Evolving a Blend–Model Test Design for Common English Courses at Tertiary Level: Prospects and Possibilities

Abdul Latheef Vennakkadan

Assistant Professor of English

Government Arts and Science College,

Kondotty, Vilayil, Kerala

Abstract

It is often argued that English examinations at university levels in Kerala, which tend to be heavily grammar-orientated and content- based, aim at testing rote memorization of textual components rather than actual language ability of learners and they, consequently, exert a negative washback on teaching and learning. The chapter examines the necessity of effecting constructive changes in test design, test tasks and constructs for common English courses at undergraduate level and proposes a new test design in which a blend model test design mooted in such a way that it creatively blends both assessment of the textual content and skill achievement in line with the global practices in language testing.

Key words: *Test design, constructs, alternative assessment, and summative assessment*

Introduction

A kind of assessment has been an inevitable part of teaching and learning throughout the history of both formal and informal education. Assessing learners in an ELT classroom must be on the basis of systematic guidelines, meticulous execution and well defined rubrics

because assessment is a valuable source for providing information critically relevant to several concerns in language teaching, learning and research. Tests, being a major component of assessment, provide evidence of the results of learning and instruction, efficacy of programs/courses, feedbacks on the learning materials, individual promotion and achievement of instructional objectives/ learning outcomes. The two major uses of language tests are as sources of information for making decisions within the context of educational programs and as indicators of abilities of attributes that are of interest in research on language, language acquisition and language teaching. So the process of test construction encompasses informed judgments in each stage of planning, choosing constructs and developing language tests (Cohen D, 1994).

The English Language Education (ELE) at tertiary level in Indian Universities is said to be riddled with many pedagogic issues like negative washback of high stakes formal examination often conducted at the end of the semester/year, overemphasis on literary texts and a consequent teacher centeredness in instructional activities, overcrowded classrooms, utilitarian attitude of ESL leaners, and deformed perception of English as a content-subject in the curriculum and teaching/learning practices. Though many of these issues are discussed and have undergone some reforms in line with emerging global trends in language education, the areas of testing, test design, test tasks and test impact have largely remained unchanged/unexplored/least problematized.

It is often argued that English examinations at university levels in Kerala, which tend to be heavily grammar-orientated and content- based, aim at testing rote memorization of textual components rather than actual language ability of learners and they exert, consequently, a negative washback on teaching and learning. In a world keeping pace with ever changing nature of ICT and the internet, practical and communicative competence in the four macro skills of English has become all the more important, integral and even a must for brighter career prospects, employability and personal and professional needs.

Obviously, there seems to have a disturbing dichotomy between a test system which seeks to assess ability to reproduce and a career world which is keen on finding and filtering skills to perform/use the language in real life situations. So, the paper attempts to examine the role played by the current test strategies at UG level in Kerala (India) and presents a blend model of test design to trigger better communicative proficiency, positive washback and effective achievement of learning outcomes leading into high level of performative proficiency and employability. The salient features of the new test design, along with comprehensive framework for test construction, are also discussed.

Testing in ELT

The interrelationship between testing, teaching and learning, methods and materials is inseparably interwoven. The objectives of teaching determine the type of material and methods to be adopted and all these factors in conjunction decide the assessment techniques to be employed. The diagram below throws clearer light on this interrelationship. The arrows point in both directions to underscore the fact that their interlink is not one sided but a two way relationship.
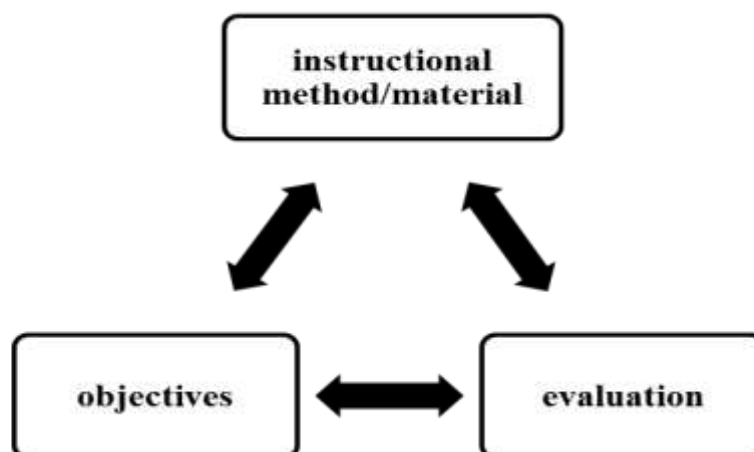
The role of tests as instruments of assessment in language education is to capture the kind of behaviour or performance of learners which can act as reliable evidences for their skill

in the Target Language (TL) in real life contexts. The tools used for evaluation have to be reliable and accurate and must be sensitive enough to indicate differences in the abilities of learners.

