Trends or Approaches to language Testing

Language testing can be divided into four major trends :
1- **Essay -Translation Approach.**

It is called traditional approach or prescientific trend .It is an approach to Language testing in which no special skill or expertise in testing is required and it is characterized by lack of concern for statistical matters or for notions as objectivity and reliability.Testing students Language ability was assessed through subjective evaluation and the language teacher did not need any special skill in constructing tests.
This traditional approach is favored by those who are not really interested in the learner or give any consideration to his needs.Language to them is a thing learned by reading and writing and it exists in texts ; there is no spoken language.The tests are mainly written exercises, translation , composition, grammatical analysis and sentence writing.

The major disadvantages of this approach involve:
1- It puts emphasis on reading and writing.
2- It neglects speaking .
3- It involves subjective evaluation and lacks objectivity.

2-The Structuralist Approach

This testing approach is influenced by the theory based on structural linguistics and behaviorist psychology. Followers of this theory see language as a machine which acts as a stimulus -response mechanism.
It is also called the Discrete Point Approach or the Psychometric-Structuralist Trend . It is an approach which is commonly referred as scientific stage of Language testing .

According to this approach, the testing method is based on analytical assessment or discrete- point approach which provides a means for assessing knowledge of skills and elements of language separately because it is essential to test one thing at a time .Discrete- point tests attempts to achieve the following goals:
a-diagnosing learner strengths and weaknesses .
b-prescribing curricula at particular skills
c -developing specific teaching strategies to help learners overcome particular weaknesses.

The main advantages of testing according to this approach are :
1- It allows for a wide coverage and objective scoring.
2- It also provides a means for measuring the knowledge of students on individual distinct points of separate sounds , grammatical structures or vocabulary items and this is carried out by supplying or selecting the correct answers as in multiple-choice questions or gab filling .

Despite these advantages, this approach was attacked and the most arguments against this approach are :

1- Language is not a set of unrelated bits ,but it forms a whole and bits must be integrated and tested together as the crucial properties of language are lost when its elements are separated and the whole is greater than the sum of its parts .

2- Tests should assess communicative ability and not formal knowledge.

3- **The Integrative Approach**.

It is an approach which involves testing of language in context and is primarily concerned with meaning and the total communicative effect of discourse.Tests do not seek to separate language skills into neat divisions in order to improve test reliability,instead they are designed to assess the students ability to use two or more skills or elements of the language at the same time .Therefore ,this approach is the exact reverse of the analytical assessment.

Integrative testing involves ((functional language)) but not the use of functional language.

The main advantages of this approach are that integrative tests .

A -are easy to administer ,

B-economical to set and mark ,

C- are reliable.

D- measure the testees language ability in ways closely approximate to the actual language use .

It should be noted that the integrative tests are best characterized by cloze testing , dictation ,oral interviews, translation .

The main disadvantages of this approach are the following:

A- Neither cloze nor dictation offer the opportunity for spontaneous production by the testees .

B- Both tests are indirect tests of linguistic competence rather than a direct test of their performance ability.

C- Neither testing procedures offer the possibility for oral or non-controlled written production.

4-The Communicative Approach.

This approach is sometimes linked to the integrative approach as they both emphasize the importance of the meaning of utterance .language in this approach is a tool for communication and the main need of most learners is not only for theoretical or analytical knowledge of the targeted language,but also for an ability to function effectively through the target language in particular setting and contexts .In communicative approach,tests meet certain criteria;

1-They should be interactive.

2-They should be direct in nature with tasks reflecting realistic discourse activities.

4- They should be based on an explicit a priori specification.
5- Texts and tasks should be relevant to the intended situation of the target population.
6- Language use is often emphasized to the exclusion of language usage. (Use) is concerned with how people actually use language for different purposes, while (usage) concerns with the formal patterns of language.
7- They raise the issue of authenticity ((of texts and situations)) which is considered one of the main characteristics of good language tests .