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LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ASSESSMENT: A THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Assessment is a universal feature of social life. If we look at history, people have been put to the assessment to prove their capabilities. They are put to test to establish their credentials. Assessment has been proliferated rapidly in modern society. Assessment takes place in various fields like medical (to test blood, hearing, eye and cancer), Law (To test DNA and paternity), sport (to test drugs), academics (language ability and performances) and so on. Assessment is being done for the purpose of understanding how a person performs particularly in relation to a threshold of performance. What is true of general assessment is true also of language assessment. It has wide range of area. The nature of language assessment has changed quiet radically over the years.

"Newer form of language assessment may no longer involve in the ordeal of a single test performance under time constraints. Learners may be required to build up a portfolio of written or recorded oral performance for assessment". (McNamara: 2014:4)

As McNamara pointed out that assessment is being done on the basis of building portfolio of written or recorded oral performances. Learners may be observed in their normal activity of communication in the language classroom or routine pedagogical tasks. They may be asked to carry out activities outside the classroom context and provide evidence of their performance. Pair of learners is asked to take part in role plays or in group discussion as a part of oral assessment. Test may be taken with the help of computer application, which may tailor the form of the test to the particular abilities of individual candidates.

"Language test plays a powerful role in many people's lives acting as a gateway at important transitional moment in education, in employment, and in moving from one country to another" (McNamara: 2014:4)

Language as McNamara rightly pointed out is a powerful tool for assessing people for various purposes. Through testing one can take decision for further related actions. It is helpful for placing the student for particular course, sending student abroad, understand students ability to prefer particular task and so on. Language testing is helpful for measuring language proficiency. With the help of language test we can assess the language proficiency.

"Testing system should be consistently provide accurate measure of precisely the ability in which researcher is interested". (Hughes: 2011:8) The very nature of language testing as Hughes has discussed should be consistent. Consistency means the activity which occurs on regular basis.

"Language test can be a valuable source of information about the effectiveness of learning and teaching. Language tester regularly use tests to help diagnose students strengths and weakness to assess students' progress and to assists in evaluating in students achievements". (Bachman: 1990: 3)

Language test are also frequently used as a source of information in evaluating the effectiveness of different approaches to the language teaching as a source of feedback on learning and teaching. Language test thus provide useful input into the process of language teaching.

Language Proficiency Test:

Test can be categorized as per type of information they provide. These tests are useful in different context, and dependent on the purpose we want to achieve. There are four types of test like, proficiency test, achievement test, diagnostic test, and placement test. (Hughes: 2011:11)

Proficiency tests are considered to evaluate people's skill in a language. The content of the test to be

considered are dependent on the tester, because these are based on the objective that researcher wants to achieve. "Proficiency means having sufficient commend of the language for particular purpose."(Hughes:2011:11). Proficiency test thus have various parameters of language. It seems to include the parameters of language skills like; reading, writing, listening and speaking. The question of whether language proficiency is single unitary competency or whether it is composed of distinct component traits one which has been of considerable interests to language testing researcher for several years.(Oller: 1976, 1976b, Bachman and Palmer: 1981a.) cited by Bachman 1990:68). As cited above proficiency test seems to have different content to be considered. Proficiency seems not to have single unitary ability but related constructs in addition to general construct of language proficiency. "Such test may have attempt to take into account the level and kind of English need to follow course in particular subject area. The function of the test is to show whether candidates have reached a certain standard with respect to a set of specified abilities" (Hughes: 2011:12)

Questionnaire Design:

A language text plays a powerful role in many people's lives, acting as gateways at important transitional moments in education, employment and in moving from one country to another country. (McNamara: 2000:04)

The entire research will be unsuccessful if there is no proper questionnaire. Questionnaire is a channel or medium through which we can get required information for the evaluation purpose. It is being designed so as to satisfy the objective. In this research questionnaire is designed to assess the language proficiency in general and writing ability in particular. The primary purpose of the text is to make inference about language about and the secondary purpose is to make decision based on these inferences. (Bachman and Palmer: 1996) cited by Weigle; 2002:40

The more general taxonomy of component of language ability put forth by Bachman and Palmer (1996) and Douglas (2011) consists of grammatical knowledge or the knowledge of fundamentals building blokes of language, textual knowledge or knowledge of how these buildings blokes are put together to form coherent text, functional knowledge , or about how language is used to achieve variety of communicative function and sociolinguistic knowledge about how to use language appropriately in different social setting (cited by Weigle :2011:42).

