Bridging the gap: using communicative language testing to assess real-world language skills

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Keywords: *communicative language testing, assessment, language competence, Communicative competence*	*Communicative Language Testing has to be applicable for four language skills: listening, reading, speaking and writing. Language assessment has an important role in monitoring the progress of language learning. Assessment of productive skills that occurs in the classroom is to be considered specific language skills in real world contact. Language assessment is not only to measure its performance and the language skills of the students and to monitor the progress of the students, but also to identify the difficulties of the students in learning the target language. This observation is focusing on the assessment of students' communicative competence, since hospitality students learn English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The objective of hospitality students learns English is to be able to apply their knowledge to meaningful communicative situations based on the students demand and their real world required.*
Article History:	

1. Introduction

Communicative competence serves as the cornerstone for testing both oral and written language proficiency. It emphasizes learners' ability to interact meaningfully, understand, and use language effectively in various real-life social and academic contexts (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). This concept encompasses not only linguistic knowledge but also the pragmatic and sociolinguistic abilities required to use language appropriately in different communicative situations. In modern language education, especially for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, the focus has shifted from traditional grammar-based assessments to those that better reflect the complexity of real-world communication (Hyland, 2020).

According to Di Niccolò (1991), communicative competence can be assessed using two main testing approaches: indirect, discrete-point proficiency testing, and direct, integrative proficiency testing. Indirect testing, often associated with traditional assessments, focuses on isolated language components such as grammar and vocabulary. While this approach can provide insights into a learner's linguistic accuracy, it does not fully capture their ability to communicate effectively in meaningful contexts. On the other hand, direct proficiency tests, also known as integrative tests, assess the learner's ability to perform language skills in

combination, offering a more comprehensive evaluation of communicative competence (Hughes, 2017).

Recent advancements in language testing have emphasized the importance of integrating both receptive and productive skills in assessment tasks. Researchers such as Bachman and Palmer (2010) highlight that integrated proficiency tests allow for a more authentic assessment of how learners can use language in real-world contexts, as they engage multiple components of language performance simultaneously. Despite this progress, however, gaps still exist in the way communicative competence is measured, particularly in specific fields such as hospitality education. While studies have extensively explored language testing in general educational settings, there is limited research on the communicative competence of students in specialized programs like Food and Beverage Management (Baker & Wright, 2017; Uysal, 2020).

This study seeks to address this gap by assessing the English communicative competence of fifth-semester hospitality students in the Food and Beverage Management program at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang. These students are enrolled in English courses every semester from their first to sixth semester, with a focus on the development of language skills applicable to the hospitality industry. Each semester, students attend English classes twice a week for 100 minutes, except in the fourth semester when they engage in a job training program. The fourth-semester training provides practical experience in the industry, integrating both English language use and vocational skills. Upon reaching the fifth semester, these students undergo formal assessments of their communicative competence, based on standardized criteria for evaluating their proficiency in English as it pertains to their academic and professional contexts.

While the current literature provides ample insights into communicative competence assessments in general education, it remains unclear how well these frameworks apply to the specific needs of students in vocational programs, particularly in specialized fields like hospitality management. Therefore, this research aims to investigate how well existing communicative competence assessment frameworks are suited to evaluate the English proficiency of hospitality students and to explore whether adjustments to these frameworks are necessary to better reflect the unique demands of the industry.

Despite extensive research on communicative competence and language testing (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980), there is a notable gap in studies specifically focusing on the communicative competence of vocational students, particularly in fields like hospitality management. Previous research has primarily concentrated on general language learners or academic English proficiency (Hyland, 2020), with little attention given to the language needs of students in specialized professional programs. Furthermore, although direct and integrative proficiency tests are widely used in EFL contexts, there is limited research examining the effectiveness of these tests in evaluating the specific language skills required for effective communication in the hospitality industry (Uysal, 2020). This study seeks to fill these gaps by assessing how current communicative competence assessment methods align with the needs of hospitality students and their future professional roles.

