to intentions of language users" whereas the sociolinguistic knowledge

determines how utterances/sentences are related to the features of the language use contexts” (Bachman, 1991, p. 684).

Though these models provide useful insights into the concept of communicative language testing there is still no agreement among the applied linguists and language practitioners on what constitutes a good language test (Weir, 1993). Moreover, a good test in one context may not be valid in the other context. A university entrance language test, for example, will be quite different from a communicative language test that focuses on a job candidate’s ability to perform in a particular language (Kitao and Kitao, 1996). In the same way, language test is also determined by the course content or the particular language skills that need to be assessed at a particular point in time. Therefore the context of the test administration also dictates the format and content of the language test, especially so in second language learning domains. This is so because the tests of language ability are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural conditions in which we operate (Messick, 1989).

### **Assessment in ESP**

Assessment is a process in which a teacher makes inferences about learners’ competence through their performance (Sarab et al, 2020). At the very outset, it should be clear that ESP testing is not the same as testing in academic English or general English. It is distinctive from English language testing (Tratnik, 2015). In fact, these tests measure the language learners’ specific abilities to perform in a given situation and in completion of a given task (Douglas, 2000). Hence, the important thing in ESP testing is whether the learners can perform the specific communicative act or not. So for Douglas (2000), both the language knowledge and context knowledge are important for an ESP learner.

The contents and themes of the ESP tests are derived from the disciplines that the students are enrolled in. There is specific jargon, syntactic and semantic features that are particular to that profession of discipline.

This leads to the discussion of authenticity in ESP testing. Bachman and Palmer (1991) believe that authenticity is of two kinds: one of these is interactional authenticity while the other one is situational authenticity. While the former deals with interaction between test-taker and the test task while the latter refers to how features of test task correspond to language use.

There have been calls for adopting novel methods and tools for assessment in ESP (Dashtestani, 2019). An important thing to keep in mind while testing in ESP is that an ESP teacher can Choose his/her testing and evaluation methods easily if there has been need assessment prior to introduction of the course (Sofa & Dewi, 2020).

### Need Assessment for a Communicative Language Test

In the first part of our research, we administered a short questionnaire to 100 teachers teaching ESP courses at different universities in Pakistan. The questionnaire contained both the close-ended and open-ended questions. The close-ended questions were mainly concerned with the teachers' testing practices and their use of rubrics. The results of the close-ended questions are tabulated below.

**Table 1**  
**Type of Tests Used by ESP Teachers for Business Classes**

Statement	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
I use a variety of assessments methods during the course.	80%	15%	5%	0%	0%
I use interviews as a testing strategy.	0%	10%	10%	15%	65%
I use presentation as a testing strategy.	85%	15%	0%	0%	0%
I use paragraphs for testing students' writing skills.	33%	12%	15%	25%	15%
I use essays for testing students' writing skills.	5%	20%	15%	40%	20%
I ask your students to write down the memos.	30%	30%	10%	30%	0%
I ask your students to write letters.	40%	25%	10%	25%	0%
I ask your students to write applications.	15%	10%	20%	40%	15%
I use authentic materials for testing.	20%	20%	20%	30%	10%
I test students' theoretical knowledge on ESP.	25%	40%	12%	13%	10%

The table shows that the teachers claim they use a variety of assessment methods during the course. However, their responses to the subsequent questions do not verify this claim as 80% of the respondents claim that they do not use interviews as a testing strategy while 60 % do not use essays to assess students' writing skills. Moreover, less than half of the teachers do not use authentic materials for testing. Meanwhile, more than half of the teachers either do not use, or sometimes use, paragraph for testing. Data shows that majority of the teachers use memos and letters to test the students' discourse competence while almost all the teachers use presentation to test students' speaking skills. However, a dominant majority of the teachers, more than 75%, either tests or has tested students' theoretical knowledge on ESP.

Findings on the use of testing procedures show that Business English teachers rely mostly on theoretical knowledge instead of trying to develop communicative competence among the ESP learners. The focus on theory, grammar and letter writing in isolation does not prepare the students to the job market fully prepared. The most important factor regarding the ESP is that students are taught language to deal with the specific purposes for which they are being trained. If this purpose is not met, it means that the students lack in essential of language competence.