Test Development:

General procedure for language test development can be found in numerous sources. E.g. Bachman and Palmer: 1996, Alderson et.al, 1995, Davidson and Lynch: 2002. These sources emphasized that test development involve different stages which do not proceed in strictly sequential or linear fashion, but inform each other in an interactive fashion. (Weigle: 2011:77)

Language testing is relevant both for those actively involved in creating language test, and also more generally for those involve in creative language test and also more generally for those involved in using tests or the information they provide in practical and research context. (McNamara: 2011:5). Test has to follow practical sequence to achieve particular objective. One way to conceptualize the development process for a test of writing is to consider it as considering three stages: design, operationalization and administration (Bachman and Palmer: 1996 cited by Weigle: 2009) different views are put forth by different author for test development. Hughes has recommended the stages of test development procedure as follows:

1. Make full and clear statement of the testing problem. To write complete specification for the test.
2. Write complete specification for the test.
3. Write and moderate items
4. Trial the item uniformly on native speaker and reject to modify problematic ones as necessary.
5. Trial the test on the group of non-native speakers similar to those for whom the test is intended
6. Analyze the result of the test trial and make any necessary changes.

7.   Collaborate scale
8.   Validity
9.   Write handbook for test taker, test user and staff.
10.   Train any necessary staff (Hughes: 2011:58).

Test Construct:

The best way to test people's writings ability is to get them to write. (Hughes: 2011:83). Taking into consideration the view of Hughes Arthur in his book 'Testing for Language Teacher' following parameters of language ability (put forth by Bachman and Palmer 1996) as discussed earlier have been considered for the test. Construct is determining what factors one involved in real world language use and which of those factors are essential to what we want to measure and what we do not. (Weigle: 2009:41)

Steps in test construct

1. Purpose of the test:

Test is being constructed as per the interests, objective or the intension of the researcher. For the language test, the key to "defining the construct of interest is in determining what factors are involved in real-world language use, and which of those factors are essential to what we want to measure and what we do not" (Weigle S. C., 2009, p. 41). It would be appropriate to state that the purpose lies in the interest of the researcher. In choosing, devising or designing test, the logical place to begin is by considering what we plan to use the test for. In other words, why are we interested in testing language ability- what is our purpose? According to Beckman and Palmer (1996) "There are two purpose of language test, the primary purpose is to make inference about language ability, and the secondary purpose is to make decision based in those inferences. Ac cited in Weigle (2002). (Weigle S. C., 2009, p. 40).

In short, there shout two main purpose of language test i.e. making inferences and making decision based on the inference.

1. Specification of the test:

In order to judge the students' performance and affecting factor for language proficiency, test specifications are discussed. This test includes the information on content, test structure, medium/ channel of data collection, sampling, scoring method and analysis and interpretation.

A. *Content:*

For the specification of content, following points need to consider

➢ Operation: Student respondents/ addressees and language teacher respondent need to carry out the task designed by the researcher in the form of test. Researcher need to explain the task to be carried out by both the respondents.

➢ Type of test: there are different type of language test, like proficiency, diagnosis and achievement. As discussed earlier researcher can frame another test depending on his interest.

➢ Respondent/ Addressees: To assess the ability, researcher must mention the target audience.

➢ *Test Structure***:** Researcher is expected to delineate the structure of the test. Researcher may include various sub-section to devise the test as per the standards are concerned.

Medium/ Channel of data collection:

It is necessary to mention the medium or the channel of data collection. Different type of data collection methods are being used to collect data. "While deciding about data collection to be used for the study, the researcher should keep in mind two types of data viz., primary data and secondary data. The Primary data are those which are collected afresh and for the first time, and thus happened to be original in character. The secondary data on the other hand, are those which have already been collected by someone else and which have already been passed through the statistical process." (Kothari, 2008, p. 95)

Sampling:

Sampling is the vital aspect of the research and it is occasionally possible to survey the complete population. "When field studies are undertaken in practical life, considerations of time and cost almost invariably lead to selection of respondents' i. e., selection of few items. The respondent selected should be as representative of the total population as possible in order to produce a miniature cross section. The selected respondents constitute what is technically called a 'sample' and the selection process is called 'sampling technique". (Kothari, 2008, p. 55). A sample is small proportion of population selected for analysis. During the recent time sampling technique has been increasingly used in the field of humanities to obtain information. "A sample is group selected from the complete population to make the task of surveying more manageable", (Nick, 1987, pp. 33-34) According to John W. Best and James V. Khan 'A sample is a small proportion of a population selected for observation and analysis. By observing the sample, one can make certain inference about the characteristics of the population from which it is drown". (Best & Khan, 1992, p. 11).

B.   Scoring procedure:

The scoring procedures are critical because the score is ultimately what will be used in making decisions and inferences about writers. Score in assessment is the outcome of an interaction that involves not only the test taker, but test taker, the prompt or task that involved in the test. Once data are collected then it has to be scored in proper way to analyze the same.

C.   Analysis and interpretation:

The collected data is then analyzed to understand the outcome of the test. There are different technique to analyses data. Analysis can be done with the help of different statistical technique. These technique are use as per the type of data. After the analysis of data, it is interpreted to understand the results of the results.

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