

**MILO MILEFF****INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES: SELECTING AND DEVISING TASKS****Introduction**

In the present paper and the discussion that follows, I present aspects of test construction and a careful description of instructional objectives. Constructing tests involves several stages such as describing language objectives, selecting appropriate test task, devising and assembling test tasks, and devising a scoring system for evaluation purposes. Tests can be classified according to their reference, that is, something external that serves to give test scores meaning. Thus, I distinguish between norm referenced and domain referenced testing. The former are in reference to performance and the latter to a general domain of skills and knowledge. In other instances, tests can derive significance through reference to more restricted domains such as those delineated in instructional plans and practices. These are called objective referenced tests. The focus here is on objective referenced tests because of their particular relevance to evaluation in second language classroom. I also present guidelines for devising closed-ended and open-ended test tasks. These guidelines are part of a larger process of devising valid tests that are compatible with the focus, range, and standards of performance specified or included in instructional objectives.

**Instructional objectives**

I distinguish between two sorts of objectives based on their generality. There are general instructional objectives, which include the skills, abilities, or knowledge students are expected to learn from extended instruction, such as an entire course. They are often expressed as the overarching goals of the course. In addition, there are specific instructional objectives that are reflected in day-to-day instruction of units and lessons. These more specific kinds of objectives are variously referred to as syllabus, unit, or lesson objectives and they are associated with course objectives around which actual instruction is usually planned and built. Although there are different kinds of objectives I focus here on language learning objectives. It is crucial that the description of language objectives be accurate and complete and in a form that is useful for making tests. I point out two methods of describing language objectives for the purposes of devising objectives-referenced tests.

***Objectives as tasks***

The most important way of stating language objectives is in terms of test tasks. Consider three examples which by no means exhaust all possible objectives a teacher might expect to find. The first example has a skill focus. Here, students will be able to answer factual questions including in their answers levels of probability. The second example has a structure focus in which students should be able to answer correctly multiple-choice items related to vocabulary, syntactic structure, and morphological structure. The third example entails communicative or notional focus, where students should have the ability to sustain a conversation in English or any L2 for that matter about every day affairs and popular topics. Objectives

described in this way provide not only the form of the tasks, namely, conversation, multiple-choice, etc., but also the standard of performance expected in terms of time framing, percentage or degree of success, etc. The second advantage has to do with the validity of the test, which represents the skills one wants to measure. Yet another advantage to this method is that it allows teachers and students to focus their efforts due to a clear and precise statement of objectives. However, some drawbacks do exist. In utilizing this method there can be a tendency to concentrate on skills that are easy to test while leaving out other skills not so easy to test. In other words, objectives may be selected because of their amenability to testing rather than their value to language learners. Therefore, if objectives are described independently, this problem can be overcome.

### ***Objectives for learning***

Here, I consider the linguistic content focus and content range of the objective in addition to the standard of performance expected of the students.

#### **Content focus**

Instructional objectives can be described in terms of performance skills (such as reading or speaking), communicative language use (including reference to specific notions L2 learners will be able to express), specific structures (such as word order or pronominal reference), or a combination of these. In any case, the linguistic content that is the focus of instruction should be clearly identified in the objective. This is necessary when appropriate tasks for the measurement of these skills are selected for use in tests. In other words the linguistic content described in the language objectives determines the linguistic focus of the test tasks if they are to be a valid indicator of attainment of the objectives.

#### **Content range**

The range of objectives refers not only to the nature of the linguistic or content to be learned but also to the conditions in which learners are expected to demonstrate their skills. The range can be specified in several ways. One is by identifying the issues, topics, or themes that the learners will be able to handle utilizing their new language skills. For instance, if the linguistic focus in the objective is syntax, one aspect of the range might be that learners are expected to be able to parse out sentences with comprehension. This is referred to as thematic range of objective. Another range specified in the objective might be the style or genre of language that learners are expected to cope with such as formal versus informal language. This is referred to as the stylistic range of the objective. A third aspect of range concerns the functional range of the skills to be acquired.

However, instructional objectives often specify one aspect of language content and leave other features unspecified, which may result in such objectives being overly general. That is, if the objective is expressed in terms of linguistic structures then the range must be specified in terms of performance skills and even communication skills. As an example, let us say that the instantiation of syntactic A movement versus A' movement is identified as the instructional objective for a lesson. This represents a structural skill. The objective must be expanded to identify implications of the instantiation in oral or written language and/or comprehension. Moreover, are the students expected to formulate hypotheses or conjecture about

other syntactic rules? These aspects of the objective need to be specified in order to narrow down the initial structural objective.

To summarize, in order for language objectives to be useful in test development, it is important to specify the range of language learning that is expected be it thematic, stylistic, and/or functional.

