



# The Question of Communicative Language Ability in EFL Testing: The Case of Language Testing in Oman

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## Abstract

This study investigates the question of communicative language ability of English tests in Oman. It assesses the presence of the features of communicative competence in English tests and assess the components of language ability included in the final tests taking grade 10 tests as a sample. It is a descriptive, content based analysis research, and the study encompasses data from all grade 10 English final tests since the introduction of Basic Education in 1998. Five tests given in the second semester, from 2011 to 2016, were chosen as the research sample. A framework and a checklist were developed for the analysis process. The framework was based on Bachman and Palmer's model of language ability (2010) and grade 10 test specifications developed by the Ministry of Education. The research findings reveal: (i) A discrepancy between the test specifications of grade 10 English final tests and the actual content of the tests. (ii) That communicative language ability was not fully addressed in the grade 10 English final tests. The majority of the test components used suitable language in a limited context with limited instructions given for some components. There was also a lack of constructed responses.

## 1. Introduction

The main purpose of language assessment is to collect information that helps practitioners to study the language ability of test takers and to make appropriate decisions about them. Language testers have been investigating the nature of language proficiency over the past few decades. Alderson and Banerjee (2002), assert that what is significant in language testing is "an understanding of what language is, and what it takes to learn and use language, which then becomes the basis for establishing ways of assessing people's abilities" (p. 80).

Communicative language testing provides information about students' ability to perform in the target language in context-specific tasks. It focuses on both learners' knowledge of the language, how they use it and to what extent they can apply their knowledge in communicative situations (Bakhsh, 2016; Baseer and Alvi, 2014; Enache, 2005; Gopal, 2014; Harding, 2014; Kitao and Kitao, 1996; Miyata-Boddy and Langham, 2000; Razmjoo, 2011). When testing productive skills, more emphasis is given to appropriateness rather than the formation of correct grammatical sentences. On the other hand, greater emphasis is placed on understanding the intention of the speaker or writer rather than getting specific details right when testing receptive skills (Baseer and Alvi, 2014).

Kitao and Kitao (1996), talk about communicative testing as a continuum of which there is "more of" or "less of". Davies (1988) indicated that communicative tests are "more integrative and less discrete point; more direct and less indirect; more criterion referenced and less norm-referenced" (p.6).

## 2. Principles and Characteristics of Communicative Testing

According to Bailey (1998), there are four principles of communicative tests, including 'to start from somewhere', as testers should know what to test and how learners will perform in a specific situation using specific criteria. 'Content consideration' is the second principle and it refers to the need for content to reflect students' interests, needs, age and language. The third principle is 'bias for the best' which refers to exploiting a learner's best performance. The fourth principle is 'obtaining positive washback' which takes into consideration the assessment criteria, course objectives and test content. Washback is the effect of a test on all teaching and learning processes.

Morrow (1979) suggested seven features that any test should have in order to be communicative, including: (a) interaction-based: the language user should take the receiver's requirements into account when delivering a message; (b) unpredictability: the test should contain unknown input; (c) context: language users should use the appropriate language for the context; (d) purpose: language users should choose the language that serves their objectives; (e) performance: the test should indicate whether learners can perform a set of authentic tasks; (f) authenticity: input should not be simplified for learners; and (g) behaviour-based: the test should measure what learners can achieve through language. Fulcher (2000), reduced this list to three main features: 1) performance, in which learners should

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produce language and have face-to-face interactions involving unpredictable language use, 2) authenticity (having a purpose for communication) and 3) using non-simplified input and language that is behaviour-based and appropriate for the context. [Morrow \(1979\)](#), also proposed that communicative tests should be criterion-referenced and assessed based on construct and predictive validity rather than concurrent validity. In addition, [Miyata-Boddy and Langham \(2000\)](#) suggested that communicative tests should have high face validity, authentic tasks and high content validity. Furthermore, they all agreed that communicative tests should evaluate learners based on qualitative rather than quantitative assessment and give validity more importance than reliability.

Similarly, [Brown \(2005\)](#) highlighted five requirements when designing any communicative test, including meaningful communication, authentic situations, unpredictable language input, creative language output, and integrated language skills. Furthermore, [Bachman \(1990\)](#) highlighted four features: (a) an information gap, in which learners are required to complete a task using different sources of input; (b) task dependency, which means that tasks are sequenced in a way that the information gathered from one task is used to answer subtasks; (c) integration of tasks; and (d) measuring different language abilities, including not only knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but also knowledge of cohesion, functions and sociolinguistic aspects. Similarly, other researchers have suggested that communicative tests should measure different language abilities, such as pragmatic, sociolinguistics and strategic competences, along with linguistic competence ([Bachman and Palmer, 1996;2010; Canale and Swain, 1980; Celce-Murcia et al., 1995; Hymes, 1972; Widdowson, 1978](#)).

It is clear from the above that different researchers have emphasised different features of communicative tests, this paper however will focus on one aspect of the overarching characteristics, which is communicative language ability.