2. Literature review

The concept of communicative competence, initially proposed by Canale and Swain (1980), forms the theoretical foundation for this study. They introduced communicative competence

as encompassing more than just the grammatical rules of a language; it also involves the ability to use language appropriately in a variety of social and cultural contexts. Canale and Swain (1980) proposed four key components of communicative competence: grammatical competence (knowledge of syntax, morphology, and phonology), sociolinguistic competence (knowledge of appropriate language use in social contexts), discourse competence (ability to produce coherent and cohesive texts), and strategic competence (ability to manage communication when faced with difficulties). These elements are essential for assessing students' ability to communicate effectively and meaningfully in both spoken and written forms.

In the years since Canale and Swain's original work, the framework of communicative competence has evolved. Researchers have continued to refine the understanding of this concept, emphasizing the dynamic and context-dependent nature of communication. Bachman (1990) expanded on this by incorporating the notion of strategic competence into the overall framework, arguing that successful communication requires not only linguistic proficiency but also the ability to navigate complex social interactions. In more recent work, the notion of digital literacy and multimodal communication has also been incorporated, reflecting the ways in which technology has influenced the communicative practices of learners (Kern, 2018).

Over the past few decades, the assessment of communicative competence has shifted away from traditional, discrete-point grammar tests toward more integrated, task-based assessments that aim to evaluate students' ability to perform language skills in combination (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). Integrative assessments, also known as direct proficiency tests, typically involve tasks that require learners to use both receptive and productive skills simultaneously, such as role plays, presentations, and written tasks based on authentic materials (Hughes, 2017). These tasks are designed to simulate real-world communication situations and provide a more comprehensive measure of a learner's proficiency.

Recent studies have highlighted the effectiveness of task-based language testing (TBLT) in assessing communicative competence. For instance, Liao (2021) found that TBLT, which emphasizes the use of tasks that mirror real-life communication, leads to more accurate reflections of students' language abilities compared to traditional grammar-based testing methods. Similarly, Jeon and Yamashita (2020) demonstrated that task-based assessments not only improved learners' speaking skills but also fostered greater engagement and motivation. These findings suggest that task-based assessments, which integrate various language skills, provide a more holistic view of students' communicative competence.

However, despite these advances, gaps remain in the effective application of communicative competence assessment in specialized fields. While much of the research has focused on general language learners, there is limited research on how communicative competence frameworks can be adapted for specific disciplines, such as hospitality management (Uysal, 2020). Hospitality students, for example, must develop language proficiency not only in general English but also in domain-specific contexts, such as customer service interactions, professional vocabulary, and industry-related scenarios (Baker & Wright, 2017). This gap in the literature underscores the need for research that addresses how communicative competence can be assessed in specialized vocational programs.

Communicative Competence in Vocational and Hospitality Education In the context of vocational education, particularly in hospitality management, the ability to use language

effectively is critical for professional success. Hospitality students need to acquire language skills that are specific to the demands of their field, including the ability to handle customer inquiries, understand industry-specific terminology, and communicate clearly under pressure. However, traditional language tests often fail to capture the unique communication skills required in such contexts (Uysal, 2020).

Recent studies on vocational language education have highlighted the importance of integrating authentic materials and workplace scenarios into language assessments. For example, Lee and Chan (2021) argued that language testing in vocational programs should focus on real-world tasks that students are likely to encounter in the workplace. Similarly, a study by Zhang (2019) found that vocational students who were assessed through role-play scenarios involving industry-specific situations performed significantly better in real-life communication than those who took traditional language tests. These findings suggest that vocational students benefit from assessments that are designed to mirror the tasks and interactions they will face in their future careers.

While these studies contribute valuable insights into vocational language assessment, they still lack a focus on hospitality education, particularly regarding how communicative competence frameworks can be tailored to meet the specific needs of hospitality students. The research conducted by Uysal (2020) and others calls for further investigation into how communicative competence can be effectively assessed in vocational fields such as hospitality management.

