

Transition to new communicative test form. Its content and development.

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Nowadays communicative approach to language teaching has gained dominance. The advent of psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic approach in teaching of foreign languages caused changes of education methods. Language is currently reckoned as a dynamic, creative and functional system. Effectiveness of communication that is coming into contact in accordance with the situation and conditions is considered to be the highest criterion of language acquisition.

The presented material reflects the following:

- Using of the language as a means of communication in certain real-life situations;
- Pragmatic direction and functional character of communicative testing;
- Ways of developing test models which are able to give the real idea about the examinees' levels of ability of using the language as a means of communication.

Broadly speaking, communicative approach (method) implies the following skills or competencies:

- language skills or grammatical competence, that is acquisition of vocabulary units and knowledge of certain formal rules for using them in comprehended expressions. Language skill is the most prominent of all communicative skills. No verbal communication (contact) is possible without knowledge of words and rules of grammar as well as construction of comprehended expressions;
- sociolinguistic (conversation) skill or using appropriate language for a given situation, that is certain method of constructing linguistic forms subject to situation;
- strategic skill, that is user's ability to use verbal and non-verbal strategies to fill code gaps in his knowledge.

In fact, communicative training provides development of all skills and their complex utilization. But lately in view of integration into the world system preference is given to conversational skills. Pragmatic direction and functional character of the simulated conversational situations enable to exam the ability of using the language in the most real situations as well as to resolve issues on the international communicative level.

Communicative approach in language acquisition was also naturally reflected in testing, its purpose and content. Today foreign language testing is considered to be a communicative reciprocal social contact. Real situations, that are life situations the examinee may experience, are described in the communicative test assignments and their solution requires some communicative skills.

In accordance with the above mentioned in testology when language acquisition level is measured the first thing to do would be to exam the ability of the examinee to adequately use his linguistic skills that is to establish mutual social relationship.

Going back to Azerbaijan testing examination history we'd like to remind that testing system has been used only for 15 years since 1992. It should be noted that on condition of existing of various methods and text-books used in teaching foreign languages in our republic that time independent testing was the only way to provide compliance with state foreign language standards as well as international language acquisition. At the same time it enables to carry out the following:

- comparison of the results to be achieved in language sphere in accordance with the standards and syllabus with the real quality results;

- the information obtained would enable both to diagnose linguistic skills and analyze the whole foreign language teaching process in our republic;
- determine the students' knowledge level in foreign language by class, school, region, etc.

Of course, in our republic foreign languages were taught mainly by traditional methods that time. And tests would also meet requirements of traditional methods in accordance with standards and text-books founded on that method. National exams mainly test grammar knowledge but not communicative ability. The significance of these tests and the whole testing process is to exam the ability of using the linguistic knowledge. At the same time social and cultural knowledge are taken into account.

Though examination of the level of linguistic knowledge used to be the main focus of tests with selected-response multiple choice items, of course, it contains items that deal with elements of communicative approach. Some features of communicative skills were tested in those tests, too. As to choose the key even for many items directed at the exposing of linguistic knowledge is connected with comprehension of the real context or situation. It could be seen from the items given below.

It is also necessary to remind that alongside with English as a foreign language we include in our tests items in German, French and Russian. And the tendency of development of tests in these languages is the same. But the testees' being more in English we refer to these data.

So, let's look through the item:

Choose the correct tense forms.

I opened the window. The rain ..., but the wind... .

- A) had stopped, was blowing
- B) has stopped, is blowing
- C) was stopped, was blowing
- D) stopped, is blowing
- E) stopped , was blowing

Choosing the key, first it is necessary to remember the peculiarities of using of different tense forms. Of course, it is also important to understand the situation in which the action takes place: *When I opened the window, I saw that there was not any rain but the wind was still blowing.* Without understanding this situation it is impossible to choose the right answer.

Let's have a look at another item.

Choose the correct articles.

Our street is in ... centre of ... city.

- A) -, the B) a, a C) a, the D)) the, the E) the, a

Choosing the key even on this kind of item with such a formal (grammatical) index of the noun as an article is directly connected with the understanding of the situation given in the sentence. It is clear that the city mentioned in the given situation is the city in which I live. So in both cases the definite article is used (D).

