

Chapter IIILANGUAGE ABILITY
=====(a) Introductory

Language ability means a complex inter-weaving of a number of traits indicating command over and facility in the use of language, and also indicating a possibility of being successful in any activity related to language. A high or low level of language ability is in proportion to the number and intensity of such traits possessed by a person. To estimate, therefore, the specialized language ability, the factors or components comprising the command over the language, factors or components involved in the efficient use of the language must be located and then measured through suitable tests. This chapter deals with the important factors that comprehensively contribute to making a person successful in using a language. It also deals with the techniques that can be most suitable for measuring such factors or traits.

(b) Language

The first step in defining language ability is to gain a clear concept about what language is. Language has been defined by different authors in different words. But all of them, specially the linguists like Jespersen (1959), Sapir (1921), Bloomfield (1963) and others have stressed some important aspects of language. None of the definitions of language can be accepted in toto; but all of them, when considered together, give a picture of what language is and consists of. Some of the definitions are given below.

Carroll, as quoted by Recer et al (1968), says,

Language is a structured system of arbitrary vocal sounds and sequences of sounds, which is used, or can be used, in interpersonal communication by an aggregation of human beings, and which rather exhaustively catalogues the things, events and processes in the human environment.

Cruickshank, as quoted by Recer (1968), defines language as follows:

Language is the ability to comprehend and use symbols (words, pictures, numbers, letters) as the accepted means of communication

in society. Oral speech is the basis, but even then, oral speech is merely the uttering of the articulate sound, the mechanism or tool used to serve a function of language, whereas total language includes such functions as reading and writing.

Artley, as quoted by Recer (1968), says,

Speaking and reading comprise two sides of a square known as communication or language, the other two sides being listening and writing. Being inextricably associated, any limitation or facility in one is reflected to some degree in the others.

Goldstein, as quoted by Recer et al (1968), says,

One must build receptive and expressive language to the point, where one normally expects language to be, when a youngster is handed his first book.

Sweet defines language as follows:

Language is the expression of thought by speech-sounds, which is then formalized in written symbols.

Block and Tragger, Strutevaun, Encyclopaedia Britannica - all of them define language as follows:

Language is that system of arbitrary vocal sound-symbols which enables the members of a group to communicate thoughts, feelings and desires among themselves.

Mackey (1965) defines language as under:

Language includes the sequence of sounds, the order of sound-arrangement and the meaning attached to such sound-sequences. Thus it includes substance and form, content and expression..... Language consists of the following elements: thought-content, sounds, group of sounds (words), word-order and structure, written symbols, and punctuation marks. Through these language acts as a means of communication and a store of ideas.

After considering all the diverse view points regarding language in a comprehensive manner, the important characteristics of language can be summarized as follows :

- (1) Language is too complex a phenomenon to be defined precisely.
- (2) Language is a structured system of using vocal and written symbols.
- (3) Receptive and expressive language arts form the two main areas.

- (4) Listening, speaking, reading and writing are the four basic language skills.
- (5) The four fundamental skills are inter-related.
- (6) Limitation or facility in any of the skills is reflected to some degree in the other.

(c) Language Ability

Some psychologists have classified human abilities and described them separately. They have described language ability (verbal ability, language aptitude) as follows.

Williamson, as quoted by Hahn and Maclean (1955), says,

Language ability is the fluency in use of one's own language and facility in the perception of verbal relations.

Kelley, as quoted by Hahn and Macleans (1955) says,

Language ability is the ability to define, understand and use words as symbols of meaning and experiences.

Test-constructors have defined language ability as follows.

GATB, Section III (1958) defines language ability as follows:

Language ability is the ability to understand meaning of words and ideas, associated with the ability to comprehend them effectively. The ability to comprehend language includes the ability to understand relationships between words and to understand meaning of whole sentences and paragraphs. It also includes the ability to present information or ideas.

DAT, Students' Manual (1952) defines verbal aptitude as under:

Aptitude is the capacity to learn. Verbal aptitude measures how well you can understand ideas expressed in words; how clearly you can think and reason with words; and how well you can use the language, that is, how competent you are in spelling, punctuation, capitalization and choice of words.

The above-mentioned definitions given by the tests provide specifications which are important for the measurement of language-ability. Considering them through an eclectic approach, the investigator came to

the following description of language ability or linguistic aptitude:

Language ability can be defined as an ability to use a language efficiently and with facility, which also indicates an ability to learn that language.

(d) Basic Language Skills

The four basic language skills - namely listening, speaking, reading and writing - form the bases for measuring language ability. But as the present test has to be a paper-and-pencil test, the first two skills are not covered in it. The component skills covered in this test are - reading comprehension and written expression. They are subdivided into four main areas:

- (a) vocabulary - (comprehension and expression)
- (b) language structure - (comprehension and expression)
- (c) punctuation and spelling -
(orthographical skills)
- (d) comprehension of passages.

