

The What, the Why and the How of Testing in the Teaching and Learning of English

DR. MOHAMMAD SHAUKAT ANSARI

Associate Professor of English
M.L.S.M. College, (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar
Email – shaukata12@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Testing is the most important component of the English teaching and learning mechanism. It paves the ground for the teacher to evaluate the effectiveness of the syllabus as well as the methods and materials he is employing. It also engages, in a systematic fashion, all the factors that affect learning process.

This study proposes dynamic views on the prevalent concepts of testing with a special focus on the matter of Classroom Tests. Moreover, the study aims to make a significant attempt to examine the vital problems concerning test-construction, test-management and test-evaluation, and suggest some practical clues for the redress of emerging problems. The study also puts forth contributory recommendations for making testing procedures more effective and more rewarding. It tends to establish a firm opinion that approaches to testing procedures do not have any demarcation boundary, particularly in view of an array of language testing alternatives and emerging new language testing formats. Therefore, they need to be reviewed, systematized and streamlined from time to time, so that they may pragmatically serve the teaching and learning goals of English as FL/SL.

In this study, it is intended to postulate that it is on the basis of the classroom environment, the level of learners, their degree of motivation, and their parameter of interests that the English teacher must make final decisions in promoting modifications and innovations to the ways of testing. Our institutions and universities must also organize training programs and workshops in the areas of testing to offer opportunities to concerning teachers to upgrade their knowledge in the what, why and how of testing.

1. Introduction

“Testing” is the most pervasive aspect of the teaching and learning mechanism of English as FL/SL. It provides actual feedback on both teaching and learning. The teachers need to know from time to time how effective their teaching has been or how much progress their learners have made. “The test is an activity whose main purpose is to convey how well the testee knows or can

do something. The test gives a score which is assumed to define the level of knowledge of the testee. Teachers prepare and administer tests to find out” (Croft 1980, 33). The test also indicates certain weak points in their teaching areas where the learners do not perform as expected. It also reveals which areas require more concentrated teaching and focused study.

Generally speaking, testing is a paradigm for measuring a person’s ability or knowledge in a given area. This definition captures the essential components of a test. For instance, testing is a method, it is a measurement, it is a means of making judgment regarding the success in the teaching and learning mechanism, etc. As a matter of fact, testing is the most dominant facet which involves more than just eliciting learners’ outcomes in English teaching. It invites to engage in a systematic way all the components that affect learning.

Hitting the attention just on whether a learner has passed or failed, a test does not help to know what worked well and what did not work well, in addition to the corrective or remedial measures that are to be undertaken. This infers that testing requires strategically a completely different approach and distinct way of pedagogic exploration beyond treating it as just the vehicle of awarding ‘pass’ or ‘fail’ to English learners. It is an invaluable device and a progressive force in teaching. Indeed, the whole subject of testing in the teaching-learning mechanism “opens the door not only to a closer analysis of the testing and teaching methods involved but also to a better appreciation of the nature of the language being taught” (Heaton 1979, 5). “Ideally, testing and teaching should go together with neither being subservient to the other” (Nagraj 1996, 2006).

The results of tests tend to cultivate better avenues for further enrichment of teaching. In fact, without a proper knowledge of where the learner was, how far he has attained, how far he can proceed, a learner will not be encouraged to continue. It is because of this broad objective, testing or stock-taking of different sorts is inextricably linked with English teaching. It is through the testing the teacher develops a deeper insight into the fundamentals and techniques of both the testing and teaching. Coughlin (2006), in the same spirit, maintains, “the teacher can evaluate the effectiveness of the syllabus as well as the methods and materials he or she is using” (www).

Therefore, this paper aims to stress the point that “testing” is strategically meaningful for both teachers and learners. In addition, it leads to pinpoint the vital problems concerning test construction, administration, observation and evaluation. It gives extra attention to classroom test types and their features with a view to positing the real purposes of tests. More importantly, it also outlines the practical as well as contributory ways to make testing procedures more effective and fruitful. It offers to assert that approaches toward adequate testing do not have any finishing line. As Croft (1980, 530) remarks, “With continual attention to the criteria for good test construction and to the need for new research on testing procedures, it should be possible to affect net improvement in the quality and effectiveness of foreign language tests” .

