Assessment and testing of English as a foreign language
in the post-method era: reading and speaking tests

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ABSTRACT

The objective of this paper is to present a bibliographical revision of the assessment and testing literature in the light of the Post-method Era. Therefore, the reflection out of that will be reinforced with the analysis of two examples of evaluation, both reading and speaking tests. The order will be introducing the philosophical grounds of evaluation and the Post-method Era; then two tests made by the authors will be presented. After that, the specific objectives of each one of the tests will be shown based on the introduction. Finally, there will be a discussion of the specific nature of the assessment procedures shown by referring to literature in the field of assessment and testing.

Keywords: assessment; testing; post-method era; reading tests; speaking tests

Evaluación y prueba de Inglés como lengua extranjera

en la era post-método: pruebas de lectura y expresión oral

RESUMEN

El objetivo de este trabajo es presentar una revisión bibliográfica de la literatura sobre evaluación y testing a la luz de la Era Posmétodo. Por tanto, la reflexión a partir de ello se reforzará con el análisis de dos ejemplos de evaluación, tanto de lectura como de expresión oral. La orden irá introduciendo los fundamentos filosóficos de la evaluación y la Era Posmétodo; luego se presentarán dos ensayos realizados por los autores. A continuación, se mostrarán los objetivos específicos de cada una de las pruebas a partir de la introducción. Finalmente, habrá una discusión sobre la naturaleza específica de los procedimientos de evaluación que se muestran haciendo referencia a la literatura en el campo de la evaluación y las pruebas.

Palabras clave: *evaluación; pruebas; era post-método; pruebas de lectura; pruebas de habla*

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, in the Post-Method Era, teachers have to make not only decisions on the planning process and the methodologies to be chosen for their lessons but also on the Evaluation Procedures to be followed so as to be consistent with the previously mentioned stages. That way, the likelihood of having good lessons together with the learners' effective understanding of them increases. However, with the advent of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach, decision-making has not been an easy task for the current EFL teacher as he/she must have successful understanding of both knowledge on the language and the actual ability to use the language. Therefore, in order to test students' achievement of both knowledge and skills in English as a Foreign Language, teachers have had to benefit from Communicative exercises and those ones which consider procedures from previous Teaching Approaches such as Grammar Translation, Audiolingual, among other ones.

This reality is reflected on by Kumaravadivelu (2003) whose understanding of teaching has to do with the fact that there are not any methods at all for teachers and researchers to discover and use. As a consequence of this, evaluation must be decided on by considering what it is we want our students to reach and how this can be tested. Nonetheless, as the Post-Method Era involves Communicative Language Teaching with procedures from other Teaching Approaches throughout history, then it will still be good to focus on both Second and Third Generation Tests as shown by Lennon (2013) in order to account for both reliability and validity. The former has to do with exact scoring whereas the second one has to do with the use of language in a meaningful context.

Regarding assessment, it needs to guarantee students' successful achievement of knowledge of the foreign language and foreign language ability. The dichotomy between usage and use is worth mentioning by referring to Widdowson (1978). To him, language is not just an abstract system –usage- for people to put into practice; it is rather a process of communication, i.e., a process of language use. Thus, a teacher's role is that of going for use and usage so as to make foreign language learning take place.

Assessment Procedure (Achievement TESTS)

Here are two different kinds of examination, which will be compared and contrasted. In the first test, students will be assessed on reading skills (Receptive skill), whereas in the second one students will be assessed on speaking (productive skill) skills

Reading Evaluation (Formal Assessment):

TEST on Reading Comprehension: "PRONOUN REFERENCE QUESTIONS + WORD MEANING"

Name:

Date: March 4th, 2017.

Total score: 26 points.

Achieved Score:

Mark (or "grade"):

Questions 1 to 5 refer to the following passage (2 points each / 10 points in total):

Egypt's army has cautioned that it will intervene next weekend if mass rallies against the president descend into violence, in one of its strongest warnings since it handed over to civilian government a year ago. Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, the defence minister, said he would not allow "attack on the will of the people" and called for political reconciliation in the week before mass rallies against President Mohamed Morsi next Sunday.