### **Standards of performance**

Standards basically tell us how to determine whether the objective has been attained. They specify both the quality and the level of performance that students are expected to acquire if L2 learning is to be successful. Two of the most common bases for assessing linguistic proficiency are accuracy and effectiveness. Accuracy can be used as the basis for assessing spelling and grammar in written language whereas effectiveness is often used for assessing communication skills. Another frequently assessed quality is appropriateness such as familiarity with the use of formal and informal modes of communication in spoken language. Other qualities used in assessment are authenticity and quantity. They are used mostly when evaluating speaking and writing skills and they reflect, for example, how long a student can speak on a topic or how close a learner is to what a native speaker might say or do. Speed is yet another quality that is sometimes assessed with respect to reading, writing, or speaking. While quality tells the instructor what aspects of linguistic performance to consider when assessing proficiency on a topic, level is a matter of how good a student performance must be with respect to a particular quality so that the teacher may conclude that the objective has been attained. A useful way of defining levels of performance is to provide models or samples of performance that reflect the level of performance one expects of successful L2 learners. Otherwise this way of describing language objectives may prove to be potentially limiting because language skills that cannot be tested easily may be excluded.

### **Selecting and devising tasks**

Once language learning objectives have been identified and defined, the next task is to select those we wish to test. It is preferable to choose a sample of objectives to test before beginning test construction in order to avoid biases that can arise otherwise such as items that are easier to test or topics that stood out in class because they were recently taught. Two commonly used procedures for selecting objectives to test are random sampling and stratified sampling procedures. Random sampling of objectives is recommended only if all objectives are equally important. Otherwise teachers run the risk of not including important objectives and therefore not testing them. Stratified sampling on the other hand requires that all possible objectives be identified and then organized according to some criterion of importance, namely communicative, structural, and/or functional.

Clearly, the most important factor to consider when choosing which type of test task to use is the overall objective. Closed-ended tasks allow assessment of comprehension skills in both reading and listening but not speaking or writing. That is, a learner's ability to perform on a closed-ended task does not necessarily mean that the individual would be able to produce the corresponding language in an open-ended task. Also related to language objectives, closed-ended tasks permit the

examiner to assess specific language skills since they are controlled totally by the examiner. In comparison, open-ended response tasks do not control the students' specific responses and they can often find ways of responding to test items that are different from what was intended by the examiner.

At this point, I wish to point out that it is important to realize that not all authentic language tasks are open-ended. For example, filling out forms are quite formulaic. In addition, not all authentic language use involves oral communication. Reading and writing are also characteristic of authentic language use. Even multiple-choice tests can be an authentic language task for L2 learners in schools where the medium of instruction is L2. Because they are less structured than closed-ended tasks, open-ended tasks are often used to assess the skills of advanced learners. In contrast, low level learners do need the structure imposed by closed-ended test tasks. However, multiple-choice tasks for testing beginning level learners can be demanding if care is not taken to avoid unnecessary complications. Open-ended tasks are suitable for testing speaking and writing skills because they require language production. In fact, they call for a variety of language skills such as spelling, vocabulary, and grammar skills in addition to discourse and sociolinguistic skills.

### **Scoring**

Because the specific responses to be made by test-takers in open-ended tasks are not controlled in any precise way, devising such tasks does not require the same technical precision as closed-ended tasks. Open-ended tests are different from closed-ended tests in that they usually consist of only one item (essay), although this is not always the case. In contrast, tests made up of closed-ended tasks generally include a number of items.

### ***Domain reference***

Test scores can be interpreted with reference to domains of skills or knowledge. Use of domains for test construction purpose requires consensus on what knowledge or skills comprise the discipline of interest. The important point here is that in order to be a frame of reference for test construction and interpretation, a domain must be finite and known. If this is done, it then becomes possible to assess performance on the test with reference to how much of the domain in question has been mastered by individual L2 learners. Thus, whereas norm-referenced tests provide interpretations of test scores relative to other learners, domain-referenced tests provide interpretations of test scores relative to an identified domain of knowledge or skill.

### ***Objectives reference***

Objective referencing is similar to domain referencing in that it provides for the interpretations of test scores with respect to a defined area of knowledge or skills. The main difference is that it does not require consensus on the description of a domain or a field of study. Instead, it depends on the description of the knowledge or skills that make up a particular lesson or course. What is important about objective referencing is that the domain is conceptualized in local instructional terms. This means that, generally speaking, students should be tested in ways that

resemble how they were taught (only if the instructional methods are an appropriate reflection of the instructional objectives).

**Final word**

When selecting appropriate test tasks, one should take into account the instructional activities that have been used in class. Students may not be able to demonstrate the full extent of their proficiency if a test task is selected that they have not seen before because the task demands may not be clear to them. Surely, an indication of language proficiency is the ability to use language in different situations. Judgment is called for when choosing test tasks that are different from but related to the activities used in class. In some cases, special efforts need to be taken to simulate the performance demands of authentic situations in which L2 will ultimately be used because the target situations are different from those in the classroom.

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