Article

Teaching English as a Language not Subject by Employing Formative Assessment

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Abstract

English is a second language (L2) in Sindh, Pakistan. Most of the public sector schools in Sindh teach English as a subject rather than a language. Besides, they do not distinguish between generic pedagogy and distinctive approaches used for teaching English as a first language (L1) and second language (L2). In addition, the erroneous traditional assessment focuses on only writing and reading skills and the listening and speaking skills of L2 remain excluded. There is a great emphasis on summative assessments, which contribute to a qualification; however, formative assessments, which provide timely and continuous appraisal and feedback, remain ignored. Summative assessment employs only paper-and-pencil based test, while the other current means of alternative assessments like self-assessment, peer-assessment, and portfolio assessment have not been incorporated, and explored yet. Teaching English as a subject not as a language, employing summative assessment not formative, depending on paper-and-pencil based test, and not using the alternative modes of assessment are some of the questions this study will deal with. The study under discussion suggests that current approaches employed for teaching English are misplaced as these take a subject teaching approach rather than a language teaching approach. It also argues for the paradigm shift from a product to process approach to assessment by administering modern alternative assessments.

Keywords: alternatives in assessment, English as L2, formative assessment, summative assessment

Introduction

The undertaken study encompasses the issues and problems of teaching English as a foreign or secondary language in the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh in particular and Pakistan in general. There are significant differences between approaches, methods, and techniques incorporated for teaching a subject and a language. Further, teaching the learner's mother tongue or common language of the learner's society (L1) and foreign or secondary language (L2) also require different approaches, methods, and techniques (Brown, 1994; Genesse, 1988; Moinzadeh, Dezhara & Rezaei, 2012; Penfield & Roberts, 2014; Piaget, 1951; Saville-Troike's, 2006; Scovel, 1988; Steinberg, 1997). Traditionally, English language has been taught as a subject rather than a language in state sector schools. Moreover, the pedagogical differences of teaching L1 and L2 have not been considered distinctively and incorporated while teaching languages in the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh. The L1 learner comes with considerable competence in two skills, that is, listening and speaking and the school helps him/her in the acquisition of the remaining two skills of language, that is, reading and writing. In the case of L2, the learner needs to acquire all four skills of language; therefore, different pedagogical approaches and methods are required for its teaching. However, the current practices of teaching English only focus on reading and writing, whereas listening and speaking remain ignored both in teaching and learning and assessment process.

The current assessment system employs summative (product) assessment at the end of the academic year to award degrees or promote students to the next class. In fact it is likely to get a degree and the learner is left with no choice and opportunity to improve and cross the learning gap. Conversely, formative (process) assessment, which provides timely and continuous feedback and appraisal to the learner for scaffolding any learning deficiencies, has not yet been employed and incorporated effectively. The absence of formative assessment constrains the teaching learning process. The situation further aggravates when the summative assessment depends only on paper-and-pencil based test, whereas the other current alternative means of assessments like self-assessment, peer assessment, portfolio assessment, interviews, conferences etc. are not explored and incorporated to assess and evaluate the learning process of language acquisition in particular and subject competence in general. Shaaban (2005) maintains that "Alternative means of assessment take into account variations in students' needs, interests, and learning styles, and they attempt to integrate assessment and learning activities. They also indicate successful performance, highlight positive traits, and provide formative rather than summative evaluation" (p.35). Hence, the study under discussion deals with the teaching of English as L2 and explores the opportunities of formative assessment with the modern alternative means. It primarily deals with the theoretical framework of teaching and assessing practices of English as L2. It seeks to develop a discourse to bolster the teaching and assessment process of English language in public sector schools and colleges of Sindh the study also distinguishes summative and formative assessment and highlights the significance of the use of alternative assessment for both summative and formative assessment process. The researchers have had first-hand experience of teaching English to the students of class IX, X, XI and XII in the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh and have drawn much from their 12-years of teaching experience, observation, prevailing teaching and assessment practices, and pedagogical practices in these schools and colleges.