It is hoped that this study will lead the target teachers (the budding EFL/ESL teachers) to reconsider their approaches to testing afresh as self assessment, and empower them to become reflective practitioners. Rivers (1981, 346) points out that “many aspects of language study may be tested – at a number of levels and in a variety of ways. The selection of material for a test and the way this material is to be tested will depend on the purposes of test.” Hence the teachers are duty-bound to construct a variety of tests to realize their teaching goals. They must also be aware of the context in which learning is taking place (Kaplan 2002).

2. Modifications in testing methods

All good tests possess exclusively four qualities: validity, reliability, practicality, and washback. The **validity** of a test is the extent to which it measures what it is expected to measure and nothing else. “A valid test is one that measures what it claims to be measuring” (Madsen 1983, 178). Messick (1989, 13) defines validity as “the degree to which the empirical evidence and theoretical rationales support the adequacy and appropriateness of interpretations and actions based on test scores”. The **reliability** of a test signifies that it must have consistence in its measurements. “A reliable test is one that produces essentially the same results consistently on different occasions when the conditions of the test remain the same” (Madsen 1983, 178). The **practicality**, on the other hand, denotes that a test must be fairly straightforward to administer. That is to say, any test the teachers conduct must be *appropriate* in terms of their objectives, *dependable* in the evidence it provides, and *applicable* to their particular situation. “Whether the teacher is constructing his own test or is selecting a standard instrument for use in his class, he should certainly understand what these concepts mean and how to apply them” (Harris 1969, 13). The last important term being used in connection with testing is *washback*. **Washback** refers to the effect of testing on teaching and learning. The effect can be defined in terms of its positive or negative washback on teaching and learning (Shohamy 2001).

Bose (2002) concedes that there are rapid changes in the enumeration of objectives and purposes in the teaching of English and even more rapid changes in outlining the syllabus and preparation of textbooks. It is in conformity with such revolutionary changes, the author of this study wishes to emphasize that teachers also have a paramount role to play, as has been admitted by Norris, "Language teachers are often faced with the responsibility of selecting or developing language tests for their classrooms and programs. However, deciding which testing alternatives are the most appropriate for a particular language education context can be daunting" (Forum 2000).

However externally-oriented the exam system is, the English teachers have a dynamic and constructive role to play in initiating adequate changes and in creating a more conducive language classroom for EFL/ESL teaching and its testing. Those who teach English as a foreign language are generally expected to be highly “accountable for the results of their instruction” (Madsen 1983, 5). Tests can help an EFL teacher answer the overriding question, Have I been

effective in my teaching? It is, therefore safe to advocate that teachers can use tests to diagnose their own endeavors as well as those of their learners. They also gain insights into their teaching strengths and weaknesses through test results. "At times, teachers can glean information from test results that needs to be channeled to test and curriculum developers" (Coombe 2007, 13).

Very often, classroom-based testing procedures encompass observation, assignments, class records, projects, etc. for assessing learners' progress or for making decisions about whether a learner should move on to another level through the gateway of the Final Exam. In other words, teachers and learners prepare for the Final Exam, which may be six months or one year later by reviewing in their class a number of times through unit tests, monthly quizzes and periodical tests. This classroom or progress testing essentially necessitates giving feedback and qualitative comments whenever possible, not just marks. In addition, the classroom test is concerned with evaluation for the purpose of enabling the teacher to streamline his own effectiveness "by making adjustments in his teaching to enable certain groups of students or the individuals in the class to benefit more" (Heaton 1979, 2). Within the language classroom, we use tests to diagnose areas of learners' needs or sources of learning difficulties, reflect on the effectiveness of materials and activities, encourage learners' involvement in the learning process, track learners' development in L2, and provide learners' with feedback about their language learning processes for further classroom based applications of language tests (Cohen 1994).

