



# 交际口语测试 理论与新模式研究

Communicative Oral Testing  
Theories and New Approaches

薛荣著



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## 前 言

口语测试是语言测试的一个重要组成部分,但由于其自身的特点和要求,口语测试一直被认为是十分困难的。在口语测试中,一种很常见的测试方法是面试。在传统的面试中,考官向考生提出问题,然后由考生做出回答。这样的测试方式具有很强的可操作性,简单实用,但也有很大的弊病。首先,考官既要和考生对话,又要对考生的口语能力做出判断。考官要同时担任评判者和对话者两个角色。考官很难在专心与考生谈话的同时对考生在测试中的表现进行评分,对其口语能力做出全面的判断。第二,传统的面试形式使考生处于一种非常被动的地位,考生往往比较紧张,很难完全发挥自己的口语水平。第三,传统的口语测试评分过程完全是主观的,一般情况下虽然有描述性的评分标准,但考官在评分过程中的个人好恶和倾向性是难以避免的。

为了改进传统的口语测试形式,本研究尝试将传统的完形填空用于口语测试。所谓完形填空,是1953年由W. L. Taylor提出的,最初被用来测试母语文章可读性。完形填空被认为是一种测试综合语言能力的可靠、有效、快捷、经济的方式,有很高的信度和效度,在国内外的许多语言测试中都被广泛地运用。对完形填空的各种研究很多,但把完形填空运用于口语测试的研究在国内外尚不多见。

本研究根据交际语言测试的基本理论和语言交际中的 Information Gap 原理,采用传统的完形填空形式,在口语测试中将听、说、读、写等语言技能结合起来,综合地测试考生的口语水平。在本研究中,作者选取了一位新西兰籍教师的信件为文本,根据完形填空的命题原则和方法,设计了20个空,要求考生在15分钟内完成测试。在该测试过程中,不是考官向学生提问由学生回答,而是考生首先通读短文,然后向考官提出问题,从考官那里获得信息,并把获得的信息填在空白处。测试结束后,考官根据学生所写下来的内容进行评分。这种新的口语测试方式避免了传统的面试使考生感到紧张和被动的弊端,使考生能够在比较放松、没有心理压力

的情况下参加测试;并在测试中正常地发挥自己的口语水平。本研究把传统面试中使用的主观评分改为客观评分,提高了评分的可靠性。

本研究的内容包括以下几个方面:

(1) 以交际语言测试理论和完形填空的命题原则为指导设计一种新的口语测试方法。

(2) 通过对参加测试的学生和老师的问卷调查来论证此种新的口语测试是否有较高的信度、效度、交互性、综合性、实用性和良好的后效作用。

(3) 本测试的结果是否与学生已经修过的综合英语、英语阅读、英语听力、英语口语等基础课程以及英语专业四级测试(TEM-4)成绩有较好的相关性。

本研究立足于中国英语学习者的实际情况,以中等英语水平的英语学习者为实验对象,以应用语言学研究的理论为指导设计了研究步骤。具体做法如下:

(1) 以一位外籍教师真实的信件为文本,根据交际语言测试和完形测试的原理设计口语测试的试卷。

(2) 选取 20 名中等英语水平的学生为测试样本对试卷进行预测试,根据预测试的结果对试卷进行修改。

(3) 选取与预测试学生水平相当的 50 名英语学习者为测试对象,分两批进行口语测试。

(4) 测试结束后立即对参加测试的学生进行书面问卷调查,对调查结果进行统计分析。

(5) 邀请 10 位英语专业教师,经过严格的培训后,担任口语测试的考官。测试结束后立即对主持测试的教师进行书面问卷调查,征求他们在此次口语测试的看法、意见和建议。