## **2.1. Communicative Competence**

Many researchers have tried to distinguish between the terms “competence” and “performance”, which are used regularly but with different uses in the second language arena. [Chomsky \(1964\)](#), was the first person to introduce these two terms. He referred to competence as the linguistic system that a native speaker has internalized while performance concerns the psychological factors that are involved in the production of speech, such as perceptual parsing strategies and memory limitations. [Hymes \(1972\)](#), questioned this distinction between competence and performance on the grounds that it ignores the appropriateness of the sociocultural significance of utterances in the verbal and situational contexts. Therefore, he proposed a broader definition of competence called communicative competence, which, in addition to grammar, also includes the contextual or sociolinguistic competence.

Additionally, [Canale and Swain \(1980\)](#) viewed communicative competence as “a synthesis of knowledge of basic grammatical principles, knowledge of how language is used in social contexts to perform communicative functions, and knowledge of how utterances and communicative functions can be combined according to the principles of discourse” (p. 20). They also distinguished between communicative competence and communicative performance, which was later termed “actual communication” by [Canale \(1983\)](#). As communicative competence refers to both grammatical and sociolinguistic competence, communicative performance involves the interaction of these competences in the actual production of utterances and includes psycholinguistic factors such as memory, fatigue, background noises and perceptual strategies.

[Bachman \(2000\)](#), preferred to use the term ‘communicative language ability’, as this combines both language proficiency and communicative competence. He defined the latter as the knowledge and the capacity to use such knowledge in appropriate contextual language use. Similarly, [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) used the term ‘language ability’ and defined it as “a capacity that enables language users to create and interpret discourse” (p. 33). It consists of two components: language knowledge and strategic competence. However, as language ability is more than just a term, researchers have tried to demonstrate its true character and as a result different models of communicative competence or language ability have been proposed. For the purpose of this research, communicative language ability was used to represent language ability and communicative competence.

## **2.2. Challenges and Solutions in Communicative Language Testing**

[Canale \(1984\)](#), summarized some of the challenges in the testing field, stating that: Just as the shift in emphasis from language form to language use has placed new demands on language teaching, so too has it placed new demands on language testing. Evaluation within a communicative approach must address, for example, new content areas such as sociolinguistic appropriateness rules, new testing formats to permit and encourage creative, open-ended language use, new test administration procedures to emphasize interpersonal interaction in authentic situations, and new scoring procedures of a manual and judgmental nature. (p.79)

[Bachman \(1990\)](#), supported the view and indicated that such challenges are faced by everyone in the linguistic field. Language testing researchers, for instance, have to gain insights from other language fields to develop tests for use as instruments for research and to help achieve a better understanding of what affects students’ performance in language tests. Additionally, developers of language tests have to develop practical test designs and uses. Furthermore, developing tests that correspond with new views of language and language use is a challenge for both theory and practice as such tests must measure different abilities related to communicative competence, communicative language ability and features of language use. Moreover, psychometrics present another challenge to the need to demonstrate that test performance is related to the test’s intended uses. To overcome such challenges, [Bachman \(1990\)](#), suggested that innovation and reconsideration of the existing procedures, measures, assumptions and technology are required.



Researchers have considered communicative language ability or language ability as a far-reaching goal in language acquisition contexts. One important challenge is the difficulty of measuring it, as many other factors may affect learners' performance (Bachman, 1990). Thus, communicative language ability seems to be an unrealistic objective in non-native contexts due to the complexity of the required skills and the high level of proficiency needed to achieve communicative language ability. This does not align with the low language proficiency levels of both teachers and students in these contexts. Therefore, the setting of objectives should be guided by the specifications of these contexts (Saleh, 2013).

### **2.3. Context of the Problem**

With the implementation of the Basic Education reform in 1998 and the Post-Basic Education in 2007/2008, the Ministry of Education introduced English as a foreign language from grade This was accompanied by curriculum reforms that introduced a more communicative thematic teaching approach that integrates all skills including listening, reading, speaking and writing, instead of the structural approach adopted in the old system (Ministry of Education O., 2010; Ministry of Education, 2012). The English Language Curriculum Framework stated that it aims "... to develop positive attitudes towards learning of English by using communicative and experiential approaches to language teaching and learning" (Ministry of Education, 2012). It also intends to encourage learners to see English as a way of communication. Additionally, the teacher's book for grade 10, indicates that the Ministry has adopted a multi-layered, task-based approach, which is one of the recently recommended communicative approaches (Ministry of Education, 2015).

Furthermore, Al Abri (2008) conducted an evaluative study of the English curriculum in Oman, in which teachers evaluated grade 10 English text books using a checklist that included three dimensions: language input, activities and tasks and non-textual components. He concluded that teachers regarded the activities and tasks used in the textbooks as able to help students to use the language communicatively; the four skills are presented integratively in each unit.

