The Need to Develop a Valid Scale to Measure One's Overall Competence in English as a Foreign Language[1] (I)

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Introduction

It is only natural that those who are involved in the teaching of English as a foreign language are anxious to know whether the teaching of a linguistic fact or the practice aimd at developing a certain language skill is certainly contributing to increasing one's overall competence in English. However, without a proper scale which tries to measure one's overall proficiency in English, we will never be able to know how effective or successful the particular teaching for a certain period has been. It is for this reason that a regularly-timed administration of a proficiency type test is needed to ensure that the students are steadily gaining overall proficiency in English.

Considering the tremendous amount of time, money, and energy devoted for improving English education in Japan, the development of such a test is of grave significance. And if such a test is developed, the current English education may change toward a more effective and a sounder one; the betterment may take time, but the test may eventually alter the two important aspects of English education in Japan.

First, since a high score on such a proficiency test can not be obtained by simply memorizing or translating the linguistic facts with undue emphasis on difficult words or grammatical knowledge, its periodical use may improve the quality of instruction in the classroom. Second, if such a test is found to be effective enough to tap overall proficiency of Japanese learners as well, it can replace partially the entrance examinations currently in use at colleges and universities. This means that by using a proficiency type test as a common yardstick, all high school graduates are tested on the same task. Consequently, such a common scale will make the tests reliable and give all the testees a fair chance to reveal their underlying competence of integrative skills. A more fruitful effect on English education would be that the students are released from memorizing words and grammatical structures of rare use, thus directing the whole undertaking of English education towards a sounder system. It is strongly suggested, then, that the privately owned colleges and universities should first determine which of the language skills and what linguistic components are to be emphasized most, and subsequently form the test items which will reveal the applicants'

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1) This is a unified and revised version of an M.A. Thesis submitted to the Graduate School of Aoyama Gakuin University in March, 1979 and a paper presented in an abbreviated form at the second JACET Monthly Study Meeting held at Sophia University on March 29, 1980.

hidden capacity in the emphasized areas of language skills and linguistic components.

Whatever the purpose of the proficiency type test may be, such a test must be scrutinized on its reliability and validity. Several attempts by experts in different fields have been made in searching for developing more effective proficiency tests of one's integrative skills. Some of them were measuring the mean length of sentences one creates or testing the degree of comprehension under reduced redundancy——it asks the testees to comprehend orally given utterances with different degrees of noise included. Despite their efforts, most of them failed to meet either one or two of the test conditions. Some seemed to lack validity which is the most important condition to be met in any type of test. Others clearly failed to meet the condition of practicality.

A measure which is attested to meeting all these conditions appears to be the cloze test, which began to be adopted at the end of 1960's for measuring second language learners' overall proficiency. Much interesting and stimulating data is being reported by numerous experiments which are carried out in many parts of the world. It has been consistently suggested that the cloze test is sensitive enough to discriminate different levels of overall proficiency among second language learners. In this series of papers the cloze test will be featured and studied from every angle in view of the fact that it might shed light on the following two significant problems.

First, if the cloze test is found to be valid and reliable as a testing device of a proficiency type test, it can be used as a yardstick to check whether the past achievement actually contributes to increasing students' proficiency. By the same token there is a possibility of using a cloze test as a partial substitute for currently-held entrance examinations at colleges and universities. Also dealt in this series of papers is the analysis on the factors to be employed when constructing and evaluating one's overall-proficiency-tests. Thus, it is hoped that the accumulation of the factor-analysis to be reported in the experimental design and various data resulting from the experiments will ultimately lead to answering the two important questions hitherto unanswered: (1) what is it that makes one know a language? and (2) what are the factors which constitute one's overall proficiency in English.

Generally the basic assumption in giving a test is that the test will help to identify individual differences so that the teachers can spot the unlearned areas or develop each learner's unique potentialities to the fullest extent. However, it is often the case that the teacher give tests simply because they want to determine students' grade, or to motivate students extrinsically, or even for no apparent reason. It is evident, then, that the repeating of tests with these unfavorable reasons in giving tests will only aggravate education.

Hence, before we search for an effective proficiency test of one's integrative skills, it is of great significance that we should be able to clearly distinguish the achievement type test from the proficiency type test.

Proficiency Versus Achievement Tests

A distinction between achievement and proficiency tests can be made depending upon the purpose for which they are used. If the major concern of the classroom teacher is with

finding out how effective his teaching and student's learning have been or with discovering what needs to be taught with more emphasis, then the achievement test may as well be chosen. In contrast with this use of the achievement test, the proficiency test is chosen when the major interest of the examiner is in determining the predictability of one's academic or occupational success. If we accept this classification as theoretically valid, it seems proper to state that the achievement test is similar in its task to the diagnostic test and proficiency test to the aptitude test in that simply stated, the achievement and the diagnostic tests measure one's past achievement and his problem areas whereas the proficiency and aptitude tests predict the future performance of the learners tested.

Let us see briefly how these differences in purposes affect the whole process of constructing the test items. It is evident that although the general objectives for which most classroom teachers strive are uniform, the teaching methods, the teaching materials (assuming that the textbook is not the only source material), the student ability, motivation and other numerous factors influence, to a varying degree, the extent to which the student has learned at the end of the course. Thus, it is fair and proper for classroom teachers to take into due consideration all the variable conditions under which the student has been placed during the course and subsequently make up test items after a careful analysis of those variables. For example, it will not be a valid achievement test if the teacher includes test items which have not been presented to the students, or those items which have lacked adequate amount of practice, or are clearly well beyond the students' capacity; the latter does not mean to say that difficult items should not be included. Among other considerations the most fundamental point to bear in mind in constructing achievement test items is that the teacher should sample the test items from what has been taught.

