

TEST VERSUS SUBJECT: IS THERE A MUST?

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ABSTRACT

Whenever teachers teach, it is expected that learners participate actively. However, reality reveals that there are occasions when learners do not participate/ engage.

In Rizal Technological University, the same dilemma is observed among the learners. Teachers perceived the learners to be inadequate in terms of communication skills. In most cases, learners are judged according to their classroom performance. Thus, the general view is that students' level of proficiency does not meet the standards set for College students.

At one point, the teacher's measure of the students learning is through test. However, how valid is the test given to determine the students acquisition of the expected competence?

This study finds out if the test taken by the students in their English 3 subject enhances their speech and oral communication and influences their class performance. Moreover, the paper aims to analyse the given test in terms of its general features, validity, effectiveness, applicability and conformity to the syllabus. In addition, the study intends to assess the general perception of the test takers towards the test.

Keywords: *test; language test; effectiveness, usefulness, performance-based*

INTRODUCTION

Assessment if not modified, changes as the landscape of education in Asia changes. Testing is a universal feature of social life [1] may it be in school, at home or in friendship or relationship. However, trying to dig deep into the nature of the test especially the school-based test, the question is how valid is the test for a teacher to decide how well the students have acquired the expected competencies?

In the tertiary education, the approach changed from content-based to outcomes-based. Therefore, from the nature of teaching to the form of assessment, the goal should be directed towards outcomes.

Whenever teachers teach, it is expected that learners participate actively. However, reality reveals that there are occasions when learners do not participate/ engage. Thus, the general view is that students in the tertiary level do not meet the standard set for College students. In Rizal Technological University, learners are commonly perceived to be inadequate in terms of the communication skills in terms of L2 communication due to their inability to respond in the target

language. In most cases, learners are judged according to their classroom engagement or performance. Thus, the general view is that students in the tertiary level do not meet/ comply with the standards set for College students.

[2] as cited by [3], the approaches to language teaching have undergone some extraordinary changes in the past twenty years, yet traditional methods of evaluating progress have been conserved in most foreign language classrooms. This situation has resulted in an ever-widening gap between the description of the course goal- often in terms of proficiency statements- and their measurement. Such a gap can erode or even destroy the effect that a curricular revision was meant to produce, no matter how innovative or creative the new materials or methods might be. This is true because the nature of evaluation, '*... that is, the content of the tests and the method by which grades are assigned, reflects more accurately than any lengthy statements of aims and purposes the real objectives of instruction*' As [4] stated in an article on testing communication skills:

If the message to the students in today's classroom is that they should be able to communicate in the foreign language, tests which measure their ability to communicate must be administered. A close look at testing in today's foreign language classroom, however, reveals quite clearly that such a message is not being conveyed. Instead, the message is that the real objective of the foreign language instruction is the development of the ability to carry out abundant grammatical exercises. (pp.52-53)

Language tests lead to decisions: a placement test, for instance allows a school to decide in which group a learner will learn most effectively. In the case of language testing, however, this simple truth is obscured by the fact that not all language tests are real tests in the real sense of the word [5].

The study investigated the test taken by the students in their English 3 subject: Speech and Oral Communication enhances their speech and oral communication and influences their performance in their other subjects specifically their class interaction during discussion as specified in the objectives of the subject or not.

Thus, this paper aimed to analyze the departmental midterm examination in English 3 given to second year English major students as one of the general education subjects. Specifically, the study sought to shed light to the general features of the test, the validity of the test in terms of the competencies set by the CHED, PRC and the College, and the perception of the students on the test's effectiveness and usefulness.

The result of the study aimed to correlate the test given to the students and the overall objectives of the subject. Hence, it intended to explore the areas the test would like to assess: its validity and effectiveness. Moreover, the result of the test hoped to serve as an eye opener to the test constructor to consider several factors in test construction other than to assess the level of students' knowledge acquisition which hoped to eventually lead to the improvement of the test given to students who are expected to become fluent and proficient communicators at the end of the semester.

METHODOLOGY

The research is quantitative-qualitative in nature applying a mix method approach. A descriptive survey was utilized to solicit responses from the respondents while in the qualitative analysis of data, content analysis was used.