For further proof of the implementation of communicative approach in teaching, the researchers observed 5 grade ten classes in 3 different schools in Muscat. Findings revealed that 94% of the features of communicative teaching were employed in the observed classrooms. It is therefore expected that the communicative teaching approach in the English curriculum in Oman is aligned with communicative testing in order to achieve the intended outcomes. The situation on the ground tells a completely different story. The Ministry of Education in Oman uses continuous assessment with two final tests at the end of the two semesters of the academic year. In 2004/2005, the Tests and Examinations Administration Department (TEAD) introduced a new form of continuous assessment (formative evaluation), as part of the examination process. Teachers are guided to use different tools for continuous assessment, such as presentations, written work, projects, portfolios, independent reading, questioning in the classroom and daily observations.

Despite the communicative teaching methodologies adopted in the Basic Education system, students continue to graduate with limited English communication skills that do not qualify them to pursue studies or to have decent jobs. Thus, colleges and universities are forced to offer students a Foundation program in order to improve their level of English (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012; Al-Mahrooqi and Tuzlukova, 2014; Al-Mahrooqi *et al.*, 2016; Ministry of Education and The World Bank, 2012; Sergon, 2011). Additionally, students show very poor performance in their English final tests. In 2011/2012 after analysis of test results, the Ministry of Education concluded that English language was one of the subjects in which students from all over the Sultanate scored the lowest percentage score. For grade ten, the success rate was 61.9%, which is very low compared to other subjects (Al-Shukri, 2012).

These poor communication skills and low performance in English tests despite the use of the communicative teaching approach suggests the need to pay more attention to English language tests in order to assess their degree of communicativeness. According to Kitao and Kitao (1996), the communicativeness of tests can be seen as being on a continuum. Some tests are entirely communicative, while the majority have only some of the communicative features. Thus, this paper aims at examining the extent to which the final tests assess the communicative language ability of grade 10 students in Oman. The study, therefore, answers the following question:

To what extent do EFL grade 10 English tests reflect communicative language ability features?

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Population and Sample**

The population included all semester two final English tests for grade 10 students. However, due to their unavailability, only a sample from the second semester tests were selected. A total of five final tests from the most recent five years, (2011/2012 to 2015/2016) comprised the sample for this study.

#### **Instruments**

Two research tools were utilized for the purpose of collecting the required data. These are framework for the grade 10 English language achievement test and test self-analysis checklist. Content analysis was used to analyse the collected data.

### **3.2. Framework for the Grade 10 English Language Achievement Test**

This framework was used to investigate the first features of communicative testing. It assessed the components of language ability included in the final English tests of grade 10 students.



### **3.3. The Basis of the Framework**

The framework was adopted from [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) definition of language ability which states that it is “a capacity that enables language users to create and interpret discourse”, as it is the most applicable definition in this context. The researchers used Bachman and Palmer’s language ability model, since it is more applicable to the testing context than previous models as indicated by the Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks (2015) and Skehan (1991). Furthermore, [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) model is considered to be one of the current models in the field of testing, which extends previous models, including that of [Canale and Swain \(1980\)](#), [Bachman \(1990\)](#), and [Bachman and Palmer \(1996\)](#).

The framework employed in this study was also based on the grade 10 test specifications used by the Ministry of Education in Oman, which are the main determinants of the content of the framework. The grade 10 test specifications include the outcomes, and the rated scales of each skill taught at grade 10. Speaking, independent reading, writing (narrative and evaluative), grammar, and vocabulary are assessed via continuous assessment, while listening, reading, writing (informative and interactive), grammar, and vocabulary are examined in the final tests. The framework utilized in this current study covers only the test specifications of the skills included in the final tests.

### **3.4. Steps Involved in the Development of the Framework**

For the purpose of this study [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) model of language ability was extended to include grammatical knowledge as part of the organizational knowledge. Grade 10 test specifications, were used to categorize the intended learning outcomes according to the types of knowledge specified in [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) model. The researchers excluded any knowledge, sub-knowledge, or sub-components that were not mentioned in the test specifications, and consequently produced an adapted framework for use in the analysis process.

### **3.5. Self-Analysis Checklist for the Tests**

A self-analysis checklist was employed with the framework in the analysis process. This checklist was used together with the adapted framework, in order to assess how many components of language ability were present in the tests. The checklist consisted of three main categories, including test components, language knowledge, and metacognitive strategies. The test components were test questions that were used as units of analysis. Language knowledge included the additional two categories of grammatical knowledge, and pragmatic knowledge. Grammatical knowledge was divided into vocabulary, syntax and graphology, and textual knowledge, including cohesion and coherence. Pragmatic knowledge was divided into the two categories of functional ( including ideational and heuristic) and sociolinguistic(including genre and register). The final category of metacognitive strategies included appraising.

A further aspect included in the checklist were the comments the researchers, or other coders may have regarding the types of knowledge covered by the test, but not mentioned in the framework, or which were mentioned in the framework, but were not covered by the test. It also included other types of knowledge that were mentioned neither in the test, nor in the framework, but were listed in [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) framework.

### **3.6. Instrument Validation**

The framework and the checklist were validated by a jury of 11 reviewers in order to assess their clarity, accuracy, and relevancy.