"There is a state of division in society and the continuation of it is a danger to the Egyptian state and there must be consensus among all," Sisi said.

1) The word "it" in line 1 refers to:

    a) Egypt

    b) Army

    c) "a" and "b"

    d) Egypt's army

2) The word "it" in line 2 refers to:

    a) Violence

    b) Egypt's army

    c) civilian government

    d) strongest warnings

3) The word "it" in line 6 refers to:

    a) continuation

    b) Egyptian state

    c) state of division in society

    d) There is a state of division in society

4) The word "all" in line 7 refers to:

    a) danger

    b) Sisi

    c) society

    d) a state of division in society

55) The word "consensus" in line 7 could be best replaced by:

    a) agreement

    b) struggle

    c) nightmare

    d) None of the above answers

Questions 6 to 9 refer to the following passage (2 points each / 8 points in total):

Mass demonstrations against the Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayip Erdoğan, should not be allowed to derail talks with Kurdish rebels, Britain's roving peace negotiator, Jonathan Powell, has said.

The former diplomat, who is lending his support to the process aimed at ending the 30-year conflict, said it would be a tragedy if civil rights confrontations with the Turkish government knocked the dialogue off course.

Powell, who was Tony Blair's chief-of-staff and helped steer the Northern Ireland peace process to final success, has met the head of Turkey's intelligence services, Hakan Fidan, and senior officials from the ruling AK party (AKP) in Ankara to share his experience as a negotiator.

6) The word "who" in line 3 means:

    a) his support

    b) diplomat

    c) former diplomat

    d) The former diplomat

7) The word "it" in line 5 means:

    a) if civil rights confrontations with the Turkish government knocked the dialogue off course.

    b) tragedy

    c) Turkish government

    d) None of the previous answers

8) The word "who" in line 7 means:

    a) Tony Blair

    b) Tony Blair's chief-of-staff

    c) Powell

    d) "b" and "c"

9) The word "steer" in line 7 could be best replaced by

    a) paint

    b) dissuade

    c) fight

    d) take

Questions 10 to 13 refer to the following passage (2 points each / 8 points in total):

The intelligence whistleblower Edward Snowden will on Monday attempt to complete an audacious escape to the relative safety of South America after his departure from Hong Kong aggravated already fraught diplomatic relations between the United States and China.

In a move that appeared to bewilder the White House, Snowden was allowed to flee Hong Kong on Sunday morning and head to Moscow on a commercial flight despite a formal request from the US to have the 30-year-old detained and extradited to face espionage

charges for a series of leaks about the National Security Agency (<u>NSA</u>) and Britain's spy centre, <u>GCHQ</u>.

In Moscow, Snowden disappeared again, leaving the aircraft without being spotted but pursued by the Ecuadorian ambassador, Patricio Chávez, amid speculation that he will fly to Quito on Monday, possibly via Cuba.

Snowden has asked for political asylum in <u>Ecuador</u>, the country that has also given shelter to the WikiLeaks founder, Julian Assange, at its embassy in London.

10) The word "that" in line 4 alludes to:

 a) appeared

 b) the White House

 c) a move

 d) "a" and "c"

11) The word "he" in line 9 alludes to:

 a) the Ecuadorian ambassador

 b) Patricio Chávez

 c) the Ecuadorian ambassador, Patricio Chávez

 d) All of the previous answers

12) The word "that" in line 11 alludes to:

 a) the country

 b) shelter

 c) Ecuador

 d) "a" and "c"

13) The word "shelter" in line 11 could be best replaced by:

 a) secure

 b) protect

 c) asylum

 d) All of the previous answers

1) Speaking Evaluation (Formal Assessment):

TEST: Speaking evaluation on "Directions".

Name:

Date: April 19th, 2017.

Total score: 30 points.

