A MODEL FOR THE COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT OF COMMUNICATION SKILLS
Lyn Murray

There is presently a need in vocational education and training for a model for the competency-based assessment of communication skills. The model proposed in this article provides an accessible and parsimonious means of such assessment. The model incorporates a holistic and authentic approach to the assessment of competence, and a process approach to the assessment of communication skills. At the core of this model is the concept of the dynamic communication environment, which includes the context, the content and the interactants. The performance of students is assessed as they interact with this communication environment.

Competency-based assessment

Competency-based assessment is obviously a contentious issue, and in generic terms it has been widely debated (see, for example, Mitchell 1989; Thomson & Pearce 1990; Whitely 1991; Thomson 1991; McCurry 1992; Hawke & Oliver 1992; Watson 1993; Hager, Athanasou & Gonczi 1994; Hall 1994). Much of the debate has concerned the problems involved in its implementation, because the translation of concepts into activities is required, and this is not always a simple process. Particularly in relation to the competency-based assessment of communication skills, difficulties have been encountered in developing mechanisms which effectively transform theory into applied theory and then into practice.

It is generally agreed amongst writers on competency-based assessment that the most complete representation of competence is likely to be developed from a wide range of assessment events. No individual assessment event would suffice to assure minimal competency (Houston 1974) and, as Wolf (1989) suggests, breadth of application can only be inferred from breadth of evidence.

However, in the real world of vocational education and training there are limitations on the amount of time, funding and resources which it is practicable to expend in the pursuit of one particular activity such as assessment, and at present administrators and teachers are required to be more effective in their practices while at the same time they are being provided with fewer resources (McDonald 1995).
Apart from the problem of limited resources, it is also fairly easy to predict that a continuous and comprehensive program of assessment would provoke considerable resistance from students. Guba and Lincoln (1981) suggest that any form of assessment at all is dysfunctional to optimal performance, because of the intrusive, artificial and anxiety-producing nature of the process, and any increase in the number of assessment events is likely to produce a parallel increase in the degree of aversion which students feel towards them.

Furthermore, a wide range of assessment tasks imposes an additional workload for teachers/trainers in terms of developing and evaluating assessment tasks as well as in terms of the documentation and record keeping which they would generate. Teachers may feel oppressed by what appears to be the imposition of an additional workload, and without a positive and committed attitude on the part of the teaching staff competency-based assessment is very difficult to implement (Scott 1988; Watson 1990).

This article suggests that an accommodation is possible between the comprehensiveness of the information gathering process which is used to determine competence, and the practical demands of implementing such a process. This article also suggests that some problems inherent in the assessment process may be minimised if assessment tasks are designed to be naturalistic and fluent rather than mechanistic and reductionist.

The assessment of communicative competence

The assessment of communicative competence, as a subset of the assessment of competence in general, provides its own particular difficulties because communication involves the construction, coordination and social negotiation of meaning (Fisher 1978; Delia, O’Keefe & O’Keefe 1982; Kaye 1994a) in essentially intangible ways. The most significant factor in determining communicative competence is not the particular outcome which is achieved, but rather the range of appropriate strategies which students are able to apply in a variety of communicative interactions (Kaye 1994b; Murray 1994a; 1994b).

Therefore the model which is proposed in this article is based on a process perspective of communication, which conceptualises
communication as dynamic, interactive and evolving. It allows for the development of authentic assessment contexts (Billett 1993) which are relevant to the real life experiences of the students and which can in fact be devised in consultation with the students.

When this model is applied, students are not required to demonstrate communicative competence by the performance of individual communication skills, which never actually operate individually in authentic workplace situations. Rather, they are required to demonstrate communicative competence by the competent management of complex communicative interactions, which is exactly what they will be required to do in the workplace.

