Teachers' Familiarity with Communicative Testing Techniques

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Abstract
This paper is based on the findings of a study conducted in selected secondary schools in Lusaka district, Lusaka province, Zambia. The purpose of the study was to establish whether teachers were using communicative techniques in test construction. Data was collected using both qualitative and quantitative methods. Questionnaires were distributed to the teachers and focus group discussions were held with them while interviews were held with the heads of department. The major finding was that teachers were not familiar with communicative language testing. Apart from failing to define communicative testing, the majority of the teachers were not familiar with various aspects of communicative testing. Therefore, the study recommended that teacher training institutions should adequately train teachers in communicative testing. Further, courses in language testing should be developed in order to help expose students to recommended language testing techniques.
Key words: Familiarity, language testing, technique, communicative competence.

Introduction
Language testing is an important undertaking in that it provides evaluations to the teaching and learning processes. Several scholars have tried to define language testing. According to Allen (2009) language testing is a process and study of evaluating the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language effectively. The communicative approach to language teaching and learning has been in use in second language teaching for over thirty years now. Equally, language testing has been in existence for a number of years. From the time communicative teaching was introduced many scholars have provided guidelines on communicative test construction. The communicative approach recommends that language tests should test the learner's ability to use

language in real life communicative situations (Kitao, 1996). Language testing cannot be separated from the teaching approach in use. This is so because the testing techniques teachers use should be in conformity with the main ideas of a teaching approach (CEFRL, 2002).

Generally, tests measure students' ability to complete certain tasks. The purpose of language tests is thus not different from that of other tests. Language tests equally measure students' ability to complete certain language tasks. These are specified tasks through which language abilities are measured.

The communicative approach to language teaching and learning has been in use in second language teaching for over thirty years now. Equally, language testing has been in existence for a number of years. Language testing cannot be separated from the teaching approach in use. This is so because the testing techniques teachers should use should be conformity with the main ideas of the teaching approach (CEFRL, 2002). In this vain, in line with communicative teaching, communicative testing techniques should be used. The main idea in communicative teaching approach is 'language usage'. Kitao and Kitao (1996:4) stated that "although Hymes ideas have been expanded over the years by different scholars and various types of competencies proposed, the basic ideas of communicative competence remain the ability to use language appropriately". Hymes and other scholars pointed out that in certain instances a speaker can produce grammatical sentences that are completely inappropriate.

Therefore, communicative tests intend to measure testees' ability to use language in real life situations (Kitao, 1996). This is both receptively and productively. In most cases, language tests have taken the form of testing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. However, scholars have stated that there is much more to being able to use language than merely knowledge about it. Since communicative tests measure learners' 'language use', Kitao (1996) suggested that the tasks in the language tests should be predictions of the situations the students will find themselves in where they will be required to perform linguistically. In their daily activities, learners will be faced with situations where they will be required to give directions, ask for permission, write letters for different purposes and many other instances where they will be required to use language. Their ability to communicate will depend on how appropriate they will be able to use language in such instances.

As a result, the concept of 'communicative competence' in language testing has been proposed by scholars. According to Kitao (1996:20) communicative competence is the "expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning involving interaction between two or more persons or between one person and a written text or oral text". Communicative competence is not about ones' ability to produce grammatically correct sentences but about appropriate use of language. Therefore, the main goal of communicative tests is to measure learners' ability to translate their competence (or lack of it) into actual performance in ordinary situations. The tests measure the communicative competence realised in the four skills of listening, reading, speaking and writing.

The communicative approach has had a lot of influence in language teaching due to its emphasis on language use. The communicative approach to language teaching and learning differs from the grammar based approach in that it is organised on the basis of the communicative functions of

language such as apologising, giving descriptions, asking for permission and invitations (Canale and Swain, 1981). The argument advanced by communicative testers was that it is important for a second language learner to not only have grammatical knowledge but also be able to use the language in real life situations such as the ones given or perform tasks using that language. However, this was not to imply that the grammatical part of a language was not important but to rather emphasise the fact that the role of language in society is to facilitate communication. Bachman (1990) suggested that communicative language ability (CLA) did not only consist of language knowledge or competence but that this had to be combined with one's ability to execute that competence in appropriate language use.

