

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter discusses problematic issues in the language assessment of receptive skills, language assessment, listening in second language, the assessment of listening, reading in second language, and the assessment of reading.

2.1 Problematic Issues in the Assessment of Receptive Skills

Before going further to discuss about assessment, it will be better if we first distinguish the terms of measurement, test, and evaluation. Those terms usually used similarly, and may refer to almost the same activity. It would lead us to confusion, if we do not really understand the meaning. The distinction of those terms may be beneficial for development and use of the language test.

Measurement in Dictionary of Language Testing is defined as the process of quantifying test takers' performances (1999: 118). It requires the production and the use of language test that comes together somewhat kind of scales. The purpose of this activity is to distinguish among test takers based on their abilities. In addition, as Bachman stated, measurement involves the assigning number (1999: 19). This activity is different from test results reporting, which is the following activity of measurement.

On the other hand, test is defined in Brown as a method of measuring someone's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain (2004: 3). Bachman states that a test necessarily quantifies characteristics of individuals according to explicit procedure (1991: 20). On the other hand, Dictionary of language testing defines the term of evaluation as the systematic gathering information in order to make a decision. In the language education, evaluation is usually used by the education designer or stakeholder to make a decision for the future program. Bachman states that the possibility of success in making correct decision does not only lie on the ability of decision makers but also on the quality of information upon which the decision is based. To describe the relationship among measurement, test and evaluation, we can look at the figure presented below.

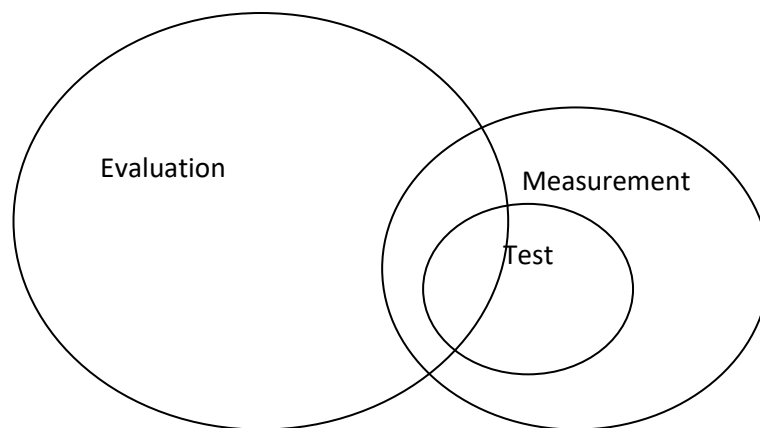


Figure 2.1.1 relationship among measurement, test, and evaluation (Bachman, 1999: 23)

Assessment deals with three valuable concepts; competence, performance and observation. Those three concepts are also the part of the assessment process. When someone's ability is being assessed, substantively only the competence is

assessed, meanwhile the performance is observed. But sometimes the performance does not imply the real competence; Brown (2004: 21) argued this unreliable measurement may be caused by the temporary illness, fatigue, a “bad day”, and any other physical or psychological factor. To anticipate this situation, he proposed one important principle in assessing competence, that is the consideration of the misjudgment of the performance result (2004: 117). The teachers should consider a design of measurement consisting of two or more performances before going to the conclusion part.

One other thing that commonly forgotten is the consideration of observable performance in the assessment. When observing the performance, teachers should be able to see or hear the student’s performance. It is quite thought-provoking in the case of receptive skills. The performing process and the product of receptive skills are undetectable. We cannot observe the real act of listening and reading, and also see or hear the performances. As the matter of fact, listening and reading are sometimes missed to be assessed, especially in the progress. Cohen (1994: 8) believed that the only way to test the language is the language users’ degree of success in speaking and writing for the purpose of conducting some transactional activities that we can in daily life. If the transaction is successfully completed as a result of verbal exchange, then it is considered that the language was sufficient for the purpose.

Beyond the tendency to ignore the receptive skills assessment, the uniqueness of the two receptive skills also arise another problem, the authenticity of the assessment. The authenticity argument believes that when assessing language

ability, only the real use of language should be taken into consideration. Although many test makers have claimed that their tests are authentic, it is still believed that many types of test item fail to set up real-world tasks. As stated by Spolsky in Cohen (1994: 18), “language testing does not assess language behavior”. He confirmed that the examination questions are not real, although they are similar to the real-life questions. Students in many tests are asked to understand special rules of exam and to respond in an unnatural way (Spolsky argued that to answer question asked by someone who doesn’t want to know the answer because he already knows the answer is considered unnatural).

