

Current Research in Language Assessment and its Implications for Language Teaching

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The layperson thinks that the syllabus and classroom teaching mould tests, for educational testing is meant to evaluate what is taught. But sometimes it appears as if the opposite is true, and that testing occupies a disproportionately large space in the curriculum. In the 1980s, a number of studies were conducted on the backwash effect of testing on teaching; it was felt that the nature of the test framework affected the nature of the learning aimed at and even coloured the interpretation of the syllabus. The nature of the test, thus, being crucial to the curriculum, requires that we devise the right kinds of tests.

Of course, testing often being the ultimate end of the game of education, and specific test frameworks adopted for a variety of administrative and other reasons, it is not easy to make changes in the format. Even research in testing has only a limited degree of influence on practice.

I shall start by giving a brief overview of the recent trends in language testing. The role of educational administrators in the choice of test patterns is very important. Also, the massive effort of teacher-training and retraining, has financial and administrative implications that make even slight alterations in the educational system almost impossible. However, with concerted planning and implementation, major changes can be made, as was achieved by the now almost forgotten 'Madras Snowball' English teaching experiment which the British Council launched in the 1940s, on a wide scale in South India. This experiment had a very positive impact on the levels of proficiency in

English. So, change can be implemented; why not try for it on at least a small scale?

Language testing has run the gamut between three approaches: i) what can be called 'traditional' testing, based on the grammar-translation approach to teaching; ii) the so-called 'scientific' approach to testing, somewhat pathetically called 'objective testing' based on the approach to teaching developed in the 50s and 60s called 'audio-lingual' and 'audio-visual'; and iii) more recent approaches based on what has been referred to as the 'socio-psycholinguistic' approach to language teaching. The first of these approaches to testing considers language as a fixed set of rules and the use of language mainly as an exemplification of these rules. Typical test elements include: changing voice from active to passive, changing speech from direct to indirect, inserting prepositions, articles and other such small grammatical items in given blanks in sentences. From these highly controlled activities there is a leap to 'global' questions such as answering comprehension questions on unseen passages, summary/précis writing and essay writing.

The second type of approach to testing attempts scientific precision. Since the earlier type of testing was considered unreliable because of assessor bias, tests were devised so that there was only one correct answer to each question. Thus, the so-called 'objective testing', particularly in its most popular form, the multiple-choice format, was born. In this, typically, a sentence or sentence fragment was given, and four different responses were

provided out of which the candidate chose one. These exercises usually focused on grammatical correctness.

This approach required students to discriminate between responses and select one, rather than thinking about the question and produce an independent response. Nor did it tap the student's knowledge of the language in context, or of realistic language use, but instead focused on grammar in isolation. Again, a factor which has consistently been ignored is that the writing of objective tests is an extremely complex and highly specialized task, requiring a great deal of pretesting and standardization if the test is to be fair to all the candidates. Unfortunately, the word 'objective' has lured everybody into thinking that it is a panacea to all test development problems and it has been widely used without any corresponding research on its validity.

What then can we offer by way of a good test? It is worth considering that if we need to assess language ability, we should be able to get evidence that the candidate can use the language in a natural or a semi-natural context, that is, be able to speak and understand oral speech, and read and write its written version. We should also be able to test whether the student can conduct a simple conversation, or write a short note with a reasonable degree of clarity. Surely, the function of language is to communicate information, and this should be done with intelligibility and appropriateness to the context.

The third type of approach to testing, called the 'socio-psycholinguistic' approach, is something we should take seriously. The sociolinguistic part of this test relates to the focus on language in context and awareness of dialectal variety and styles of speech.

The concept of 'language in context' is very important. Language occurs in context, only when one person is speaking/ writing to another and not in isolation as an example of sentence patterns. The relationship between the participants, whether there is a feeling of distance or familiarity between them, whether they are equal in status, or age, and so on, will influence the language used. Words will have to be chosen as per the conventions of politeness and the norms of cultural behaviour, which will make them appropriate to the context. It is important to understand that even grammatically correct language can give rise to great offence if these conventions are flouted.

