

## Development Status of Communicative Listening Test and Teaching

LEI Min<sup>[a],\*</sup>

<sup>[a]</sup> Yangtze University College of Arts and Science, Jingzhou, Hubei, China.

\* Corresponding author.

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### Abstract

Language as a tool plays a significant role in bridging and facilitating different people to build up good relationships in social interactive communication, surely during which, listening dominates the big part of the time. This article reviews the historical development of communicative listening test and teaching and takes typical listening test cases and teaching strategies for instance to analyze their mutual independent but indivisible partnerships, aiming at drawing people's close attention to the proved conclusion that communicative listening test and teaching are indivisible partners but are not subordinate to each other; only by effective interaction of each other and promoting their active strengths, will productive fruits come into reality in walks of language acquisition.

**Key words:** Communicative listening test; Communicative listening teaching; Development status

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### INTRODUCTION

It is attributed to the trend of globalization in politic, economic, cultural and other walks of life that there will be effective reformation on language testing and teaching in place. The main purpose of language testing and teaching lies in to enable students communicate effectively in actual communication, to teach students how to reorganize, reproduce and then output what they

have learned into creative ideas. "It has been accepted for many years that 'communication' is the proper aim for language teaching." (Allwright, 2000).

Just as Coakley and Wolvin (1990) point out, people usually spend 42 percent to 54 percent communicative time in listening. Listening is so prevalent in language communication, which is the same case in the second language acquisition or foreign language learning. Taking New College English Band 4 Test and Teaching for instance, even though students can make the right choices in test, most of them are unable to reorganize and let alone output what they have heard in actual communicative situation. Among those students who have got high scores at listening test, only a few can express their idea fluently in oral communication. The phenomenon of having higher scores but lower English communicative competence is fairly popular in present college English test and teaching. Which leaves us some notable questions to explore: whether the present CET4 listening test can really assess students' authentic communicative competence in English; may the present listening teaching upon CET4 effectively improve students' English communicative competence rather than instill skills just to pass the test; why should we interface test with teaching appropriately while conducting English training.

As Arthur Hughes states, "the proper relationship between teaching and testing is surely that of partnership". It is true that a good or an appropriate testing may have a beneficial backwash to teaching and vice versa. Therefore, better understanding of development status of communicative listening test and teaching will definitely contribute to their common progress and promotion.

### 1. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE LISTENING TEST

Looking back the history of Language testing and

teaching development, both Communicative Listening Test and Teaching have undergone a series of evolution or reformation, during which some corresponding productions have come to birth.

### 1.1 Theoretical Development

As we all know that Foreign Language Test came into being following the development of Foreign Language Teaching. So far as reviewing the history of language development, we can find that within different periods, owing to people's different cognition upon the essence of Language or Language competence, Language test has been categorized into three different modes or systems, which can be named by the order that they came into being, the first generation (pre-scientific testing), the second generation (psychometric-structuralist testing) and the third generation system (psycholinguistic-sociolinguistic testing) (Liu, 2000).

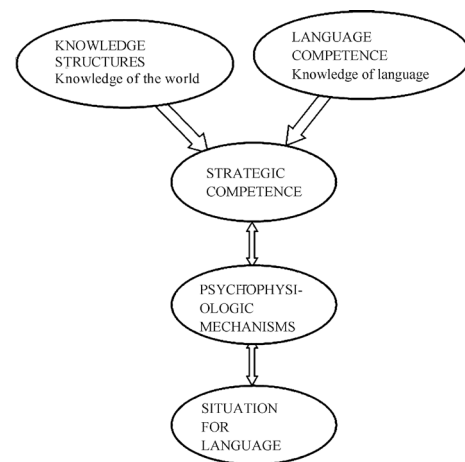
In the period of the pre-scientific testing, it is time before 1940, language had been instructing and testing as a branch of knowledge involving grammar, vocabulary and phonology, which are free from any context, with the popularity of the multiple-choice item. Though this approach can cover a large sample of language forms in one test paper and is highly objective, "it pays little or no attention to the way those separate elements interact in a larger context of communication". Over the years this concept of language had not been challenged.

Till 1940, the theory of psychometric-structuralist testing came out of a group of American structuralist-linguists represented by Bloomfield, Fires, Lado etc., who put forward the first thesis "Language is a system of a series of signs, a form structure", which focus on oral language and gives priority to listening and speaking both in teaching and test but not taking appropriate situation into account. The typical response types utilized in this approach are cloze and dictation that are assumed to integrate separate language skills (Heaten, 1988). However, although involving contextual consideration and functional language, it does not adopt the use of functional language and still focuses on meaning not on interactive communication.