(6) 根据事先制定的评分标准对试卷进行评阅,对测试成绩进行统计分析,对试题进行项目分析。

(7) 根据在研究中获得的各组数据以及教师和学生的建议对测试的信度、效度、实用性、后效作用等方面进行论证。

(8) 指出本研究存在的缺陷和今后进一步研究的方向。

本书共分 9 个部分。引言部分介绍该研究的背景、目的以及本研究的主要设计思想,提出本研究需要回答的问题。第 1 章是对交际语言测

试的理论综述,该章首先简要介绍由 Hymes(1972), Canale 和 Swain (1980)以及 Bachman (1990)等人提出的“交际能力”理论,然后详细探讨交际语言测试的主要特征。第 2 章介绍交际口语测试的相关理论,论述口语交际的性质、口语语言的文体学特征、口语能力的定义、口语测试的种类、口语测试常用的方法以及当前国内外口语测试的基本现状。第 3 章介绍语言学中的信息理论,包括信息的编码与解码(encoding and decoding)、信息密度(density of packing information)、信息结构(information structure)、已知信息和新信息(given information and new information)、信息填空(information gap-filling)、信息冗余(information redundancy)等,探讨信息填空在口语测试中的运用。第 4 章是对完形测试的理论综述,介绍了完形填空的定义、完形填空的心理语言学基础、完形填空的分类、完形填空的优缺点以及完形填空在国内外的研究现状。第 5 章介绍了试验研究的具体过程,包括研究的目标、测试的对象、测试的步骤和方法、测试的组织、测试的环境、测试成绩的获取、试卷的评阅、调查问卷的发放与收集等。第 6 章为实验数据的分析与讨论。该章分析了此次口语测试的结果、学生调查问卷、教师调查问卷以及此次口语测试成绩和综合英语、英语阅读、英语听力、英语口语等基础课程以及英语专业四级测试(TEM-4)成绩之间的相关关系。第 7 章是对此次口语测试的效度的论证。根据 Bachman 提出的语言测试效度评估的“有用性”原则,分别对此次口语测试的信度、理论效度、真实性、交互性、后效作用和实用性等方面进行了论证。第 8 章是结论部分,该章对本研究做了总结,概括了全书的要点,指出了该研究对英语口语教学和测试的启示意义,并指出本研究存在的局限性和今后努力的方向。

在本人从事该项研究的过程中,得到上海外国语大学博士生导师邹申教授的细心指导和鼓励。在本书的写作过程中,得到爱妻杨小惠、女儿薛丹杨的理解、支持与帮助。许多同事为本人研究工作的顺利完成给予很多帮助,在此一并表示真诚的谢意。

由于作者水平有限,成书时间仓促,书中难免存在疏漏和不当之处,欢迎外语专家、同行和广大读者批评指正。

作者

2009.9

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# Introduction

## 0.1 Background and Aims of the Research

It is safe to say that language testing came into existence the moment language teaching began. However, not until recently has language testing come out of the shadow of language teaching, and been viewed in its proper right as an independent discipline. Around 50 years ago, language testing drew attention of applied linguists and this trend continues. Language testing provides not only a powerful and progressive force in language teaching but also a better understanding of the nature of language, language use, as well as language teaching.

Of course language testing almost never takes place in isolation or in a vacuum. Current advances in language testing incorporate progress in several areas: research in language acquisition, language competence, language use, measurement theory, especially in language teaching. It is argued that language testing is developing in accordance with language teaching and other related areas. 1970s witnessed the gradual flourishing of communicative language teaching approach, which highlights the importance of the improvement of a student's communicative language ability rather than anything else. But the traditional language testing puts special stress on assessing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar without consideration of language communication in the particular context. Accordingly, communicative language testing (CLT) is called for and becomes the mainstream in language testing field in the past few decades in America, Britain and other western countries. Comparatively, CLT comes into prominence in China rather lately. In recent years, too much complaint against those

traditional language teaching approaches leads to the birth of communicative language teaching approach.

In contrast to the popularity of this new teaching approach, most of the tests, either in classroom or in large scale, are still designed in terms of the conventional testing approaches. The ability of listening, reading and writing are often tested but the ability of speaking is often neglected as the testing of that is difficult and time-consuming. Consequently language testing, to a great extent, impairs language teaching. Naturally, more and more teachers, linguists and administrators show increasing interest in this new testing approach. Some doubt whether it works while others have unreasonable expectations about it. Then, what is communicative language testing? What is its theoretical basis? What are its characteristics? How to apply its principles to the practical testing of speaking? What techniques can be used in testing proficiency? Can we try some non-traditional methods in testing speaking? For instance, cloze test? Dealing with these questions is extremely difficult. This dissertation will narrow itself to some aspects of these problems in an attempt to research the nature of CLT and its application in the testing of speaking ability.