The other aspect of the test, the psycholinguistic proficiency, relates to the way in which languages are learned by first language learners. From the 70s and 80s, much research has been done on the way first language learners acquire language and whether the processes of second language learners vary. Research indicates very clearly that there are two ways in which second language learning can proceed. In a formal classroom set-up, the focus is on grammar. While this seems to work with highly motivated persons, or those with a markedly academic bent of mind, the larger number of successful learners learn far better through informal contexts which focus on meaning and not grammar; they speak in context, just as a first language learner does, and thereby effortlessly internalize the grammar. Internalizing the grammar implies that the rules of grammar are unconsciously acquired. This enables the learner to generate plausible instances of language, which, instead of being empty grammatical vehicles, convey genuine content. We get a clear example of internalization in language learning by observing neighbours in a building. Hindi speakers living next to Tamilians, for example, have no

difficulty in acquiring Tamil, even though they have major problems learning English at school. It is necessary to recognize that Tamil is far more different from Hindi than English, for Tamil is not even an Indo-European language. Yet, when learnt informally, it seems easier for Hindi speakers to learn Tamil rather than English taught in a formal context.

The question that arises is how to build these insights into the normal round of tests a learner has to undergo at school or college. Tests are what society requires as a proof of learning, and established patterns of measuring learning cannot be changed readily. In India, we have two different standards operating simultaneously. We expect students to demonstrate grammatical knowledge piecemeal on an English test, and take this as evidence of learning, but we also expect that people should be able to speak, listen, read and write in English, in order for us to say that they know English. For example, if an English-speaking foreigner asks someone the way to the station the person should be able to reply intelligibly, or understand the contents of a letter, or be able to draft a reply without just copying a similar letter from the past. The English test, however, does not correspond to the demands of the man on the street. It is just that we are not allowed to do anything different; the pattern is set. In order to make a change in the examination, students will have to be trained in a different manner; courses will have to be run differently and teachers trained accordingly. It is a gigantic task, not easily contemplated.

What then can one do? Fold one's hands and twiddle one's thumbs? Not quite. For one thing, the more awareness there is of what is truly required to test adequately, the more chances there are of changes taking place, even on a small scale. Other steps can also be taken by a committed teacher. Perhaps the ordinary

classroom tests can be moulded to measure ability more meaningfully, without the teacher getting into trouble. This could also certainly be done in the lower classes in school where students are not appearing for Board exams, or indeed, in private classes for teaching English. My approach may sound like an undercover operation, but it is difficult to take liberties with established test frameworks. Many things are of course, possible if the university or institution concerned is willing to take the chance. Before I suggest some small changes in the existing test framework that teachers could adopt on their own, let me outline two major projects that were officially launched in Maharashtra.

One of the projects relates to testing the 'Communication Skills in English' course in the First Year BA Programme at Mumbai University. As it involved thousands of students, it was a major project that required almost continuous teacher training in the early years. The test framework was unique, involving different levels in the same end-of-year exam. There were various levels of difficulty in terms of language, thought-content and the nature of the task. All the students were supposed to answer questions at each of the Levels, but it was expected that only the better students would be able to tackle the Level 3 questions, thus separating the better students from the weaker students in a principled way. Level 1 (which carried 50% of the marks) was geared towards the low achiever, and Level 2 was the in-between level. This was an attempt to take care of the wide range of levels of ability in English within Mumbai University, as it caters not only to a city like Mumbai but also the surrounding mofussil areas. It also ensured that the different groups all had their measure of challenge, hence not unduly sacrificing the good or the weak student.