Although there has been significant progress in the assessment of communicative competence, there remains a gap in understanding how these frameworks can be adapted to assess the language needs of students in specialized fields like hospitality management. While studies on task-based language assessment (TBLT) and communicative competence in general education are well-established, there is limited research on how these approaches can be tailored to meet the requirements of vocational programs. Additionally, few studies have explored the specific communicative needs of hospitality students, particularly in relation to their ability to use English in industry-specific contexts (Baker & Wright, 2017; Uysal, 2020).

This research seeks to address these gaps by examining the communicative competence of fifth-semester hospitality students in the Food and Beverage Management program at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang. By investigating how existing communicative competence assessment frameworks apply to the specific needs of hospitality students, this study aims to contribute to the development of more relevant and effective assessment tools for vocational language education.

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology for assessing the communicative competence of fifth-semester hospitality students enrolled in the Food and Beverage Management program at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang. The methodology includes details about the participants, research instruments, data collection procedures, and the research location. The approach is designed to provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' English communicative competence using both quantitative and qualitative data.

The participants of this study will consist of 40 fifth-semester students (20 males and 20 females) enrolled in the Food and Beverage Management program at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu

Bahasa Asing Semarang. The students are aged between 19 and 22 years old and have received regular English instruction since the first semester of their studies. The sample will be selected using a convenience sampling method, as these students are already enrolled in the program and are available for participation during the data collection period. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and they will be assured that their participation is voluntary and that their responses will remain anonymous.

The students' proficiency in English will be assessed based on their performance in prior English courses, which focus on general English skills and English for specific purposes (ESP) related to the hospitality industry. These students have already received instruction in English for communication in the hospitality field, including customer service terminology and industry-specific language, thus making them an appropriate group for this study.

The research will take place at the Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang, specifically within the Department of Food and Beverage Management. The campus is located in Semarang, Central Java, Indonesia, and serves as a higher education institution focusing on tourism, hospitality, and culinary arts. The students' classes are typically held in classrooms equipped with audio-visual aids to support interactive learning.

Data will be collected in a controlled classroom environment to minimize external distractions. The study will take place during the fifth semester of the students' academic year, which is when formal assessment of their English communicative competence occurs. The main instruments for this study will include a diagnostic communicative competence test and semi-structured interviews. The diagnostic test is designed to assess both receptive (listening and reading) and productive (speaking and writing) skills related to the students' ability to use English in real-world, hospitality-related scenarios. The interview component will provide additional qualitative data on students' perceptions of their English language proficiency and their ability to apply communicative skills in the hospitality field.

Diagnostic Communicative Competence Test
The diagnostic test will consist of four main sections:

Grammar and Vocabulary Section: This section will assess the students' knowledge of grammar structures (specifically verb tenses, prepositions, and articles) and vocabulary relevant to the hospitality industry. It will include multiple-choice questions and gap-fill exercises. Listening Comprehension Section: Students will listen to audio clips featuring authentic hospitality scenarios (e.g., customer inquiries, staff interactions) and answer related questions to assess their understanding of spoken English in a real-world context. Speaking Task: Students will engage in a role-play scenario where they simulate a customer service interaction in the hospitality industry. They will be assessed on their fluency, accuracy, appropriateness of language use, and ability to maintain conversation in an authentic setting. Writing Task: Students will be asked to write a short email or a customer service report based on a provided scenario, focusing on their ability to communicate effectively and professionally in writing.

Semi-structured Interviews A subset of 10 students (5 males and 5 females) will be selected for semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data about their experiences and challenges in using English in real-world hospitality situations. The interviews will focus on their perceptions of their English language proficiency. The challenges they face when communicating in English within the hospitality industry. Their opinions on how well their English courses have prepared them for practical communication in the field. The interviews

will last approximately 20–30 minutes and will be conducted in English. The responses will be transcribed and analysed to identify themes related to students' communicative competence.