The communicative approach to language teaching is recommended in Zambian public schools. However, it was not known whether the teachers in public schools in Lusaka district were using communicative testing techniques in accordance with the communicative teaching approach. This is what prompted this study.

Statement of the Problem
The communicative approach in use in Zambia means that communicative techniques should test learners' ability to use language in real life communicative situations. There are many scholars who have guided on the construction of communicative tests from the time they were introduced. Teachers should construct their test items in line with the techniques advanced by many communicative testers. The problem, therefore, was that it was not known whether teachers were familiar with communicative language testing techniques.

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study was to establish whether teachers were familiar with communicative testing techniques.

Research Questions
The following were the research questions;

1. What was teachers' understanding of communicative testing?
2. Were the teachers familiar with characteristics of communicative tests?
3. Were the teachers able to differentiate communicative tests from other types of tests?

Significance and Limitations of the Study
The findings, as presented in this paper, may provide information to interested parties on the status of communicative language testing. To the teachers, this may help them in finding ways of how they can improve on communicative test construction. It may also help expose the challenges that teachers face in communicative testing thereby helping policy makers come up with appropriate measures. Apart from that, the findings may contribute to the body of knowledge on

communicative testing. However, although a mixt approach to data collection was employed, the findings might not be generalized because the study was conducted in one province out of ten.

Literature Review

In communicative language testing, the concept of 'communicative competence' has been proposed by scholars. This is a concept first coined by a socialinguist called Dell Hymes in 1971 as he argued against the concept of 'linguistic competence' earlier used by Noam Chomsky (1965). He argued that linguistic competence is part of communicative competence. Linguists such as Chomsky and Lado had linked language knowledge to knowledge of discrete points of that language. However, Hymes disagreed stating that language is better learnt when it is used for communication purposes (Wesche, 1983). He further argued that knowledge of discrete points of a language did not necessarily translate to knowledge of a language and that language is better learnt when used in real life communication. The diagramme below summarises his explanation:
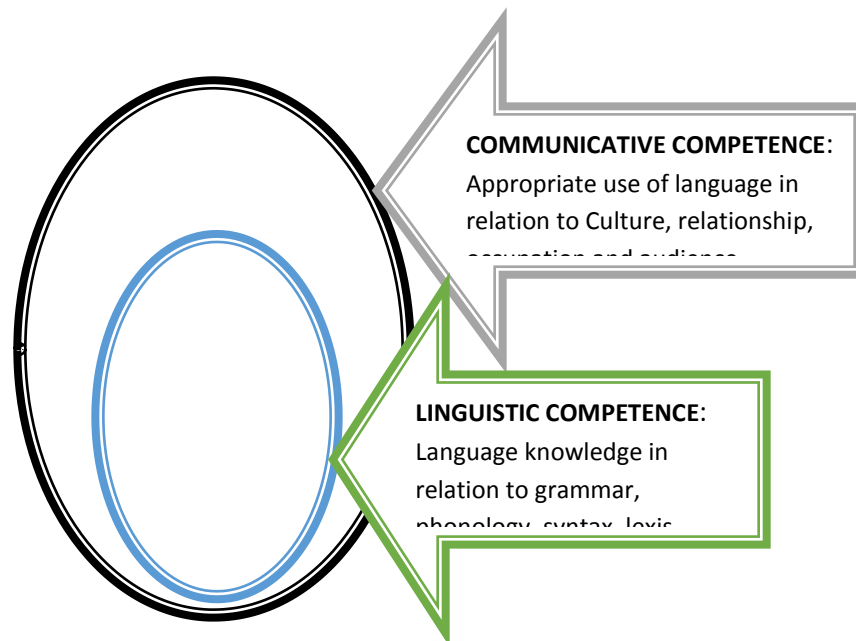
(*Diagram source*: Developed from Hymes' explanation)