It is obvious that the type of assessment which is used should be congruent with the desired outcome and purpose of the assessment (Terenzini 1989; Ewell 1991; Erwin 1991), because as Glaser and Silver (1994, p. 394) argue, the ‘... interaction between testing or assessment and the surrounding setting or system is of fundamental significance’. Consequently, it is clear that the unique features of communicative competence need to be reflected in the development of the methods by which it is to be assessed.

This model provides an accessible and parsimonious method of applying these considerations to competency-based assessment design and implementation in vocational education and training. It provides a method of assessment which is simple and flexible, so that a number of naturalistic performances in context can be observed and assessed without increasing the assessment workload on teachers and without increasing the degree of stress experienced by students under assessment conditions. The philosophical foundations of the model emphasise the dynamic, interactive and evolving nature of communication, and the structure of the model reflects these foundations.

The model

The model is based on the premise that people do not interact without regard to context, but rather within a communication environment. This communication environment can be broadly classified into three elements which impinge most directly and most definitively on the communicator. These three elements are:
1) The interactants
2) The contents
3) The context

The organising principle of this model requires the assessor to construct assessment tasks which allow for observation of the students' ability to adapt to changes in the communication environment. Therefore, assessment events are to be designed and expressed in a way which allows the assessor to manipulate individual elements in the students' communication environments, and to observe the performance of the students as they respond to the requirements of the particular circumstance. In essence, the students will be assessed in interaction with their own changing communication environment.

Students may also be able to demonstrate mindfulness as they adapt their communication strategies to the changing requirements of the interactants, contents and context. Indeed, as a direction for future research the construct of mindfulness in communications skills training shows great potential. Although Irwin (1988, p.22) argued for the value of further research on mindfulness in communication, this is a task which has not been pursued with great rigour or enthusiasm, perhaps because of conceptual difficulties inherent in the construct itself. This model may be seen as a preliminary attempt to emphasise the critical nature of mindfulness, and the opportunities which the model would provide for students to present themselves as mindful communicators are apparent.

The interactants

A change to the interactants will allow students to demonstrate that, for communicative purposes in a particular context, they can perceive and respond to the perspectives of others. For example, students would need to demonstrate by performance that they could respond to the position of the other interactant by being aware of whether or not the other interactant was likely to be well-disposed, well informed about the subject matter, responding logically or emotionally, and so on.

As details relating to the interactants were manipulated by the assessor, students would be required to demonstrate by performance...
their ability to employ skills such as perspective taking, listener adaptiveness and strategic message modification, which all contribute to effective communication and enhance shared meaning.

Assessment according to this model would require that the students demonstrate by their choice of communication strategies an awareness of the relational, interactional and contextual nature of the situations in which they are interacting. It would also require an ability to recognise and deal spontaneously with communication issues or problems which might arise because of the indeterminate and uncontrollable nature of the other interactant(s). That is, students would be given the opportunity to demonstrate that they have considered the effects of individual differences and individual points of view on communicative interaction, and that they have attempted to take these into account in their communication strategies.

The contents

According to this element of the communication environment, situations are devised which require students to employ a number of different communication skills in order to resolve them satisfactorily. For example, different skills will need to be integrated in the conduct of meetings depending on whether the purpose of the meeting is to generate decisions, to plan the implementation of decisions which had already been taken, to reconcile conflicting points of view, or to summarise the results of previous activities.

The need for integration of communication skills is also increased because the contents of any communicative action may be associated with multiple intentions and goals. A simple example of multiple intentions can be found in the everyday practice of attempting to persuade friends or relatives to do a favour which may require some sacrifice on their part, while still maintaining a positive relationship with them and leaving the opportunity open for further favours to be granted in the future even if this one is refused. The intention is to persuade, but some types of strategies such as intimidation or emotional blackmail may immediately be ruled out because of the equally strong intention to retain goodwill, and to maintain goodwill for the future. Communicators can simultaneously pursue various interactional goals during the course of a communicative interaction,
and the pursuit of multiple goals will require the use of multiple integrated communication strategies and skills.