### **3.7. Procedures**

[Zhang and Wildemuth \(2005\)](#), provided eight steps for conducting qualitative content analysis research, which were adhered to by this study. These include preparing the data, defining the unit of analysis, developing categories and coding schemes, testing the coding scheme on a sample, coding all the tests, assessing the coding consistency, drawing conclusions from the coded data, and reporting the findings.

### **3.8. Preparing the Data**

Five final grade 10 English tests from the second semester were chosen for analysis, due to their availability. Grade 10 was selected since the teaching approach adhered to at this grade is communicative teaching, which should be aligned with communicative testing procedures. Additionally, the final test was chosen for analysis because it is the only formal test prepared by Ministry of Education for all students in grade 10 in Oman. The final grade 10 English test consists normally of twelve different questions including: three listening, two vocabulary, two grammar, three reading, and two writing questions, which are worth 60 marks. Students are expected to answer all questions in two and a half hours. [Table 1](#) provides further details concerning the specifications of the test.

### **3.9. Defining the Unit of Analysis**

Since the final grade 10 English test is divided into different questions, the test questions were selected as the units of analysis within the three checklists. The term ‘component’ was employed instead of ‘question’.



**Table-1.** Test Specifications of the Final English Tests for Grade 10 Students

Question	Type	Weight
Listening 1	Multiple Choice (Dialogue)	6 marks
Listening 2	Wh-Qs (Informative Text)	5 marks
Listening 3	Matching (Short Texts w/Words)	4 marks
Vocabulary 1	Gap-fill (Words provided) (Text)	2.5 marks
Vocabulary 2	Word Completion (Sentences)	2.5 marks
Grammar 1	Multiple Choice (Sentences)	2.5 marks
Grammar 2	Gap-fill (No words provided) (Paragraph)	2.5 marks
Reading 1	Matching (Texts w/Texts)	5 marks
Reading 2	Multiple Choice (Evaluative Text)	6 marks
Reading 3	Wh-Qs (Short Answers) AND Multiple Choice (Narrative Text)	9 marks
Writing 1	<b>EITHER:</b> Information Points (Paragraph) <b>OR:</b> Picture Cue (Describe and Comment)	5 marks
Writing 2	Task Instructions (Letter/email)	Marks

### 3.10. Developing Categories and Coding Schemes

Zhang and Wildemuth (2005), indicated that categories of analysis can be derived from three sources, including the data, previous related studies, and theories. Thus, the categories of analysis used in the self-analysis checklist investigating the communicative competence of the tests were the types of knowledge discussed in Bachman and Palmer (2010) model of language ability. The coding scheme for this study was primarily a deductive one which relied heavily on a model and on related studies available in the literature.

### 3.11. Testing the Coding Scheme on a Sample

In order to obtain reliability of the test analysis checklist, the researchers first sought inter-coder reliability. Three independent coders were trained and familiarized with the analysis checklist. They were trained to use the checklist to categorize a sample of final English tests for grade 10 student from the second semester of 2015/2016. Following this, the coders and the researchers separately analysed one of the five tests to be used in this study, which was that of the first semester of 2015/2016. Coefficient of agreement was calculated using the following formula:

$$\text{Coefficient of agreement} = \frac{\text{Number of times of agreement}}{\text{Number of times of agreement} + \text{number of times of disagreement}}$$

### 3.12. Coding all the Tests

After checking the inter-coder reliability, all tests were analysed using checklist.

### 3.13. Assessing the Coding Consistency

In order to gain intra-coder reliability, the researchers analysed and recorded the same tests within a three week interval, and the correlation between the analyses and the recordings were computed using the same procedures used to obtain inter-coder reliability. The degree of consistency was found to be .91 for test self-analysis which represented a high level of reliability.

## 4. Results

Analysis of the data revealed that some types of knowledge were given sufficient attention in the analysed tests including organizational knowledge especially grammatical knowledge and ideational knowledge as part of pragmatics knowledge. However, a discrepancy was discerned between the grade 10 test specifications, and the actual tests, as the tests sometimes included items that assessed types of knowledge that were not emphasized in the test specification framework, while at other times, they did not cover all the types of knowledge mentioned in the framework. The results are presented below in four parts:

The first part includes the types of knowledge included in the tests as well the framework. This study found that the type of organizational knowledge most emphasized in the tests was grammatical knowledge, which was assessed in four out of 12 components in each test. It was also assessed indirectly in other components: the knowledge of syntax was examined using wh-items in the listening and reading components, while the knowledge of vocabulary was assessed in some of the reading components. With regard to textual knowledge, little emphasis was given to cohesion, which was mainly examined in Reading 1, and coherence, which was assessed in the writing components. Ideational knowledge was the most emphasized pragmatic functional knowledge in the tests, particularly with regard to a student's ability to understand language used to inform, which was tested in listening, reading, and sometimes in writing. Sociolinguistic knowledge was only tested in the writing component, including knowledge of genre, and knowledge of registers.