Reading Comprehension

The solution of most classroom problems in the modern school or college in India requires the skillful use of books as sources of information. Language has to be used as a tool of library reference. When considered from this point of view, reading is something more than mere rapid comprehension of printed symbols and the memory and organization of the material read. It is also the ability to utilize books and libraries as efficient sources of information. As a means of gaining information and pleasure, it is essential in every content subject. As Green et al (1954) say,

A full appreciation of the importance of intelligent reading in society at large has also developed in recent years. Reading is considered the indispensable means by which adults may keep abreast of current happenings and familiarize themselves with current social, community, political and national problems. The mass of printed matter which the typical adult must read and evaluate, even within the limits of his own fields of interest, is stupendous.

This situation makes the development of a high degree of reading skill in schools and colleges all the

more imperative. The use of reading for acquiring academic grades represents only the small aspect of its function.

The ability to read opens up rich avenues of enjoyment and pleasure in the field of literature. This provides the medium through which the individual can become acquainted with life, its meaning and significance.

It also reveals those aspects of life, its activities, ideas, ideals and emotions around which human interests cluster. The type of material one reads and reads with facility reveals his interests and aptitudes in life.

Written Expression

Expression is basically oral; one writes as one speaks. So written expression is closely connected with oral expression. It can be inferred from this that a test measuring written expression might to a great extent reflect the ability for oral expression also, and can be an indirect measure for it.

The problem of written expression takes a three-fold form. Green and others (1954) have described it as follows:

Firstly, written expression involves the formal or mechanical factors, such as writing, spelling, punctuation, form and general appearance. Secondly, it involves certain grammatical factors, such as common errors in language form and the sentence structure and form. Thirdly, it also involves the more subtle elements of composition, the rhetorical factors involving the questions of choice of words, quality of interest innate in the material, and logical organization of the subject matter, both within the sentence and the larger units.....

These mechanical and grammatical elements constitute in a way the raw material of written expression. The rhetorical factors are the results of the manner in which these raw materials are put together. They are the factors that make for appeal, originality, style and distinctiveness in written expression. It is difficult to measure the rhetorical factors. The rhetorical factors are more intangible, more difficult to identify and to measure, and thus far some of these elements have eluded the best efforts to measure them objectively.

The abovementioned language skills are not independent; they are to be regarded as integrated performances which call upon the testee's mastery over the language as a whole. They have distinctive identity of their own; but, at the same time, they are highly interrelated.

We might summarize the differences among them as follows: Reading involves grasping of meaning and interpretation of ideas; written expression involves giving expression to ideas. Written expression involves most of the component skills of oral expression; but over and above, it involves spelling, punctuation and handwriting.

A test measuring language ability can have content validity only to the extent that it comprehensively covers all these component skills and gives them proper relative weightage. This brings us to the topic of how to evaluate language skills.

It must be evident, from what has been said, that an accurate analysis of the underlying skills in language is necessary before any significant programme of evaluation can be undertaken.

Evaluation is integrally related to instructional or educational objectives. Consideration of

the objectives of teaching a language would help a test maker to know specifically what he is expected to cover in his test. As Ahman (1965) says,

The evaluation process is completely tied to educational objectives.

The following section deals with the specifications of the general objective of language learning.

(e) Specifications of Educational Objectives

Instructional objectives are classified by Bloom into three major domains - cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Thus far only the first has been extensively analysed. The cognitive domain includes those objectives which deal with the recognition or recall of the learned material and the development of intellectual abilities. The affective domain includes interest, attitudes, values, appreciation and adequate adjustment. Objectives in this domain are not stated very precisely and hence difficult to evaluate. The psychomotor domain deals with physical, motor or manipulative skills.

Within the cognitive domain, Bloom describes six ascending levels. They are: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. He has drawn a sharp line of distinction between

knowledge one one hand and the other five levels on the other. The latter involves "intellectual abilities and skills".

Stecklein, as quoted by Stanley (1964), offers the following list of abilities above the knowledge level: application, ability to recognize assumptions, comprehension and analysis, ability to judge the validity of inferences, analogous reasoning, problem solving, and ability to draw valid conclusions.

In the present investigation, the investigator has tried to cover as many of the component skills and abilities listed above as possible. Affective objectives are difficult to evaluate; some test items measuring appreciation and style were included in the pre-tryout. But as the investigator felt that they lacked precision, objectivity and reliability, they were not included in the try-out version. Psychomotor objectives are indirectly evaluated through the recognition of such psychomotor skills required in efficient use of language. But the present test mostly consists of items evaluating the cognitive objectives. The six level hierarchy of the cognitive domain has helped the investigator much in selecting the skills to be covered, in developing a valid two-dimensional chart (blueprint) and in framing test-items. Items intended to measure

higher and more complex mental processes are also profusely included in the test.

The abilities and skills that enter into language ability as measured in two of its aspects, namely reading comprehension and written expression, are given in Table 4.2. Such an analysis proved very useful in planning the test. It helped in the selection of content and of the sample of behaviour to be tested.

This brings us to the stage of test-construction. The next chapter deals with the theory of test-construction and the procedure adopted in constructing the present test.

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