

English Language Assessment for Social Justice: Teachers' Voices from Multilingual Classrooms

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Abstract

The article reviews a research study on a group of teachers teaching in primary grades with the objective of exploring their perspectives on assessment of English in multilingual classrooms. Through in-depth interviews, the study attempted to investigate and bring to the forefront some of the relevant and pressing concerns pertaining to this theme. The findings of the study suggest that assessment practices are primarily monolingual and the use of students' home language in English language assessment is unacceptable, especially in written tasks. While formative assessment affords a little flexibility, summative assessment is more rigid in this regard. Through the lens of social justice, such assessment practices appear to divest students of a crucial and powerful tool of thought which spells academic disaster for them. This makes teachers adopt a conventional approach towards assessment which aligns more with an attitude of language purism as far as the written text is concerned.

Keywords: Multilingualism, English language assessment, social justice

Introduction

India is a multilingual and a multicultural country. In fact, multilingualism (or 'Multilinguality') is the reality and norm in most countries across the world (Agnihotri, 2010). Theoretically, it has been acknowledged that students' home language is a resource worthy of being accommodated and used in language classrooms (Agnihotri, 1995; Mohanty, 2017).

These theoretical findings have received support in the form of policy recommendations. National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 emphasises the need to teach students in their home languages to help them

gain foundational literacy and numeracy. Prior to that, the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 position paper on Teaching of English recommended the use of students' mother tongue as a resource to teach English, as per their needs.

Emphasising the pivotal role of language(s) in education, Agnihotri (1995) puts forward the view that language is at the centre of all education enterprises. This underscores the all-encompassing nature of language in education and the crucial role language(s) play in determining the academic success (and failure) of students. Although changes in pedagogy of language(s) are being called for in order to make the teaching-learning process more inclusive, the question of assessment of language(s), especially English, in a multilingual classroom is not addressed sufficiently. Considering the 'washback effect' (Green, 2013) of assessment on teaching-learning processes, research in the area of English language assessment becomes imperative to pave the way for a tangible shift from old methods of teaching English.

Given the above, it becomes crucial to delve deep into the issues related to assessment of the English language, since it is perceived as the language of upward social mobility and therefore the language people aspire to learn. In India, it is also a marker of one's identity as "educated" and belonging to a certain social class.

The study aimed to know i) teachers' perspectives on assessment of English language in primary grades, ii) the strategies used by them to assess English in their classrooms, and iii) teachers' views on assessment practices vis-à-vis multilingual classrooms.

Theoretical Framework

Language, as delineated by Agnihotri (2014), is a fluid entity with boundaries between languages being porous. This conceptualisation of language explains to a great extent how they interact with each other and how they are learnt. Within the social constructivist paradigm, as children learn, they construct and co-construct meanings of the world around them often with the help of necessary scaffolds. In the context of language learning, especially in a multilingual society, this scaffold is provided by the home language(s) to facilitate language learning at school.

While highlighting the importance of students' home languages in

education and specifically in learning other languages, Cummins (2009) delineates the psycholinguistic benefits of multilingual education. Elaborating on this, he describes the process of transfer of learning which happens between languages when the second or more languages are learnt. It is the knowledge of the first language which builds the foundation for learning more languages. Being already equipped with the sounds and structures of one language, students learn more languages with the help of adequate meaningful inputs provided by an encouraging and enabling environment. Metalinguistic awareness is another benefit of multilingual education that Cummins emphasises. When students learn languages, whether one after the other or simultaneously, they often notice aspects of different languages as they compare and contrast them. This metalinguistic awareness helps them establish interlanguage connections and develop an enhanced understanding of languages. The greater the awareness about a language, the greater the ability to engage with it. Learning multiple languages also increases one's cognitive flexibility which facilitates an easier switch between languages and helps students use languages with little effort. Keeping the above in mind in the context of teaching and learning of English, it would certainly be more beneficial if students' home language(s) are used as a scaffold to facilitate the learning of English.

In the Indian context, where most students do not use English as their home language, learning English at school without adequate support of the home language poses a huge challenge which often becomes insurmountable for them. Pedagogy of dominant languages such as English which often disregards the home language(s) of students, runs the potential risk of leaving both students and their languages marginalised. Such a teaching and learning process is not only futile but also unfair as perceived from the framework of social justice which argues for greater diversity and therefore inclusion of more languages in the academic space (Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). The influence of globalisation has also been promoting language homogenisation to meet the requirements of job markets created by multinational companies, further posing a threat to language diversity, especially the minority languages (Agnihotri, 2009; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2009). Considering the centrality of language in education, such approaches towards language and language teaching force students out of an education system which appears meaningless and biased against them.