Objectives of the study

1. To distinguish between teaching approaches, methods, and techniques used for teaching L1 and L2.

2. To highlight the importance of formative assessment as compared to summative assessment.

Review of Literature

What is assessment?

Frank (2012) argues that "Assessment is how we identify our learners' needs, document their progress, and determine how we are doing as teachers and planners" (p. 32); therefore, assessment is a continuous process which helps both teachers and learners to

determine whether the teaching learning process is effectively being incorporated and points out the gaps in it. Moreover, it estimates that the demands of the learners are duly fulfilled and their learning process is developed gradually, systematically, and scientifically. Assessment can be summative if done at the end of the learning process or formative if done during the process. The assessment tool needs validity and reliability; the former refers to the extent the employed tool measures what it claims to measure, and the latter determines how much consistent it is in measuring if employed with the change of place and time. The pattern of assessment can be subjective, if there is a possibility of more than one answers or responses to a question or the skill being assessed therein, and it becomes objective when there is only one correct answer or response. Eventually, the assessment produces positive or negative backwash on the mind of the learners; the positive backwash boosts the teaching learning process, whereas the negative feeling at the end of the assessment casts adverse and gloomy impact on the minds of the learners and it becomes detrimental to teaching learning process (Assessment Glossary, 2015; Assessment of Language Learning, 2014; Glossary of Assessment, 2014; Key Assessment Terms, 2015).

Limitations of traditional test-based assessment

Frank (2012) debates that most of the teachers use paper and pencil based tests as a means of assessment to measure the achievement of their students, whereas globally, "Some alternative forms of assessment are (also) growing in popularity" (Frank, 2012, p.32). However, most of the items included in these traditional tests have issues of content validity; therefore, they fail to measure the aimed skills adequately and satisfactorily (Davies, 1990; Heaton, 1990; Popham, 1981). Content validity in an educational test represents how much measure of the given test is related to the subject actually taught to the students. Henning (2012) points out 20 common mistakes in the traditional testing pattern, which are categorized under four main aspects of testing: (a) examination characteristics, (b) items characteristics, (c) test-validity concerns, and (d) administrative and scoring issues. The examination characteristics include that if the test is either very tough or too easy, either too short or very

lengthy, redundant in type, lacks reliability and validity, casts negative backwash on the minds of the learners then it fails to meet the objectives intended. The item characteristics highlight that tests should not contain tricky questions, redundant wordings, divergence cues, convergence cues, and it should not consist of small number of choices in multiple-choice questions or false-true questions, because it increases the possibility of guessing and reduces accuracy of measurement. Test validity concerns include that "A test accurately measures the content or ability it purports to measure" (Henning, 2012, p. 35). It should not be based on mixed contents or it should not include the options beyond the targeted skills or ability. For instance, it does not sound valid if the option of verb agreement is included in the answer choices of a question that purports to assess the use of tenses. The standard test neither uses wrong medium nor does it consist of the questions of common knowledge, which can be answered without incorporating certain skills or ability. Sometimes, a test becomes subject to syllabus mismatch and content mismatch; the former refers to the aspect if the test is beyond the prescribed syllabus, whereas the latter points out at the shortcomings if the test becomes mere tool to test memory and answers can be sorted out without employing any skill or ability.

The administrative and scoring problems include the issues of lack of cheating control, inadequate instructions, administrative inequities (when test is not administered with same loudness, clarity of voice, lighting and sitting arrangements), lack of piloting, and subjectivity of scoring. Pilot study enhances the validity and reliability of the test and helps to adjust multiple errors and irregularities in the test; however, to put a check on the subjectivity of scoring, it is essential to devise and determine some measuring tools, yardsticks, criteria, and points to be added for specific ability or should be deducted on certain mistakes, but they must be same for all assessors (Henning, 2012).

