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1980-2010

Testing communicative  
language use: a brief  
overview

# A sense of history

*Nescire autem quid antequam natus sis  
acciderit, id est semper esse puerum.*

Not to know what happened before one was  
born is always to be a child.

—Marcus Tullius Cicero

*De Oratore (XXXIV)*

# Language Teaching at the end of the C19th

“The prime object of scholastic education is the training of the mental faculties. Hence a youth is put to hard and dry studies, often confessedly distasteful...The mental training is never forgotten; on the contrary, the powers so developed increase in grasp and tenacity.

Training by the ear will never do this: it simply cultivates one faculty, memory, and that only for a short time. It is always found that children so trained are the most volatile have not power of application, and in after life seldom settle to any definite pursuit.”

R.W. Hiley 1887 Journal of Education Vol IX: 308)

# An academic view of language

Grammar translation enabled pupils to learn a language to access its literature and benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development such an approach involved.

## Grudging acceptance of spoken language

Schools were being encouraged to include modern languages with an oral component towards the end of the C19th but headmasters, according to Gilbert (1953: 3), :  
“...consented only because they thereby satisfied utilitarian parents and because the Modern Side enabled them to **‘shunt the empties’ or transfer the dullards from classics to modern languages.**”

Palmer (in Palmer and Redman 1932:22-23) insightfully argued that language should be seen:

“in its essence as a means of communication ... teachers generally miss this fundamental point. They look upon the language as a code or as a subject or as a literature - in short as something to be learned or studied, whereas a language is rather something to be used. “

Traditional approaches such as grammar translation and teaching English as an access route to great literature were to succumb by the 1970's to pressing utilitarian needs for English as a means of communication between people rather than a rarefied object of academic study.

In Stern's words the interest in language became “social” rather than “scholarly”

# Language as a means of communication

The 1970s accelerated the shift from teaching language as a system to teaching it as a means of communication. The emphasis was no longer on linguistic accuracy, but on the ability to function effectively through language in particular contexts of situation.

As Pauline Rea (1978, p. 4) succinctly put it:  
'the ability to communicate with ease and effect in specified sociolinguistic settings.'

# CPE 1913-2012

Phonetics	1913-32	
Dictation	1913-84	
Listening Comprehension		1975-
Reading aloud	1913-84	
Conversation/oral	1913-	
Translation	1913-75 (1988)	
Composition	1913-	
Literature	1913-75	
Reading Comprehension		1975-
Knowledge of grammar	1913-32	
Use of English		1956-



# Lancaster 1980: issues in communicative language use tests

- Importance of test purpose
- What are *communicative use tests* testing? How are they different from traditional tests?
- Authenticity: a chimera or...
- Content (real life) and Construct (theory) validity
- Background knowledge
- Psycholinguistic abilities: enabling skills.. How can they be measured?
- Individual variability in test taking process
- Need for Specification/ danger of over specification: explicitness necessary in LT
- Extrapolation: sampling and prediction
- Practicality: putting people in cocktail parties
- Reliability a concern not an obsession: value of pooled judgements
- Focus on scales and criteria
- Test taker characteristics
- Need for validation

# Impact on others

Despite an innovative, wide ranging and perceptive coverage of the issues of testing language as communication, *Issues in Language Testing* 1981 itself seems to have had limited impact (only 43 citations in Google scholar).

Why?

- *Accessibility of ILT (especially in US)*
- *Issues not solutions*
- *Absence of specifications for examinations*
- *Need for a framework/model.*

# What has had an impact in the way we approach language testing since 1980?

In search of a model/framework

- Canale and Swain Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing 1980 (2483 citations).
- Bachman *Fundamental Considerations in Language Testing* 1990 (2565 citations)
- Council of Europe *The Common European Frame of Reference for Languages* 2001 (72 citations)

# Bachman

A broad model of communicative language ability was first proposed by Canale and Swain (1980) in their seminal paper '*Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing*'

Building on this earlier paper, Bachman's (1990) influential multi-componential model of Communicative Language Ability (CLA) provided test developers with a wide ranging account of CLA and useful theoretical questions to ask in the design of language tests.

# Weaknesses

BUT

The critical weakness of the model is that it proved to be extremely difficult if not impossible to operationalise, not least because of its daunting breadth and depth but also its lack of clear prioritisation as to what might constitute criterial parameters for language testing purposes especially for the purpose of differentiating between different levels of proficiency

# Useful but not usable

McNamara (2003: 468) : *“those who have used the test method facets approach have found it to be difficult to use, and it has in fact been implemented in relatively few test development projects....”*

# Context of use

McNamara (op cit.) criticises the Bachman model as being:

*essentially psychological, seeing communicative language ability as a mental ability, while the context of use is increasingly understood theoretically as a social arena*

*...The idea of a general a priori competence is increasingly questioned in studies of language use in context, and it is being found to be problematic in practical language testing contexts too*

