Glitches and Perceptions of Second Language English Testing at Tertiary Level: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: This study is about the disputes in the present examination design of the second language English language, researching some of the International English language proficiency assessments to augment and renovate the second language examination design. The chief concern of examination of any theme is to determine whether the objectives outlined at the establishment of the course are attained. As far as English as a second language is concerned, the major objectives are to listen (understand), to speak (to be understood), to read and to write in the target language. The destination of the present examination system is providing to the requirements of comprehending the aforesaid major objects of language learning is a serious basis for concern. In spite of learning English as a second language since their schooling, students find it difficult to accomplish aptitude in the language. Their basic language skills (LSRW) are lacking even after graduating. Since many innovative methods and approaches have been introduced and implemented in the field of second language teaching and learning as efficient inputs, the need of the hour is to renovate the examination system and to navigate active yields.

Key Words: Examination design, assessments, LSRW, language learning

The second language learning of English is as crucial as air to survive in the modern society and to acquire knowledge from all the corners of the world in order to compete in this competitive world. The lack of which is also identified as one of the foremost factors accountable for many graduates to be unemployed. They are urged to enhance their English language and communication skills to make themselves fit into the globalised society. This can be better achieved only if equal importance is given to language learning like that of other subjects. One has to be dedicated in learning all the subjects equally and keep hi

m/her abreast by referring various books for which English language learning plays a significant role. There is no use in finding fault with the students, the teachers and the system for the inadequacy of English language skills. The gulf between the formulation of the objectives on the one hand and realizing the objectives on the other seems to be the principal cause for the lack of language fluency.

DISPUTES IN THE EXISTING LANGUAGE SCRUTINY SYSTEM

The purpose of the examination system should be focused to make a paradigm shift from testing the language-knowledge to language-use.In other words, the examination system should focus to test the language skills, where the students are required to listen and understand, to speak and to be understood, to read and comprehend the meaning and to write in English. The students, who are taking English as a second language, aspire to communicate fluently in the language. Communication skill comprises of using all the four basic skills. Hence, the examination pattern of English language should give proportionate prominence to test all the skills. Students' level in using the language should have influence in test design and test performance.

The examination pattern of English language for the second language undergraduate and post graduate students in higher-education institutions profoundly focuses on written performance. There is little attempt to test the oral performance. Listening skill is discarded since the paper-pencil test is prevailing in almost all colleges and universities. While a student is able to write pages and pages in English within the stipulated period of time, he/she can hardly speak a few sentences without mistakes even for less than a couple of minutes. This accentuates the point that necessary changes should be carried out in the examination pattern according to the changing needs of the students.

The present societal attitude towards the educational system for the second language learners insists the students to race for marks and grades than for knowledge. They are bridled to focus to get through the examination. Since, the examination pattern emphasizes the written performance, students are much concerned about enhancing the written performance in order to fare high marks and bag top grades. Many a time, this very performance itself is the reproduction of what have been known inside out. There is a least effort to bring out the creativity or originality of the students in writing. These can be overcome if the examination pattern is to test all the four skills and require the students to equip themselves in all the skills. This would eventually help them acquire better communication in the real world.

As far as the listening skill is concerned, many second language learning students are unable to understand a conversation in English which lasts for more than a minute.

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Some of them even want a sentence to be repeated twice and thrice to comprehend the meaning of what an interlocutor proposes. This is due to their limited exposure to the listening tasks. Since, there is a negligence of testing listening skill in examinations; the students never try enough to expose themselves to the tasks on listening skills.

Speaking is a vital skill next to the listening skill. The prominence of the English speaking skill in the present context can be witnessed from the mushroom growth of spoken English institutions. Though the students try to enhance their speaking skill inside and outside the classroom, they never take serious efforts to attain competency since there is no scope of testing speaking in the examination pattern. The antic of the examination pattern is that the origin of a language started from the speech sounds whereas the testing of the language starts from the absence of the speech sounds (silence) in the examination hall for a stipulated time. Hence, the testing of speaking should be given adequate prominence in the examination pattern.

The reading skill of the students is being tested by comprehension paragraphs. But, most often students rewrite the same sentences given in the paragraphs. The comprehension questions should be framed in such a way that the students write illustrations and originate original notions to the concepts given in the paragraphs. This attempt will require the students to comprehend the paragraph than merely writing the same lines. Marks allotted for reading comprehension should be increased in proportion to other skills.

