

ON LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS INVOLVED IN TESTING

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Each of us; in his school life, must have taken exams from time to time at certain grades. However, only very few have so far thought of why we are given tests, and by most of us they have been taken for granted in order to pass a class.

Despite all, the subject of testing is seriously under discussion here and it will be anatomized scrupulously by you, the specialists.

As is known, on the one hand, tests may be either diagnostic or prognostic. They either measure one's present achievements or show his present weaknesses, or they may supposedly measure potential. On the other hand, in terms of scoring, they may also be either subjective or objective. In a way, tests may be analysed into various names or types in according to their aims.

Tests from the objective points of view can be classified under three headings,(1) Aptitude,(2) General Proficiency,(3) Achievement. An **aptitude test** serves to indicate an individual's facility for acquiring specific skills and learnings. A **general proficiency** test determines what an individual is capable of doing with what so far he has acquired in that field. As for **achievement test**, it shows the extent to which an individual has mastered the specific skills or pieces of information acquired in formal learning atmosphere.

Testing involves not only students and the learning situation, but also teachers and the teaching process. Because teachers should know how effective their teaching has been or how much progress their students have made.

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The irrevocable truth is that speech and writing are two linguistic activities which are respectively called **encoding** and **decoding** processes psycholinguistically. As far as listening and reading are concerned, they are the parallel decoding processes by which we understand either a spoken or a written message. That's why it is said language includes four skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing. In addition, another belief is that in this order we generally learn our mother tongue and that is why foreign languages are being taught in the same way.

Just at this point, let us have a brief look at **linguistics** for it is the science which describes and analyses languages and studies their properties scientifically. As for the **linguist**, he identifies and describes the units and patterns of the sound system, the words and morphemes, and the phrases and sentences, that is, the structure of a language. Since dealing with languages is the task of the linguist, so are the teaching and learning of languages and the methods of which whether they are second or foreign languages. In a way, linguists have undertaken such an ordeal and transferred data and the findings into a new field called **applied linguistics**. As a result, new discoveries in that field as well as the results of the cooperation made with other disciplines have been made available for teachers. That is why the language teacher cannot ignore the linguistic studies and products. Again, it is for the same reason that testing in second language teaching should be administered and applied according to linguistic guidelines and consequences.

If the objectives in the course include all four language skills, all four should be tested, that is, each test should cover one section to test listening comprehension, one for speaking, one for reading, and one for writing. However, the universities in Turkey are mostly interested in general proficiency and achievement tests. Among the achievement tests, **quiz type** is the most common and the favorite of many foreign language teachers. It is usually referred to in order that students prepare their daily lessons. They might be periodic, announced or unannounced. Yet, the **pop quizzes** often frustrate students who are anxious and that the tension create a negative reaction toward the class and the teacher.

Periodical achievement tests covering a major part of material can be given at the end of each unit, lesson or chapter, and thus they

help students organize their knowledge and assimilate the major part of material. They are also good for longterm retention and are used to indicate group or individual progress toward the instructives of a specific study or training program.

Here, one thing to bear in mind is that directions of tests should be made clear enough because the purpose of a test is never to measure cleverness in reading, but achievement. Students should not be discouraged to ask questions in case they fail to comprehend what is expected. The teacher can even walk through rows during the exam and check if the students have grasped what and how to do.

In terms of the nature of tests to be given, the most weighty ones are structure tests the purpose of which is the testing of control the basic grammatical patterns of the spoken language. Now that either the class texts or the handouts given by the teacher should be used as the basis of such test, selection of the structures to be inserted in an achievement test is rather easy. The test, as a rule should cover the whole scope of structures taught in the course, and each structural type should be emphasized as much as it was in the classroom.

As is known, **proficiency tests** are given to those who claim a position, prestige or proficiency, eligibility or an exemption from a compulsory course or study. To an extent, **placement tests** are also considered as belonging to this group because the content of which includes full range of grammar and vocabulary as well as reading comprehension and writing skill. Inasmuch as they are arranged from easier items to more difficult in a systematic way, that is, the alignment of the required test items follow a definite course program, they are very practical as regards to place students according to the points or grades they attained.

Another important point to mention here is that the teacher should prepare test items in such a way that the real objective must be to test student understanding of the language system. As a result, there should be no way that students can answer rotely at all. In addition, all the structures of a certain language should be tested.

In the field of linguistics, more research has been made in terms of contrastive analysis and language testing. Especially **Robert**

Lado, should be remembered as one of the pioneers who have paid the way in that. In «**Linguistics across Cultures**», his first book in this field, he presented the close relationship between applied linguistics and the analysis of culture and that he emphasized the comparison of two languages and cultures to discover and describe the problems that the speakers of one of the languages would have in learning the other. The results of such comparisons had proved of fundamental value for the preparation of teaching materials, tests and language learning experiments. Moreover, language teachers who understood this field would acquire insights and tools for evaluating the language and culture content of textbooks and tests, supplementing the materials in use, preparing new materials and tests, and diagnosing student difficulties accurately. To tell the truth, the preparation of up-to-date pedagogical and experimental materials had to be based on this kind of comparison.