In accordance with the requirements of *The College English Teaching Syllabus*, the goal of college English is to enable students to have an excellent ability in reading and a certain degree of level in listening, speaking, writing and translating so that they have a comprehensive ability of communicating in English. It has been two decades since CET (College English Test) was administrated. Owing to its scientific approach, CET is now well established as a large-scale standardized achievement test and is universally recognized in China, enjoying a high reliability and validity. However, with the popularity of communicative language teaching, CET was exposed to severe criticism at one time for the absence of assessing oral ability. Following Bachman (1996), language testing tends to exert an impact on language teaching

and learning. Correspondingly, CET, a test without an oral section, inevitably brought a negative side effect to language teaching and learning. The passing rate of CET was such an important concern in many universities that teachers completely ignore the oral teaching and the students aimed solely at passing CET without motivation to practice speaking. The subsequent result was the low level of oral ability among college students. Nevertheless, with the economic development and exchanges with other countries, oral communication becomes more and more frequent. To meet the increasingly urgent needs of the society, *The National College English Testing Committee* has begun administering CET Spoken English Test (CET SET) in more than 34 cities since November 1999. By June 2000, CET-SET had been made available to candidates in the provincial capital cities and municipalities in China. CET-SET is held twice a year: in early May and early November. *CET Spoken English Test Syllabus* pointed out that CET-SET aims to measure the oral English proficiency of college students. So far, on the basis of research of test development, scoring, rater training, and so forth, CET-SET has been developed into a scientific and complete system with a relatively high reliability and validity. It has brought beneficial washback to current English language teaching and learning. According to Jin Yan (2005), the CET Spoken English Test was administered in 36 provincial capital cities and 51 testing centres were established nationwide and about 100,000 students took part in the test by 2005 (Jin Yan, 2005:49-53).

Apart from CET-SET, Test for English Majors (TEM) also developed its speaking test. The oral test of TEM-4 adopts the form of recorded test and it is designed to assess the speaking ability of English majors in different types of situations and on a wide variety of topics. It consists of three tasks, each involving a particular speech activity.

In 2007 tens of thousands of college students took the TEM speaking test. Apart from the Spoken English Test of CET and

TEM-4, PETS (Public English Testing System) also developed its speaking and test and thousands of learners take the test. This shows that the practice of communicative language testing in China follows the steps of the big trend of language testing.

With the development of communicative language testing, endeavours have been made to design language tests that are mainly aimed to measure the learners' communicative abilities. But the oral performance of the learners is the most difficult to be measured and quantified. In many cases, a common method of testing oral performance is by means of oral interview. That is, the tester asks questions while the candidates answer them. And then scores are awarded to the candidates subjectively by the tester. This technique is simple and effective but it has many drawbacks. Firstly, in a conventional oral interview, the roles of interlocutor and assessor are combined. It is difficult for one person to concentrate on assessing effectively while at the same time trying to appear interested in what the learner is saying and involved in serious communication with him or her. Secondly, a traditional oral interview puts the candidates in a quite passive position. The atmosphere of the test is usually tense and the learners are very likely to feel nervous. As a result, the learners may not be able to demonstrate their speaking ability fully. Besides the above-mentioned disadvantages, the scoring procedure of traditional interviews is entirely subjective. Personal preference and human factors are inevitable. Hence, the reliability of the interview is questionable.

To overcome the deficiencies of conventional oral interviews, this dissertation makes a tentative study of the application of cloze procedure in the testing of oral proficiency. Based on the principles of communicative testing and the theories of information gap in real communication, the present study tries to apply cloze procedure to the testing of speaking. For the sake of convenience, the new testing technique will be called "Oral Cloze Test" hereafter. In the research a

letter by a New Zealand teacher is chosen as the text. Based on the designing principles of cloze test, 20 gaps are created and the candidates are required to finish the oral test within 15 minutes. During the test, instead of answering the testers' questions, the candidates are encouraged to ask questions to elicit information from the testers so as to complete the gaps. Scores are awarded objectively on the basis of what the candidates have written down. This new oral testing format minimizes the drawbacks of traditional oral interviews. The candidates can demonstrate their speaking ability in a relaxed way without pressure and nervousness. Meanwhile the reliability and validity of oral testing is improved. The study tries to achieve the following goals:

(1) To devise a new oral testing technique in line with the principles of communicative language testing and cloze test.

(2) To find out whether the oral cloze test has high face validity, interactiveness, authenticity, practicality and positive washback effect by means of two questionnaires for the teachers and students.

(3) To find out whether the oral cloze test has ideal correlation with the students' performance on such courses as *Comprehensive English*, *English Reading*, *English Listening and Oral English* as well as with the National TEM-4 scores.