Achieved Score:

Mark (or "grade"):

Look at pictures and say the best phrase (direction) from the box for each one of the pictures. (1 point each /10 points in total)

Take the second turning on the left (turn left) / take the first turning on your right (turn right)
Cross the street / go back / go up / go across /
Go along this street / go past
Go through / go round
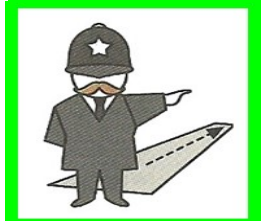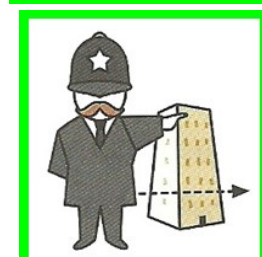
1. Take a look at the following map and answer the following questions by giving the right answer. Remember to use the phrases for giving directions learnt in class. You are located where the arrow starts in East Street. (4 points each /20 points in total)
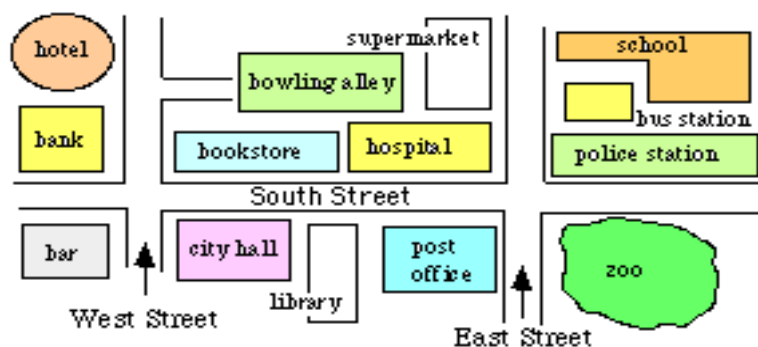
(You are here)

Example:

Question: Where is the library?

Answer: Go straight on as far as South Street, then turn left up to the bookstore. The library is opposite the bookstore, between the City Hall and the Post Office.

 1) How do I get to the Hotel? (next to)

 2) Where is the Bar? (across from / opposite)

 3) How can I get to the School?(next to / opposite / across from)

 4) Where is the supermarket? (next to / opposite / across from)

 5) How can I get to the bank? (next to)

Assessment Objectives (Achievement TESTS)

The previous tests shown are based on specific evaluation criteria. Thus, the objectives of both of them are the following:

1) Test 1 (Reading):

▪ To assess discrete units

▪ To benefit from integrative language, i.e. language in a context, to be able to achieve understanding of discrete units

- To be able to understand the overall idea of texts as well as specific sentences within it by benefiting from "Anaphoric Reference", i.e. words which refer back to another word.

- To recognize which words have certain "replacement words" or "deictics" that replace them within the text.

2) Test 2 (Speaking):

- To assess discrete units (Item 1)

- To assess integrative language (Item 2)

- To understand lexical phrases and be able to distinguish among them according to the particular communicative context.

- To use lexical phrases for communicative functions such as "Directions".

Discussion of the rationale

We would like to refer to Anne Lennon's (2012, p. 19) quotation that says "tests are not normally watertight representations of one generation of testing, normally techniques are mixed and matched." Therefore, taking that into account, it cannot be avoided that, even though the tests shown here are inspired by one generation, which clearly is the third generation of tests, there is always some kind of eclecticism in them. Above all, this happens when multiple choice exercises from test 1 and exercise 1 from test 2 are used since there is no ambiguous answer in them.

After the statements above, it is impossible to avoid saying that, based on Harris and McCann (1994), both the reading and the speaking tests are considered as "tests" due to their formal testing nature. In the same sense, they are kinds of internal formal assessment as they are invigilated by the same EFL teacher who teaches the class English. Also, they carry a mark achieved out of a specific score. Thus, based on Scriven (1967, p. 43), tests 1 and 2 presented in this assignment belong to summative assessment.