# Context of use

Chaloub-Deville (2005: 822) is supportive of Bachman's model to the extent that it addresses "issues related to language use", but she agrees with McNamara's view that it represents an essentially psycholinguistic view of performance and is largely missing important interactional and sociolinguistic elements



# Not so cognitive after all

The inadequacy of the treatment of the cognitive processing dimensions (as versus metacognitive) of the various skills components in the Bachman model is also a disadvantage when considering its use for test development purposes especially where attempts are made to define different levels of language proficiency (Weir and O'Sullivan 2010)

# CEFR: usable but not useful

At the same time work was being carried out on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) which *aimed* to be usable by both testers and teachers as a descriptive framework of language ability over a series of distinct levels (Council of Europe 2001).

This framework was certainly usable but was to fall a long way short in terms of its underlying theory and descriptive adequacy.

# CEFR

- While the CEFR has had a significant and positive impact on the practice and discourse of language testing since its publication, it has a number of inherent limitations and has been used on occasion for purposes for which it was not suitable, for example as a basis for detailed test specification
- Weir (2005b: 281) argues that “in its present form the CEFR is not sufficiently comprehensive, coherent or transparent for uncritical use in language testing.”
- “Lack of sufficient theoretical and practical guidance to enable test specifications to be drawn up for each level” (Alderson et al., 2004, p. 1)

# Limitations of the CEFR

Significant limitations to using the CEFR as a basis for developing or comparing tests are:

- The CEFR does not take account of the impact on task performance of variations in contextual parameters
- There is no recognition of the need to establish clearly what cognitive processes are undertaken by an individual when responding to a language elicitation task, neither is there any recognition of the impact this might have on establishing equivalent tasks

# Looking back 1980-2005

- Bachman's model of CLA was of considerable value to theoreticians but of less practical use to those responsible for test development and implementation.
- The CEFR on the other hand has been welcomed by governments and practitioners as a suitable tool for communicating about language proficiency but unfortunately it lacks the theoretical rigour, coverage and explicitness necessary for its confident use by language testers to develop tests to determine levels of language proficiency.

# Room for improvement

The models of communicative language ability and frameworks for description that currently dominate our profession are insufficient to meet the needs of language testers, who need a comprehensive model which enables them to consider and incorporate criterial social, cognitive and evaluative parameters at the test design and development stage, and, more importantly, one which guides them in generating evidence of the successful operationalisation of these features at the test implementation stage.

# Validity = language testing

Alan Davies (1984: 68) wrote in the first issue of the journal *Language Testing*:

“...in the end no empirical study can improve a test’s validity. That is a matter for the construct and content validities. What is most important is the preliminary thinking and the preliminary analysis as to the nature of the language learning we aim to capture.”

Replicating the reality of language use situations:  
language testers do it better

Test developers since the 1980's have sought to identify and operationalise the performance conditions and language operations that offer an adequate description of the most important components of language use in particular contexts (see for example Alderson and Hughes, 1981; Skehan, 1988; Alderson et al 2004, O'Sullivan 2000, 2006 and Weir, 1983,1993, 2005 ).