The second part presents knowledge covered by the tests but not mentioned in the framework. Spelling conventions, lexical chains related to content schemata, manipulative instrumental functions, and appraising



constituted the types of knowledge identified in the tests but not mentioned in the framework. These types of knowledge were tested in many components, and were allotted a large portion of the marks.

The third part presents other types of knowledge mentioned in the framework, but were not covered by the tests. This includes using clear and legible hand-writing, correct punctuation conventions, and other functions such as predicting, comparing, and evaluating, together with some aspects of strategic knowledge, including evaluating, editing, and improving drafts of texts.

Finally, communicative competence was not addressed in its totality in the analyzed tests, demonstrating that some types of knowledge were mentioned in [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) language ability model, but were covered neither by the framework, nor by the actual tests, including aspects of pronunciation, word stress and intonation patterns of lexical items, conversational structure, regulatory and interpersonal functions, knowledge of imaginative functions, knowledge of dialects/varieties, knowledge of natural or idiomatic expression, knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech, goal setting, and planning.

## 5. Types of Knowledge Included in both Tests as well as the Framework

### 5.1. Organizational Knowledge

The findings further revealed that organizational knowledge was the most emphasized type of knowledge in all of the tests. [Table 2](#) shows the frequency of types of knowledge in the five tests, and illustrates the fact that organizational knowledge was assessed 67 times in the 60 components of the five tests.

**Table-2.** Frequency of Types of Knowledge in the Five Tests

Knowledge				F	Total 1	Total 2
Language Knowledge	Organizational	Grammatical	Vocabulary	21	50	67
			Syntax	29		
			Graphology	0		
		Textual	Cohesion	7	17	
			Coherence	10		
	Pragmatics	Functional	Ideational	28	41	63
			Heuristic	13		
		Sociolinguistic	Genre	11	22	
			Register	11		
Metacognitive Strategies	Appraising			0	0	0

As shown in [table 2](#) grammatical knowledge dominated most of the components of the tests. It was assessed 50 times in the 60 components of the five tests, including both vocabulary and syntax, which were assessed 21 and 29 times, respectively. Furthermore, four out of the 12 components of each test were specifically intended to assess grammatical knowledge alone. In all of the five tests, Vocabulary 1 assessed knowledge of vocabulary by providing students with eight words in a box, together with a very short piece of text; the students were assessed on their ability to understand the meaning of these words, and to use them in the appropriate linguistic context. The vocabulary assessed was related to the themes taught in grade 10, which included media, business, and advertisements. Similarly, Vocabulary 2 examined knowledge of vocabulary by providing students with five sentences that included incomplete words. Students were required to deduce the missing words from the linguistic context. The vocabulary tested was mainly selected from the lists of words at the end of the grade 10 English curriculum. Thus, vocabulary was the main focus of these two components.

Additionally, Grammar 1 assessed the students' knowledge of syntax by providing students with five multiple choice sentences, requiring them to select the correct form necessary to complete the sentences. These sentences mainly focused on the linguistic structures taught at grade 10, with little focus on the structures taught in the previous grades. [Table 3](#) shows the linguistic structures included in the final grade 10 tests.

**Table-3.** Linguistic Structures in the Final Grade 10 English Tests

Test	grade 10 Curriculum (2 <sup>nd</sup> Semester)	Previous semester/grade
Test 1	Tag questions – conjunctions (cause and effect) – used + to	Future and present passive
Test 2	Tag questions – past passive – wh-questions – indefinite pronouns	Second conditional
Test 3	Tag questions	Conditional - adjectives-infinite
Test 4	Present passive – past perfect – indefinite pronouns	Relative clause
Test 5	Reported speech – past passive	Continuous – conditional

Likewise, Grammar 2 assessed students' knowledge of syntax; it consisted of a closed question in which students were required to fill in a gap with one word related to grammar. They were required to recognize, and deduce, the appropriate form to be used in the linguistic context.

The other components in the tests examined grammatical knowledge indirectly. For instance, knowledge of syntax was emphasized in almost all of the tests in Listening 2, including Tests 1, 2, 3, and 5, and in Reading 3 in



Tests 2, 3, 4, and 5, as students were required to differentiate between *wh*-words, such as *which*, *who*, *where*, *when*, *how old*, *how long*, *how many*, and *how much*, and to understand their use in order to answer the items. If the student was not aware of the use of *wh*-words, they would not be able to answer the listening and reading components.

Additionally, knowledge of syntax was emphasized in Writing 1 and Writing 2. In Writing 1, students were required to describe a given picture, or to write a short paragraph from a given piece of information in a box, while in Writing 2, students were required to compose an email about a given topic. In their writing, it was necessary for students to use structures appropriately within the context, as they were assessed on their level of accuracy and on their use of a range of grammatical structures.