The researches on impact studies (Bachman & Palmer,1996) underpin the fact that both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other. Tests serve different purposes like reinforcing learning, motivating students, providing feedback on various aspects the system and assessing the students' performance abilities in the language. A good class room test helps locate the precise areas of difficulty encountered by the class or by the individual students and their areas of strength as well. Thus, test is used as a valuable teaching as well as assessment tool.

When speaking about the relationship between testing and teaching Hubbard et al. (1983:   255) mentioned ten aims that testing fulfils.

1. Identification of problem areas for remedial attention.

2. Giving each student a course grade.

3. Assessment of your own effectiveness as a teacher.

4. Checking on general progress and obtaining feedback.

5. Course or syllabus evaluation.

6. Preparation for public examinations.

7. Institutional requirement for student promotion.

8. Measuring what a student knows.

9. Identification of levels for later group-work.

10. Reinforcement of learning and student motivation.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the assessment strategies at tertiary level English language education in India remain reluctant to change or receive least attention even

when there are considerable revamp taking place in ELT curriculum at local or national level. To quote Gupta (2005)

> "The examination system is more achievement oriented rather than performance oriented, leading to an emphasis on grades and positions rather than issues of fluency or proficiency. Indirectly, the teacher remains in many classrooms even today, the facilitator of examinations rather than of linguistic or communicative proficiency. This sensitivity to learner needs is what has been lacking in the academic aspect of ELT in India. The whole academic process is so unwieldy that it fails to respond to learner needs; learner response is too often ignored (p.24)"

It is overtly evident from researches (Bachman and Palmer, 1996; Weir, 2004) that in a language education system which gives greater weight to formal/summative content based examination, the possibility of the assessment mechanism negatively influencing the learners' attitude to the TL, their performative skills and the pedagogic practices in the classroom is greater. One way of overcoming this counter-productive influence is to redesign the assessment tools in such a way that they intend to assess those constructs of the Target Language in tests which can be indicators of learner's actual ability to perform in real contexts. Another measure is to introduce a variety of evaluation tools like portfolios, projects, seminars presentations ,journals, blogs/e-portfolios which will have due weight and will help reduce over importance of summative examinations held at the end of the course.

English Common Courses at UG level

The English education at university level has never been a point of serious concern in Kerala because there was no move either on the part of government or the universities to initiate time demanded reviews/alterations in its curriculum, assessment mechanisms and language learning objectives. Commenting on the predicament, Nayar (2008) observes that, at a glance, it seems to be ambivalent and confused in its logic, its legitimacy, and its

motivation. English curriculum in the colleges in Kerala, by and large, appears to be too scared or too unmotivated to break away from the set traditions of the literary text-based mould of the pre-independence days. As Sheorey points out "most students have difficulty understanding the substance of the 'prescribed' literary selections. The typical method of teaching consists of explicatory reading of the text...and occasional discussion of grammar points"(2002, p.18).

According to Manjooran

> The situation is pathetic. The plight of an English teacher trying to teach a difficult textbook to a crowded classroom of mixed ability students can be miserable if his sincere intention is to teach them the language and not the text book, for the examination at the end of the year hangs like the sword of Damocles, ready to shatter his good intentions, with its time bound threat. Sadly, the situation does not warrant any sweeping reformatory changes in the immediate future. The teacher is stuck with text book teaching, so to say, and the learners of L2 miss the most important point of the whole process of learning a second language, that is the absorption of, and awareness of the target language as a whole. (1997, p. 3)

Rationale for the new model

It is rather unwelcome to notice that no realistic change has been proposed in the conventionally adopted testing system though the universities, revamping the curriculum, have introduced semester system at UG level recently. The high stakes university exams aim at, as they have been for quite long time, testing writing skills only. Since the minor studies on exam washback on ELT practices at undergraduate level show that it has a strong negative impact on teaching and learning methods (Manjoram, 2008) ,the total curriculum restructuring is likely to fail to have the desired outcomes achieved if a new approach to testing in language courses is not adopted.