It can be risky and sometimes even detrimental to assess young children by employing summative tests as a means of assessment. Katz (1997) explains that "Young learners are notoriously poor test-takers…. [T]he younger the child being evaluated, assessed,

or tested, the more errors are made… [and] the greater the risk of assigning false labels to them" (p.1). Besides, young children feel much anxiety when they are put in traditional testing system (Smith, 1996). It is, therefore, necessary to assess small children in an anxiety-free situation. In addition, Tennant (2008) is of the view that it is essential to determine that the test really assesses the skills or ability what it purports to measure without involving other skills or ability, which can be difficult to achieve when writing a test. If language teachers intend to assess the speaking skills of the learners, they can ask them to speak in response to some kind of stimulus, which may be a question, a picture, a problem, or a piece they listen to, or a piece of writing they read and then they speak in its response. Hence, the test along with speaking also involves the skills of listening and reading. Generally, the learners remain unaware of the test pattern or marking criteria because the rubrics are not devised by taking them on board and as a result, the traditional test becomes a threat and causes much anxiety among learners, especially if they get a low score.

Alternative assessments

Along with traditional formal test-based assessment, there are various modes of assessments which could be employed for formative and summative assessments. If the learners do badly in a formal test, it does not mean that they are not learning. There are alternative ways and means of assessments, which are less formal and with a lesser degree of quantitative measures. Pierce and O'Malley (1992) while defining alternative assessment reiterate, "Any method of finding out what a student knows or can do that is intended to show growth and inform instruction and is not a standardized or traditional test" (p. 21). In addition, alternative assessment undertakes and considers the needs of the learners, the style they prefer to learn with, and the way they integrate the learning and assessment process. Thus, it highlights positive traits among learners, brings successful performance in limelight and instead of summative evaluation it preferably provides formative assessment which supports the teaching and learning process.

A teacher can make the formal, stern, stressful, and cumbersome

process of assessment interesting, flexible, less formal, and stress-free by employing project work, class-activities, group tasks, and homework as means of alternative assessment. If tests are inevitable, even then students can be given a number of tests and two or three best out of all may be used for the final grading. This will reduce the anxiety factor and increase the interest of the learners; and at the same time help those who owing to some reason fail to perform well in a particular test. For that, we need alternative means of assessments, which are more democratic than the autocratic paper and pencil based testing system. Some alternative modes of assessment are as under:

Peer assessment. Peer-assessment enables students to help and support one another, thus enhancing mutual understanding, cooperation, harmony, respect, and tolerance. It is likely to shift the authority of the teacher to the students, which instills responsibility among them and boosts their interest. It enriches the teaching learning process and helps students to nurture their analytical skills, confidence level, and creativity. The learners feel relaxed, which reduces the hesitation and anxiety and as a result, they learn fast and effectively.

Self-assessment. Oskarsson (1980) traces the origin of self-assessment and shares that it came into vogue after the publication of Council of Europe report on the topic in 1980. It has since been incorporated for the better integrity of both teaching and learning and assessment process globally. Self-assessment reduces teacher's workload and shifts responsibility and authority from the teacher to the student. There is a possibility that the learners may remain subjective during self-evaluation, but this can be managed by devising instruments which produce quantitative value for evaluation. McNamara and Deane (1995) state that "Although self-assessment may seem inappropriate at first, it can yield accurate judgment of students' linguistic abilities, weaknesses, strengths, and improvement" (as cited in Shaaban, 2005, p.38).

Portfolio assessment. Portfolios are a collection of students' work over a certain period of time to show their efforts, progress, and achievements in the given areas. For making a qualitative portfolio,

the learners need to organize, synthesize, and clearly describe their achievements and effectively communicate what they have learnt through providing evidence for their completed tasks (Timothy, 1999). Portfolio assessment strategies provide a structure for learning that stays for a longer time and which is conceptual based. Hence, the onus of demonstrating mastery of concepts transfers from the teachers to the learners.

Dialogue journal. Peyton and Reed (1990) maintain that journals can be used as an interactive means between teachers and learners for writing dialogues. Such journals have been found useful for learners at all levels as they can use their free and uncensored expressions without being worried about grades (Peyton & Reed, 1990). Brown and Hudson (1998) add that for teachers, these journals can provide a means "To collect information on students' views, beliefs, attitude, and motivation related to a class or program or to the process involved in learning various language skills" (p.4).