Data Collection Procedures

The diagnostic test will be administered in a classroom setting during regular class time. Each student will be given 90 minutes to complete the test, which will be conducted in a single session. The test will be designed to be completed individually, and students will be informed beforehand about the objectives and format of the test. Teachers will be present during the test administration to provide any clarifications if needed, but they will not assist with answering any questions during the test itself.

After the diagnostic test, the semi-structured interviews will be scheduled with a randomly selected group of 10 students. The interviews will be conducted face-to-face, recorded, and transcribed for analysis.

The interview questions will be open-ended to allow for flexibility in responses and to gain deeper insights into students' experiences and challenges.

Data Analysis

The data collected will be analysed using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The diagnostic test responses will be scored based on predefined rubrics, with separate scores assigned to each section (grammar/vocabulary, listening, speaking, and writing). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) will be used to summarize the students' overall performance on the test. The data will also be analysed to identify common errors or patterns in performance across different sections of the test. Correlations between different test sections (e.g., speaking and listening) will be examined to identify possible relationships between different aspects of communicative competence. The interview transcripts will be analysed using thematic analysis. Common themes related to students' perceptions of their communicative competence, their challenges in using English in hospitality contexts, and the effectiveness of their language instruction will be identified. The qualitative data will provide context and deeper insights into the quantitative findings, allowing the researcher to understand the factors influencing students' communicative competence beyond test scores.

3. Findings

In teaching and learning process, there is a way of assessing how good learners understand the lesson, how appropriate their performance in implementing the knowledge. Therefore, testing cannot be separated from learning and teaching process to know the learners 'communicative competence progress. Not only theories and approaches in language teaching and learning process develop from time to time, but also assessment keeps changing as well based on the situation demands.

English teachers at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang use communicative approach in teaching and learning process. Therefore, communicative language testing is used in assessing learners' English performance. Communicative language testing is purposed in providing ways of testing learners communicative competence and considered to reach the target of the testing itself. The first stage of the language testing was about grammar-translation, then followed by the structural. The last stage is Communicative

Approach. Canale and Swain (1980:1) state that" A-set of three competences is combined to produce communicative competence. The grammatical competence that includes knowledge of sentence grammar etcetera, the sociolinguistic competence, includes sociocultural rules, and then strategic competence says about verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies are there. The main implication of this model in which there is a theoretical distinction is the learner has to be tested not only on his/her knowledge of language, but also on his/ her ability to put it to use it in a communication situation.

Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang in process of English language teaching and learning process tends to use communicative approach. Therefore, communicative language testing is used which provides a set of communicative language test. Communicative language test needs a high content validity when it is used to assess the students' competence. 'Test of communicative language ability should be as direct as possible (attempt to reflect the real-life situation) and the tasks candidates have to perform should involve realistic discourse processing" (Weir: 1990: 12). The most important aspect in communicative language testing is assessment that is not easy to test students' communicative competence. Morro (1981) states that: 11 Communicative tests should be more assessed qualitatively than quantitatively. As the English teachers at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang have to assess the fifth semester students of Food and Beverage Management, the students need to be trained first their language communicative competence in order to reach our standard competence. While their comprehension in responding or answering the questions provided need to be assessed carefully. As the students still make some grammar mistakes, sometimes they still make common mistakes related to subject• verb agreement. Finally, the students are able to produce their communicative competence appropriately both writing or their comprehension and productive skill or speaking. The forms that we use for assessing students" communicative competence at Sekolah Tinggi Ilmu Bahasa Asing Semarang for fifth semester students.

4. Conclusion

This research is to identify the significance and effectiveness of communicative language testing to find out the students' communicative competence. The standard communicative competence forms are used to assess the learners' communicative competence both learners' comprehension that is related to their knowledge of grammar, paraphrasing, vocabulary and sentence formation or syntax, and productive skill that is related to strategic competence. However, the other competences: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and discourse competence are also included in assessing communicative competence. Due to the students' ability to understand and use their language to communicate appropriately in their real situations, the students' communicative competence is assessed through communicative language testing.

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