With the uniqueness of receptive skills, teachers as the test maker will have much bigger role and extra effort in designing a test. They have to decide what kind of instrument of assessment they are going to use to assess the receptive skills which are suit to the real language use.

2.2 The Language Assessment

Historically, the language assessment has had three main approaches: discrete-point, integrative, and communicative approaches. These three approaches are in accordance with the shifting of teaching methodology (Brown, 2002: 7). Each test item of each approach is based on specific theoretical assumptions about the nature of the construct being measured.

During the audio-lingual method period (1950s), discrete-point approaches testing was the most accepted. Buck stated that the basic idea of this approach is

the possibility to identify and isolate every language elements (the unit of linguistic knowledge) and test each one of the elements separately (2003: 62). In listening for instance, the most common tasks are phonemic discrimination task, paraphrase recognition, and response evaluation. He also stated that discrete-point tests generally use selected response. One of the common techniques is the true-false item test (2003:63).

In the early 1970s, Oller confronted what was believed in the discrete-point approaches. He started arguing for what he called integrative approaches. Oller in Buck, encountered the discrete-point test which test the knowledge of language one thing at a time, while his integrative tests try to assess as much as possible the language assessment at the same time (2003: 66). The integrative test finally centered into what it was called unity trait hypothesis which suggested the unified language proficiency: vocabulary, grammar, phonology, and any other language elements. Cloze test and dictation seemed to be the most suitable tests for the integrative approach.

And in the mid 1980s, the language testing had refused the concepts about unity trait hypothesis and was about starting to design communicative language testing tasks. The language testing need a correspondence between language test performance and language use, the test must show the language use in non-test situations (Bachman and Palmer in Brown, 2003: 10). It was believed that the unity trait hypothesis found in such integrative test can only give the information about linguistic competence.

2.3 Listening in Foreign Language

There are not much differences can be found between the first language listening and the foreign language listening. They may have technically similar processes. One of the differences is the possibility of arisen problem. When problem arise in first language listening, it may be caused by such factors as listener being distracted, disinterested or responding to another content by thinking about something else, while in foreign language listening the problems may be caused by the poor knowledge of linguistic system, or a lack of knowledge of socio-cultural content of the message (Buck, 2003: 49).

Gaps may always be faced in the listening process. Both first and foreign language learners ever happened to face the gaps, but the gaps occur in the foreign language listening usually have far more meaningful effect on comprehension.

2.4 The Assessment of Listening

It is not easy to construct a listening test. Although the aural comprehension has become an important area of study, the attention of its teaching and learning process, included the assessment, is still neglected. It becomes teachers', as test designers, to put much attention on designing a good test on listening comprehension. When designing tests, Buck suggests noticing the interactivenss of tests. He proposes two principles in fulfilling the interactivenss: firstly is the successful completion of the task should be dependent on comprehension of the text, secondly is the knowledge, skills, and abilities requirement to comprehend

the text representing the knowledge, skill, and abilities in the construct definition (2003: 126).

In deciding what activities will be inserted in the assessment, teachers, as test designers, should pay more attention to the listening sub skills. The test should cover the listening sub-skills. Weir in Buck, divides three four general listening sub-skills, they are direct meaning comprehension, inferred meaning comprehension, contributory meaning comprehension, and listening and taking notes. In the direct meaning comprehension the skills should be assessed range from the ability to listen for gist, the ability to listen for main idea, the ability to listen for specific details, and the ability to determine a speaker's attitude toward a listener or a topic. In the inferred meaning comprehension, the skill vary from the ability to make inferences and deductions, the ability to relate utterances to their social and situational contexts, the ability to recognize the communicative functions of utterances, and the ability to deduce meaning of unfamiliar lexical items from context. In the contributory meaning comprehension, there are seven skills should be assed. They are the ability to understand phonological features, the ability to understand grammatical notions, the ability to understand discourse markers, the ability to understand the main syntactic structure of clauses or idea units, the ability to understand cohesion, the ability to understand lexical cohesion, and the ability to understand lexis. While in the listening and taking notes, the skills should be assessed range from ability to extract salient points to summarize the text and the ability to select relevant key points (2003: 54-55). Brown also proposes micro and macro skills for listening. He proposes eleven