In order for teachers to test learners' real communicative competence, they should use communicative techniques when constructing language tests. This entails that teachers should familiarise themselves with communicative testing and its recommended techniques. Many scholars have given guidelines on how communicative tests should be constructed. For example, Miyata and Langham (2000) stated that communicative tests should present learners with language tasks which reflect a real life context. In line with this, most scholars have argued against the use of multiple choice questions in language tests due to the fact that they do not present learners with a real world communicative situation (Cardoso, 1998). Apart from that, communicative tests try

to measure a learner's ability to communicate in various real communicative situations and not ability to form grammatically correct sentences. Therefore, tests should be constructed in such a way that learners' communicative ability is established.

Further, Brown (2005) stated that communicative tests should test learners using authentic situations. This means that the tests should test real life skills, should be justifiable and employ tasks which can be recognised. 'Unpredictable language input' and 'creative language output' are the other components of communicative tests. This implies that it is not always possible to predict what the other speakers might say (unpredictable language input). Therefore, learners will need to be creative in how they respond to such situations (creative language output). Language production is also important in communicative tests. Fulcher (2000:489) stated that "in communicative testing, learners should actually produce language".

However, various research works in communicative testing have revealed that teachers were not familiar with communicative testing. For example, in Malaysia a study by Pumtha and Bin Embi (2014) revealed that teachers were not familiar with principles of communicative testing. In Iran a study by Razmjoo was conducted and it revealed that teachers' tests represented a short version of Lado's model (1961) which was not in line with the new trends. In Africa, a study by Sane and Sebonde which sought to examine the appropriateness of the communicative approach in teaching English in Tanzania further revealed that the majority of the teachers were not trained in CA to enable them to teach using the approach. In Zambia, most studies have been undertaken that have sought to establish whether teachers were using the communicative approach to teach the learners. One such study was conducted by Munakaampe (2005) which revealed that teachers were not using the communicative approach in teaching the learners.

Despite the various research works in communicative testing in Africa and Zambia in particular, there was still need to establish whether teachers in Zambian public schools were familiar with communicative techniques. This was so because most studies in Zambia have focused on the implementation of the communicative approach in the classroom and there is limited research on the teachers' use of the communicative testing techniques.

Methodology
The concurrent mixed design method used covered a total of 38 respondents. Seven secondary schools were sampled and a total of 31 class teachers and 7 heads of department took part in the study. Data was collected both qualitatively and quantitatively. Questionnaires were distributed to the teachers and interviews with heads of department were held.

Target Population
The target population in this study was all the teachers of English language in Lusaka District.

Research Area and Participants
The study covered seven (7) secondary schools in Lusaka District and a total of 38 respondents were sampled. Simple random sampling was used to come up with the secondary schools while class teachers and heads of department were purposefully sampled.

Research Instruments
1. Open ended questionnaires: The researcher distributed open ended questionnaires to the sampled teachers in the respective schools.
2. Interview Guides: The researcher used interview guides when interviewing the heads of departments.
3. Focus Group Discussion Guide: Focus group discussions guides were used in order to have directed, meaningful and result yielding focus group discussions.
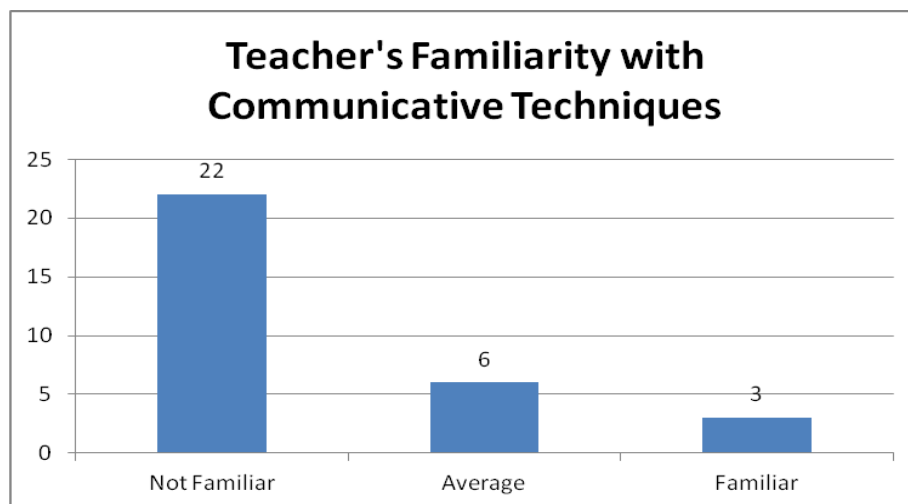
Data Analysis
Data was analysed using themes that were generated from research objectives. Excel was used to generate charts and graphs.