By the same token, a point-by-point comparison of target and native languages will provide the basis for more efficient instruction. **Contrastive analysis** is applicable to every aspect of language such as phonology, morphology, syntax and vocabulary. Through a contrastive analysis, we try to determine⁽¹⁾ What language patterns are the same in both languages, ⁽²⁾ what patterns in the target language do not have any acceptable equivalents in the native language, and ⁽³⁾ What patterns in mother tongue have sufficient similarity to patterns in the target language to specify principal points of interference.

The teacher must be aware of the linguistic facts of the language of the students in order to understand the particular problems they will have in learning the target language. He must know the major differences and similarities of two systems and the considerable vocabulary facts of the target language.

As for phonological problems of English as a foreign language which were derived from either the separate vocal and consonantal features or the lack of certain sounds have been studied in detail and recognized. Even their solutions in conjunction with their teaching methods were introduced to the teacher long ago. By having minimal pairs and having them compared and contrasted, the discrepancy between them can be pinpointed, taught and tested. Of course this phonological aspect is mostly directed towards the oral phase of the second language and the test of which should also

be administered orally. Yet, the charts of points and manners of articulation, their nomenclature should be left for the students of linguistics. The student should only be familiar with the correct pronunciation of the phonemes and be aware of the phonological rules and system which they themselves used. For instance, the plurality (—s) morpheme at the end of nouns should be taken care of whether it occurs after voiced or unvoiced consonants in terms of the correct pronunciation. The experienced teacher, however, knows how to deal with those problems and to test them, and those who are new can cope with them by following the guidelines by the experts through their books written in that field.

In terms of grammar and grammatical structures, in addition to what I have said earlier about the contrastive analysis, the patterns of target language should be contrasted with their equivalents in the native language inasmuch as they are the units of phonological, morphological and syntactic features all of which constitute the whole grammatical system. The similarities are the fringe benefits of the learningteaching situation but the contrasts observed considerably create the real problems and should be treated at large weighing towards their structure and usage. By the same token, quizzes and other progress tests should cover them proportionately.

The morphemes such as prefixes and suffixes ought to be introduced to the students with respect to their function and usage. The distinction between the derivational and inflectional morphemes and morphology should be illustrated, used contrastively and tested from the standpoint of functional usage. The noun, adjective and verb and adverb -making affixes should be noticed and analyzed by the students, and this should be noticed and analyzed by the students and this property of affixes should be tested in discrete items, and the synonymous ones should be indicated in terms of stems they can be added to exclusively.

Again, the syntactic contrasts weigh more towards teaching and testing the second language. Since thoughts and cultures are different, they cause man to think and express himself within the restricted capacity of his peculiar language through his internalized grammar system. Therefore, among the language universals, parallelism cannot always be found. The following examples will illustrate

it clearly: The meaning in the sentence «She caught a cold last week», is, however, expressed in a passive structure while it is active in English. Similarly, we see the same fact in this sentence «I can't tell you **what to teach.**» In Turkish, the part «what to teach» is turned into passivity as «what to be taught». Also, a structure like «Did the two banks open?» often confuse Turkish student's mind who is learning English, for its equivalent in Turkish is fully passive. Such verbs as **open, read** and some others which are both transitive and intransitive are always difficult to handle, and they remain as the problem to solve. The more patterns are contrasted the more gaps or discrepancies come out. The more one learns and succeeds in the test the more s/he is both familiar and equipped with the culture and cultural behaviour of the target language.

In terms of testing syntax, the scrambled sentence type of tests is rather satisfactory, besides it is playful and economical, and urges the students to think variably and consider various types of structures.

As for the lexical contrastive analysis, denotative and connotative meaning of words and their derivatives really show great difference and mostly are deceptive for one who is not aware of it. The field **semantics** is, at least, as important as that of structure. Especially, prepositions are involved in both syntax and semantics. That is why they should always be tested in any exams of progress and proficiency.

Whether a translation passage given for testing is approved or not, words together with their special, denotative or connotative or textual meanings should mean a lot for a student, and be treated fairly and consciously, and be used properly carrying the right message or note. Although they are mostly seen in discrete, it will be better to test them in intergral ones.

I think, the more structure and vocabulary are attained, the more cultural way of thinking and behaviour will take place than ordinary, inconsistent words. Consequently, the comparison and contrast of cultural patterns will affect the language and its components. This interdependent state is inevitable and helps the teacher immeasurably with the comprehension of the problem, and to solve it from a linguistic point of view.

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