points for micro skills and six points for macro skills (2004: 121-122). The points of micro skills should be covered in a listening test are as follow: 1) the ability to distinguish the distinctive sounds of English, 2) the ability to recognize the chunks of language in short-term memory, 3) the ability to recognize English stress patterns, stressed and unstressed words, rhythmic structure, intonation and their role in the perception of information, 4) the ability to recognize reduced form of words, 5) the ability to classify word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns, 6) the ability to process speech at different ways of delivery, 7) the ability to process speech with pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variable, 8) the ability to recognize grammatical word classes, systems, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms, 9) the ability to detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituent, 10) the ability to recognize different grammatical forms can express a particular meaning, and 11) the ability to recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse. And the points of macro skills in listening comprehension are as follow: 1) the ability to recognize communicative functions of utterances, 2) the ability to activate the real-world knowledge to infer situations, participants, and goals, 3) the ability to infer links and connections between events, deduce clauses and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification, 4) the ability to differentiate literal and implied meanings, 5) the ability to use non-verbal clues to figure out meanings, and 6) the ability to develop and use different kind of listening strategies.

In designing tasks on listening test, Buck, adapted from Valette and Heaton, divides the type of the tasks based on three: 1) testing knowledge of the sound system; it may still be appropriate to put the sound system as the part of listening test because there are many situations that can be problem when the students are listening to target language. This assessment tasks would help teacher to figure out what problem faced by the students. The task activities may vary from minimal pairs with decontextualized words, minimal pairs with words in utterance, recognizing grammatical structure, recognizing intonation pattern, and recognizing stress. 2) testing understanding of literal meanings; this kind of tasks enable the students to understand the explicit information or a passage on literal semantic level. The task activities include body movement tasks, retention tasks, picture tasks, conversation tasks, and self-evident comprehension tasks. And 3) testing beyond local literal meanings; it is rather difficult to find tasks that suitable for testing a broader listening construct, the most well-known technique is asking the comprehension questions (2003: 133-135).

Otherwise, Brown divides the type of listening tasks on the basis of the listening types, 1) intensive listening, 2) responsive listening, 3) selective listening, and 4) extensive listening (2004: 120). These stages are classified from the simpler things to the most difficult ones. At the intensive listening, students may only listen to understand the language components such as phonemes, words, intonation, etc. Go beyond to the responsive listening, students will listen to a short range of language such as a greeting, and question, and be asked to give response to it. While in selective listening, students will listen to a longer range of

language and should understand the designated information in the text given. Students at extensive listening will listen to a global understanding spoken language. At this stage, students may need to implement the interactive skills such as note-taking or discussion.

2.5 Reading in Foreign Language

Learners of first language' reading issues may vary from the strategies, vocabulary development, up to the word recognition and reading fluency. In foreign language context, the issues have become more complex than what are arisen in the first language. Foreign language learners have wider ranges of language proficiencies, unlike the first language learners who already have understood grammar knowledge by the time they are able to read (Grabe and Stoller, 2002: 41).

Some scholars believe that foreign language learners are slower and less successful than first language learners. Oller and Tullus in Cohen stated that the failures are caused by the learners are spending more time at each idea (1994: 212).

2.6 The Assessment of Reading

Some people argue that reading probably the most important skill in the learning process. The only reason for this argument is that reading is the most frequent activity done in the classroom. In academic settings, reading is

considered as the central way to get new information and gain access to alternative explanation. To develop students' reading ability, teachers should decide appropriate techniques in teaching and also testing reading skill.

The reading assessment should be designed on the basis of sub-skills of reading. The CIE IGCSE syllabus curriculum (as cited in Woods, 2005: 68-69) divides the sub-skills of reading into core reading skills and extended reading skills. In the core reading skills, students should be able to demonstrate the understanding of words in short texts, to bring out specific information from texts, to show general understanding of extended texts, and to scan specific information, organize the relevant information and present it in a format given. While in extended reading skills, students are expected to be able to show comprehension of a wider range of texts, to demonstrate the ability to identify important points in an extended piece of writing, and to carry out conclusion from , and see relations within, an extended text. Brown (2004: 187-188) proposes seven points each for micro and macro skills of reading. The points in micro skills are as follow: 1) the ability to separate among the distinctive graphemes and orthographic patterns of English, 2) the ability to recognize the chunks of language in short-term memory, 3) the ability to write an efficient rating to meet the purpose, 4) the ability to recognize a core of words and also to interpret word order patterns, 5) the ability to recognize grammatical word classes, systems, patterns, rules, and elliptical forms, 6) the ability to recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms, and 7) the ability to recognize cohesive devices in the written discourse and their role in signaling the relationship between and