These features that are attached to the achievement test are not shared in the proficiency test. Because the major function of the proficiency test lies in the fact that it attempts to predict one's future attainment, it disregards the various conditions such as how and what the learner has been taught and instead, on the basis of what he can do at the time the test is given, it tries to predict how well he will be able to perform in various communication contexts. The test constructor thus picks up test items so that the test items, as a whole, will effectively tell him how well or successfully the examinee will perform the given communication tasks in the future.

In other words, the data measured by achievement tests give us only the quantitative scale of judgement: how much the students have acquired within a certain amount of instruction. Certainly, this kind of data is meaningful in itself in that they indicate the extent to which how effective the instruction and the students' learning have been. But it is also the fact that they will not tell us much on how well each student will function in a given communication context or how effectively he will process linguistic data in a novel contexual situation. What is needed here is clearly the proficiency type test.

Resultant from these intrinsic differences in the character of the two test types is a possibility for a good student to obtain a high score on an achievement test and a very low score on a proficiency test. It implies for example, that the student may have acquired specific

knowledge or linguistic components as demonstrated in an achievement test but may not have yet reached the stage where the full control of other linguistic components as well as non-linguistic competence are called for. Thus it seems proper to claim that the achievement test tries to assess a short-term goal and the proficiency test a long-term goal. To put it another way, the achievement test would be more suitable to be employed when the teacher wishes to measure the specific linguistic knowledge or components. But if the teacher has kept using achievement tests throughout the course and later found that his students have attained little linguistic competence, it would be far too late to suddenly reshape the student's past linguistic experience into a desired language behavior. This will easily be evidenced by the following example.

In an attempt to develop the speaking skill the teacher may first put enormous emphasis on the accurate pronunciation and on the proper placement of stress on certain words and phrases, and yet, after a semester or two, he may be disappointed to find that his students cannot utter simple expressions using the words and phrases which have been practiced repeatedly.

For the reasons stated above it is necessary for the classroom teachers to use proficiency type tests (if not a pure proficiency type test) to periodically check the students' linguistic competence in a context and, by doing so, the whole educational process would become more meaningful. Though it is not yet fully known what linguistic competence means and how it can be measured, several practical techniques have been found to be effective as proficiency tests which may perhaps measure one's total command of a language.

There is no standardized proficiency tests available in Japan but one that is similar to them in the construction of test items is STEP (The Society for Testing English Proficiency) conducted by Obunsha and authorized by the Japanese Ministry of Education. The entrance examinations held at higher academic institutions will be categorized as the type which does not belong to either the achievement or the proficiency test. In general, these entrance examinations share the same approach to constructing test items as the achievement type test in the sense that both types of tests try to examine how much the student has learned within the prescribed course of instruction. Theoretically, the long-term objectives of English education at junior and senior high schools are uniformly stated and if all the entrance examinations attempt to assess the degree to which the high school graduates have attained toward these stated objectives, they may be categorized as an achievement type test. But if the main purpose of entrance examinations is to test the applicants' potential ability of whether he can successfully complete the academic study after entering the university, such tests will be categorized as a proficiency type test. A representative proficiency test developed in America and conducted all over the world is TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). This is a test which tries to predict the foreign applicants' potential success in academic work at American universities.

The present writer feels that the outline objectives themselves stated by the Japanese Ministry of Education are rich and meaningful in content if they are successfully achieved. The fact is, however, not so satisfactory as is well known and much is expected to be im-

proved. Variables such as the general level of student ability, the teacher's competence in English, the pedagogical goals of the school, and other factors affects, to varying degrees, the course objectives, and thus perhaps the content of course objectives of a particular school or class may have to be altered. This we must accept as inevitable and valid in itself. The important task for all persons involved in a particular educational system (teachers, students, parents, school administrators, etc.) to accomplish is to know how much closer the students have gotten toward the stated long-term objectives as a result of certain amount of instruction. This can not be assessed by the achievement type test because, as stated previously, it may gather information on how much the learner has learned, but not on the degree to which the student has met the long-term objectives.

Even in first language acquisition the child continues learning phonemes, sound segments, words, and sentences in order of complexity though it is said that any native child has internalized rules of syntax which gradually enables him to create entirely new sentences. The point in issue common to both first and second language learning is that both learners use the same strategies in the beginning stage of learning a language, and there is no doubt that a solid knowledge of phonology, syntax, morphology, and lexion is essential before proceeding on to learning more complex knowledge. The significant difference which is crucial in causing a great gap in progress between the first and the second language learners is the environment in which learning takes place. It is suggested, therefore, that even from the elementary stage the classroom teacher should be aware of the importance of making sure if his students are really able to use the knowledge or skill they have acquired in a novel context where the function of their linguistic knowledge or skill is tested.

In short, the test items on the proficiency type test should be prepared according to the established statements which explicitly identify the tasks the examinee is to perform. The major problem of such a test is validation: a question of making sure whether the test is really uncovering the testee's communicative competence. The difficulty of finding validity does not decrease in any sense the merit that accrue to the use of proficiency type tests. A periodical use of these tests will enable the classroom teachers to ascertain whether his students are coming closer to the long-term objectives.