**Table 2: Rubrics**

Statement	Always	Almost Always	Sometimes	Seldom	Never
I develop a rubric for presentations and interviews.	10%	10%	20%	40%	20%
I score on the go taking an overall assessment of presentations and interviews.	25%	55%	10%	6%	4%
I develop a rubric for paragraphs and essays.	10%	10%	20%	40%	20%
I score on the go taking an overall assessment of paragraphs and essays.	25%	55%	10%	6%	4%
I explain the rubric to your students.	5%	5%	20%	50%	20%

The importance of rubric for speaking and writing tasks cannot be overemphasized (cf. 1.4.1 & 1.4.2). However, the data presented above suggests that teachers do not develop their own rubrics for rating interviews, presentations and written compositions of ESP learners. It is evident that majority of the teachers seldom or never develop their rubrics. Instead, they rate the students' presentations, interviews and written composition on-the-go.

Findings from the questionnaire for ESP teachers highlight the need to develop a Communicative Language Test and rubrics for ESP learners with Business major. In the next sections, we explain the test, its various sections, and the rubrics for speaking and composition sections of the test.

### **Development of a Test**

Bachman and Palmer (1996) claimed that language tests provide the best and the most useful means of collecting data about learners' performance in language. In developing a communicative test for Pakistani ESP learners, the test developer should keep in view the fact that most of the components of communicative competence should be tested.

In this study, a communicative achievement test was developed that dealt with discourse competence (through composition and speaking assessment), grammatical competence (through precis writing and composition), and strategic and sociolinguistic competence (through speaking assessment).

The first section also consisted of 25 marks that dealt with the textual study. The need for this portion arises from the fact that once they enter the practical field, these students will need to read and evaluate reports written in English. Hence, it is necessary to test their ability to comprehend text.

In the second section of the test, we included informative and narrative essays. The informative essay was added to judge the students' discourse competence in providing information about a familiar topic while the narrative essay was meant to assess whether they were capable of narrating an incident that could happen at the workplace.

The last section of the test pertained to the aural-oral skills of the students. This portion was included in the test to cover the objectives of an ESP course, i.e. to enable the students to listen to and speak English at workplace.

### **Developing a Rating Scale for Writing**

We developed two rating scales, one each for writing and speaking, because rating scales are important to ensure that tests are assessed reliably. The analytic method and the holistic method are perhaps two of the most significant (Alderson, Clapham and Wall, 1995) among methods developed for scoring learners' writings. If a rater is making an overall judgement of learners' writing, it means s/he is using a holistic scales. As against it, if rater decides that various aspects of the learners' writing need to be analysed separately, it would mean that s/he is using an analytic scales (Galti et al., 2018). The holistic method completes quickly because the paper checker has to get an overall idea of what the language learner has written and if the information provided was actually required. This makes the jobs of the teachers quite easy. However, it also means that a lot depends on the judgment of the teacher as every teacher will have his or her own view and their judgment will be final, though not necessarily similar. This raises an important issue of reliability. Moreover, it might seem unfair to judge the learners' writing in one go (Weigle, 2002). To overcome these issues of reliability and fairness, it is recommended that each test should be marked by at least four teachers (Hughes, 1989). Nevertheless, it logically follows that such a practice will deny this method's benefit of speed in marking.

Consequently, there has been a growing body of research to advocate the use of analytic scales for rating composition skills because they enhance a test's reliability (Kaba&Sengül, 2016; Finson, Ormsbee, and Jensen, 2011; Dogan &Uluman, 2017). There is an advocacy for using these scales in order to ensure that empirical procedures are used for assessment. These scales take into consideration different

aspects of composition. Since the rater divides the composition into different bits and analyses these on the basis of a definite criterion, it takes time but ensures reliability. That is why we decided to use analytic method of scoring.

### **Assessment of Composition Skills**

Assessment of the writing skill is an integral part of any testing procedure in ESP (Morgan and Alfehaid, 2019). However, one has to carefully decide what categories one should include in a rubric for assessing the composition skills in ESP. Moreover, adding up dozens of categories will ultimately burden the rater. That is why we preferred to use five categories that were most relevant to the learners' needs in practical life. To develop this scale, (See Table 1) we relied on Oklahoma Analytic Scoring Rubric for Writing Assessment 8TH Grade OCCT., The British Council Scales reported in Hughes (1989) and CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Language) (Council of Europe, 2006).

