

Review

English Language Teaching is an Assessment and Natural Approaches to the language learners with Theory and Practice

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Language testing at any level is a highly complex undertaking that must be based on theory as well as practice. A language assessment system focusing only on Reading and Writing is outmoded and need to be modified, especially in this electronic era when the oral skills are dominating other skills. This paper analyses various techniques employed in language testing and examines the guiding principles of assessment. It investigates the assessment systems followed at CBSE, SSC, ICSE, IGCSE and the undergraduate levels. It advocates the urgency of assessing all the four skills which will be beneficial for students of different levels of intelligence. The Four Skill Assessment and Alternative Assessments are suggested remedies for improving the standard of English amongst the students.

Keywords: Language learners, scope of the language, approaches, assessment, Natural thoughts of the language employer's.

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INTRODUCTION

When students learn English as a Second Language, they face various problems. These problems can be partially categorized as problems caused by mother tongue interference and partially those caused by the method of language teaching and assessment. The greatest curse of the modern educational system is the lack of harmony between what is taught and what is tested. Up-to-date methods are implemented, curriculum is innovated but the questions remain traditional to the core. Most of the questions asked in the Communicative English paper focus on the rules and regulations; practical oriented questions are ignored. Students naturally study with the purpose of scoring good grades in the exam. They are not concerned about the

practicality of what they are studying.

In this context, four-skill assessment plays a vital role. Unfortunately, the English language teaching in the school level and even at the college level gives importance to Reading and Writing and neglects Listening and Speaking.

Only when the four skills are tested independently, the purpose of language learning will be fulfilled. Testing is an integral part of the curriculum. Even though students are nervous and curious of exams, they will not be happy with a course which provides a pass certificate to all those who have attended a course. Graduates passing

out of a university should be able to communicate in oral and written English. This would be possible only if the test is designed in a systematic manner. Tests help teachers to measure the progress of their students. Through tests, teachers can find out if their teaching has been effective. Tests help teachers to discriminate between good and bad learners. Tests provide proper feedback to the learners and understand their progress. Based on the feedback from the tests curriculum designers can modify or change the curriculum. Moreover tests serve as the tool for the researchers. There are mainly two techniques employed in testing. They are objective and subjective. The questions which fall under the objective category are true/false, multiple choice, matching, completion, rearrangement, transformation etc. The subjective questions are short answers, translation, interview, essay etc (Balasubramaniam, 1987; Fazili, 2007; Heaton, 1995; Lloyd et al, 2005; Richards and Rodgers, 2001; Saraswathi, 1998).

Heterogeneity of the classroom is a common problem that most teachers face. Handling a mixed ability class is not easy because each student has his own interest, attitudes, level of intelligence, learning style and linguistic background knowledge. So the teachers should conduct continuous assessments and individualise them as much as possible. The test should be congenial to all students. A good test should have certain guiding principles. They are validity, reliability, practicability, security, wash back and transparency.

i. **Validity:** A communicative language learning approach must be matched by communicative language testing. It should also have face validity which means that the test should measure what it is supposed to measure. It should also have content validity.

ii. **Reliability:** Reliability suggests the consistency of the test scores. The result of a test should be the same if it is conducted at any other time. There should be consistency in the format content.

iii. **Practicality:** The practicality of the test can be obtained only when the tests are marked and the students are given proper feedback.

iv. **Security:** It is part of both reliability and validity.

v. **Wash back:** It refers to the effect of testing on teaching and learning. The students accomplish the desired result when they perceive the tests are markers of their progress.

vi. **Transparency:** Students should be provided clear, accurate information which is known as transparency.

vii. **Usefulness:** It is an important quality of testing.

A good test should stick on to all the above mentioned features. A language assessment should stick on to the four skills. If the assessment is confined to one or two skills, we will not recognise the skill in which a student excels or in which he/ she keeps a low level of performance.

Four skill assessments will be beneficial for students of different intelligence level. When the four skills are tested independently, the purpose of language learning will be fulfilled. Each student will understand in which skill she excels and in which one she requires improvement. It is necessary to explore the language assessment system presently followed in the Grade X of CBSE (Central Board of Secondary Education), Kerala State syllabus –SSC (Secondary School Leaving Certificate), ICSE (Indian Certificate of Secondary Education) and IGCSE (International General Certificate of Secondary Education) Curriculum of University of Cambridge. While IGCSE tests the four skills, CBSE gives priority to written skills: Reading and Writing.

Hence, after 10 years of English language learning, to perform marvelously in an interview or a job by conversing in good English, students need to join some spoken English classes. They may be excellent in writing but the first impression of a man is formed through the words he utters rather than the words he writes.

Assessments in SSC, CBSE, ICSE & IGCSE.

In SSLC examination, there is only one paper in English. It includes questions from poem, passages, supplementary reader and language elements. In short, it gives importance to Reading and Writing; Listening and Speaking are neglected.