The nature of the tasks set was also of a different kind. I shall deal with the tasks set in the initial version of the test, which remained virtually unchanged for about twenty years. There was a section each on Reading Comprehension, Summary Writing, and Composition. Reading had four unseen passages, two at Level 1, and one each at Levels 2 and 3. There was only one Level in Summary Writing and two levels in Composition. Another major departure from tradition was that the tasks and passages were entirely unseen, so that the content could not be memorized in advance. Students had to demonstrate genuine knowledge of the language in order to succeed. Again, the nature of the questions was markedly different. Each question was worded in such a way that the words in the question were entirely different from those in the passage. Having similar words is a standard trick that makes the answer fall into the lap of the student without his/her making the effort to comprehend it. Care was taken to ensure that the student had to genuinely understand the meaning of the text in order to get at the answer.

Moreover, being a reading test, an attempt was made to word questions in such a way that to answer them the students had to pick out words from the text. Hence, there could be a question such as: "There are 2 words in the text meaning 'beautiful'. State these." Students were not expected to produce their own language, which is a writing task, and even if they did, they were not penalized for incorrect grammar. Correctness of production was tested in the writing component. Another important dimension of the reading task was that it was expected to be a cognitive challenge – the right associations, links, judgments had to be made, which are factors of reading tasks.

It is also necessary to state that the reading tasks in this course involved a number of different cognitive skills. An analysis of the reading questions set for the Communication Skills course (Lukmani, 1982/1994) reveals that the questions demanded the following skills: recognition, identification, discrimination, analysis and interpretation. These skills represent a wide range of cognitive functioning and are routinely required in any genuine reading endeavour.

All this, has had to be stated very briefly (without dealing with the rest of the course), but a more comprehensive description of the reading questions mentioned here, with examples, is provided in the article mentioned above. In addition to this, there is, a detailed description of the course, and its evaluation that was conducted with the support of British Council, after 10 years of its functioning, in Lukmani (1995). The results, based on a study of students of different proficiencies, revealed an enormous progress in the English language ability in the course of a year, particularly in case of the weaker students. It is also interesting to know that at a seminar held in Ratnagiri around that time, teachers from mofussil colleges said that they wanted a course of this kind only to improve the level of their students. Insights into the types of questions used in this course, and documented in the articles mentioned, will give you an idea of what is possible to achieve even within the system. They will also indicate to you how the quality of learning in the classroom can be enhanced by having the right kind of tests as the end point of the course.

Another experiment in testing was initiated by Dr S.V. Sastry at Shivaji University, Kolhapur in Maharashtra in the 1980s and the 90s. Dr Sastry was following on from a research done in the 70s in the US and Britain,

where a wonder task/test had emerged called the Cloze test.

The Cloze test consisted of a passage where every nth word (e.g. the 5th or 7th word) was left blank, regardless of whether it was a function word or a content word. It was believed that if the student could fill the correct words in the blanks, he would demonstrate knowledge of the grammar as well as an understanding of what was being expressed in the text.

As Head of the Department of English at Shivaji University, Kolhapur, Dr Sastry introduced the cloze test in the First Year B.A. English examination. This was a major departure from tradition, and was continued as part of the University examination for about five years. In order to have lasted longer, and to have had the wide-spread salutary effect it was intended to have on classroom teaching, a great deal more teacher training needed to be done. Nevertheless it was a very bold step, and a genuine attempt at improving the system.

The above two experiments have been put forward to show that even extremely innovative changes are possible given the will to change things. But it is certainly possible to introduce some small changes in the test framework during classroom tests in order to provide avenues for greater learning. In order to do this, we must get students to realize that:

1. Language must be produced and understood at a certain pace. If it takes too long to read, write or understand the flow of speech/writing, they cannot use language properly in any natural setting.
2. Language has to be learnt and produced in context, so notions of cultural specificity and appropriateness are important. Equally important is the improvisation of situations

in the classroom which approximate to real life.