The second-year English major students divided into two (2) Blocks who took the departmental midterm exam in English 3 were requested to answer the survey.

These students were chosen since their field of specialization is English and are expected to perform better than the other majors in terms of speech communication.

The Departmental midterm exam given every semester was used as the main instrument in the study. The test was composed of sixty (60) item multiple choice.

While the survey contained three (3) questioned with two options. After each question, a follow up question was asked.

A Table of Specification was also considered as reference to the construction of the test items.

The table below shows the specification of the Departmental Midterm Test.

Table 1 Table of Specifications of the Mid-Term Examination

Topics	No. of Days Discussed	% of the Items in each Topic	No. of Items	Item Placement	Distribution of Items				Level of Difficulty	
					Competencies of the Exam					
					K	C	E	A	Tot	
					n	o			al	
I. Oral & Speech Comm. Process	3	14%	14	1-14	5	5	2	2	14	Average
II. Levels of Communication	1	6%	6	15-20	2	2	1	1	6	Easy
III. Models of Communication	1	6%	6	21-26	2	2	1	1	6	Average
IV. Listening Process	3	14%	14	27-40	6	6	1	1	14	Difficult
V. Speech Mechanism	2	10%	10	41-50	4	3	1	2	10	Average
VI. Speech Sounds	2	10%	10	51-60	4	2	2	2	10	Difficult
Total	12	60%	60						60	

Kn: Knowledge Co: Comprehension E: Evaluation A: Application

In the conduct of the study, the researcher utilized the Departmental midterm exam questionnaire in English 3 Speech and oral Communication subject.

The test question was borrowed from the Office of the College of Education Custodian. While copies of the survey questionnaire were distributed to the students. After the questionnaires were answered, they were collected, tallied, analyzed and interpreted.

After the survey questionnaires were interpreted, they were presented and correlated with the sub problems.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Language testing is a complicated subject and much of this stem from problems of description and measurement which are particularly acute in linguistic and psychological investigation.

The general features of the test

The Departmental midterm test in English 3: Speech and Oral Communication was composed of sixty (60) item **multiple-choice questions**. It could also be gleaned that the test was an example of a **discrete point approach** to testing which is meant to measure one content point such as:

1. *The process of transmitting ideas, feelings, opinions, emotions or attitudes between and among individuals for better understanding.*
 a. *speech* b. *sounds* c. *communication* d. *synthesis*
2. *The word communication comes from the word "communis" which means*
 a. *commune* b. *commonness* c. *communist* d. *commit*
3. *The process of assimilating the continuous flow of words and responding with understanding or feeling.*
 a. *auding* b. *indexing* c. *coaching* d. *responding*
4. *This refers to the pictures or diagrams to help make something clear.*
 a. *Channel* b. *model* c. *decibel* d. *pictograph*

The test projects that there is only one possible answer for each item, each item samples an element through the use of one skill (recall), items are not dependent on one another- changing one item does not change the testee's performance on the other items of the test. Hence, requires only that the testee recognize the correct answer.

In addition, the test is characterized as '**closed type**' where the testee had to choose between a limited number of responses which promised an '**objective**' scoring since whoever marked the test, the result would be the same, making it a psychometric.

Validity of the test in terms of the competencies set by the CHED, PRC and the College

English 3 which is described as Speech and Oral Communication is categorized under general education subjects. The Commission on Higher education (CHED) and the Philippine Regulation

Commission (PRC) state the English 3 should aim to use accurate, meaningful and appropriate language in written and oral discourse [6].

English 3 as stipulated in the syllabus, is equivalent to a 3-unit general education subject which focuses on the nature, principles, techniques and practical application of oral communication. This course aims to develop the listening-speaking in various communication situations and to improve the wholesome attitudes and values concerning public speaking and its importance in a democratic society. Effective use of language, thought, voice and bodily actions at the different levels of communication and application of theories and rhetorical principles are part of the course.

The course is designed to bring improvements in the quality and effectiveness of the students' [speaking] voices and foster the developments of their potentials through various exercises on speech sounds. Specifically, the students can:

1. Demonstrate reasonable fluency in expressing ideas;
2. Acquire training in the effective use of verbal and non-verbal symbols for effective speech communication;
3. Present individual or in group speech activities geared towards what they will experience in their field;
4. Use appropriate body language in every speech activity;
5. Participate in and enjoy various communication activities; and
6. Display self-confidence in speaking before a crowd or public.