In CBSE there is only one paper in English; it consists of four sections:

Section A: Reading

Section B: Writing

Section C: Grammar

Section D: Literature

The focus is given on literature and writing. LS are not assessed. Literature can be considered as a comprehension passage given in advance to the

students, the answer to which can be memorised even by weak students. It rarely gives any chance for skill development. Any student who mugs up the literature section will be able to get through the English examination.

a) **English-I** is for two hours. There will be 4 broad questions.

- A composition of 450 to 500 words
- A letter
- An unseen passage and related questions
- Questions to test grammar

English – II is also for two hours, but purely based on literature

- Section – A
- Section – B
- Section – C
- Section D

In IGCSE E2L students have to face three English examinations in 10th grade:

Oral Communication: The students are given a test card based on which they have to converse with examiner for nearly 15 minutes.

Reading and Writing: Students have to comprehend passages, brochures, advertisements etc. which they have to do in their daily life too. Moreover they must do some creative writing in this paper.

Listening: Students have to listen to the audio clippings and answer the questions provided in the question paper

If a child fails to obtain the minimum standard in any of these 3 papers in English, he will not be provided a pass certificate. Students may choose Core or Extended Paper depending on their calibre. The Core Paper is easier than the Extended Paper.

In IGCSE oral communication examination, there are 3 phases.

Phase-1: Warm-up.

Candidate is asked a few questions about herself/himself, the school etc. to give her/ him time to get used to the

exam situation. This phase is not marked.

Phase-2: Initial Task.

The test card is given to the candidate to go through the instructions. The candidate is given a few minutes to prepare for the task. He/she is not supposed to make any written notes.

Phase-3: Development.

The candidate discusses his/her ideas and suggestion with the examiner.

In the undergraduate level, the curriculum has been revised and kept in balance with the international standard. The common course of the University of Calicut, A01:

Communication Skills in English are aimed at the development of the four skills of the students. But unfortunately in the real sense it tests only writing. The main emphasis of the syllabus is the use of language in communicative situations. Some of the questions asked are purely based on theory: a) what is group discussion? b) What are the dos and don'ts of group discussion? c) What is communication? Students can prove their mettle if questions aid them in involving in imaginary debate or discussion on a particular topic like 'Can computers replace teachers?'. The questions like 'Analyse the character of Macbeth' or 'Write a critical appreciation of Ode to the West Wind' will not be that much beneficial for students in their real life.

The real problem of English Language Teaching lies in the assessment system followed. The international standard in the assessment is compromised because of the constraints of time, energy and money. Assessment in many parts of the world has focused primarily on high stake examination. Writing a three hour theory examination is of no significance. Instead of that Alternative Assessments can be employed. Alternative Assessment is a non-conventional ongoing strategy involving both student and teacher in making judgments about the students' progress. It is different from traditional standardized testing. The principal aim of Alternative Assessment is to gather data about how students are processing and completing authentic tasks in the target language. Question paper should not be prepared during the last hour. Much care and attention should be given in the setting of the question paper so that it really tests the skills of the students rather than their memory.

The traditional tests are based on recall and reproduction where as Alternative Assessment asks students to show what they can do. It is unfortunate that even the pattern of NET/JRF examinations, the competitive examinations of University Grants

Commission, is restructured and gives opportunities only to those students who can memorise the answers. The students are not given a chance to exhibit their language proficiency. The evaluation is based on what the students can integrate and produce. The important techniques employed in Alternative Assessment are Self-Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, Student Designed Test, Learner Centered Assessment, Project, Presentations.

Stages in a course

Portfolio Assessment: Portfolios are collections assembled by both teacher and student. It contains a variety of work in various stages.

Student Designed Test: It results in greater learner awareness of course content, test format and test strategies.

Learner Centered Assessment: Students can select themes, formats and marking schemes to be used.

Projects: Projects are content based. It requires individual or group work. It can be a poster, brochure, display or many other options.

Presentations: It is a real life skill that gives learners an opportunity to address socio-cultural aspects of communication. It helps them to use appropriate register and discourse.

The communicative approach has introduced radical changes in syllabus, methodology and curriculum design. But evaluation has not gone through any practical change. The future of testing holds out great promises and challenges the whole process because if it moves in the right direction, the entire process of language learning will be benefited. The acquisition of oral skills would not be a problem for students of affluent families because

they get enough exposure to the language.

But the middle class category relies only on their school teaching and testing in order to strengthen their language skills. With the advent of globalization, English has become the language of opportunities and the main motivation for the language learner is to communicate successfully. Instead of teaching our students the toughest words which they hardly use in their daily life, my suggestion is to make language learning practical oriented. Or else, our students who have mastered Shakespeare will fail to comprehend an ordinary pamphlet and brochure and will be bewildered to speak in English, when they go for higher studies in Indian universities or abroad.

As the language acquisition device is more active during the young age. This will build up confidence of students who are good at listening and weak at other skills. The students who have poor listening skills will get a chance to improve their skill. In India, English links different states. Though it is a foreign language, it is widely used. One big hindrance in our students obtaining excellent jobs is lack of poor communication skills. Four-skill-assessment will improve English competency. It will increase job opportunities and promote tourism.

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