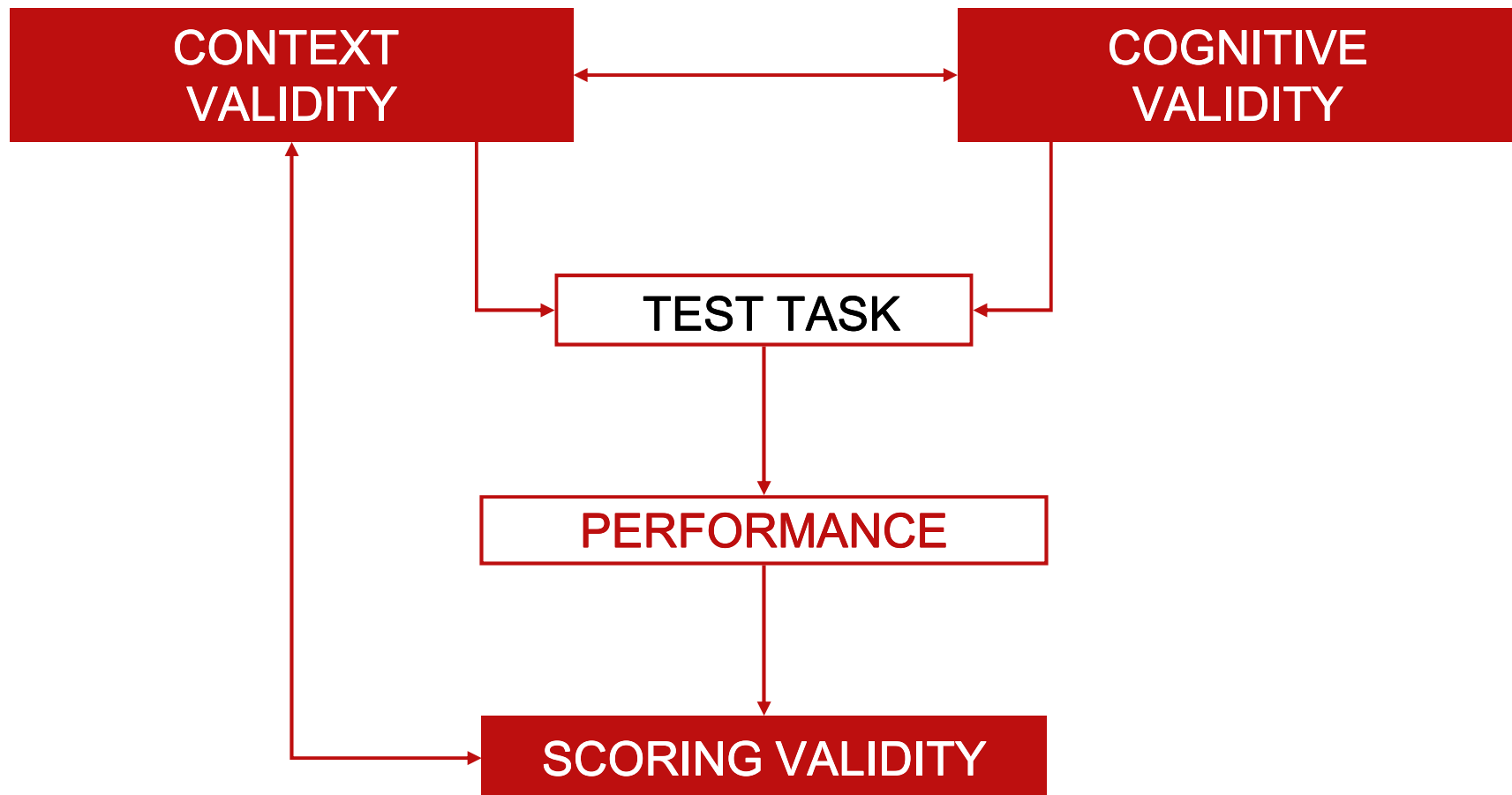


# We need

A model/framework which allows for serious theoretical consideration of the issues but is also capable of being applied practically; one which has direct relevance and value to an operational language testing/assessment context

Earlier frameworks (e.g. Bachman 1990) were helpful in provoking us to think about key issues from a theoretical perspective but they generally proved very difficult for practitioners to operationalise in a manageable and meaningful way.

# A Construct Validity Framework: a socio-cognitive approach



# Validity Evidence

- Are the cognitive processes required to complete the test tasks appropriate? (focus on *Cognitive validity*)
- Are the characteristics of the test tasks and their administration appropriate and fair to the candidates who are taking them? (focus on *Context validity*)
- How far can we depend on the scores which result from the test? (focus on *Scoring validity*)

# Socio-cognitive approach

In this approach a construct is seen as not just the underlying latent trait of a particular ability or skill but as the result of the constructed triangle of trait, context and score (including its interpretation).

The approach is therefore effectively an *interactionalist* position, which sees the construct as residing in the interactions between the underlying cognitive ability, the context of use and the process of scoring (see Weir 2005, Shaw and Weir 2007, Khalifa and Weir 2009).

# Missing links

Widdowson (2001:17) reminds us of the lack of dynamic coherence in existing communicative competence models:

*The problem with these different models of communicative competence is that they analyze a complex process into a static set of components, and as such cannot account for the dynamic interrelationships which are engaged in communication itself.*

*As a consequence, when you make such models operational in language teaching and testing, you can only deal with the separate parts as discrete features, since the essential interrelationships that make the whole are missing*

# Bachman too

Bachman is well aware of this shortcoming and comments in reference to his approach (2007: 55): “... it does not solve the issue of how abilities and contexts interact, and the degree to which these may mutually affect each other”.

# Symbiosis

The various elements of our socio cognitive model are presented as being separate from each other for descriptive purposes only. There is undoubtedly a close relationship between these elements, for example even small changes to parameters of context validity (e.g. Planning time, number of participants, sentence length) are likely to impact significantly on cognitive processing and subsequently on the score or grade a candidate receives in a test.

For us to more fully understand the whole process, we will need to explore the interactions between, and especially within, these different aspects of validity. Doing so may well eventually offer further insights into a closer definition of different levels of task difficulty.

## Chaloub-Deville's Interactionalist Perspective: the new "promised land"?

- Chaloub-Deville encourages us in the direction of exploring these inter relationships in future language testing research.
- She argues (2003: 369) convincingly that we need to accept that "individual ability and contextual facets interact in ways that change them both".
- How they do this will keep testers occupied for the foreseeable future and will constitute an important focus for LTF *in a few decades' time*.