among clauses. And the points for macro skills are as follow: 1) the ability to recognize the rhetorical form of written discourse and their significance for interpretation, 2) the ability to recognize the communicative functions of written texts, 3) the ability to infer implicit context by using background knowledge, 4) the ability to infer links and connections between events, deduce clauses and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification, 5) the ability to distinguish between literal and implied meanings, 6) the ability to detect culturally specific references and interpret them in a context of the appropriate cultural schemata, and 7) the ability to develop and use different kind of reading strategies.

After deciding what sub-skills should be assessed in a reading test, the next step to do is decide what tasks will be included in that test. Brown (2004: 189-190) divides the types of reading task on the basis of the reading types. He stated four type of reading: perceptive reading, selective reading, interactive reading, and extensive reading. Perceptive reading is the basic and fundamental level of reading. The task in this level of reading implies that the students are at the early stage of being literate. The bottom up reading process is implied at this stage. In selective reading, the level of difficulty at this level of reading is getting higher. Typical task used in this level are as follows: picture-cued task, matching, true/false, multiple choice, etc. The combination of bottom-up and top-down reading process may be used at this level. Go beyond to interactive reading. At this stage, the students are no longer accepted to deal with simple component of language such as letters, words, punctuation and so on. What they have to do is

interact with the text. It means that they will negotiate with the meaning within the texts (Brown, 2004: 189), they try to implement a set knowledge to understand the meaning. The top-down reading process is typical for such task. Extensive reading will be top of reading type that acquires higher skill. The students at this stage are exposed with somewhat longer texts such as journal articles, technical reports, longer essays, etc. The integrated skill may also involve at extensive reading, because sometimes the product of this stage are as much in the form of written as reading (Brown, 2003: 212).

2.7 Course Outline in English Learning

Before discussing more about the role of course outline in the English learning, it is better to distinguish the term of course outline and syllabus. Course outline, as described in <http://www.cccurriculum.info/curriculum/DevelopCurOutline/ModelOutline.htm> (retrieved on May 29th, 2010), is a contract between the college and students that contains all the requirements and components of the course, while a syllabus is a description about how the teacher carries out the terms of that contract by means of specific assignments. A course outline gives all the basic components required in the course to be taught by all teachers. And the teachers are allowed to develop the methods, topics beyond the course outline through syllabus. In short, a syllabus is an expansion of a course outline which allows teachers to use their strength, by means of methods and techniques, to teach the course line.

Course outline plays important roles in learning process, in this case English learning. As stated in <http://www.ccccurriculum.info/curriculum/DevelopCurOutline/ModelOutline.htm> (retrieved on May 29th, 2010), there are about two important roles of course outline. The first one is as the form of the basis for an agreement among students, teachers and the institution. Course outline describes what components of the course will the students get from teachers and institution. Another role of course outline is as the program review. By using course outline a college seeks to keep its curriculum relevant and to allocate its resources sufficiently to maintain its programs.

There are several things to be considered in designing a course outline. Based on Government Regulation no. 19 year 2005 article 20,

“Perencanaan proses pembelajaran meliputi silabus dan rencana pelaksanaan pembelajaran yang memuat sekurang-kurangnya tujuan pembelajaran, materi ajar, metode pengajaran sumber belajar dan penilaian hasil belajar.”

Whereas Garcia, (1976: 18), proposes three main decisions on designing a course outline. They are decisions on what to teach, decisions how to teach, and decisions relevant to evaluation. In deciding what to teach, the course outline should cover course description and course objectives as clear as possible. In deciding how to teach, the course outline should describe what topics and activities will be served, including the time allotments. In this part, the course outline should also show all the references going to be used. In deciding something relevant to evaluation, the course outline should cover all the requirements needed for evaluation.

Course outline is a legal standing document that should be accountable. Nowadays, it can be seen by many more eyes than only teachers and students. In consequence, teachers and institution should prepare it as clearly as possible. California Community College in <http://www.ccccurriculum.info/curriculum/DevelopCurOutline/ModelOutline.htm> (retrieved on May 29th, 2010) suggests a model of course outline. It consists of 1) catalog description, 2) expected outcomes for students, 3) course content, 4) assignment and methods of evaluation, and 5) textbook (s).