Design of the Study

The participants of the study consisted of fifteen teachers teaching in primary grades in government schools of Delhi. Since teachers teaching in schools work at the grassroot level in any education system, capturing their experiences, perspectives and voices becomes highly important. Categorising English medium schools into different types, Mohanty (2017) explains that teachers teaching English in 'elite English-medium private schools' and 'high-cost English-medium private schools' often have the parental support for language input, relevant resources and therefore have students who already have at least some basic proficiency in English language. However, students studying in low-cost English medium schools and government schools often come from impoverished backgrounds and do not have the 'cultural capital' required to learn English successfully and perform well in English assessment tasks.

Since the study attempted to explore teachers' subjective experiences and perspectives on assessment, it was deemed appropriate to situate the study in a qualitative paradigm. In view of this, in-depth interviews were conducted with each participant with the help of a semi-structured interview schedule. Some of the themes addressed in the interview schedule included: assessment practices followed in school; type of tasks included in the tests; problems faced by students and teachers; factors affecting students' performance; assessment of English in a multilingual classroom.

Key Findings

The findings of the study highlight some very pertinent issues regarding assessment of English at primary level. All the participants in the study admitted to following assessment practices as recommended by the governing body of the school. Formative assessments are conducted during each term and summative assessments are conducted at the end of each term. Formative assessment tasks used by the participants include both oral and written tasks which the participants pitch at an easier level to help their students successfully complete the tasks. Summative assessment tasks follow a set pattern and syllabus as prescribed by the school's governing body. As reported by the participants, formative assessment gave them some autonomy with respect to the choice of tasks and criteria for marking. As one teacher informed us, "*Formative*

assessment mein to hum apne hisaab se manage kar lete hain" [In formative assessment, we manage as per our convenience and requirement]. Another teacher shared that "*formative assessment mein koi bandish nahi hoti*" [There are no restrictions in formative assessment]. All participants also admitted to being more "lenient" and accepting of students' home language in formative assessment as they felt that there was no strict external surveillance in formative assessment. This was more so in the case of oral formative assessment tasks. However, they were cautious about accepting students' home languages in written tasks. Out of all the participants, only two accepted the use of students' home language in written formative assessment tasks. As one of them informed, "*class tests mein agar students kuch apne ghar ki bhasha mein bhi bol dete hain ya likh dete hain to hum usko correct maan lete hain. Kam se kam bachche ne answer to diya. Final exam mein aise nahi kar sakte*" [In class tests even if students respond in their home language, we consider it correct. At least the students responded. This cannot be done in final exams]."

The responses of the participants validated the written word and the fact that the use of an important scaffold in the form of one's home language and by extension as a tool for thinking was unacceptable in summative English language assessment. As one participant remarked, "*Ab exam mein written answer mein to Hindi ya koi aur bhasha nai chal sakti na?*" [The use of Hindi or any other language cannot be accepted in a written response for an exam], when asked about the usage of home language in written tasks during summative assessment. Interestingly, the participants agreed unanimously to the important role played by home language, (Hindi in this case), in teaching English and admitted that without it, teaching English would not be feasible. All the participants agreed to using Hindi while teaching English which all students in their class understood, though many of them had other home languages as well. However, the important resource which the students and teachers use in performing other classroom activities is rendered completely invalid during summative assessment of English. Due to this, as reported by the participants, there are instances when students leave their answer scripts blank or need cues and prompts from their teachers to attempt various tasks. As can be inferred from the participants' responses, these kinds of English language assessment practices become disabling for students and can potentially lower their confidence and self-esteem given the status of English in our society.

The participants' responses reaffirm that the focus of English language assessment remains on reading and writing; listening and speaking largely continue to be excluded. Although the participants sometimes assessed students on the basis of oral reading of a text or poem recitation, such tasks were rare as they required long hours of practice and memorisation.

When asked about the kind of tasks included in formative assessment, most participants listed the tasks which involved memorisation or asked for factual information. Some of the tasks mentioned by the participants included matching alphabets with words, matching opposite words, marking statements as true or false, dictation, filling in the blanks, writing words with a particular vowel sound. In order to help students attempt a test successfully, the difficulty level of questions is reduced. As one participant mentioned, "*Hum class tests mein questions aasan hi rakhte hain taki bachche kar payein. Test ke pehle kaafi practice karwa dete hain to bachche likh lete hain*" [We keep the questions easy in class tests so that students are able to attempt them. We make them practise well before the test so students are able to write the answers]. The participants revealed a tendency to include tasks involving low cognitive challenge. Tasks involving higher order thinking are deliberately kept out of formative assessment as they do not guarantee success.