Findings
In terms of familiarity with communicative testing techniques, the findings revealed that the majority of the teachers were not familiar with communicative techniques.

Figure 1

As figure 1 shows, only 3 of the 31 teachers involved in this study indicated that they were familiar with communicative techniques while 22 of the 31 teachers indicated that they were not familiar with communicative techniques while 6 indicated average understanding.

During the focus group discussions, most teachers indicated that they were not familiar with communicative testing techniques. One teacher said:

> *I am not familiar with the techniques though I know that there is communicative teaching…but in terms of testing I am not sure of how the communicative approach can be applied.*

On the definition of communicative testing, it was revealed that most of the teachers were not able to define communicative testing. The chart below shows teachers' responses on the definition of communicative tests.

Figure 2
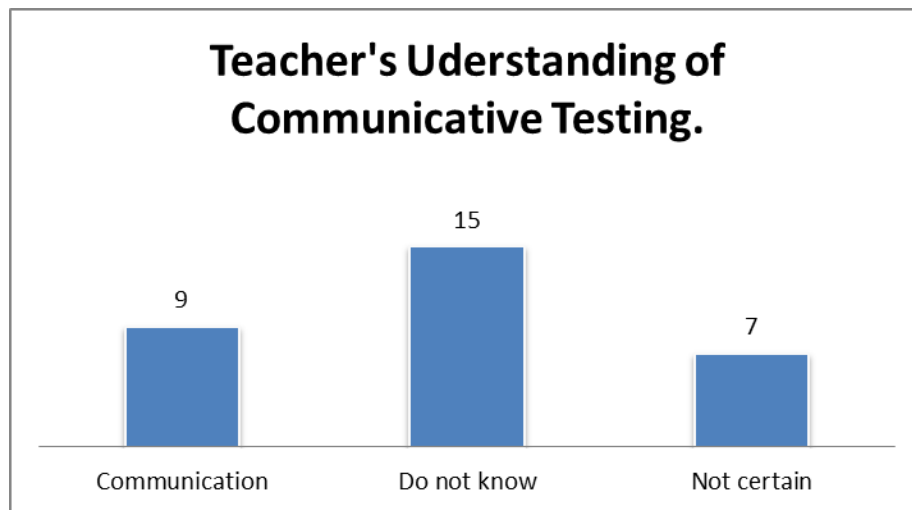
The majority of the teachers did not understand communicative testing. From the 38 respondents, 15 indicated that they did not know what communicative testing was, 7 were not certain and 9 said it was about testing communication. Further, most teachers could not state what communicative language testing was during the focus group discussions. Some of them thought that it had come with the new curriculum. One of the teachers said:

> *It is important for policy makers to train teachers before they introduce these things. The new curriculum has come with a lot of things but the sad part is that us the teachers are not considered because we just see things coming!*

During the interviews most heads of department could also not define communicative testing. One of them said:

> *Mmhh! to tell you the truth you make me feel like am being tested. Communicative testing…? I don't understand clearly but I think the word*

> *communicative comes from the word communication but communicative*
> *testing in relation to testing the learners? Mmhh! am not sure!*

Secondly, the study sought to establish whether the teachers were familiar with the characteristics of communicative tests. The graph below shows the responses the teachers gave and the subsequent number of teachers that gave the answer.