## **0.2 Organization of the Dissertation**

The dissertation consists of seven chapters. Chapter One gives a preliminary introduction to the background and motivation of the research. It states clearly the aims of the study and the basic ideas behind the research. Chapter Two is a review of the theoretical basis of communicative language testing. Hymes, Canale and Swain's language competence theories are described briefly, and then Bachman's framework of communicative language ability and test method facets are introduced. It also discusses the essential characteristics of communicative language testing. This chapter also discusses the

theories and principles of communicative oral testing. It explores such matters as the nature of oral communication, the features of spoken language, and the types of oral test. Finally, this chapter also deals with the historical trends of testing oral language proficiency, the difficulties of testing speaking and the present situation of oral testing. Chapter Three is focused on the information theory in linguistics, such as encoding and decoding of information, "Notion of Doubt" in real communication, "Density of Packing Information", information structure, given information and new information. Information gap and the different forms of information gap used as an oral testing technique are introduced in this chapter. This chapter also explores the relationship between information gap and cloze. Chapter Four is a review of the literature of cloze test. Firstly a definition of cloze test is given and then the psycholinguistic basis of cloze test is explored. Secondly a classification of cloze test is made. Finally this chapter reviews the present study of cloze both at home and abroad. Chapter Five reports an experimental study of cloze used a technique in testing oral proficiency. Chapter Six is an analysis of the data collected from the research. Statistics of the test results are analyzed here in this chapter. For the purpose of research a questionnaire for students as well as for teachers was administered and the results are analyzed in detail in this chapter. Chapter Seven is of great importance to the whole research. It is a validation study of cloze test as an oral testing technique. Based on the framework of the "usefulness theory" of evaluating a language test proposed by Bachman and Palmer (1996), this chapter validates oral cloze test from six perspectives, namely, reliability, construct validity, authenticity, interactiveness, impact and practicality. At the end of the dissertation is a brief conclusion.

# Chapter One

## Theoretical Basis of Communicative Language Testing

As Weir points out, “Tests must be theory driven” (Weir, 1993: 169). Either the discrete point testing approach or the integrative approach is guided by a certain theory. Then, what is the theory on which communicative language testing is built?

In a sense, the hottest topics discussed in 1970s and 1980s can be concluded as two words “how” and “what”. That means, the “how of testing” was prevailing in the 1970s while the “what of testing” was prevalent in the 1980s (Davies, 1990; Skehan, 1998). Then, what about the 1990s and later on? The focus will chiefly remain with “what”. “We need a framework for research into language proficiency which will be accessible and relevant to the needs of teachers, testers and researchers” (Weir, 1993: 169). Therefore, communicative language testing (CLT) calls for its own theoretical framework.

### 1.1 Hymes: Communicative Competence

Generally, the aim of language testing is nothing but measuring the testee’s language ability. And accordingly, the CLT is carried out for the purpose of evaluating the test taker’s communicative competence. Unfortunately, what “ability”, “competence” and “performance” refer to, is in such confusion that many linguists may give different definitions. It seems that “ability” is a general word, meaning “power and skill, especially to do, think, act, make, etc.” (Longman: *English-Chinese Dictionary of Contemporary English*, 1982: 2).



Sometimes, it is similar to “skill” or “capacity”. As far as “competence” is concerned, perhaps Chomsky was the trail-breaker to use it in the linguistic field. He defines “linguistic competence” as the underlying knowledge of an idealized native speaker of a language, while “linguistic performance” refers to the infinitely varied individual acts of verbal behaviour with their regularities, inconsistencies, and errors (Chomsky, 1965). As for Chomsky, the task of linguistics is to study competence rather than performance. Chomsky is criticized for his theory emphasizes only the “pure” linguistic competence and overlooks linguistic performance in contexts. But his initiatory “competence” leaves the way open for Dell Hymes, who coins the rival notion “communicative competence”, which is comprised of knowledge (and ability) of four types:

- (1) Whether (and to what degree) something is formally possible;
- (2) Whether (and to what degree) something is feasible in virtue of the means of implementation available;
- (3) Whether (and to what degree) something is appropriate (adequate, happy, successful) in relation to a context in which it is used and evaluated;
- (4) Whether (and to what degree) something is in fact done, actually performed, and what its doing entails (Hymes, 1972: 281).

Hymes obviously broadens Chomsky’s “linguistic competence”. In his view, “communicative competence” is the interaction of grammatical (what is formally possible), psycholinguistic (what is the social meaning or value of a given utterance), and probabilistic (what actually occurs) systems of competence. Therefore, Hymes’s contributions have offered a theoretical foundation for the growing interest in the teaching of language for communication. Meanwhile, Halliday and Henry Widdowson complement Hymes’s view of “communicative competence” respectively, the former stresses the functions of language use (Halliday, 1973); the latter presents a view of the relationship between