Thanks to scholars' following up research, people's recognition upon language has been deepening gradually. At first, Chomsky proposed the concept of "linguistic competence" and "linguistic performance". He claims that it is the linguist's task to characterize what speakers know about their language, i.e., their performance. "Linguistic theory is concerned primarily with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language in actual performance." (Wardhaugh, 2000); Subsequently, in 1972, sociolinguist

Halliday also advanced "the function of language", that is to say, the same words, while being spoken in different occasions, it will have various meaning and then generate different effect. In which, the active communicative process and the importance of context of speech have been recognized, because the real language competence embodies in daily life. Hence, the concept of "communicative competence" came into being. Thus result in the third generation system "communicative language testing".

Bachman's introduction of an interactional approach to language testing have an profound influence in language testing field, which is honored as the landmark in the history of language testing by Skehan (1991) from which we can get that Language competence are not able to take effect without language communicative situation.



**Figure 1**  
**Bachman's Mode of Communicative Language Competence (Bachmen, 1990)**

In theoretical realm, communicative listening test, before coming into being have experienced the evolution from being free from context, to involving context but not focusing on communication, eventually to taking communicative situation into particular consideration.

### 1.2 Typical Testing Cases

The theory of Communicative language Testing brings to two typical cases, one is IELTS (International English Language Testing System) the other is TOEFL (Test of English as a foreign Language).

It is fairly well known for us that in major English speaking countries, IELTS is the typical product of the Communicative Language Testing. The most obvious character of the test lies in it tests the students' English communicative ability. The listening sections of IELTS covers four tracks, the former two of which focus on the real social situation that involves daily life, social state of affairs, social interaction and so on. While the other two are concerning about the commonsense and fairly realistic

topics of informative, academic discussion on worldwide subjects. It is definitely a test for evaluating examinees' authentic language communicative ability. Through the process of preparing for IELTS oral test, the students could find a way to overcome "Dumb English" and equip themselves with the communicative ability to solve the communicative problems they would meet in their daily life and study.

The new TOEFL test is the other case in point. Its listening test is a simulation of the study and life scenes in northern American universities, with real-life materials based on communicative language test theories. As for the contents of listening materials, New TOEFL has washed out previous short conversation questions and then takes two long campus situational conversations and four class reports into its composition. CHEN Dongbing, in his article *New TOEFL Listening Test and College English Listening Teaching* holds that New TOEFL will have positive inspirations and influences on China's reform in college English teaching and testing.

In China, the typical outcome of Communicative Language Testing is CET4. Compared with the old CET4, the listening subtest of the new CET4 is closer to that of IELTS, i.e. is closer to the communicative listening test. However there are still some potential problems to be solved, such as a lack of variety and interesting in terms of listening materials, an absence of real communicative situation etc. which are deserved to be reformed.

In this field, as for the relevant research about New CET4 Listening Test, they are mostly involved in discussing and analyzing the washback effect that listening innovation brought to college English teaching and learning, rather than taking their mutual washback effects into consideration.

## 2. PREVIOUS RESEARCHES AND ACHIEVEMENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE LISTENING TEACHING

### 2.1 Theoretical Development

"Of all the concepts in language teaching which have been widely used in recent years, the term 'communication' no doubt top the list." (Sun, 2007). Communicative Language Teaching Approach (CLTA) is originated from the changes in the British Situational Language Teaching Approach dating from the late 1960s. It just emphasizes on meaning and communication in the purpose of developing learners' "communicative competence", Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach has developed into a notable language teaching method and gradually replaced the previous traditional grammar-translation method based on teacher's instruction. Which suggests us that traditional non-communicative teaching method is surely tended to

be replaced by an effective new teaching method, that is a communicative teaching method based on training learner's conversational competence in actual situations. Usually, language is used by members of a speech community to accomplish their purposes, which confirms that we cannot learn language without community or situation. Since the concept of "communicative competence" was first introduced by Hymes in the mid-1960s, further relevant theories have come to birth which therefore enriched the theories of listening teaching.