Figure 3
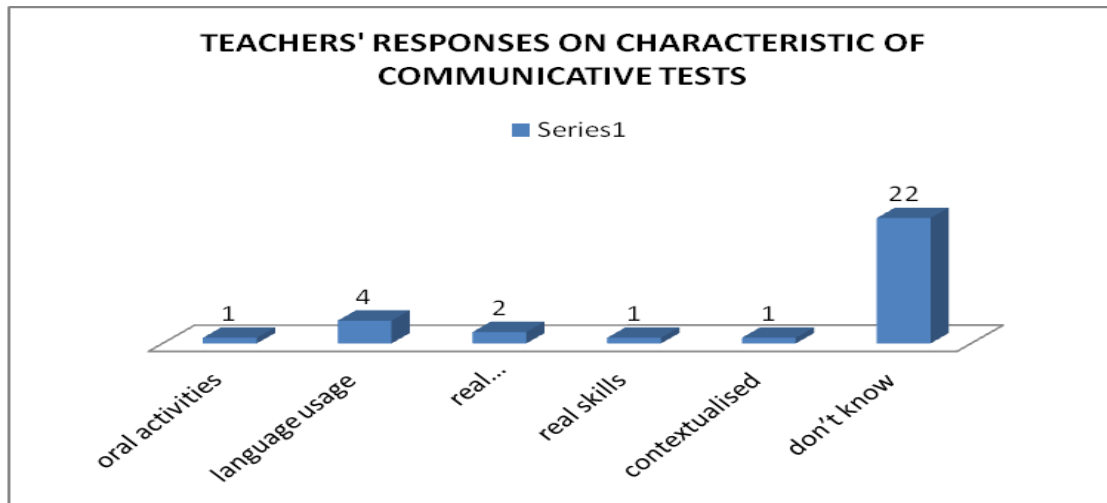
Most of the teachers were also not able to mention characteristics of communicative tests. As the graph shows, 22 of the 31 teachers said they did not know any characteristic of communicative tests. However, others were able to mention some of the characteristics. One of the teachers said that; "The characteristic maybe is that these tests are based on communication, as in whether the learner is able to grasp the given information be it in speaking or writing".

In addition, most of the HODs were also not able to state the characteristics. One of the teachers said; "I don't know I wouldn't want to lie, this is new to me".

On the difference between communicative tests and other types of tests, most teachers were not able to state the difference. Equally, of the 7 heads of department, only one mentioned communication as a characteristic of communicative tests while the rest did not give any. In responding, one of the teachers said:

> *The problem is that I don't know how these tests are prepared. Therefore, it is*
> *difficult for me to state the difference.*

Others observed that approaches at school level were not emphasized especially in language testing. One of the teachers said; "Approaches are not emphasized at school level which makes it easy for us to forget these things when we leave college".

Teachers' test tasks also revealed that they were not using communicative techniques in language test construction. Most tasks were multiple choice tasks especially for structure and comprehension. Further, the tasks could only measure learners' ability to form grammatically correct sentences and could not be used to measure a learner's ability to communicate in a real communicative situation. Additionally, learners were not allowed to produce language in the tests because they were provided with limited writing opportunities. The diagram below summarises the commonalities found in the sample tests.