**Table 3**  
**Rating Scale for Composition**

	<b>Grammar</b>	<b>Expression and development of Ideas</b>	<b>Vocabulary</b>	<b>Mechanics</b>	<b>Organisation and unity</b>
<b>3</b>	Minor errors but otherwise grammatically sound	Clear expression and development of ideas.	Spellings are mostly correct and there are negligible, if any, lexical errors.	Very few errors of punctuation (if any)	Appears to be well knitted and one piece.
<b>2</b>	Not that correct grammatically but acceptable	Can put the message across though clarity of ideas is lacking.	There are a few mistakes of spellings and word choice	Errors of mechanics but comprehensible	It is overall logical and organized with a few interpolations
<b>1</b>	Frequent errors of grammar	Ideas are unclear for the most part.	Demonstrates lack of command over vocabulary	Several punctuation errors	Several interpolations
<b>0</b>	No sense of grammar	Clueless in terms of ideas	Wrong use of words	Full of mechanical errors	No unity

In the fourth and the last section of the test, we assessed learners' speaking and listening skills. The task of testing speaking and listening skills was accomplished in two days. We administered a Listening Test on the first day. We played an audio-tape that the students had to listen before they could choose correct response for each of the questions. We played the tape twice so that the students had enough time to comprehend the audio. The audio consisted of a dialogue between a

manager and an engineer in which the manager explained the working environment at a plant. The students were required to answer 10 MCQs. Every item had one mark. During the listening test, the researchers ensured that there was no sound intrusion or disruption.

The speaking test was conducted on the next day. The students were asked questions not only about their personality and choices they make but also about things they have studied at university. As we did about composition, we had to develop a rating scale for speaking as well. There is no dearth of rating scales as far as testing speaking is concerned. Out of the rubrics developed thus far, the CEFR and the American Council on Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) are the most prominent. However, for the present study, CEFR was adopted with some modifications along with the rating scale employed by Test in English for Educational Purposes (TEEP), Associated Examining Board, England (as cited in Weir 1993, p. 43-44) (See Table 2).

**Table 4**  
**Rating scale for Speaking**

	<b>Fluency</b>	<b>Relevance</b>	<b>Comprehensibility</b>	<b>Accuracy</b>	<b>Vocabulary</b>
<b>3</b>	The response is fluent and clear. No significant pauses	The response is mostly relevant.	Overall comprehensible. Very few pronunciation errors.	Negligible errors of grammar	Reasonable vocabulary to perform the task
<b>2</b>	Few pauses but message is put across easily	Few digressions which are quickly overcome	Message is overall comprehensible but rater faces problems in comprehending	A few grammar errors but these don't hamper communication	Limited but Acceptable vocabulary
<b>1</b>	Lacks fluency Utterance lacks clarity	Mostly irrelevant	Comprehension of message is difficult. Several pronunciation, errors	Several grammar errors of grammar.	Vocabulary is limited
<b>0</b>	No fluency. Utters words but cannot communicate	The speech is totally irrelevant	Not comprehensible at all	Full of grammatical inaccuracies	Lacks the vocabulary to perform the task

Since it was essential to perform item analysis, the researchers awarded one mark to the subdivision have 2 or more than 2 marks while zero marks were awarded for subdivision having less than two marks.

The test was put up to a panel of experts for the purpose of validation. The experts analysed the test items in terms of their suitability for the undergraduate

level Business English classroom in Pakistan, also bearing in mind that fact that the communicative competence among students was to be tested.

### **Conclusion**

Teachers generally develop tests based on the content they teach instead of focusing on the aims and objectives of a course. If the aim is to develop desired competence in the target language in a specific setting, the test should also assess the students' ability to do the same instead of asking the learners some theoretical concepts that they read in the class. It has been reported by Jahanzeb (2009) that most of the teachers modify their teaching methods and manners keeping in view the English exams while the students also focus on the same things that the teachers are likely to test.

The present study shows that it is not only possible but also desirable to develop a test of communicative language ability for the Pakistani ESP business students. Such a test might be a motivating factor for the teachers to focus more on the oral communication skills of the students and thereby balance all the skills in a course of English for specific purposes in Pakistani context.

It would be highly inappropriate if we do not comment on the strengths and weaknesses of this test. Strengths of this test include a balance between form and language function, an effort to ensure that questions relate to topics that would be relevant to the test takers, a variety of question types and the fact that the test targets all the four language skills. Nevertheless, we have to concede that this test does not cover all the aims and objectives of all the ESP courses. It is limited to ESP course taught to business students at a Pakistani university. However, it presents broad outlines of how a communicative language test for ESP should look like.

The study opens new vistas for test developers to experiment with new testing techniques for ESP learners. In a country like Pakistan where testing the listening skills of the students is a rare commodity, this test establishes that testing of the listening skills for ESP courses is quite possible.

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