The Table of Specification indicated that the test covered six (6) general topics: Oral and speech communication process, levels of communication, models of communication, listening process, speech mechanism and speech sounds.

The table below presents the distribution of items competencies:

Table II. Distribution of Test Competencies

Competencies	No. of Items	Percentage
Knowledge	23	38.33 %
Comprehension	20	33.33 %
Evaluation	8	13.33 %
Application	9	15 %
Total	60	100 %

In terms of the distribution of items and competencies of the exam, it could be gleaned that 23 items (38.33%) fall under knowledge, 20 items (33.33%) fall under Comprehension, 8 items (13.33%) fall under evaluation and the remaining 9 items (15%) fall under application.

The data reveals that among the competencies, knowledge or recall which is the lowest level of learning has the biggest percentage.

When the test items were further evaluated, it was found that out of the 60- item test, 54 items (90%) of the items were knowledge- based questions. The remaining 6 items (10%): item nos. 37, 40, 57, 58, 59 and 60 were the only items categorized under application. It is implied then than the test items based on the distribution of competencies aimed to assess the retention level of the information especially the terminologies used in Speech and Oral Communication.

Evidently, the test is dominantly a recall test. In a recall test, the testees must actively remember the necessary facts, forms or structures [2]. Even the six (6) items: item nos. 37, 40, 57, 58, 59 and 60 though were categorized under application do not involve actual production of language.

In terms of validity, the degree to which it measures what it is supposed to measure [7] the given test failed to serve the purpose that it is intended for- the accurate, meaningful and appropriate use of language in written and oral discourse. The content of the test is primarily focused on the concepts discussed in the subject rather than the core objectives of the course [8].

Evaluating the content validity which focuses on the content of the test, the test items failed to represent the objectives or specifications the test was originally designed to measure [9].

Students perception of the test in terms of:

a. Effectiveness

Effectiveness means adequate to accomplish a purpose; producing the intended or expected result [10]

The table below presents the Students Perception of the Test in terms of effectiveness

Table III. Students' Perception of the Test

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Effective	59	88.1 %
Ineffective	8	11.9%
Total	67	100 %

As shown in the table above, it could be gleaned that the 88.1 % of the students found the test effective. While the 11.9% found it ineffective.

When they were asked for the reason, those who answered effective stated (*copied verbatim*):

“ Because it identifies whether we learn something from that subject.”

“Because of the scope of the test was all part of the discussion.”

“ It helps me to evaluate what I've learned and to remember everything about the topic discussed in a semester.”

“To remember the things we discussed the different terms.”

“Because I understand it well and I got a passing grade.”

"I find it effective because some terminologies we encountered were also in other subject."

"I find effective since I was able to use all notes I had reviewed."

"Because I know the answer to the questions asked."

"Because we were able to apply the lessons we took."

"It is a very good evaluation of the knowledge we have acquire during the discussion."

"Because it is a written exam."

"Because most of the test question given was taught to us and we tackled it before the exam."

While those who claimed that the test given to them was ineffective cited that:

"Because it doesn't necessary related to oral communication."

" Because it is just written test and does not involve any practical activities."

"Because it refresh us from the fundamentals of speech."

"Because it doesn't fit the kind of skill that has to be achieved."

In the analysis of the students' responses relative the effectivity of the test, one could surmise that the majority found it effective because the concepts they have discussed appeared in the test. While those who cited that the test is ineffective claimed that the test did not really measure the required competency of the subject. The reasons of the testees in the citing the effectivity of the test reveals their dichotomy of interpretation of the word *effective*: For some, the test was effective because what they discussed appeared in the test while for those who oppose its effectivity pointed the applicability of the test given to them.

b. Usefulness

The table below presents the distribution of responses in terms of the usefulness of the test in the enhancement of their communication skills.

Table IV. Students' Perception of the Usefulness of the Test

Perception	Frequency	Percentage
Useful	50	74.63%
Not useful	17	25.37%
Total	67	100 %

Usefulness is the quality of having utility and especially practical worth or applicability [11]. Based on the given data, 74.63% the testees believed that the test given to them was useful in their communication skills enhancement.