3. Perhaps most important of all is that what the students say must be intelligible, in both speech and writing, or else they will be producing not language but nonsense constructions, even though the grammar may be beautifully formed. An important aspect of intelligibility is connectedness of ideas, and linkages provided in the language, or what is known in literature as 'coherence' and 'cohesion'. Control over these aspects will certainly help in achieving intelligibility.

I would like to suggest some tests which can measure development in these three areas. These test types can also serve as tasks in the classroom. These tests are:

1. Speed/ fluency tests

Speed Reading gets the eyes to move, and focus on the meaning of the whole passage, and not get tied up in knots over individual words and expressions that they can't understand. For this, only very broad questions can be set, in perhaps a True/False format, to test the global level of comprehension, and a calculation of the reading speed be measured as a measure of progress in speed.

Writing for fluency

In this test, the students are made to write briefly (say for five minutes) on any topic. The objective of fluency writing is simply to get the pen moving – a seemingly impossible task for many students. Nothing is to be tested - not meaningfulness, not connectedness, not grammar. The students can write on anything they choose - and they generally choose topics

very close to their lives – the only condition being that they don't raise their pens from the paper. Having tried this task extensively at all levels of proficiency, from beginners to research students, I can claim that after the first five minutes of writing, it is difficult to get students to stop writing. They begin to enjoy the process immensely.

Speaking for fluency

This is similar to writing for fluency, in that there is production of text without a pause. Students have to speak to their neighbour for five minutes. Once again they are not corrected for anything, not pronunciation, not grammar, not ideas. The sole objective is to build their confidence, their pace of speaking and their ability to carry on speaking. Students are always pleasantly surprised to discover how much they can say in English!

2. Focusing on connectedness of ideas and linkages in language

There are so many possible exercises for focusing on connectedness of ideas and linkages in language, however I shall suggest just a few. I can, however, refer the interested reader to the long list of exercises (in all the skills) that I have proposed, along with examples, in Lukmani (1996). Some of these are as follows:

- i) Combining a given pair of sentences in order to indicate the kind of relationship: comparison- contrast, causal link, etc.
- ii) 'Unjumbling' a jumbled paragraph. The sentences of a paragraph are presented in a random order and the student has to put them back in the original order. This involves knowledge of the rhetorical development of ideas as well of the

linguistic signals which indicate these relationships.

- iii) Editing unsuitable passages of student writing/journalistic writing/office correspondence to improve the rhetorical patterning.
- iv) Creating a coherent passage from a collection of different bits of information.
- v) Adding the given pieces of information to a passage. Deciding where and how to insert these from the point of view of appropriate organization.
- vi) A paragraph is presented to the student. He/she is asked to imagine the situation in which it occurs, and write a suitable beginning and end for it.

3. Appropriateness to context

The easiest way to function in a context is through role play, i.e. by students enacting a scene. It is not a daunting task if done without any words initially, and can also prove to be great fun. In the second round, the same role play can be done but now with the words added. For this test, familiar situations can be chosen, e.g. the student asking his mother for permission to go out and the mother refusing permission, saying that he has to stay back to study. The language in the same basic situation will be different if an elder brother was to refuse the younger the right to go out. Another example could be from an employer-employee encounter when the boss is accusing his junior of not doing his work properly. Any number of such situations can be used and each time the language will differ depending on the relationship, the difference in social status, the nature of the topic, etc.

Another important area is that of feedback, or correction of errors. However, this is a matter of assessment, and not testing, even though it is impossible to separate it from testing.

Teachers may conscientiously wish to correct everything that is not right, but they should also consider the impact of the correction on the learner. If the learner is constantly told that everything he produces is not correct, he is likely to become too diffident to try to improve. That is why it is important to have fluency exercises where no correction is done. Another approach could be that of limited, focused correction, where only one feature is selected and corrected.

Finally, test patterns have to change and teaching has to correspondingly improve so that the student has a chance to learn in the language classroom. Even in a small way teachers can institute some change in the classroom, and then perhaps this could lead to larger changes in the system.

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