Similarly, knowledge of vocabulary was assessed indirectly in some components within the tests. For instance, in Test 1 in Reading 3, students were required to recognize the word 'vacation' as a synonym for 'holiday' in Item 6, while in Item 9, they had to recognize 'cycling' as a synonym for 'riding his bike'. Test 2 in Reading 3 provided another example in which students were required to deduce the meaning of 'inexperienced' in Item 16, and 'kind-hearted' in Item 17 from their context. Similarly, in Test 4 in Reading 3, students were required to recognize the adjective 'rich' as a synonym for 'upper-class' in Item 15. Furthermore, students were examined on their appropriate use of words in context in all of the tests in both Writing 1 and Writing 2.

## **5.2. Textual Knowledge**

Little attention was given to textual knowledge, particularly to cohesion and coherence, as it was assessed only 17 times in the 60 components of the five tests, as illustrated in Table 4. Cohesion was assessed seven times, but only in very few items within Grammar 1 and Grammar 2. The students' ability to recognize, and use, the appropriate conjunctions in a certain linguistic context were examined, including 'due to' in Test 1, and 'but' in Test 2. Moreover, all of the items in all of the tests in Reading 1 encouraged students to use their knowledge of cohesive devices, such as references or substitutions, to combine short reading texts about different topics. For example, in Test 4 in Reading 1, Item 2, "A brand-new health centre is now being built in our area", students were required to know that 'it' substitutes 'health centre' in order to combine the sentence with the statement, "it will have excellent, ultra-modern facilities..." Another example occurred in Test 5, Item 2, in the sentence, "I'm worried about my friend, Khalid. I haven't seen him for over two weeks". Students were required to combine this with, "I tried to phone him several times, but he never answered", as 'he' substitutes 'Khalid', and 'him' also refers to 'Khalid'.

Meanwhile, coherence was assessed 10 times in the five tests in the Writing section alone, as shown in Table 4, in which students were assessed on their ability to organize their ideas into cohesive texts. This was specified in the marking guide for Writing 1, which indicated that students would earn full marks if their "writing is well-organized and coherent" and "descriptions and comments are clear", and as stated in the rubric for Writing 2 that "your writing should be clear".

## **5.3. Pragmatic Knowledge**

Some aspects of pragmatic knowledge were assessed in the final tests. It was assessed 63 times in the 60 components of the tests, as shown in Table 2. Functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge were the two main types of pragmatic knowledge emphasized in the tests.

## **5.4. Functional Knowledge**

Functional knowledge was the most dominant type of pragmatics knowledge in the final grade 10 English tests, as it was examined 41 times, as shown in Table 4. The tests stressed ideational knowledge, and heuristic knowledge, as part of functional knowledge.

## **5.5. Ideational Knowledge**

Ideational knowledge was the most emphasized form of pragmatic knowledge in all of the tests; it was assessed 28 times in the 60 components of the five tests, as shown in Table 2. The main focus of ideational knowledge testing was to examine the students' ability to understand language used to inform, describe, interact, and identify opinions. It was assessed in listening, reading, and writing. In Listening 1, students were required to listen to a conversation between two people about a particular topic, and to understand the conversation in order to gain particular information, and to answer six multiple choice items in the tests. This emphasized the necessity for students to understand the language used to inform. Similarly, in Listening 2, students were required to listen to a short presentation, and were then assessed on their ability to understand the language used to inform by writing short answers to five items in the tests.

Few items assessed the students' ability to identify language used to offer opinions. Those which did included Items 3, 4, and 5 in Test 1 in Listening 1, in which students were required to identify the character Zainab's opinions concerning a certain company's products. Another example was Items 1 and 4 in Test 3, in which students were required to identify the opinions of a TV presenter and her manager concerning a programme, Item 6 in Test 4, in which students were assessed on their ability to identify the opinions of a manager and a doctor intending to warn their staff of a disease, and Items 3 and 4 in Test 5, which was intended to assess the students' ability to identify the opinions of two lecturers concerning how to save paper.

Likewise, ideational knowledge was examined in all of the tests in reading. In Reading 2, students were assessed on their ability to understand the language used to inform through answering six multiple choice items, while in some items, they were required to identify the opinions of others. For instance, in Item 9 in Test 3, students were



required to identify the writer's opinion on donating furniture; in Item 10 in Test 4, they were required to recognize the writer's opinion on a film called 'Trash'; and in Item 11 in Test 5, they were required to understand the writer's suggestions concerning how to improve a cake-making machine. Likewise, in Reading 3, students were assessed on their ability to understand the reading texts in order to gain the correct information to answer three wh-items, and three multiple choice items.

In all of the tests in Writing 1 and 2, students were assessed on their ability to use language to inform, describe, and interact. In Writing 1, they were required to either employ language to inform, using a given piece of information in a box, such as that in Tests 1 and 4, or to use language to describe a given image, such as in Tests 2, 3, and 5, while in Writing 2, they were required to compose an email, and to use language to interact with their friends about different topics.