GRADE 10   GRADE 11   GRADE 12

Grammar, Multiple choice questions and Limited language production.
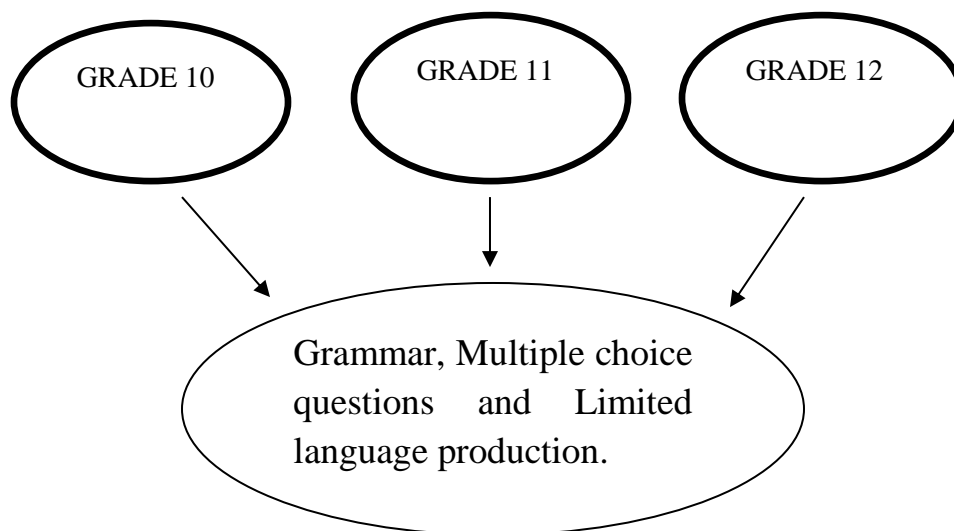
Discussion
The findings revealed that teachers were not familiar with communicative testing. The teachers were equally not using the recommended techniques in testing the learners as can be seen from the findings. An approach offers a framework on which both teaching and testing are based. Teachers' lack of familiarity with communicative techniques, therefore, means that the tests lack clear objectives in relation to what the communicative approach recommends. This fact contrasts with the argument that the teaching and testing techniques should be in tandem (NRLC, 2004). Most scholars have further reiterated the need to set clear objectives in language testing. According to Nguyen (2012), the test makers must clearly state what they expect the test takers to perform when they use a target language in a particular context. Setting clear objectives in language testing can help improve the teaching process.

Learners' performance in language tests can indicate whether the teaching and learning objectives were being met or not. However, in this situation, recommended techniques were not being followed and the test results could not be used to foretell the learners' future performance or to improve the teaching process. This is in view of the fact that teachers were not familiar with the recommended techniques. Apart from failing to define communicative language testing, teachers also expressed uncertainty on other aspects of communicative testing such as construction,

difference between communicative tests and other tests, characteristics of communicative tests and also the purpose of communicative tests.

In relation to other studies, this revelation is in agreement with the findings of another study carried out in Malaysia by Pumtha and Bin Embi in 2014 where it was revealed that the teachers investigated reflected uncertainty concerning the principles of communicative testing. However, the findings contradict on the aspect of teachers' familiarity with the communicative teaching approach. Whereas 90% of the teachers investigated in Pumtha and Bin Embi's study were familiar with the principles of the communicative teaching approach, the majority of the teachers in this study were unfamiliar with both communicative testing techniques and the teaching approach itself.

Pumtha and Bin Embi's findings, therefore, mean that familiarity with communicative teaching approach might not necessarily translate into familiarity with communicative testing techniques. This means that training for teachers should be adequate in both communicative teaching and testing so that teachers can be equipped with the necessary skills recommended by the approach.

Apart from that, this study also revealed that most teachers in schools did not see the need to use approaches, as a serious undertaking. Most teachers and heads of department interviewed indicated that approaches in language testing were not emphasized at secondary school level. One of the teachers said: "the last time I heard about approaches was when I was at college and I have forgotten almost all I learnt relating to approaches because it's not emphasised at school level." This, however, is despite the Zambian Secondary School Language Syllabus clearly giving guidelines on the approaches to be used when teaching the learners. Additionally, under its objectives, the syllabus clearly states that it aims at 'producing a learner who would communicate effectively and appropriately in English in various social contexts, including those involving topical issues.' Further, most teachers were not in a position to mention the approaches they used in testing the learners. They only indicated that they used a mixture of approaches. One of the teachers said: "we don't use one approach, all I can say is that we use a mixture of approaches but I cannot specify them." This means that teachers were generally not familiar with approaches and that they didn't consider such aspects when constructing language tests.