Teachers often remain neglected when important decisions regarding assessment practices are taken by the school's governing body. Working in close proximity to their students, teachers understand their needs and potentials the best. As can be gauged from the participants' responses, the assessment tasks developed by them help their students experience success, even if to a limited extent. This makes their inputs for planning English language assessment, both formative and summative, very crucial. One may argue that nowadays teachers are included in curriculum development committees and consulted by decision making authorities. However, often their representation in such decision-making platforms is low. Moreover, given the inbuilt hierarchy within the system, the value accorded to their opinions remains suspect. As one teacher commented when talking about the question paper set for summative assessment in Grade V, "*Teachers ki rai li to jati hai in sab cheezon mein lekin pata nahi teachers bhi kya suggestion de kar aati hain jo aisa paper aa jata hai*" [Teachers' opinion is sought in these matters but I wonder what suggestion these teachers give that we get this kind of paper].

Current assessment practices empower neither the student nor the teacher. All the teachers admitted that they could not change patterns and tasks of assessment. As one teacher mentioned, *"Hume jaisa bataya jata hai fir usi tarah se assessment karna padta hai"* [We are required to conduct student assessment as we are directed].

Discussion

The study has managed to explore some very pertinent issues related to the assessment of English as perceived and practised by teachers teaching primary grades in multilingual classrooms. The findings of the study suggest that the assessment of English language is largely governed by notions of language and language teaching which are not in consonance with the multilinguality of classrooms. While it is a well-recognised fact that most of our classrooms are multilingual, the assessment practices remain primarily monolingual. Despite the development in discourse on multilingualism, in practice, languages are still treated as separate entities belonging to separate water tight compartments where mixing of one with the other would lead to 'contamination'. Although giving space to other languages while assessing English may seem paradoxical and counter-productive, given the fluidity of languages, porosity of language boundaries as explained by Agnihotri (2014) and the way a multilingual brain might process these languages, it would only be fair and just if these boundaries are relaxed in our classrooms.

The study also exhibits the participants' understanding of ground realities and the needs of their classrooms and their efforts at creating an enabling environment for their students. By letting their students use their home language during formative assessment, though primarily in oral tasks, they try to 'bend' the formal rules of English language assessment to some extent so as to create opportunities for their students to succeed and feel motivated. However, this sense of little agency displayed by the participants is weakened by their awareness and overall adherence to the conventional rules of English language assessment which uphold monolinguality. This further prevents them from allowing the use of home language(s), which is an important scaffold for students, in written tasks, both in formative assessment (with the exception of two participants) and summative assessment. Such restrictive assessment practices are unjust for both students and teachers.

The findings of the study also hint at the hierarchical relation which exists between teachers and administration. The participants follow the dictates of the governing body regarding pedagogy and assessment practices for all subjects. Despite the involvement of a few teachers in various committees for decision making, the participants do not see any substantial changes taking place in the area of assessment.

From the perspectives of social justice and psycholinguistics with respect to multilingual education, the findings of the study provide crucial insights which carry implications for relevant changes and research in the area of assessment for multilingual classrooms.

Conclusion

The findings of the study call for a dire need for change in the way English language assessment is conceptualised and carried out. The washback effect of assessment on pedagogy (Green, 2013) implies that we need both new pedagogy and assessment practices which recognise and honor multilingualism and the developmental nature of learning.

Debates would certainly arise and would need to be addressed with respect to the use of students' home language in English language assessment such as how much of home language can be considered necessary and legitimate, what changes would be required in criteria of assessment to make them socially just and inclusive. Methods of teaching and assessment work in tandem as both impact the other. Policy recommendations calling for newer approaches and methods in teaching need to be complemented with equally innovative approaches towards assessment to preserve and flourish the multilingual nature of classrooms.

The title of Bachman and Purpura's (2008) article (although written in a thematically unrelated framework) resonates well with this context where we must question the function and consequences of language assessments as gate-keepers or as door-openers. Given the current scenario of English language assessment, one can say that at present they are functioning as gate-keepers. However, with changes in language policy and development in the discourse on education for multilingual classrooms, one can be optimistic and hope for more inclusive assessment practices.

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