3. Specific modalities of testing

There are four specific modalities that seem to be crucial for the classroom or progress testing in the teaching of EFL.

1. It is vital to include all communication skills in class test. It is necessary to train learners in all the skills in an integrated way, even if the Final Exam may not incorporate them for practical administrative reason. It is in this connection Perkins and Oller (1969, 2) opine that "the language curricula intended for the teaching of foreign languages are commonly based on the assumption that several distinct skills exist (e.g. listening, speaking, reading and writing) and that each of these can be divided up into multiple subcomponents (e.g. vocabulary, syntax, phonology, graphology), and into receptive and productive repertoires, and so forth." This also includes morphology and semantics. Aslam (2003, 137) reiterates almost the same idea by saying that "in discrete item tests language is seen as a code which is made up of sounds, syntax and lexis. Knowing a language is therefore seen as knowing the rules of grammar and distinct points of phonology, morphology, syntax and lexis of English ..."
2. The EFL/ESL learner brings with him preferred learning styles, degree of intelligence, aptitude for language learning, attitude, motivation, and so on. All this necessitates

getting feedback on learners' performance and maintaining a track-record of progress to regulate how much each learner progresses during the course.

3. Transparency is one of the cornerstones of good testing practice. The more learners know about the test, the less anxiety they will feel when they are taking it. It is, therefore, significant that evaluation should be made transparent to all those who are involved in it.
4. It is also advisable to apply a variety of mechanisms to evaluate progress. The well-asserted ways, for example, are diaries, self-evaluation, checklists, class-room observation, questionnaires, interactions, short tests, team assignments etc.

4. Suggestions for better testing

Based on my experiences of teaching English as FL in Saudi Arabia and my teaching English as SL in India I would like place some vital suggestions as practical guidelines for better testing procedures in the teaching and learning of English. The forwarded suggestions are premised on my scanned observations and professional surveys, and the data from the real world of language learning.

(1) Tests sometimes create negative reactions because they try to trap the learners or even they reinforce what learners don't know exactly. In contradiction to this, teachers should always favor the more suitable methods that must give our learners a chance to demonstrate their best or their optimal capability in the test. For instance, in most modern FL courses, instructions begin with the teaching of the sound system and the most frequent useful grammatical patterns of the spoken language. Vocabulary is at first quite limited, but as the learners gain control over the sounds and structures of the language, they are fed more and more vocabulary which are chosen for their usefulness in oral communication. During this stage, questionnaire for reading skill tests are needed to be tailored "to strengthen their control of the oral / aural skills" (Harris 1969, 58).

(2) It is better to test to those abilities that teachers actually want to promote in the class. For example, if teachers want to encourage learners' own writing, they then have to test that ability. If teachers actually want learners to sharpen speaking proficiency, they then have to test just that. It is important not only that certain abilities are tested, but also their importance should be adequately reflected in the test in terms of their weighting. In many teaching situations, it is, for example, warranted that areas of the language are first presented orally before reading and writing are practiced. Where this is the case, it is important for the teacher as a writer "to include those types of questions which appear relevant to the ability to speak the language" (Heaton 1979, 3).

(3) One test or two tests, in course of EFL/ESL teaching, do not tend to address to the goals. Several tests with different corrective measures are hopefully meant to render a better prognosis

of the EFL/ESL teaching-learning mechanism. The most obvious rationale for multiple measurements is that any human ability is complex and thus requires a wide range of item samples. It is, therefore, believed that “a single set of test items or a single test may fail to measure a very complex human ability of learners such as language proficiency” (Oller and Pernius 1969, 48). “Not any one form or type of test is able to present a comprehensive picture of a learner’s academic abilities. Many factors need to be considered” (Davidson, Coombe, and Jones 2005, 152).

(4) While designing tests, the EFL/ESL teachers should also be aware of the fact that question paper covers equally all components of the text or unit. It is a part of good strategies that the question paper begins with an easy question to establish learners' confidence and to reduce their test anxiety. Also, it comprises equal number of easy, medium, and hard level questions.

