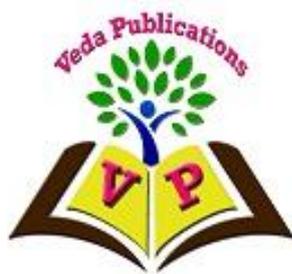




TASK-BASED LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT (TBLA) IN THE INDIAN ESL CONTEXT: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT



English language teaching in India has undergone tremendous changes over the past six decades. Task-based language teaching is increasingly used in school ESL curricula in India. The Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) syllabus document clearly states that a 'multi-skilled, learner-centred, activity-based' approach is to be adopted in teaching English. While such measures have dramatically transformed the nature of textbooks and teaching styles in Indian classrooms, language assessment has largely remained unchanged. Discreet item tests to individually assess different language abilities continue to be used in classroom assessment. Thus teaching and assessment falls out of alignment, disadvantaging both the realms. This paper argues for the adoption of task-based language assessment (TBLA) in formative and summative assessments. All four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing, and vocabulary can be assessed using direct system-referenced task-based tests which make use of an explicit theory of language proficiency. TBLA which uses integrated tests provides ample opportunities for teachers and examiners to sample learner performances and assess them in formative and summative tests. This paper proposes a scheme for task-based classroom assessment, drawing on the theoretical foundations of the CBSE language curriculum, text books, assessment patterns and question papers. The projected benefits of using TBLA for language assessment are high levels of validity, reliability and authenticity, and alignment of teaching and assessment ensuring positive washback effect.

Keywords: *Task-based Language Assessment, Validity, Washback Effect, Indian ESL Context.*



INTRODUCTION

English language is unquestionably one of the most widely used languages used in academics, business, and communication in the 21st century multilingual India. Indian schools teach English as a Second Language (ESL) so that our students can be part of global society, academia and economics. Over the years, people accepted the necessity of English for communication as reflected in NCERT's Position Paper on teaching of English: "The level of introduction of English is now a matter of political response to people's aspirations rather than an academic or feasibility issue" (NCERT, 2006).

OBJECTIVES

The global transformation in pedagogy led to the widespread use of task-based method and textbooks in classrooms. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is an 'approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching' (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It follows the principles of primacy of meaning, closeness to real-world tasks, priority of task-completion, assessment based on task outcome, communication as goal, freedom to create one's meaning, spontaneous, and contextual language use, and authentic materials (Skehan, 1998). Use of TBLT caters to language acquisition by promoting negotiation of meaning and focus on communication (Ellis, 2003).

Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA) emerged out of the need to align assessment with TBLT. The earlier assessment models were either decontextualized or were discreet point tests. TBLA evaluates meaningful communicative performances elicited using goal-directed, meaning-focused language tasks (Brindley, 1994) which require simultaneous use of linguistic and non-linguistic resources. It promotes validity (Ellis, 2003), favourable washback, integrates assessment into learning, and provides useful diagnostic feedback. Tasks are the central constructs here. Therefore, task-selection is of prime importance as suggested and illustrated by Pica, Kanagy and Falodun (1993) and Willis and Willis (2007). In Ellis' (2003) words, TBLA 'utilizes holistic tasks involving real-world behaviour [...] or the kinds of language processing found in real-world activities'. Task is considered

indispensable for formative assessment to be a medium of learning (Eisner, 1999 as cited in Norris, 2002). Everyday language tasks used in the method helps elicitation of test-takers' best performance.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

This paper analyses Central Board of Secondary Education's (CBSE) assessment, and proposes to make it more skill-balanced and task-based. CBSE's English language curriculum is skill-based, activity-based and learner-centred (CBSE, 2017) aiming at language development for acquisition of knowledge. *Interact in English*- CBSE's task-based three-textbook-package for class X aims at improving learners' communicative competence to promote language skills for professional, social and academic needs.

An analysis of the sample question papers of CBSE Class X summative assessment (<http://cbse.nic.in/newsite/examination.html>) brings up two questions. The first concerns the weightage given to various language skills in assessment. The curriculum document (p. 23) uses 18 descriptive points to specify teaching/testing objectives for listening and speaking skills but is assessed only for five marks, while reading and writing gets 80 marks. In the long run, this mismatch between curriculum directives and assessment practice results in the failure of Indian learners to develop these skills. Giving fairer representation to these skills in assessment is a challenging task, but will lead to positive washback effect. Including oral and aural assessment in summative assessment may not always be feasible due to logistical, financial and human resource-related issues. But it is possible to assess listening and speaking skills as part of continuous assessment giving an optimum share of marks to ensure validity and reliability. A balanced approach to skills-assessment using authentic, practical and efficient assessment tasks is necessary for the overall language development of learners. The proposal made here is that a more appropriate weightage be given to listening and speaking skills assessment using a judicious combination of internal and summative assessments.

One option is to emphasise these skills in internal assessment in classes IX and XI when there is no board examination. Another is to start assessing



these skills at class V or VI so that by the time students leave school, they become proficient. Problems in implementation at the level of schools and individual assessors might hinder such steps. But for language assessment to attain its potential, such best practices must be strictly implemented.