Another example:

Choose the correct degree of the adjective.

The last exam was ... than we expected. It took me ... time.

- A) difficult, little
- B) more difficult, less
- C) more difficult, more
- D) the most difficult, much more
- E) less difficult, more

In order to choose the key to such kind of item, alongside with the knowledge of grammatical (formal) features of adjectives, it is necessary to understand what is compared and then to define what degree (positive, comparative or superlative) should

be used. As in our example we have comparison, so we choose the comparative degree (more difficult, more --C).

Generally speaking, each item provides a certain situation because each text by itself is a type of communicative speech. But since we didn't focus on that feature of items, it did not form the content of the items.

According to statistics the answers of the examinees to these kinds of models with selected-response items are considered to be sufficient and provided sufficiently stable index and this index was increasing year in, year out.. It was the evidence of the validity of the tests and the possibility of using them at the examination to control the real level of formation of the skills and habits in mastering on language sphere.

After Azerbaijan joined European Union European norms of language teaching were widely adopted here. They are widely used in teaching foreign languages and resulted in educational reform. Communicative method was recognized as a significant task. And new standards and text-books written on their basis appeared. According to this standard the aim of teaching languages is to create communicative abilities of language learners in order to establish social mutual relationship.

This situation found its reflection in linguistic test modeling. It became perfectly clear that nowadays testing is one of the ways of integrating into the world education system. Communicative tests attempt to focus on the expression and understanding of the functional use of language rather than on the limited mastery of language form. We (the participants in seminars of foreign languages in the State Students Admission Commission) see the positive benefits accruing from such testing. Soon it became more and more acceptable. Its aim is to reflect real life situations and to bridge the gap between teaching, testing and the real life.

Thus changes have been made in test contents which provide complex examination of verbal and written understanding skills, ability to express the opinion, purposefully work on the given assignments as well as analysis and synthesis skills. The pragmatic trend of the modeling intercourse situation and the functional character of the test materials create the possibility to control language mastery in situation maximally approaching real situation.

That is why we changed our attitude to choosing the linguistic material for tests as well as the contents and forms of assignments. More and more tests reflecting communicative approach are used. But the most significant one is that conversational realia are reflected in the tests.

As an example let's have a look at the assignments below:

What's the purpose of the following letter?

Dear friend,

I am in trouble and I don't know what to do. I wonder if you could allow me to live in your country house for a few days.

- A) to offer a friend a country house
- B) to complain about the life in the country
- C) to ask for help
- D) to buy a new house
- E) to offer help

The letter is addressed to the friend. Each of the given options may be used in such a letter. But if you do not understand the meaning of *I'm in trouble and don't know what to do*, you cannot choose the key easily (the letter asks for help).

There may be given more examples of items, reflecting the real life situations and conversational realia the examinee may experience:

Choose the correct variant.

Tom: I met Linda's parents yesterday.

Pete:

Tom: They're very friendly.

- A) Did you? What do they like?.
- B)) Did you? What are they like?
- C) Did you? What are they?
- D) Did you? What they are like?
- E) Did you? Who they were?

Complete the dialogue.

--What is Amy like?

--

- A) She's better today B)) She is clever and intelligent C) She's English
- D) She is my aunt E) She is a secretary

Complete the dialogue.

-- I have seen this film more than once and I am always ready to see it again.

--Why did you like it?

--

- A) It doesn't make you think B) It cannot educate people C) Nothing about the film is original
- D)) Because it has connection with real life E) It has little richness of meaning

Complete the dialogue.

- The project was..., wasn't it?

- Yes, we are ... of our work.

-!

- A)) successful, proud. Congratulations.
- D) useless, ashamed. I'm so grateful to you.
- B) not difficult, tired. So wonderful.
- C) interesting, tired. You're welcome
- E) useful, proud. I'm sorry to hear that.

Complete the dialogue.

— I'll have to take a history exam next week.

—.....

- A) Happy holiday B) Not at all C) See you soon
- D) The same to you E)) Good luck

Choose the correct variant.

--Will you join us?