(5) With the jobs of language assessment in focus, the EFL/ESL teachers will be better able to select the appropriate language testing tools and to decide how they should be used to get the jobs done (Norris 2000). There has been a strong argument for making tests as direct as possible. Direct tests involve getting learners to exhibit precisely those skills which teachers wish to measure. If teachers would like to know how well learners can speak, they get them speak. If their intention is to know how well learners can scan through a text, they have to undertake this task at the time of the test. The tasks that teachers use in the test would, therefore, have to be as authentic or real-life as possible. Teachers should remember that if they are to test anything of value, there is a need to approximate their tests as closely as possible to real-life communicative situations.

(6) Teachers must formulate criterion-based testing wherein “learners know in advance exactly what knowledge they will be required to demonstrate on a particular test” (Rivers 1981, 355). If teachers are clear about what learners should be able to do and with what degree of success at the end of a course, and judge their performance against that criterion, the testing might be more fruitful. Teachers should make their demands "more transparent, arrange things so that assessments are less of an ordeal and give precedence to the beneficial effects of the entire process" (McBeath 2007, 13)

(7) Another concept that gains currency in the backdrop of the learner-centered teaching-learning mechanism is that a test gauges individual progresses over time. It aims to measure the learner’s present performance in contrast to his previous performance. Such a process which accommodates the unique, idiosyncratic behavior of each learner is undoubtedly advantageous, and priority must be accorded to it.

(8) One attention-catching fact which most EFL/ESL teachers rarely admit is that their class is heterogeneous in terms of language competence. Another taxing problem for these teachers is

that they are often confronted with large classes of mixed ability learners. Therefore, conscientious teachers are concerned about tests not providing enough challenge for better learners but at the same time being unfair to weak ones. A test trying to accommodate the so-called average learner can not satisfy the others and probably does not satisfy anyone. A way out of this would be to think of levels built into a single test which would be transparent to the teacher and the learner. Learners could be encouraged and trained to enter the level they think is appropriate to them. This prevents learners from facing a test which is far beyond their capabilities or which encourages them to blindly give inappropriate answers or which demotivates them because they can not attempt even half the number of questions.

(9) It has been the my observation that during any scheduled test or even any class activity, the average level learners do not comprehend the modalities of items in questions. It is, therefore, better to ensure that the testing format is familiar to learners. For the test to accomplish its job well, and to ascertain as accurately as possible the ability in question, the learners taking the test will need to be familiar with the method of testing. The method includes, for example, the format (i.e. multiple choice, short answers, long answers, true /false statements, matching pattern, etc.), the rubrics (i.e. instructions for doing the task, examples or sample items, etc.), and how the performance is assessed (i.e. how the criteria are for a high and a low score and the assessment scale: qualitative and quantitative). Unless learners know these things before they take the test, the score may not reflect the true ability being tested, but instead their ability to understand instructions or to figure out how a question has to be answered. There is an Arabian proverb related to this issue, which can be translated into English as, ‘understanding the question is half of the answer’. In other words, “test directions should be brief, simple to understand, and free from possible ambiguities” (Heaton 1979, 102).

(10) Next, teachers have to ensure that learners, and of course, teachers themselves know what the test demands of them. With many novel testing methods available, it is possible for teachers to have tasks that help them to focus on particular abilities in a specific context for a given purpose. If this is so, their task, which includes the instructions and the stimuli that set the scene or context, will need to be read and understood quite carefully. Therefore, teachers will have to familiarize their learners with these new types of rubrics to understand the task. “Unless all testees are able to follow the instructions, the test will neither be reliable nor valid” (Heaton 1969, 160). Based on this foundation, “many theorists call for students to be trained in how to take tests to give a corresponding chance for students to use test-taking skills when taking a test” (Davidson, Coombe, and Jones 2005, 108). Frankly-speaking, our EFL learners are mostly in need of some sort of orientation or training for comprehending the rubrics in toto.