The second question concerns the alignment of teaching and assessment. Though language teaching has adapted task-based methodology, assessment has largely remained unchanged. Brindley (1994) insists that by integrating assessment with learning, language is better used as a tool for communication. Charlhoub-Deville (2001) states that the increased use of tasks in assessment literature and practice is due to the need to align teaching and testing. Mislevy, Steinberg and Almond (2002) claim that such alignment of assessment and instruction is one of the driving forces behind the interest in TBLA since it directly contributes to validity. Nunan (2004) states that not using tasks in assessment will be a violation of the key curriculum principle that assessment should reflect what has been taught. Above all, when teaching and assessment are aligned, positive washback is promoted. However, bringing this alignment into actual practice is a challenging task as various practical constraints are involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ellis' (2003) general framework to classify language assessment tests has two intersecting continua- system-referenced and performance-referenced tests, and direct and indirect tests (Table 1).

Mode	System-referenced	Performance-referenced
Direct	Sample of oral or written language via interview and/or composition	Communicative simulation of target tasks, e.g. library skills, reading test
Indirect	Grammar and reading multiple-choice tests	Breakdown of simulation into sub-tasks for multiple-choice formats

Table 1: Framework for language assessment (Nunan, 2004)

System-referenced tests require the test-takers to know phonological, lexical and grammatical systems while performance-referenced tests require them to demonstrate the ability to use language (Nunan, 2004). Direct tests directly elicit criterion performance while indirect tests attempt to measure the underlying ability/skill of a certain performance. While designing assessment it is wise to have a judicious mix of different types of tests. Direct system-referenced tests (ex: composition writing and information-gap tasks) and indirect performance-referenced tests (ex: identifying paragraph structure) are task-based. A few proposals to this effect are made below.

ASSESSING SPEAKING

Speaking is the most difficult skill to assess in terms of practical considerations. Earlier, highlighting the importance of listening and speaking skills, CBSE's circular 63 (CBSE, 2012) had allotted 20 marks for these two skills as part of summative assessment. Unfortunately, this was revoked later. Current pattern allots only five marks for both the skills. Considering the constraints of speaking assessment, it will be wiser to assess it as part of internal assessment using individual, pair and group tasks. Brown's (2004) outline of basic types of speaking, and micro and macro speaking skills is a very useful checklist in designing oral assessment tasks. Looking at speaking tasks from the perspectives of purpose, context of use and speaker-roles is also helpful. Useful descriptions of accuracy, fluency and complexity to assess test-taker language are available in Nitta & Nakatsuhara (2014).

ASSESSING LISTENING

Listening skill is the ability to understand and process spoken language, and take part in oral interactions. It is as important as speaking skill for communication, and transactional and interactional discourse. However, as a receptive skill it can only be assessed using inferences made from observation of productive skills. Brown (2004) classifies listening into four basic types and lists 17 micro- and macro skills. Sen (2012) lists six types of listening tests. These two sources are useful aids in designing listening assessment. Listening tasks could integrate speaking as in listening to and transferring a telephone message orally to another. However, one must make



sure that test-takers are familiar with such activities to avoid non-representative test-performances which invalidate the assessment.

ASSESSING READING AND WRITING

CBSE's current model assesses reading for 20 marks and writing with grammar for 30 marks in both Communicative English and Language and Literature papers. Out of the 26 teaching/testing objectives, many are not met by the model question paper. For example, reading comprehension questions assess only 'reading for specific information'. Structural knowledge is assessed through re-ordering words/phrases, finding meaning of vocabulary items, subject-verb agreement and matching prepositions. Global and inferential comprehension can be assessed with various tools like titling a reading passage. Identification of textual and rhetoric structures, synthesis skills, etc. can be assessed using many short texts, tabular data and diagrammatic information. Likewise, assessing writing must include more subskills than letter and story-writing which carry 18 marks in the current model.

Another way of organising writing assessment is to provide more number of writing tasks that require grammatical accuracy and sociolinguistic appropriacy, use of cohesive devices, organisation of many ideas, structuring and linking paragraphs, and introducing and concluding conventions (Krishnan, Testing Writing, 2012). This is beneficial for content and predictive validity as well. Ability to convey culture specific meanings using audience-specific strategies, giving and soliciting feedback, etc. (Brown, 2004) could be assessed as these skills are necessary in today's social and professional environments. A sample task is given below¹.

A writing task - Advertisement

You have received a new bicycle as a birthday gift. Therefore, you want to sell your old blue bicycle which is in good condition. You recently got it serviced, and replaced both the tyres.

Write an advertisement for your school notice board in about 40 words.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Use of any particular test-type alone could lead to practical problems in design and implementation. Important assessments like CBSE examination must find a sensible and pedagogically acceptable balance of test-task types, various skills and internal-external assessment. This will ensure that the assessment is valid, reliable and authentic. Use of more assessment tasks in classrooms with or without explicit directives from curriculum will benefit both teaching and assessment with beneficial washback effect.

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¹ A few more assessment tasks are available at this link: <https://goo.gl/JAD8kh>



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