Moreover, according to purpose (Lennon, A., 2012), the reading and speaking tests can be classified as achievement tests as they are both proctored during a course and after a certain amount of syllabus content. Being they large scale tests, the reading tests assess abilities related to reference in the discourse organization of reading comprehension of texts –real samples of language-, whereas the speaking test evaluates functional language related to directions which students have practiced through –about– 5 lessons before sitting for the examination.

Even though these third generation tests assess integrative language or discrete language units within a communicative context, their scoring procedure is both objective and criterion-referenced (Lennon, 2012) since students are given a score based on their own particular performances. Nonetheless, the second item in the speaking test is not as objective as the rest of the items of both tests because different examiners could give students deviant scores focused on, eventually, not so well built sentences in terms of grammar. Actually, the deviant scores might go from 1 to 4 points for not fully correct answers, i.e. answers which have the required prepositions but the sentences they are within have some grammar mistakes.

Moreover, it could be said that both tests are reliable although the reading test is much more reliable than the speaking test due to the kind of subjective nature of its second item. Therefore, the reading test has both high inter-rater and intra-rater reliability, whereas the speaking one may have an especially deviant inter-rater reliability as different examiners could give students different scores in item 2. However, since the latter is less reliable than the rest of the items of both tests, it is supposedly more valid if we focus on Lennon's theory (2012).

Regarding West's Fundamental Principles of Testing (1990), the tests shown in this assignment, as they have contextualised language within communicative contexts, they measure performance rather than competence. We would dare say that, since performance is in nature unsystematic (Chomsky, 1965), that is what can really be given a particular score based on students' answers. Also, since communicative competence is what matters in Third Generation Tests, then performance is what must be given importance (Lennon, 2012). Also, since questions are based on particular communicative contexts, language use rather than language usage is what is given primary importance in the tests shown (Widdowson, 1978). In the same fashion, this Chomsky's performance (1965) and/or Widdowson's language use (1978) evaluated in the tests is an example of Direct Assessment (West, 1990).

Notwithstanding all what has previously been said, it is hard to state whether discrete points – or discrete language units- and integrative language are mutually exclusive in both the reading and the speaking tests. In fact, in the whole reading test and item 1 of the speaking test, the type of scoring has both high reliability, but we cannot deny the communicative context those questions are taken from. That way, it could be said there

is some kind of eclecticism or mixture in the tests. In order to reinforce this idea, we would like to refer to Weir's comments (1993). He talks about Davies's concern (1978) because, in his survey article, which looked back on the 1970's, it was mainly the <u>how</u> of testing what really mattered, i.e., discrete items instead of integrative formats. 1988 state-of-the-art article, by Skehan, is concerned primarily with the <u>what</u> of testing in the language teaching context. Also, the focus in the 90's will remain like that. Therefore, what really matters is evaluating integrative language, i.e. language within a communicative context rather than how it will be evaluated as in the case of multiple choice questions in test 1 and prepositions taken out of a box in item 1 of test 2.

Following West's principles (1990), the reading test assesses a receptive skill –reading-, whereas the speaking test evaluates a productive one. Also, as both of them are achievement tests (Lennon, 2012), they are a type of backward-looking assessment in the sense that the evaluate language as part of a syllabus on a course. Nevertheless, they could also be a forward-looking kind of assessment since the evaluation of integrative language may account for students' communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) in the target language to be used at a future time.

CONCLUSION

Even though, it is not easy to devise evaluation exercises for the assessment of discrete units (language out of context) and integrative language (language within a context), the current EFL teacher must strive to make that come true. So, we must benefit from Third Generation tests which are based on the Communicative Language Teaching Approach since they aim at showing how much a student can do with language. But, that is not all. Requirements still focus on knowledge of the language, even those ones of some international examinations such as TOEFL. Therefore, Second Generation tests are not old-fashioned as they can actually help us evaluate that necessary aspect of language learning, i.e. knowledge.

That is why we would dare focus on Third Generation Tests only inasmuch as the Post-Method Era is actually replacing Communicative Language Teaching and this new trend expects us to be both communicative and eclectic if language knowledge is to be assessed.

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