This model provides the assessor with a means of actively manipulating the communication environment to vary the intentions and goals of a particular interaction. This will require the students to integrate various different communication skills according to the changing nature of the communication goals. Assessment tasks based on this model would allow students to demonstrate the ability to integrate various communication skills in the pursuit of particular intentions and goals, and to adapt their message choices accordingly. The emphasis would be on a demonstration of the students’ command of a range of communication skills which they could select and organise in response to their evaluation of the particular communicative interaction in which they were required to participate.

The context

Changes to the context will require students to apply various dimensions of skills across a number of different circumstances, and this will allow their competence as inferred from performance to be assessed. For example, different dimensions of the skills involved in conducting interviews will be required depending on whether the interview is being conducted for selection or promotion, for performance appraisal purposes, in the workplace, in the home, on the street, over the telephone, and so on. The students must be able to adapt the skills to suit the context, and their ability to do this can be assessed by presenting them with a variety of contexts in which they must interact. As the details of the context are manipulated by the assessor, the skills acquire various dimensions according to contextual factors, and students have the opportunity to demonstrate their possession of a repertoire of differentiated strategic behaviours by adapting the skills under consideration to meet the particular demands of the context in which they are required to operate.

The ability to use skills appropriately and the ability to adapt and transfer according to the demands of the context must be an integral part of competence in that skill. Assessment according to this model would provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate by their performance that they can consider the sorts of behaviours involved in communicating competently, make appropriate choices among...
possible strategies, and then implement those choices. It requires students to adapt to the changing context, and to demonstrate the ability to plan and control the use of communication skills.

When this assessment model is applied, assessment tasks can be developed which will require students to provide performance evidence that they can strategically organise behaviour, and demonstrate adaptability and behavioural flexibility in response to a range of environmental variables. The students would be evaluated on the basis of their ability to recognise and adapt to the changes in the communication environment, and competence could be inferred from the evidence provided by their performance in authentic interactive communication situations.

In the following examples it will be demonstrated that by actively manipulating communication environment factors the assessor possesses a very powerful tool for the assessment of communicative competence. The examples employ the competency-based training and assessment modules which were developed by the National TAFE Communication Skills Project Team for the teaching and assessing of communication skills in vocational education and training (National Communication Skills Project 1992). These modules include the performance criteria which will be applied during the assessment process.

It should be noted that according to the model students are requested to engage in simulation, rather than role play. They are not assigned false names, or particular roles to enact to bring about a previously specified result, but rather are encouraged to respond in a fashion which they feel would be authentic for them under the particular circumstances. The objective is to elicit student performances which are as natural and fluent as possible whilst still addressing the pedagogical issues which must necessarily be addressed during assessment procedures.

It should also be noted that this model has implications for the training of vocational educators in communication skills. It cannot be assumed that assessors will immediately have the capacity to apply the model without some assistance. Some of the principles involved in this model will require many teachers to engage in a re-conceptualisation of both communication and assessment to make their thinking more current with the latest scholarship in the field.
Although it is beyond the scope of this article to consider teacher training issues, the model clearly has the ability to be applied, with minimal modification, as a training model as well as an assessment model.

Example one

This example shows how the model could be used in the assessment of accountancy students in a ‘Writing Skills for Work’ module. The student, as accountant, is given a letter from a new client suggesting that he or she should have received a larger income tax cheque. The student is asked to write a reply to the client, and also to write a letter to the Taxation Department inquiring why certain deductions mentioned by the client were not allowed. The student is then given a letter from the Taxation Department stating that some deductions were not allowed because in previous years they had been found to be fraudulent. The student, as accountant, again replies to both the client and the Taxation Department.

The assessor has manipulated a change in the contents (by requiring a change in the contents of the two sets of letters), a change in the context (by making it necessary for the student to write to both a client and a government department), and a changed view of the interactants (by introducing new information about the client after the student had already had an opportunity to form an opinion). The assessor has manipulated changes to each of the elements of the communication environment and can now, by using performance criteria appropriate to the circumstances, assess the ability of the students to adapt to those changes.