Teachers' lack of familiarity with communicative techniques means that the learners were being disadvantaged on many fronts. One of them is that they were not being exposed to the tasks they will be expected to perform in the real world. Many scholars have pointed out that communicative language tasks should be closer to what the learners will experience in real life. Canale and Swain (1981) suggested that communicative testing must not only deal with what the learner knows about the second language and about how to use it but also to what extent a learner is able to actually demonstrate this knowledge in a meaningful communicative situation. In line with this, therefore, teachers' language tests should aim at producing leaners that will be able to communicate in actual communicative situations or perform using the language they are learning.

Teachers' lack of familiarity with communicative testing also casts question marks on the quality of training being conducted by most teacher training colleges. Most of the teachers in the study indicated that they had not adequately been trained in both communicative teaching and testing.

Although the majority said they had learnt about communicative teaching during training, they were quick to mention that the training was in brief and not enough to enable them to master the approach. There is, thus, need to develop courses in language testing that will help the teachers to develop skills that will help them construct language tests that will test learners' language abilities. This will further help to produce teachers who will not only have understanding of the language but align their language tests to the teaching approach.

As already outlined, communicative competence in language testing refers to aspects such as learners' ability to apply and use grammatical rules, form correct utterances and use these utterances appropriately. An assessment of teachers' test tasks, therefore, sought to establish whether the teachers' tests presented learners with tasks that tested their communicative competence. As the findings revealed, teachers mostly used multiple choice tasks to test learners' language abilities. This was evidence that teachers were not following communicative techniques in constructing learners' tests. Many scholars have given guidelines on how communicative tests should be constructed. To begin with, communicative testing is about meaningful communication. This means that learners should be tested on whether they are able to comprehend and respond appropriately in a real communicative situation (Miyata and Langham, 2000). It has been argued that multiple choice tasks create a gap between real life situation and the test tasks (Cardoso, 1998). This is so because under a real communicative situation, learners will not be given options of what to say or how to respond. However, they will be required to respond appropriately to the situation.

Therefore, the multiple choice tasks that teachers were using could not effectively test learners' ability to communicate. The tasks were not a reflection of what the learners would face in real communication. They could thus not be used to foretell what learners could do with language in a real communicative situation. Further, most items tested learners' knowledge (linguistic competence) of the language and not the communicative competence. For examples, the two questions below required learners to choose the correct prepositions from the ones provided.

> *Part B: Circle the correct answer (structure)*
>
> 11. Life is difficult………………lazy people
>
>   A) with   B) to C) for D) on
>
> 12. She told us it was a simple problem……………her.

Additionally, teachers' lack of familiarity with communicative testing means that there is a gap between the test tasks learners face and the real life communicative situations. Like earlier stated, communicative tasks should be closer to real life situations. However, if communicative techniques are not followed, it means that there is a gap between what learners will face in real life and the tasks they are given (Cardoso, 1998).

Conclusion
The study revealed that teachers were not familiar with communicative testing and that they were not using communicative techniques in constructing tests. The study has further established that

teachers were unfamiliar with all aspects of communicative tests. Apart from that, it was revealed that approaches to language teaching and testing were not emphasized at school level and that teachers were not adequately trained in communicative testing. Finally, the study also established that teachers were not aware of the approaches they were using in testing the learners and that they widely used past papers to guide them.

Recommendations

Language testing is an important undertaking because a learner's future performance can be foretold using the different tasks he/she is given. Teachers should use recommended techniques in testing learners so that there is no gap between the test tasks and the real life situations. The findings of this study revealed that teachers were not familiar with the communicative testing techniques recommended in Zambian schools. In order to achieve the desired goals in language testing, the study recommended the following:

1. The training that teachers undergo in communicative teaching, testing and language testing in general should be adequate and more practical.

2. Courses in language testing and communicative testing in particular should be developed so that trainee teachers are exposed to the recommended techniques.

3. Teacher training institutions should work hand in hand with secondary schools to enhance In-service teacher training.

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