Additional tools. Some further tools which can be employed for the assessment and evaluation of the learners include homework, project work, in-class activities, audio-tapes of discussions, videos of role-plays, learning logs, anecdotal records, teacher observation, and performance-based assessments. These are continuous evaluating tools where the learners have to demonstrate their learning, knowledge, and skills throughout the academic sessions.

Methodology

This study was a qualitative research using observations as its tool. Qualitative research is aimed at achieving an in depth understanding of a specific organization, an event or a phenomenon. "When studying a context, qualitative researchers examine people's actions (local performances) and the structures (informal guidelines and formal rules) that encourage, shape, and constrain such actions" (Tracy, 2013, p. 22).

Observations are useful for generating in-depth descriptions

of organizations or events, for obtaining information that is otherwise inaccessible (Anis, 2015). Participant observation requires that the researcher be involved in various activities over an extended period of time, so that the researcher is able to observe participants in their natural setting and is able to understand accurately the phenomenon under investigation (Kawulich, 2005). As the researchers were English teachers; therefore, the data for this research was based on the observations made by them during the course of teaching. Since the researcher had first-hand experience of teaching English to the students of classes IX to XII in the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh, the data for the study were derive based on the authors' observations, prevailing teaching, and assessment practices in the workplaces.

Observations and Discussion

Teaching English in public sector schools and colleges of Sindh

Pakistan has parallel education system namely, the government and private run schools, colleges, universities, and madrassas. Ironically, their syllabus, pedagogy, objectives, and assessment modes drastically differ from one another. As the focus of this study is to analyze and evaluate the practices and approaches deployed for the teaching and assessment of English language in the government run public sector schools and colleges of Sindh; therefore, teaching and assessment approaches used in other educational institutes are not taken into consideration for drawing generalization and conclusion. The present-day public sector educational system of Pakistan is predominantly based on the British education system introduced in the undivided Indian subcontinent during the British colonial rule. Initially, it adopted a two-year teaching learning process followed by a comprehensive examination of both subjective and objective nature. With later developments, it shifted to an annual education system, which is prevalent in public sector schools and colleges to date with the exception of some institutes and universities that follow semester or quarterly education system.

Rehman (1996) states that Pakistan is a multilingual and multiethnic country with six major and over 57 other languages; however, the languages of the domains of power such as government, corporate sector, media, education etc. are in Urdu and English. After independence of Pakistan, an All Pakistan Educational Conference was held, which recommended that English should be taught as a functional subject rather than as literature. Education Policy (1992) further added that the medium of instruction would be either provincial languages, the national language (Urdu) or English. Public sector schools in Sindh use provincial language, Sindhi and national language, Urdu as medium of instruction. Initially English was added as a functional subject from year six, but later on it was recommended to be taught from primary level.

The teaching of L1 and L2 differs in many respects and approach. Nawab (2012) in his study found that teachers in rural Pakistan use translation method to teach English language. They teach grammar rules deductively, focus on reading and writing, whereas listening and speaking skills remain ignored in both teaching and assessment process. It must be kept in mind that language acquisition is based on the four skills namely: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Listening and reading are receptive skills; whereas, speaking and writing are productive skills. The receptive skills significantly add to the development of productive skills. Subjects like mathematics, science, social studies and others can be taught with certain limitations in any regional language, but these regional languages cannot be used for teaching L2.

In the case of L1, the learners come up with a considerable acquisition of listening and speaking and the school helps them to improve the remaining two skills. Therefore, the school devises syllabus, approaches, and methodologies to focus on developing only reading and writing skills of the leaners. Those who do not undergo the formal process of education system, remain deficient in reading and writing, but possess a good deal of command in speaking and listening skills of L1. The general practice for teaching L1 in these schools is that the teachers teach learners alphabets in L1 then lead

them to book reading, coupled with word meaning, dictation, written exercises, and the assessment also focuses on reading and writing skills. Unfortunately, public sector schools and colleges have not drawn explicitly different approaches for teaching and assessing L2. Most of the time, they adopt the same approach and method that they incorporate for teaching L1. As a result, the focus remains only on reading and writing skills and the two crucial skills of listening and speaking English remain almost ignored during teaching and altogether overlooked during the assessment process. There is an annual assessment system in these schools and colleges in which paper and pencil based test is used as a tool to assess and evaluate the performance, skills, and acquisition of the learners; whereas, formative assessment is a rare phenomenon with no established frequency and consistence.

