



Assessment of English Language Skills at the Secondary Level in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Assessment is a key component of learning because it helps students learn. This study aimed at determining the current understandings of English language assessment of teachers in the secondary schools in Bangladesh. The study was conducted through semi-structured interviews with six English teachers in two different secondary schools and these interview responses disclosed English teachers' understandings of the assessment strategies. Alongside semi-structured interviews, secondary English curriculum was analysed. Findings of the study revealed that the present English assessment system at the secondary level in Bangladesh does not match the stated objectives of teaching English. Though summative assessment is still dominating, the practice of formative assessment is slowly developing. The study indicated that there had been a gradual shift in the assessment process and the teachers were trying to use individual assessment strategies to motivate the students' learning. The respondents in the study claimed that the current assessment is mainly based on reading and writing skills. However, for overall development of language skills, the secondary English language curriculum may need to be redesigned so that all the four skills can be included in the assessment system. Better opportunities for training to develop teachers should also be considered positively.

Keywords: Language skills, assessment, secondary level, listening, speaking, reading, writing.

1. Introduction

In schools, assessment is a process that teachers use to identify the learners' current levels of skills and understandings; intellectual achievement of learners; and to find areas for further development. In Bangladesh, English language assessment is done mainly based on summative assessment, where the learners' abilities in memorization and comprehension are assessed. Assessing learners listening and speaking skills are ignored. Other skills such as learners' presentation, analysis, synthesis and critical thinking are rarely considered important for evaluation (Begum & Farooqui, 2008). This study aims to know the understandings of teachers about English language assessment in secondary schools in Bangladesh; and the challenges teachers face in implementing English language assessment suggested in the curriculum.

2. Literature Review

According to National Curriculum and Textbook Board (NCTB, 1996) report, the communicative method was introduced to secondary and higher secondary level and the curriculum 2012 (NCTB, 2012) also puts emphasis on communicative language teaching (CLT). This communicative approach focuses on four language skills - listening, speaking, reading and writing and aims at increasing participatory activities in the classrooms. However, there are still some fundamental barriers such as physical facilities in the institutions, large numbers of students in the class, sitting arrangement and duration of the English class. Above all, the lack of

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trained teachers is considered to be the main cause for a generally poor standard of teaching and learning of communicative English (Begum & Farooqui, 2008).

Although the curriculum emphasises four language skills, examinations are based on only two skills; reading and writing, while the other two skills, listening and speaking are not formally taught and assessed. In some cases, some English language teachers in some reputed schools often informally assess the listening and speaking skills of the students in the classroom. Despite this, most students have difficulties in communicating orally in English even after passing secondary level.

Begum & Farooqui (2008) found that in Bangladesh secondary schools, a traditional approach in the assessment of reading skills still existed. Though communicative approaches had been introduced in the language curriculum, most teachers preferred following the traditional grammar-translation method that mainly focuses on the syllabus which is to be completed within a set time with the sole aim to obtain higher scores in the examinations. There is a significant gap between the learners' needs, curricular expectations, and teachers' teaching methods and techniques. The same is true for writing. In the assessment of writing skills, students are encouraged to write on the requirements for the examination only. Though there are some practices of guided and semi-guided writing in the classroom, students have limited opportunities in the classroom to practise creative writing. Students are expected to write according to the prescribed set of questions that cover limited number of contents for passing the examination and obtaining a high score. As a result, students do not have much opportunity to increase vocabulary and this limited vocabulary knowledge results in students' facing difficulties in constructing sentences for writing on a topic. Besides, they do not have and cannot acquire enough grammatical knowledge and accuracy with the mechanics of writing they practice.

A study conducted by Hamid and Baldauf (2008) with six rural secondary school teachers in Bangladesh which conducted semi-structured interviews highlighted the similar situation, where CLT failed to create sufficient opportunities for genuine interactions in the classrooms as most of the teachers were not aware of the importance of the aural-oral method in CLT. Furthermore, all the six teachers in his study, including the trained ones, admitted that they had limited understandings about how to design speaking activities during practice and production. Hamid (2010) further comments that there is a big gap between the learning objectives and the actual teaching and assessment practices. The fact that there is no provision for formal testing of speaking and listening in Secondary School Certificate (SSC) and Higher Secondary Certificate (HSC) and this might be one of the reasons why learners cannot exhibit the skills as expected in the curriculum.