### **5.6. Heuristic Knowledge**

Limited attention was given to heuristic knowledge, which is part of functional knowledge, as it was assessed 13 times in the tests, as shown in Table 2. The first aspect of heuristic knowledge emphasized in the tests was intended to extend the students' knowledge. The only topic that added to students' knowledge in Listening 1 concerned dengue fever in Test 4, and Listening 2, Test 5, which was about an insect found in Australian homes. Some topics within vocabulary and grammar also assisted in extending students' knowledge, such as the topic in Vocabulary 1, Test 2, which discussed Anne Hathaway, a film actress; in Vocabulary 1, Test 3, which instructed students how to apply for a job in a company; and in Grammar 2, which discussed Arabian horses. Vocabulary 1 in Test 4 offered students advice concerning how to prepare for a science examination, and Grammar 2 provided students with information about a new drug called LY22.

Similarly, Reading 2 provided students with certain information concerning how to make good use of their free time, how to take care of the environment, and regarding films such as 'Trash' and 'Slumdog Millionaire'. In addition, Reading 3 discussed certain topics that may help to expand students' knowledge, such as discussing a disease called 'SMA' in Test 3, expounding information about 'Lipton', which is a popular kind of tea, in Test 4, and providing information concerning a radio station called Radio Caroline in Test 5.

Another aspect of heuristic knowledge involves making inferences as part of solving problems, and this was encouraged in both Listening and Reading. In all of the tests in Listening 3, students were required to listen to four people talking, and then to infer who the speakers were, where they were, what they were doing, or what they were discussing. Also, in Item 1 in Listening 2, Test 1, students were required to listen in order to infer Ibrahim's age.

Similarly, Reading 2 included items that required students to infer the answer, such as in Items 7, 8, 9, and 11 in Test 2; Item 6 and 7 in Test 3; and Item 6, 8, and 10 in Test 4. Furthermore, Reading 3 included several items that encouraged students to infer the answers from the text. For example, in Item 16 in Test 1, students had to evaluate the number of tigers after reading the text. Additionally, in Items 12 and 14 in Test 2, students had to evaluate the year and number of staff involved after reading the text. In Item 12 in Test 3, students were required to infer Emily's age, when she had SMA, and in Item 16 in Test 4, where students were required to read the text in order to assess why Lipton was able to sell tea at low prices. Most of the items in Test 5 involved making inferences, including Items 12, 14, 15 and 17. For instance, in Item 12, students were required to infer the place where Radio Caroline first broadcast, while in Item 14, they had to evaluate the most successful year in the station's history. In Item 15, students had to infer the time during which the station did not broadcast, while in Item 17, they had to evaluate the kind of programmes for which the station became most famous.

### **5.7. Sociolinguistic Knowledge**

Sociolinguistic knowledge was assessed a total of 22 times in the tests, as shown in Table 2, although it was only tested in writing. Two types of sociolinguistic knowledge were examined, including knowledge of genre, and knowledge of registers. In Writing 1, students were assessed on their ability to write a short biography, or to describe a graph, while in Writing 2, they were required to write an informal email to a friend. In the marking guide, teachers were informed that they should deduct marks from students if they did not adhere to the correct format involved in the intended genre. In the writing components, key words including 'describe', 'comment', and 'email' were emphasized in order to draw the students' attention.

With regard to knowledge of registers, students were required to adapt a piece of writing for different purposes, including writing descriptions and comments that were appropriate to the image in Writing 1, and using language that was appropriate to the reader and the context in Writing 2. It was intended that their writings should achieve its purpose, and have a positive impact on the reader.

### **5.8. Types of Knowledge Covered by the Tests, but not Mentioned in the Framework**

- Spelling conventions, which are part of the knowledge of phonology, and organizational grammatical knowledge were examined in some components within the tests. Vocabulary 2 presented students with five sentences including incomplete words, of which only the first two or three letters were provided. Students were required to provide the correct spelling. Similarly, in Grammar 2, students were given a short text with five missing words related to grammar, and were required to provide the correct spelling of the words. Therefore, spelling in such components was an important criterion in the assessment;
- Lexical chains relating to content schemata which form a part of the knowledge of cohesion, textual knowledge were assessed. These constitute words that are connected to one another by association within the same 'semantic field', such as mother, child, newborn, baby, birth, delivery, and nursing. This was



assessed in Listening 3, in which students were required to listen to four people talking, and then to assess the identity of the people, their location, and what they were doing, or what they were discussing. In order to achieve an answer, students were required to assess the semantic field to which the key words are related.

Similarly, in all the items in Reading 1, students were provided with short texts that they had to match to one another by recognizing which texts were related to the same semantic field. For example, in Test 1, students had to match Item 5, “In my country, there are many successful businessmen” with Item D, “They have worked hard and studied the market well. So they’ve become experts in businesses”, since the words ‘businessmen’, ‘market’, and ‘business’ are related to the same semantic field. Another example was in Test 3, Item 1 in which, “The ship sailed for three days, but suddenly a strong storm came and it slowly started to sink” should be matched with Item E, “But there weren’t enough lifeboats for everyone, so many people drowned”, since the words ‘ship’, ‘lifeboats’, ‘sail’, ‘sink’, and ‘drown’ are from the same semantic field;