Patil (2008) confesses that the objective of teaching English language is not mere transfer of information, but it aims at making the learners able to listen, speak, read, and write English fluently and easily. However, schools and colleges pre-dominantly transfer content to the students without focusing on developing language skills. Learners can acquire language skills if exposed to the activities designed for language development (Watkin, 2007) for which the teachers must be clear about the short term goals and stipulated aims for incorporating such activates in the class (James, 2001). Mercer (1998) justifies that the role of the teachers is very significant in managing and directing language activities the learners are involved in so that they can make sense of what, how, and when they are needed to undertake the ongoing language activities. In state-sector schools and colleges of Sindh, teachers use L1 to teach L2 (Hall & Cook, 2013). Students are not exposed to activities, context, and situation where they can practically experience and practice L2 skills.

Listening is the key to learning any language. Extensive research carried out from listening perspective entails that learning language with ears is more effective than learning with eyes. Vandergrift (2004) adds that "The ear is the key organ to language learning" (p. 17). Though both reading and listening are receptive skills; however, the proportion of listening is 80%, whereas 20 %

is reserved for reading. A vast range of graded listening activities, leading from simple to complex level should be designed and incorporated in the classes for better learning of a language (Brown & Yule, 1999). In public sector schools and colleges, the teachers mostly use translation method (Hall & Cook, 2013; Nawab, 2012), in which the learners are not involved in listening targeted L2 language, but listen to their L1, which does not help them improving L2 acquisition skills. Stern (1983) opines that translation method lays little emphasis on learning basic language skills. Most public sector schools and colleges have no established practice of arranging listening and speaking activities and the prime focus remains on reading and writing. These classes tend to be teacher-centered and age-old lecture method is in vogue where student autonomy is limited. Grammatical rules are taught and tested in isolation without situational context; reading and writing are emphasized, whereas listening and speaking take a back-seat.

Many studies conducted in Asia reveal that learners are shy in learning and using a second language and one of the ways to alleviate hesitation, shyness, and nervousness of the learners is that the English teachers should design and develop relevant, meaningful, and contextual situations in which they can develop skills to read, write, and speak fluently. Nawab (2012) opines that, "For developing such situations in the class, he teacher should use games, role play activities, information gap tasks, brain storming exercises, riddles, puzzles, cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, songs, and other low-cost and easily available teaching materials" (p. 698). Appropriate incorporation of all above activities requires well-trained, fluent, and experienced teachers. Unfortunately, teacher training in Pakistan is a fiasco and the availability of such trained teachers has emerged as a big challenge (Aslam, Nadeem, Husain & Khan, 2010; Behlol & Anwer, 2011; Shamim, 2008). Siddiqui (2010) elaborates that the prevailing pre-service courses are either outdated or emphasis of the theoretical aspect is least focused on the real existing teaching practices and problems. Text books designed for developing L2 skills play pivotal role in language acquisition process. Ideally these books must contain activities based on the whole range of language skills (Sahu, 2004). Nikolov (1999)

argues that children get a great deal of motivation and develop their interest in learning foreign languages if they find the materials used for activities interesting and the teacher leading the class helpful. In public schools and colleges of Sindh, text books are outdated and the exercises given at the end of each lesson of English books prescribed for the classes 8 to 12 are diametrically opposite to the examination pattern, which includes multiple choice questions and short and long answers. These books need immediate revision to match with the assessment patterns. Moreover, these text books do not encourage autonomy and choice for the learner to initiate the activity of their interest.

