

CHAPTER 7: HISTORY OF LANGUAGE TESTING

1. GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION

- faculty psychology and traditional grammar
- subjective tests → no item analysis, reliability, and validity → **intuitive era**
- Facts about English often weighed as heavily as skill in using the language.
- common techniques → translation, essay, dictation, précis, and open-ended answers based on reading comprehension
- the **pre-scientific** stage

2. DISCRETE-POINT APPROACH

- Behavioral psychology and structural linguistics → the **scientific** stage
- Structural linguists → language elements could be separated (hence the name discrete-point tests) → **Skills/components model**
- Assumption → a collection of discrete points if taken together as a single score, will produce a measure of some global aspect of language ability
- The key concern of educational measurement experts (or psychometricians) → provide objective measures using various statistical techniques to assure reliability and certain kinds of validity
- Criticisms:
 - decontextualized items
 - linguistically, GT theory questioned the validity of the structuralists → the assumption that language can be divided into isolated bits
 - psychologically, Gestalt psychology believed total language ability is different from the sum of the discrete abilities
- Advantages:
 - desirable psychometric characteristics
 - extremely practical
 - diagnostic value

3. INTEGRATIVE APPROACH

- Cognitive psychology and generative grammar
- Language is a dynamic system whose various sub-skills are assessed all at the same time → **integrative/global test**
- Oller (1979) believed in a g-factor (or general language proficiency) or the idea that second language proficiency is a unified set of interacting abilities that cannot be tested separately → **unitary trait hypothesis**: an **indivisible** view of language proficiency
- A concern for *meaning* and the *total communicative effect* of discourse as in cloze test
- **Grammar of expectancy** → knowledge of language which includes knowing whether a word or utterance is likely to occur in a particular context or situation → the measuring instrument has

been called **Pragmatic tests** which invoke linguistic sequences that relate to extralinguistic context in meaningful ways

Oller claimed that the idea of making guesses in context-reduced situations provides evidence for a general language factor or the idea that second language proficiency consists of a single global trait (i.e., Unitary Trait Hypothesis).

- Limitations:
 - time required to administer and score such tests
 - reliability of cloze and dictation tests was in question
 - did not tap the ability to really use the language

4. FUNCTIONAL-COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH

- Linguists → concerned with the analysis of human discourse and communicative interaction.
- Psychologists → language as a task the subjects learn to communicate, out of which syntactic structures are developed.
- The testee is expected to *perform certain functions* in order to communicate → communicative competence is defined as the knowledge about the form of language and about how to use it properly in context → role-play
- **Needs analysis** → the relevant functions and the domain and conditions under which the functions have to be performed are identified → English for specific purposes (ESP)
- Measure different language skills in communicative tests based on a view of language referred to as the **Divisibility hypothesis** → obtain different profiles of a learner's performance in the language, i.e. profile-reporting.
- **Authentic materials**
- Concept of qualitative modes of assessment in preference to quantitative ones → **language band system** is used to show the learner's levels of performance in the different skills → detailed statements of each performance level serve to increase the reliability of the scoring.

Functional Testing

1. DEVELOPING TEST STEM

1.1. Pretesting with Native Speakers

Elicit socially appropriate and linguistically accurate responses for items

1.2. Pretesting with Non-native Speakers

Elicit the possible inappropriate answers for items

Responses given by native and non-native speakers are categorized into four classes:

- *Functional responses* → socially appropriate and linguistically accurate responses
- *Linguistic responses* → socially inappropriate and linguistically accurate responses
- *Social responses* → social appropriateness and linguistically deviant responses
- *Distractors* → both socially and linguistically deviant from the native speakers' norm

1.3. Pretesting with Native and Non-native Speakers

Main purposes: (a) to assure that NSs would select functional responses and (b) to make sure that NNSs should understand the directions and the purpose of the test

2. SCORING SYSTEM

A weighted scoring system is usually used in functional tests:

- functional responses receive two points;
- either linguistic responses or social responses receive one point;
- distractors receive no points.

●* **Note:** The Functional test incorporates contextualization, the most praised characteristic of integrative test, and item independency, the obvious advantage of discrete-point tests.

Ali Derakhshesh