(11) The process of EFL teaching and learning is, as a matter of fact, a challenging job for both teachers and learners. The learners are supposed to maintain their tempo and motivation at all stages of learning. At the same time, the teachers are supposed to closely monitor each action of learners. Is this possible when there is a large class? Never! It is, therefore, in the fitness of

things that our management should consider to make EFL classes small in size. And if it is possible, the management should establish different sections of classes in accordance with the learning-capabilities of learners. A Placement Test can be put into practice as a yardstick for determining such sections. Cooney (2007) maintains that Placement tests do just what the name asserts. They enable administrators to group learners in more or less appropriate classes.

(12) Everyone would agree that even when tests are valid and reliable, they cannot achieve much success unless they can be administered efficiently, or unless they are practicable. Practicality in tests also refers to the administrative decisions that have to be taken before the test is given. Decisions relating to the conduct of the test in terms of available resources, manpower, equipment, arrangement, etc should be taken much before the actual date of the test.

(13) While recalling the fascinating words of Scrivener (1994: Foreword) – “teacher development is a continuous process of transforming human potential into human performance, a process that is never finished” – our decision-making bodies should organize certificate-oriented workshops or training programs at the desired intervals to make newly-appointed English teachers and even seniors updated in the realms of EFL/ESL teaching and testing. Such occasions of togetherness for exchanging views and sharing concerns on issues pertaining to teaching and testing are sure to empower the participants with the electrified zeal for retrospection as well as review of their teaching and testing methods. They will also come to know how to adopt the latest developments in such areas for the maximum benefits of learners.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors wish to point out that Achievement Tests - both Final and Progress Tests - in the teaching of English as an FL (and even as a second language) are relevant in a situation where a course is offered. Teachers need to gear up their learners for the Final Exam, and, therefore they need to keep track of how learners progress toward the target objectives. By the same token, Progress Tests which give us information about on-the-way achievement or the means to the end are equally important. Hence, both teachers and learners can apply corrective measures during the course to achieve the target. There is a greater need, however, for teachers to think of authentic tasks that work in class, in terms of learners' linguistic level, motivation, interest, etc. More than anything else, teachers should know which type of tasks learners enjoy doing. It is also important that teachers aspire to make testing fun and that is what they should work towards in classroom testing. Teachers usually need to brood over how language skills can be evaluated. They also need to use information on learners' performance in tasks, during teaching as well as testing, to help learners improve their language learning.

In our final estimation, if teaching and testing practices in the EFL/ESL classroom are viewed more exploratory rather than evaluative, much of the tension and trauma can be eased, and teaching can become a fun and enjoyable process of 'give and take' between teachers and learners. Varshney (2002, 320) strongly supports this notion and contends that teaching and testing demand of teachers an intelligent skepticism and a willingness to reject both old and new techniques that seem unsuitable and an eagerness to refresh their teaching with useful adaptations of techniques both new and old. To do this intelligently, the teacher must be well informed about the methods and techniques that are available to him. Tests, then can benefit learners, teachers and administrators by "confirming progress that has been made and showing how we can best redirect our future efforts. In addition, good tests can sustain or enhance class morale and aid learning" (Madsen 1983, 5).

Finally I wish the target EFL/ESL teachers of this study good luck and happy test-writing.

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BIO NOTE

Dr. Mohammad Shaukat Ansari is working as Associate Professor of English at MLSM College, (L.N. Mithila University), Darbhanga, Bihar. He has been teaching several English courses to UG level (Hons.) students of Arts, Science and Commerce. He taught at Baha, Taif and Madina in Saudi Arabia both at college and university levels as Assistant Professor and Professor. His areas of interest in teaching are English Literature, Poetry, Novel, Grammar, ELT and ESP. He presented papers in a number of national/international seminars/conferences, and chaired technical sessions in three International Conferences. He has published more than eighteen research papers/ articles so far. Two research scholars are working for the award of Ph.D. degree under his supervision. Two more research scholars are likely to be registered under him. He is co-ordinator of UGC Sponsored Coaching Classes for Entry in Services (Banking, Rlys and SSC Exams) at college.