--.....

- A)) With pleasure B) See you soon C) you're welcome
- D) So do I E) Don't mention it

Choose the correct variant.

--What time does your plane fly?

--In an hour/

--... .

- A) Be on time at the railway station. B)) I'll come to see you off
- C) Glad to meet you D) Don't mention it
- E) You're welcome

Choose the correct answer.

Which expressions are used while meeting?

1. How are you? 2. Apologize to your mother for me.
 3. How do you do? 4. Thank you for the pleasant party
- A) 3,4 B) 2,3 C) 1,4 D) 1,3 E) 1,2

Starting from 2005 according to the world practice texts were included into our tests to exam various features of speech habits.

Using the text into operation we intend to control 3 levels:

1. understanding the main context of the text;
2. choosing of more exact (specific) information;
3. vocabulary

Alongside with it we understand that individual questions to the text which are used in testing and are more valid from the point of view of communicative theory such as: *Do you agree with the author's opinion? Would you act in the same way? What new things did you learn? Did this text teach you something that you didn't know before and if yes, what is it?* are very important. But, unfortunately we do not use this type of questions in our texts because of selected-response multiple choice items.

During selection of texts for tests we take into consideration the following:

- familiarity of the examinees with this type of texts;
- familiarity with topic;
- familiarity with socio-cultural and linguistic-social character of the text;
- text complexity from linguistic point of view (number of new words and structures);
- text structure (clarity and sequence of ideas and events);
- text style;
- time frame given for work with the text;
- conceptual complexity of the text (ideas complexity);

In other words, the texts show the natural use of the language. Socio-cultural and everyday life should be reflected in the text.

Of course, original (authentic – natural) or semi-authentic adapted texts are used in testing. When text is adapted, connective features cannot be removed from the text as it can make the understanding difficult. We think, naturally, “simple” texts are more preferable than adapted or “simplified” texts.

While working at texts we take into consideration that it is more important to understand the general meaning of the text than the meaning of separate words.

Thus, at present on the base of the text we control the general understanding of the context of the text (choosing the best title, the main idea, etc.) ,the vocabulary (especially synonyms and antonyms and the meaning of different words) and, of course, the ability of the examinees to analyze and synthesize(choosing the wrong or right statement, answer different questions from the text, etc.). But in future with the aid of the texts we intend to control other spheres of knowledge and skills, too.

The results of the pretests which include the same test model was usable and shows that we have a reliable instrument to control the language mastering skills and habits by using texts.

It should also be noted that texts are only a part of our tests. The other part consists of the items examining different language skills including linguistic (grammatical) competence. We understand that the multiple choice items are restricted to using of communicative aims. In real life there is no five alternative choices. Especially it is necessary to take into account the limited time at the exam. So we tried to use the more

items in which it is necessary to complete the statement (right or wrong), to define the main idea or theme of the topic, to make a conclusion from reading, etc.

All mentioned above shows that our purposes are to prepare test models which are able to give the real idea about skill level of using the language as communicative means in certain situations.

Therefore, clear idea of the parameters used for examination of communicative skills is of utmost importance for preparation of tests. This enables to answer the question on test validity, that is, how correctly it measures the parameters it is supposed to. Then another question arises: what number of test assignments would be sufficient to express an opinion of the language acquisition level?

But the task is not considered separately from criteria. The relation between the task and criteria is the main factor in making a decision that includes communicative tests.

At present criteria used for evaluation of productive types of conversational skill enables to measure the conversational quality more precisely. Individual evaluation of each component is of major importance in these criteria. In practice there are two types of approach to the evaluation of speech products: impressionistic and analytical. The analytical type, that is evaluation of details when each criteria in score table is considered separately, then gets the sum, is determined more useful.

At present we use in our tests some elements of communication. So how adequately and fully the examinee uses the linguistic competence and speech ability to take part in social relationship is our main criteria.

And we think that we will be able to answer all these questions using the experience in communicative testing of other countries, where testing has been used for a long time.

We also hope that soon there will come a time in Azerbaijan testing when it will be possible to examine listening and comprehension skills of the examinees along with all of the above mentioned by using open-ended items.

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