Traditional test-based mode of assessment

The teaching learning pedagogy, approaches, and methods in Pakistan in general and Sindh in particular have undergone a gradual transformation from book-based approach to teacher-based and then student-based approach. As a result, the private and some public sector institutes in Pakistan have adapted, implemented, and enforced performance-based, interactive, activity-based, modern and innovative methodologies and approaches in teaching, but for assessment they depend on the age-old-traditional test method. Therefore, it could be suggested that the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh lag behind in both teaching and assessing process. The existing examination system in public sector schools and colleges of Sindh itself is a main hindrance in learning English as a language. The exam pattern does not assess all language skills, it focuses on the testing memory which leads students towards rote-learning and cramming. The teachers also remain enticed with the idea of completing the prescribed syllabus rather than developing L2 skills.

Public sector schools and colleges of Sindh have devised local examination system up to class 8 in which question papers are set at district level and dispatched to all middle schools, whereas from class 9 to 12 the examination papers are conducted at central level under the supervision of various Boards of Intermediate and Secondary Education of Sindh. A quick glance at these subjective

and objective question papers of English language reveals that a greater proportion is based on close-ended questions, testing the memory of the students, focus on grammar rules rather than the language skills and competency. Moreover, listening and speaking skills of English language remain excluded from the assessment process as they are already less focused during teaching. These public sector schools and colleges only practice summative (product) means of assessment, whereas the formative (product) assessment is not in vogue. Besides, the only tool they exploit to assess and evaluate the skills, competence, progress, and development of the students is paper and pencil based tests; however, the modern means of alternative mode of assessment are not in practice.

Conclusion

The public sector schools and colleges in Sindh teach English language (L2) either as a subject or with L1 pedagogical approaches and methods. Unfortunately, they have not drawn explicitly different approaches for teaching and assessing L2. These schools and colleges depend upon the age-old-traditional test method and a quick glance at the subjective and objective question papers of English language reveal that the greater proportion is based on close-ended questions, which test the memory of the students.

Assessment is a continuous and regular process to assess progress towards the product as well as to assess the product. Both teaching and learning processes and assessments should be based on cocrete observable objectives so that the learners as well as the teachers can concretely determine that the learning process is effectively taking place. Rubrics need to contain clear instructions for both the teachers and the learners. Since the learners are one of the main stakeholders in the teaching learning process; therefore, they should be given an important role in the assessment as well. Furthermore, the teacher and learner in harmony and collaboration could design the rubrics, criteria, breakdown of marks, and the format of the assessments with a mutual understanding. When the learners realize that assessment is not all about scores, but also about learning the

process, they will start taking interest in it, which ultimately paves the way for better understanding.

Assessments cannot be only paper-and-pencil based test, which is rather totalitarian and authoritative in nature as it creates fear and anxiety among the learners, but there are more democratic, less stern and less formal alternate modes as well. Alternative modes of assessments have some shortcomings as highlighted by Brown and Hudson (1998), who believe that "Performance assessments are relatively difficult to produce and relatively time-consuming to administer…reliability may be problematic because of rater inconsistencies, limited number of observations, [and] subjectivity in the scoring process" (p. 662). To construct alternative modes of assessment and use it effectively is a laborious task, as it requires both skills and patience. However, once the teachers and learners become familiar with it, it does wonders with the teaching learning and assessment process. Alternative assessments reduce anxiety and fear among the learners, instill a sense of responsibility and accountability, allow learners to play an active role in the assessment process, shift responsibilities from teachers to learners, and above all challenge the conviction and establish that learners can also assess themselves and their peers.

Recommendations

1. English language should be taught as L2 with the focus on all four skills of language.

2. Teachers should be trained for teaching English as a second language.

3. Text books prescribed for teaching English in the public sector schools and colleges of Sindh should be revised to develop all skills of language.

4. Listening and speaking skills should be focused during both teaching and assessment process.

5. Along with summative assessment, formative assessment should be considered to provide timely and continuous feedback and appraisal to the learners.

6. Modern tools of alternative assessment could be considered to make teaching-learning process more composite, objective-oriented, and effective.

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