### 2.2 Teaching Countermeasures

The traditional way of teaching whose strategy works like this: "Present a structure, drill it, and practice it in context..." (Sun, 2007) is characterized by teacher-centered mode, focusing on developing students' grammar and basic skills, reading and translation abilities instead of training learner's capability of applying what they have learned in actual situation or community. Therefore, under such a kind of teaching approach, the students are not prone to meet the society's requirements in that what they have learned is not up to the demand of society; most of them lack effective communicative skills. In other words, they do learn "mute English" but cannot make a fluent and effective communication in real situation.

Compared with the traditional teaching method, communicative language teaching (CLT) aims at developing learner's actual communicative competence. It strives to alternate the predominant roles between teacher and students in class activities. One primary role for the teacher is to facilitate the communicative process in class activities, while students are the center of the class rather than "passive listeners". It is characterized by student-centered mode. The end goal of CLT lies in not only instructing students how to use linguistic forms correctly, but also teaching them how to use language appropriately within different situations.

It is evident that communicative language teaching has obviously outweighed the traditional one. Therefore, the concept of CLT should be brought into effect throughout the whole Language Teaching Activities. As far as the given researches on CET4 Teaching is concerned, most of them either focus on instructing listening skills or concentrate on building up students' comprehension capability, rather than introducing the communication concept, let alone put the communicative teaching strategies into full play in listening teaching activities. Furthermore, one-sided view of teaching to test contributes to learner's good at marking out choices but weak in reproducing and outputting what they have heard on the tape.

So far, regardless of relevant theoretical development on CLTA, listening teaching activities still remains at the level of focusing on listening comprehension rather than listening to speak and communicate.

### 3. REFLECTION ON PRESENT STATUS OF COMMUNICATIVE LISTENING TEST AND TEACHING

#### 3.1 Sided Instructional Concept of *Teaching to the Test*

Owing to the sided instructional concept of *Teaching to the Test*, Language teaching activities are inescapable of aiming at increasing the pass-rate of examination. Taking CET4 listening teaching for instance, since CET4 certificate becomes one of the qualifications for graduating, both college students and college English teachers have to engage themselves in training to the test. Nearly one fourth of classes are occupied by CET4 Question-items exercise and listening skills' instilling, especially when test drawing near. Even though the New CET4 listening has added some communicative situational elements, it is still comprehension-oriented by objective question-items and passage listening materials rather than appropriate subjective question-items and conversation listening materials with actual situation.

It is the incompletely communicative listening test form gives the negative washback effect to listening teaching. On contrary, the incorrect concept of *teaching to the test* meanwhile worsen the negative washback effect, and consequently, both of test and teaching get stuck in the bad circles: teaching activities are contained by the negative sides of test, whereas, test will not take any constructive advice from teaching. At length, mutual promotion will come to be null and void.

#### 3.2 Neglect of Mutual Washback Effects and Interactive Promotion

Up to now, quite a few scholars have done the microscopic researches either on CET4 listening test or on CET4 listening teaching without taking mutual washback effects into consideration; few of them can integrate them together, and attach great importance upon their potential wash back effects (truly, each of them can effect on the other); most of researches ignored their mutual effects and take their integrated partnership aside. Two partners have being treated as isolated individuals, working independently.

As for test, it has both positive and negative washback effects on teaching. Both effects should not be neglected. If the positive effects of test, such as good results, on teaching have been put aside, teaching will lose the credible information for deciding to strengthen its given merits; if the negative ones have been ignored, teaching will be misguided into wrong way. And so does in teaching. In sum, without effective reflection from teaching, test will not be found of spot; lacking of proof outcome from test, teaching will not realize its improvement.

Neglect of mutual washback effects prevents test and teaching from perfection. If neither test nor teaching can get promotion, there will be nothing meaningful of introducing test and teaching into college.

### CONCLUSION

From above study of theoretical and typical case researches on Communicative Listening test and teaching, we can get the conclusion that, language acquisition has stepped into a new era of communicative test and teaching. They are inseparable partners who exert both positive and negative washback effects on each other, effective cooperation and integration of them will contribute to common development and promotion; however, It has been revealed that the significance of their mutual washback effects has being neglected still now, which attributes to their backward in course of processing; which indicates if their partnership is neglected or separated, two of them will go backward and retreat to nothing helpful in language training. Furthermore, traditional sided instructional concept of *Teaching to the Test* will become the huge stone getting in the way of their common development. It proves us the truth that testing and teaching are indivisible partners but are not subordinate to each other; only by effective interaction of each other and promoting their active strengths, will productive fruits come into reality in walks of education. Above research suggests that it is particularly important to strategically interface testing with teaching and put their joint force into full play in language application.

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