- Manipulative instrumental functions, which are part of functional pragmatic knowledge were included in the tests. These are employed to encourage other people to behave, or not behave, in a certain manner. Examples are making requests, giving instructions, suggestions, advice, and warnings. This was assessed in Writing 2, in which students were required to compose an email to a friend in order to give them a piece of advice, or a suggestion, about a certain topic. For example, Test 1 involved a friend who asked for advice about how to find friends at a new school:

Hi, as you know, I have just moved to a new school in a different area. I’m worried about finding new friends. What should I do? Can you advise me? Please write soon,  
Nasser/Nasra

Similarly, in Test 3, students were required to provide advice to a friend who had heard that their best friend was speaking ill of people:

Dear uncle Salim/ Aunt Salma,  
I need your advice. Somebody told me that my best friend is saying bad things about other people. What should I do? Please help me.  
Love, Sami/Samia

In Test 4, they were asked for suggestions about what to do at a party for their Mathematics teacher:

Dear Nasir/Nasra,  
I need your advice. Our class is organizing a surprising party for our Maths teacher. The question is: what shall we do at the party?  
Have you got any ideas? Please help me!  
Love, Sami/Samia

While in Test 5, they were required to ask for advice from a friend, as their parents did not agree with their choice of subjects to study at Grade 11:

Situation: Imagine that you are Nasser/Nasra. You are in grade 10. You are now thinking about your subjects in grade 11. However, your parents do not agree with your choices.  
Task: Write an email to your friend Sami/Samiya. Explain the problem; say how you feel and ask for advice.

- Appraising, which forms part of metacognitive strategies, was also assessed. Within the framework, the main focus of appraising concerned the writing skill in which students were required to edit their written text; however, in the tests, students were guided to evaluate and edit their answers in the listening components.

## 6. Discussion

The results of the analysis of the final grade 10 English tests indicated that the tests did not cover all types of knowledge. In particular many aspects of pragmatics, and strategic competences, as mentioned in [Bachman and Palmer \(2010\)](#) language ability model were absent. This supported the findings of previous studies, including that undertaken by [Al mamari et al. \(2018\)](#) who investigated the degree of communicativeness in grade 10 secondary school diploma, [Nguyen and Le \(2013\)](#), who analysed the content of 10 tests for Grade Six students at five different schools in Vietnam; [Kharrant \(2013\)](#), who analysed the content of 1418 and 1419 tests administered to ESP students at King Khalid University in Saudi Arabia; [Razmjoo \(2011\)](#), who analysed two final tests for Grade Three students at public and private high schools in Iran; [Bernardo \(2011\)](#), who investigated the communicativeness of the 22 English language tests of 22 different instructors from 22 colleges and universities in the Philippines and Ireland (2000). All of these researchers found that the tests they analysed did not examine all aspects of students’ communicative competence, ignoring discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic elements.



In contrast, previous studies indicated that the most emphasized type of knowledge in the tests analysed was the linguistic, or grammatical knowledge, and that they ignored sociolinguistic and strategic competence. This present study produced similar results, as more emphasis was given to organizational knowledge, especially grammatical knowledge, in the Omani tests. On the other hand, this study differed from others in that it found that an emphasis on ideational knowledge was present as part of pragmatics knowledge. However, strategic competence, and other aspects of pragmatic knowledge, such as regulatory and interpersonal functions, knowledge of imaginative functions, knowledge of dialects/varieties, knowledge of natural or idiomatic expression, knowledge of cultural references and figures of speech, were completely absent from the tests.

Bachman (1991), indicated that when designing a test, it is important to consider both the areas of language knowledge that will be involved, and the strategies that will be evoked, and to what extent. Similarly, Bachman and Palmer (1996) indicated that in order to make inferences about students' language ability, the responses to the test tasks must involve both language knowledge, and strategic competence, as this can also aid in creating and interpreting discourse.

Additionally, Maraheel (2004) stressed the importance of pragmatics knowledge, the ultimate goal of which is to determine the linguistic, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence of students' communicative competence as a whole. She stated that pragmatics competence "enable(s) language learners to identify their problems and their contribution of each component of language competency to the totality of communicative competence" (Maraheel, 2004). Similarly, Bachman and Palmer (1996) indicated that strategic competence is the component that connects the other components within the individual, and provides the cognitive link between the language use task, and the setting. Meanwhile, Purpura (1999 cited in Bachman and Palmer (2010) highlighted the fact that strategic competence is related directly, or indirectly, to certain stages of language acquisition, use, and testing.

## 7. Conclusions

This study examined the communicative language ability of grade 10 tests in Oman using Bachman and Palmer (2010) model of language ability, along with the tests' self-analysis checklist. Findings revealed that the tests analysed did not address communicative language ability in its totality, but rather they focused on grammatical and ideational knowledge, and ignored many aspects of pragmatics and strategic competence. It was also found that a discrepancy existed between the grade 10 test specifications, and the actual tests. In order to accurately measure students' language ability, it is imperative that testing is aligned with the communicative mode of instruction adopted in the schools. Further research is required to explore the impact of communicative testing on students' communicative language ability.

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