Stiggins (2002) claimed that a few teachers were prepared to face the challenges of assessing the English language skills in the classrooms. My experiences as a Teacher Educator say that secondary English teachers in Bangladesh have little or no training for assessment of the language skills. English in Action (2010), a language development project operating in Bangladesh, stated that the majority of secondary English teachers did not have the required level of English proficiency and they had limited skills and understandings to continue classroom communication in English. Furthermore, because of poverty, a large number of secondary students in the rural areas are unable to access to necessary English language learning resources such as books, Internet, and private coaching (Hamid & Baldauf, 2008). Teachers therefore rarely have the opportunity to learn how to use assessment as a teaching and learning tool.

3. Research Methodology

This study employed semi-structured interviews with six secondary school teachers and document analysis methods. For ethical consideration, the participants were given pseudonyms. As the study was qualitative, the data were narrative and descriptive. Interviews and observation



field-notes were transcribed. After several reading of the transcribed data, they were coded and categorized. During the coding and categorization of the data, the findings emerged. Similarly coded data were put together for further thoughts and analysis.

4. Research Questions

This research set out to find out teachers' current understandings of language assessment in the secondary schools in Bangladesh. Therefore, this study tried to explore the answers to the following questions:

- a) What are the current understandings of the Bangladeshi secondary English language teachers about English language skills assessment?
- b) How are the English language skills currently assessed?
- c) What challenges do the teachers experience in assessing English language skills?

5. Research Findings

The findings emerged during the coding and categorizing of the data. The findings have been presented in the following sections under the themes of the research questions. All the participants were introduced by pseudonyms:

5.1. English Teachers' Perception of the Roles of Assessment

All the six teachers in the study had a good understanding about the aspects of English language assessment, although each of the participants highlighted different aspects of assessment. Their ideas indicated that assessment of language skills was essential both for teachers and students for their English language development. The teachers' understanding of the assessment of language skills had a bias towards summative assessment although continuous assessment (CA) system was the demand of the curriculum. Another aspect of teachers' understanding was that, they were speaking for learners' knowledge assessment in English which goes against CLT. Sonia, a participant, recognised that "there is a deep relationship between teaching and assessment because the teacher can assess his/her students through assessment, either formative or summative, and can get a reflection of his/her performances".

Two other participants, Nafisa and Atique, also agreed that "without assessment, teaching and learning cannot take place. I have to know the students' needs. Teachers should know the learning outcomes. So for knowing the students, and the students' performance, assessment is needed." Three teachers suggested that formative assessment was a crucial means of identifying what students know, can do, and what else they needed. Nafisa summed up by saying "through assessment, I can identify what students knew, what they could do, and I can identify the next learning steps. I believe that summative assessment is very formal, planned and organised". Shakila, another participant, stated that summative assessment was a record which gave them a clear picture of the institution's success or failure and the result informed the guardians about the success, weakness, and failure of their children. Shakila further claimed, "Students can get a clear idea about their achievement what they have learnt and they are motivated greatly with assessment because students want to compete with their classmates; one wants to excel the others. It's a challenge for them to work harder to perform better in future".

Likewise, Romana, another English teacher, expressed that "through assessment they can identify students' problems and can make future planning. It is useful for changing students' attitude which helps to develop students' motivation and better improvement". She commented on the importance of assessment for teachers too because "for the teachers we can find the drawbacks, how much we are successful about teaching and if we have any drawbacks we can change our plan and develop ourselves". Additionally, she mentioned that "assessment is significant for effective teaching. It begins with identification of some learning goals, prepare the students and finally observe how well the goals are achieved. So, it's a procedure which takes a lot of preparation for the teachers".



Atique further argued that formative and summative assessment were totally different from each other. Actually he considered that formative assessment was difficult and time consuming. However, he also acknowledged that formative assessment developed students' creativity and that that was a continuous process.