Example two

This example shows how the model could be used in the assessment of Nursing students in a ‘Presenting Information’ module. The students are asked to prepare two presentations related to nursing issues. The first should be directed to their colleagues, while the second should be directed to non-medical people (in effect, the assessor). The students are instructed that they should attempt to encourage participation in the form of questions from their audience.

The assessor may now observe the first presentation and interact in the second. In this task, the assessor has created circumstances in
which there is a change to the context, because the student has to present the material in two different forms, and may, for example, rely more heavily on anatomical and physiological terminology in a presentation to peers, and be more discursive and explanatory in a presentation to the assessor. In addition, the assessor has provided for a change in the content, because the student is required to proceed from presentation to interaction with the audience. The assessor has also provided for a change to the audience or interactants, because the kinds of questions the peer group and the assessor ask the student will be quite different, and will need to be responded to in different ways, according to the student's perception of the level of knowledge and understanding present in each case.

The assessor has the opportunity to assess the student's skills in adapting to the changes in the three components of the communication environment, which the student will need to do both in the presentation and in the audience participation sections of the task. This model is therefore a very powerful assessment tool because it allows the assessor to observe the student's ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Example three

In this example the assessment of engineering students in the 'Dealing with conflict' module will be considered. The student is asked, in consultation with the assessor, to identify a potential source of conflict with a superior in a work situation. Hypothetically, the student may identify conflict over decreases in productivity in the area for which the student is responsible. The student is then asked to engage in a simulation with the assessor as the superior.

In the simulation, the assessor as superior begins an interview by stating, for example, that there is cause for concern about decreases in productivity. The student responds, and the interview then proceeds according to its 'natural' course. The assessor then alters the way that he or she interacts with the student (by changing, for example, from sympathetic to threatening), and in this way creates a change to the interactants. Again the interview follows its 'natural' course. During this interview the assessor can also abruptly change the contents, for example by changing the complaint about productivity to a discussion of untidiness in the work space. At this point in the simulation the assessor/employer expresses concern about the conflict which is
developing between them and asks the student/employee for his or her advice on what to do. This changes the context because the interview is then effectively directed by the person with the lesser status.

This example provides a simple illustration of how the assessor can actively manipulate the communication environment to create communication situations in which the student can interact in an authentic way. The assessor has introduced changes to the context, the contents, and the interactants, and can now assess how the students adapt to those changes. The precise way that the assessor elects to do this will depend on the specific performance criteria that are set out in the National Communication Skills Modules to be assessed, but a number of informal trials with both teachers and students have indicated that this method works fluently and effectively.

In this task, by making what are essentially quite straightforward and plausible changes to the interactants, the contents, and the context, the assessor can establish authentic circumstances under which the students' competence can be inferred from performance. In addition, the model allows the assessor to observe the students' ability to integrate strategies and adapt to changes in the communication environment. This ability to observe adaptation to changes in the communication environment is one of the significant features of this model.

Conclusion

The examples provided above demonstrate that students can be assessed in an interactive, dynamic fashion that is unique to this assessment model. Students can be assessed while in the process of selecting from a repertoire of communication strategies, based on an evaluation of the context and the other interactants. They can also be assessed while adapting their communication strategies to suit changing requirements. This means that the students' ability to communicate competently in a worklike situation is being assessed in a relevant and contextually authentic manner.

It will also be clear from these examples that assessment tasks based on the model described above can be simple to devise and simple to implement. They can also be very cost effective in terms of time and
resources because authentic, interactive assessment tasks will be able to evaluate a large number of skills simultaneously, and within the parameters of a single assessment task.

The design of assessment tasks which are actually competency-based is neither difficult nor time consuming, if this model is used to direct assessment task design. The model promotes the design of assessment tasks which are accessible, adaptable and broadly applicable, and so makes it easier and more cost effective in terms of both time and resources for teachers to implement the competency-based assessment of communication skills.

References


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