Though the reading and writing skills are considered as academic skills, listening and speaking skills have their key role in the present context of higher education. These are the skills which will make the academic activities more interactive. The use of these skills will enhance the active participation of the students in classroom and out of classroom activities. The holistic development of all the language skills will help the students to groom themselves for the present employment market.

INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY TESTS FOR SECOND LANGUAGE ENGLISH LEARNERS

Some of the patterns of international language proficiency tests can be emulated to improve the current second language examination pattern. IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) are widely recognized as a reliable means of assessing the language ability of the students and candidates.

IELTS:

LISTENING (30 minutes) 4 sections 2 conversations 2 monologues.	SPEAKING (11-14 minutes) 3 sections -introducing oneself -a talk based on the topic given in the task card -discussion over the topic given in the task card
READING (60 minutes) 3 sections 3 passages from journals, books and newspapers.	WRITING (60 minutes) 2 sections -look at a diagram and present information -present solution to a problem, justify, compare, contrast, challenge and evaluate the ideas.

TOEFL:

LISTENING (60-90 minutes) 4-6 lectures (6 questions from each) 2-3 conversations (5 questions from each)	SPEAKING (20 minutes) -2 independent skill tasks -4 integrated skill tasks
READING (60-100 minutes) 3-4 passages (12-14 questions from each)	WRITING (50 minutes) -1 integrated task -1 independent task

EFFICACY OF TECHNOLOGY IN RENEWING SCRUTINY

Technology has witnessed a rapid growth in the recent past in almost all the fields. In particular, it has been availed in language teaching, learning and testing.Many international language proficiency tests are available in computer-based versions and on CD ROM. Internet has a significant role in delivering the language tests to the users. Alderson (1996) points out that computers can be used not just for test delivery but also for test construction, test scoring and test analysis. Computer-based tests have the advantages in accessibility and rapid delivery of results and disadvantages in terms of lack of computer literacy or computer familiarity. Hence, it is essential to give computer tutorial to the students and teachers as well before introducing them to the computer-based tests.

There are many innovative technologies which can be incorporated in computer-based tests to enhance the opportunities of testing the individual and in the integrated language skills. There is a new technology called 'e-rater', which assesses the productive language skills such as speaking and writing. It uses natural language processing technique to duplicate the performance of humans' rating open-ended essays. Bustein (1996) stated that "the barriers to the successful use of technology are less technical than conceptual," but since then the progress in technology is optimistic.

Another instance of using technology to assess the speaking skill is PhonePass (Strachino). It is delivered over the telephone. The test takers are asked to read the texts aloud, to repeat the heard sentences, to say synonyms and antonyms to the heard words, and to give short answers. It uses the speech recognition technology to rate responses by comparing the performances with the models of native and non-native performance on the tasks. It also gives scores on test takers ability to understand and respond to spoken materials. This includes the fluency and pronunciation of the responses.

The listening skill tasks in computer-based tests, exploit the photos, videos and graphics to make the context more rejuvenated and lively in which students do more than just listen to the lectures. These blending of various features enable the students to heed more attention since they appeal in more than one sense. They can see and hear the questions before the response options appear. Reading tasks on computer-based tests are similar like that of traditional paper-pencil tests except the advantage of rapid feedback.

Technology reduces the dependency of students on teachers for assessing their language ability. This paves a great way for self assessment of the students. Many computer-based self assessment tests are available to test language proficiency. DIALANG is one such test, which renders immediate feedback and suggestion to the students to progress their current level to the next level of language proficiency. Performances for each task will be judged based on the pre-rated benchmarks.

In the present scenario of second language English learners, almost all higher education institutions such as colleges and universities are equipped with the modern technologies in the form of language lab and smart classrooms. The knowledge of using technology should be imparted to the teachers as well as to the students. Computer familiarity should be enhanced, especially in connection with English language teaching, learning and testing. One of the remarkable features of technology in testing is self-assessment, which is alike to the welcoming concept of self learning. Hence, self-assessment should be encouraged as an alternative assessment which is less formal than traditional tests.

CONCLUSION

The ability of using a language in different contexts should be given a place rather than just testing the knowledge in designing the language examination. This should be a criterion-referenced test which emphasises the mastery of the skills than scoring marks. A language examination should be designed in such a way that the examinations should be to concretise the skills learned during the course of time. Dereliction of testing the language skills may weaken and wean the students' language proficiency. Hence, testing all the language skills is the need of the hour, since a poorly designed language examination would make the students linguistically challenged in the days ahead.

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