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## Item Changes of NMET: A Mirror of Its Communicativeness<sup>①</sup>

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### Abstract

Starting with a brief review of communicative testing, the author focuses on communicative language ability and the communicative testing model by Bachman. The working definition of communicativeness is then presented. Based on the reviewed literature, the communicativeness of NMET is analyzed in the highlight of its item changes from 1995-2003 in depth from both macro and micro perspectives. The results indicate that NMET tends to be more communicativeness-oriented. In the end, suggestions for the in-depth reform of NMET are proposed.

**Key words:** item changes; NMET; communicative language ability; communicativeness; communicative testing

The communicative approach has been increasingly valued and conducted in present English classroom teaching. The National Matriculation English Test (NMET), as a basically effective way to evaluate both teaching and learning outcomes, has also taken on a new look in different light in order to match such a prevailing teaching approach. The most notable feature

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lies in, undoubtedly, its communicativeness. Therefore, NMET in some sense is a kind of communicative testing (CT).

## 1. Communicative Testing: A Brief Review

In the late 1960s, some experts on language testing, such as Spolsky and Upshur *et al.* claimed to establish a new kind of testing to assess the examinees' communicative language ability (CLA) (Briere, 1969: 333-337). In the 1970s, the early development stage of CT, many applied linguists, for example, Levine (1976) and Morrow (1979), propose more systematic theoretical CT model. For language testing, the 1980s could be characterized as the decade of "communicative" testing (Bachman, 1991: 677). The 1990s witnessed the maturity of CT, which was symbolized with the extended CLA model by Bachman.

## 2. Communicative Language Ability (CLA)

CLA was firstly proposed by Hymes in 1972. He presents four components of CLA: possibility; feasibility; appropriateness and occurrence (Hymes, 1972: 281). Canale and Swain develops Hymes' CLA model and depicts the CLA with the following four aspects: grammatical competence; sociolinguistic competence; textual competence and strategic competence (Canale and Swain, 1980; Canale, 1983). Although Canale and Swain's CLA model didn't explore the inner-relationship between different components in depth (Han, 2000: 48), yet it can be observed that the language competence is no longer restricted to the linguistic competence and more elements related to using the language in communication within a certain cultural context should be rendered more considerations. In 1996, Bachman drew a new picture of CLA: an extended model.

### 2.1 Bachman's extended CLA model

CLA can be described as consisting of both knowledge, or competence

the capacity for implementing, or executing that competence in appropriate, contextualized communicative language use. The framework of CLA includes three components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms.

Language competence comprises, essentially, a set of specific knowledge components that are utilized in communication via language. It includes organizational competence, which consists of grammatical and textual competence, and pragmatic competence, which consists of illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence.

Strategic competence is the term to characterize the mental capacity for implementing the components of language competence. Strategic competence thus provides the means for relating language competencies to features of the context of situation in which language use takes place and to the language user's knowledge structures (sociocultural knowledge, "real-world" knowledge). It performs assessment, planning, and execution functions in determining the most effective means of achieving a communicative goal.

Psychophysiological mechanisms refer to the neurological and psychological processes involved in the actual execution of language as a physical phenomenon (sound, light) (Bachman, 1990: 84-108).

For language testing purposes, it is a must to consider language ability within an interactional framework of language use. So in 1996, Bachman and Palmer (1996: 63) presented a view of language ability, topical knowledge, and affective schemata, on the one hand, and how these interact with characteristics of the language use setting, or test task, on the other. Here, language ability covers language knowledge and strategic competence of CLA. Topical knowledge sometimes is referred to as knowledge, schemata or real-world knowledge (Bachman, 1991: 65). Affective schemata can be thought of as the affective or emotional correlates of topical knowledge (*ibid.*). Personal characteristics are individual attributes that are part of test takers' language ability but which may still influence their