5.2. Teachers' Perception on Curriculum Guidelines

All the six teachers considered that though the present curriculum guidelines focused on the assessment of four skills, examinations were based on mainly two skills - reading and writing. They added that since listening and speaking were not included in the assessment process, students were not aware of the importance on these two skills. So, they would like the education authority to allocate marks for speaking and listening. Sonia commented that "Like practical works, some marks could be included in listening and speaking but in this case teachers should deal with the issue fairly as some teachers may be influenced and in this case external examiners may be appointed". Likewise, Nafisa remarked that the curriculum focus was on the summative assessment. The curriculum guidelines published 1995, were appropriate to meet the demand of the time, but now require change. She was also of the same opinion as Romana in regard to contents of the tests. Texts for measuring reading skill were set from the textbook. She considered that these texts should always be unseen as it was not possible test reading skill with a piece of text already read by learners.

Shakila expressed a need for teachers to undergo training in order to build teaching and assessment capacity. She drew the attention of the policy makers and curriculum planners to consider the inclusion of listening and speaking skills in the assessment process. She considered that external examiners could be appointed to reduce corruptions in awarding marks in speaking tests. In addition to this, Arzu suggested that in order to achieve the best outcomes teachers should test the listening and the speaking skills at regular intervals during the academic session and assess learners on the basis of their performance over a period of time. Students would then be more motivated to develop their listening and speaking skills.

5.3. Teachers' Perception in Assessment

The participants in the study were asked to make comments on the English language assessment-related changes during the last 10-15 years. They talked about pedagogical shifts and SBA and its implications. They all remembered that earlier they mostly focused on summative tests and they had a little sharing with colleagues about the changes and how to cope with the new demand of the curriculum. For example, Sonia thought that there was a positive change in the current assessment system. She added, "Earlier assessment encouraged memorization but recent assessment gives importance to four skills and creativity. Students have started to read for comprehension and then answer". Nafisa indicated the nature of assessment changes:

Earlier the teacher read the text, students listened. Present curriculum is very much comprehensive where students' creativity has been given much focus. Some texts are set from the real life situation; students read the texts and answer the given information. So students are not memorising. In the previous system students memorised some answers and delivered it to their answer scripts. Romana reinforced the following idea by stating that "both subjective and objective types of questions have been included in the curriculum". She claimed that through SBA, students were being assessed in the classrooms. Atique and Arzu pointed out that, both guided and semi-guided writing have been introduced. Students can understand and write from their own experiences and understandings. Shakila stated, "earlier, we dealt with literature and essay type questions. Students used to prepare notes, memorised them and wrote the answer. At present, for assessing reading skills, questions are followed by reading comprehension, and are set from real life situation".

However, most of the teachers in the study considered that there had been a remarkable change in the knowledge and understandings of the teachers about the practice of formative



assessment and they had developed skills to deal with formative assessment supporting students' learning. The participants also claimed that in the past they had little sharing of ideas among the colleagues about the teaching and assessment procedures but school-wide practices of collaboration and cooperation had increased their ability to deal with teaching and assessment more confidently. Nafisa and Atique explained that there was remarkable shift from traditional to the new approaches of language assessment and that had become possible for some initiatives taken by some of the development projects such as Teaching Quality Improvement in Secondary Education Project (TQI-SEP), English Language Teaching Improvement Project (ELTIP), Secondary Education Sector Improvement Project (SESIP), and so on. These teachers further elaborated that, they used to involve students in pair work, group work, role play, dramatization, and in acting.

All the six participant teachers considered assessment essential both for teachers and students. They agreed that there was a close link between teaching and assessment, and that one influenced the other. All the six teachers in the study agreed that earlier language assessment was very much summative, but that recent curriculum focused on both formative and summative assessment. Earlier essay type questions were set in the examination, but at present the curriculum included both subjective and objective questions in the testing process. All the six teachers in the study were of the same opinion that there was a mis-match between the curriculum guidelines and actual assessment practices; and they were hopeful about the positive changes in the assessment process.

5.4. Major Challenges of English Teachers Faced

The teachers faced many challenges while assessing the students in the classrooms. Some of these challenges were related to students' ability; some were related to students' and teachers' socio-economic background; while some others were related to institutions. In this study, teachers identified large classes as a major challenge to practise and assess language skills in the classrooms. Sonia, one of the participants, mentioned that some students felt very shy and did not want to participate willingly. She said that the large number of students in the class and furniture setting also acted as barriers for assessing the students. Other two teachers identified students' low level of language ability as the major challenge. Nafisa and Romana thought that the different levels of students, level of their understanding and teachers' workload, the want of modern teaching aids were one of the main barriers for assessing the students.