Numerous studies have demonstrated that test method has a sizable influence on performance on language tests and language acquisition.(Shohamy 1983).The testing

Global English-Oriented Research Journal (GEORJ)
Critical & Creative Explorations/Practices in
English Language, Literature, Linguistics & Education

ISSN 2454-5511

system followed from school to higher education levels does test only one of the four skills of the learners in English, namely writing .The weight given to reading is nominal whereas crucial oral   skills like speaking and listening are completely ignored even in detrimental school/college exams   consequently they are underweighted   in teaching and learning.

The present testing system with its defective overweight on writing skills and total lack of components from other skills seem to have certain ruinous impacts on the students as well as teachers for both of them give over importance to exam preparation thereby reducing the whole curriculum to coaching for grades. The examination expects them to be familiar with the literary texts and make critical evaluations on many issues based on the texts. 'Most surprisingly, they manage to do this! One wonders what applied linguists and second language learning pundits will make of that' (Nayar ,2008 p.5).

So, an alternative test design which falls in line with international benchmarks in language testing, closely aligned to instructional objectives and learning outcomes, promoting a massive positive washback in terms of teaching , learning, contents, and mode of instruction and simultaneously adaptable and practicable in the present ESL scenario seems a felt need and necessity of the hour.

Blend model test design

The proposed blend model test design is a mixture of the traditional practices followed in the ELT testing at undergraduate level and the global perceptions of language testing and practices adopted in international testing systems like IELTS, KET and TOFEL. On the one hand, it gives due weight to all the four macros skills. On the other hand, it provides opportunity to ESL leaner's to get exposure to the finest use and semantic richness of words in the literature. So, it's said to be promoting positive washback in terms of better learning outcomes, effective testing and desirable attitude to English education. It is generally observed that the major reasons for content-oriented test construction and

teacher centric methodology are due to overemphasis on text books which are packed with elevated literary pieces of various genres.

The proposed test design, realizing this fact, has given due weight and importance to all the four macro skills and textual contents. It also advocates the use of both summative and alternative assessment tools to give comprehensive indicators about the leaner's abilities in English and to reduce the negative test impact resulting from single high stakes formal exams. The distribution of marks in the blend model test design is follows.

Marks distribution in the proposed blend-model test design for UG

Summative Assessment (SA)		
Skills/components in focus	Percentage (%)	Marks/80
Listening	10	10
Speaking	10	10
Reading and vocabulary	15+10=25	20
Grammar & writing	10+15=25	20
Textual contents	20	20
Total	100	80
Alternative Assessment (AA)		
Assignments/project/journal	30	3+3=6
Test papers	30	3+3=6
Classroom participation	20	4
Attendance	20	4
Total	100	20
Grand total (SA&AA)	**100%**	**100**

Conclusion

The test pattern, task types, the order of cognitive skills targeted in current high stake semester end examinations at UG levels fall much below the global standards, practices and perspectives on English language testing. Consequently, they exert a destructive impact on contents, learning, pedagogic practices and attitude of leaner's and teachers towards ELT. The major stakeholders of ELE strongly believe that the current test design, and targeted skills are quite ill-suited to assess the course objectives and instructional outcome. Therefore a blend model test design mooted in such a way that it creatively blends both assessment of the textual content and skill achievement in line with the global practices in language testing. It is called a blend-model because in the design and nature of tasks presented in it, both higher and lower order skills of the Educational Taxonomy are duly represented and assessed.

References

Bachman, L. F. & Palmer, A. S. (1996). Language testing in practice. Oxford:

Cohen ,D. Andrew (1996)   Second language learning and use strategies: Clarifying the issues.   University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Cyril J. Weir(2004) Language Testing and Validation :An Evidence-Based Approach

Gupta, D. (2005) ELT in India: A Brief and Historical and Cultural Overview. Asian EFL Journal 7:1

Hubbard.P   et   al   .A training Course for TEFL. Oxford .OUP.

Manjooran, L. (1997). Redundant factors in second language learning. PhD Thesis, University of Calicut.

Mokhtari, K., & Sheorey, R. (2002). Measuring ESL students reading strategies. Journal of Developmental Education, 25 (3), pp. 2-10.

Nayar, P. B. (2008, December). English in Kerala: Plus ça change? TESL-EJ, 12(3).

Oxford University Press.Palgrave Macmillan.Retrieved August 30, 2010 from http://tesl-ej.org/ej47/a1.html

Shohamy, E. 1983. Rater reliability of the oral interview speaking test. Foreign Language Annals.16, 3, 219-222