During the validation of their answers, they cited that the test was useful due to:

" I was able to follow directions."

" Yes, because some terms are used in speaking"

" I learned the theories in communication."

" It exposed us to the fundamentals of communication."

" I learned the proper posture when speaking and how to control my voice."

While those who contest the usefulness of the test (25.37%) argued that:

“ Communication skills will be better developed with oral tests.”

“ The test given was more on the academic content.”

“ Does not exhibit actual situation.”

“ You may know the correct answer but if you don't know how to apply it in communicating with others, its useless.”

“ I was able to develop my communication skills through writing.”

“ its only written...”

“ It doesn't have the items that cover application level, more on cognitive.”

“ No space for practice”

“ It doesn't help us in pronunciation.”

One could clearly see that even in their concept of usefulness, the testees have deviating ideas. The test is useful because the testees acquired the amount of knowledge necessary to application. While those who resist the test usefulness weren't able to utilize the concepts learned in the actual usage of language or in communication itself.

Type of Test Preferred by the Students

It is surprising to note that in the first two characteristics of the test: effectiveness and usefulness, the testees dominantly approved the effectiveness and usefulness of the test. However, when they were asked of the type of test they recommend for the future English 3 test takers, they consensually preferred performance- based test.

The table below presents the distribution of the students preference of the type of English 3 test:

Table 4: Students' Preference of the Type of English 3 Test

Preference	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Performance-based test (such as oral tests, public speaking, actual tests)	50	74.63 %	1
Essay test	2	2.99 %	2.5
Paper and pencil test	2	2.99 %	2.5
Both paper and pencil and performance-based test	3	4.48 %	4
Total	67	100 %	-

It could be gleaned from the given data that 74.63% prefers performance-based tests over the paper and pencil which was given during the midterm.

When they were asked for their choice, they said that performance- based tests give them the opportunity to express themselves. Thus, the authenticity of the test is taken into consideration. In addition, they preferred the performance based test because it allows them to apply what they have learned in the classroom.

Those who preferred essay test (2.99%) declared that it helps them express themselves. While those who preferred both paper and pencil and performance-based test cited that written tests test their understanding while performance-based test is the application of what they have understood. The other 2.99% insisted the paper and pencil test because for them: *“it’s a test of knowledge.”*

Based on the abovementioned data, students prefer authentic tests where they could exercise and enhance their communication skills. Yet, they do not eliminate the idea of paper and pencil test that could measure their general understanding of the theories and concepts in speech communication.

CONCLUSION

Language tests play a powerful role in many people’s lives, acting as gateways at important transitional moments in education... since language tests are devices for the institutional control of individual, it is clearly important that they should be understood, and subjected to scrutiny [1].

Testing enable the teacher too discover whether the class or course objectives are met. Through tests, the teacher can evaluate the effectiveness of the teaching methods, approaches or even the materials used.

Before determining a test for a specific course or before setting out to teach a course, the teacher should clearly envision his/her course objectives. By doing so s/he will be sure that his/her teaching will be rationally oriented and that his/her tests will indicate how close each student has come to attaining the objectives [2].

The theory of language testing, specifically Speech and Oral test assumes that language is a system of habits of communication [12]. Therefore, it is recommended that the teachers consider primarily the objectives of the course more than the number of concepts (knowledge) remembered by the learners in test construction. Performance based test which is also known as authentic assessment requires students to perform hands-on tasks [13]. However, this does not bar the teacher in constructing knowledge-based test considering that such is the foundation to the application of what had been acquired in the classroom.

Thus, the real measure of the effectiveness and usefulness of the test is when the learners able to apply it appropriately in their daily communication.

Speech and Oral communication subject is an avenue where students could enhance their communication skills. Thus, it is expected that students after they have finished the course had improved their communication skills. However, it is a reality that it is a very arduous activity that requires a lot of preparation, careful implementation, objective and reflective evaluation on the part of the teacher. Hence, the individual needs of the students should be taken into consideration. Individual assessment may be one of the best instruments in assessing the students’ performance.

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