Another teacher Antique mentioned that the lack of motivation of the students as a challenge for the teachers to engage students in the learning process. Antique claimed that because of different ability of students, the want of teaching aids, and the lack of students' interest, teachers could not engage all students in the language learning process. He further stated:

Some students are not interested in participation. Therefore, it is very challenging for us to give close observation to each and every student. It is difficult to involve students in group work as their ability varies and sometimes they are not interested to participate in the classroom.

This teacher also mentioned the shortage of resources for effective classroom practices. He added that:

Another problem is that in the class we normally use only text books and sometimes we use some posters, newspaper cutting, and magazine to develop motivation of the students. But most of the time these aids are not available. Sometimes, students are unable to formulate questions because of lack of questioning skills.

Two other teachers Shakila and Arzu acknowledged that, insufficient class time also acted as an obstacle as they could not complete the lesson and elicit responses from every learner followed by feedback. Similar views were resonated from Sonia who thought teachers



did not have time to attend individual students and to check writing tasks outside the classrooms because of workload. Nafisa mentioned that because of having huge test pressure the teachers had to complete syllabus within the set time. Students' beliefs and attitudes also acted as a challenge for effective learning, teaching, and assessment practices. All the six teachers in the study considered that most students in Bangladesh falsely believed that learning English meant learning its grammatical rules. After memorizing all the grammatical rules, they would be able to start speaking fluently. Learning English is not just about grabbing grammatical rules, structures, and vocabulary. It is a matter of regular practice and the use of the language in the practical situations.

All the six teachers in the study admitted that assessment for learning was very essential for students' development. However, Nafisa considered that, in Bangladesh secondary schools, most teachers liked the traditional grammar translation method, and they used mother tongue in the classrooms. She elaborated that the present curriculum and the textbooks were based on a communicative approach which focused on students' language practices. She stated that most teachers continued to emphasize grammar-translation method. They lacked knowledge on different activities and also their command over English language was not satisfactory. The attitude of the teachers, students and parents was also negative that did not allow to create a congenial environment for implementing CLT. Shakila mentioned that, in most cases students were not willing to take part in the class activities and wanted to concentrate on completing the syllabus and acquiring good scores in the examinations. Teachers believed that, in the new communicative approach it was difficult to involve the learners in activities because of not having suitable classroom environment, physical facilities and modern teaching aids.

5.5. Test- driven Teaching and Learning

Most of the teachers in the study commented that most teachers of secondary schools in Bangladesh were guided by examinations requirements. Nafisa was firm that the nature of the problem was that most teachers focused on examinations and students on obtaining good scores in the examinations. Because of having a large syllabus which has to be completed by the due time outlined in the guidelines, it becomes difficult for them to put emphasis on activity based learning. She further elaborated that their main focus was to prepare the students to get better scores in the examinations. The performance of the educational institutions is measured on the percentage of success of students in the public examination not on the skills they acquired. Romana also supported Nafisa's views. She added, "English language skills are not tested in the examinations, then why will teachers and students practice English skills?" Shakila also mentioned that the examination system was faulty as it did not include the assessment of four language skills. She also added that the examination system needed to be modernized and teachers needed to be properly trained.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be mentioned that in order to improve the English language teaching and learning in Bangladesh, curriculum need to be changed keeping provision for teaching and assessing all the four language skills in the internal as well as public examinations. In addition to that, some reforms in the examination system are required where there will be scope for teaching and assessing listening and speaking skills alongside other two skills. The development of resources for practising language skills as well as training teachers should be integral parts of the said reforms as appropriate resources and training are essential for the success of these reforms. Ideally, the Ministry of Education can form a committee with the experts to identify national needs, including the development of a national language policy which would identify the goals and objectives of English language learning; prepare the resources as well the resource persons for teacher development; conduct study to check what methods, techniques, and reforms would suit Bangladesh situation.



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