
New Perspectives in Testing

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Abstract

Second language education, ever since its growing importance is sensed by the world, has been broadening its concept incorporating study skills, soft skills and even thinking skills besides LSRW. But language examination, on the other hand, is still restricted to testing grammar, vocabulary, and LSRW skills, which is purely a language centric discrete approach. Language is not a distinct subject. Without language, no other subject exists. Language is essential to understand any information in the world. Having linguistic competence does not mean that we have language skills. Hence, it is crucial to change our attitude towards English as a specific subject to English as a holistic subject.

If we consider language testing, the tests are still focusing on linguistic competence instead of comprehension, expression and thinking. These three aspects of language are vital in information transfer (both receptive and productive). The changes that have been taking place in testing over many years, have paved the way to include comprehension and expression as part of Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) at the secondary level. However, being accustomed to conventional system of examination, students are not able to utter even a few accurate sentences in real life contexts. Inclusion of Open Book Exam can change the CCE system as the exam prepares the students for real life problems by enabling them to read extensively.

Keywords: CCE, Open Book Exam, Language Examination, Performance Based Exams,
Extensive Reading

Introduction

A brief look at our examination system makes us understand that the education in India continues to give more priority to memory and rote learning than to understanding the application of theories or concepts and developing creative and critical thinking skills. Most students memorize the information given in guide books or test papers just before the exams and get through them with good marks and ranks. Even in language examination, they cram the

grammar rules and the content for a few repeated questions and cross the class barrier successfully. But, in reality, students can't cope with the demands of using a second language like English, in real life situations to communicate successfully. Unable to understand the topics at the peak hours, many students feel tensed during preparation and try to mug up the information. This happens because of the stress students feel due to the burden of examination. Thus, our education system has failed to develop the cognitive skills which are the main aim of quality education.

Background

To overcome the problems of education system, the examination system has to look at the possibilities offered by alternative assessments. As a response to this, CCE (Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation) was introduced in the evaluation system. The situation of using questions which require factual information or crammed responses has been changed. The items in the summative exam test the knowledge of students to analyze, think critically and apply the concepts. As there is no proper preparation for the students in dealing with such questions, students are not able to perform well. In fact, formative assessments should be designed in such a way that it prepares the students for final end term exams. But that is not happening. All the items used in formative assessments are factual, memory based. Hence the system is not getting the desired results. To strengthen the system of CCE for better results, we can use continuous Open-Book Examinations as a preparation for public or board exams. Opportunities have to be given to students to use the language stimulating real life contexts. Hence, performance based exams are the need of the hour in language assessments.

The above argument of improving the examination system is not a new concept. For several decades, discussions have been going on for their improvement. Numerous recommendations, number of suggestions were made by think-tanks in conferences and committees. But, only a handful of them are being implemented. The rest of the suggestions are restricted only to the books, theses and journals. Of late, CBSE board started implementing the innovative suggestions like CCE (Continuous Comprehensive Evaluation) PSA (Problem Solving Ability Test) and OTBA (Open Text Based Assessment). But, in the year 2017, it has taken a surprising decision

to stop all these innovations and finally embrace traditional board exam system. It's another instance of failure of examination reforms.

When students are required to create or critically analyze the information based on their textbook knowledge which is supposed to be read and comprehended by them, they are unable to write anything meaningful owing to their conventional methods of study. A typical classroom in Telangana State has an English teacher explaining the lesson, and then giving the notes to the questions provided at the end of the lesson. This kind of a pedagogical practice makes the students mere passive learners. They lose their interest in reading texts, as teachers tend to spoon-feed children to score maximum marks in exams. Examination scheme has been changed from memory based to thinking based, but the study methods of students are still memory based irrespective of the subject. Hence teachers often find their students making errors and having poor writing skills in English language exams. The errors they make in written exams are not predominantly a writing problem. It's a reading problem (Hirvela, 2004). Reading is an essential skill which promotes accurate writing in English language (Carson & Leki, 1993). When enough reading is done, all the necessary grammatical structures and discourse rules for writing will automatically be presented to the student. (Krashen 1984:23)

Theoretical Assumptions

The major proponents of reading express that extensive reading approach helps to enhance language abilities besides gaining world knowledge. But students generally do not like to read and it is a serious problem in second language learning (Richard & Bamford, 1998, P.4). The testing of comprehension and expression in language exams is an impetus for students to read texts. Exposure to texts through reading contributes to students' acquisition of understanding about writing and its features. Since Open-Book Exam encourages text reading and application of language in real life contexts (Carpenter et.al. 2006, Karpicke & Roediger, 2007b, McDaniel et.al, 2007 as cited in Pooja K Agarwal et.al 2007), it should be encouraged and widely used. Open-Book Exams make the students refer a wide range of books and encourage them to take notes. This process enables the students to improve their knowledge and reading skills.

Pedagogical Practices/ Classroom Activities

Open Book Exam as part of formative assessment enhances the learning of students. However, judicious use of questions is needed. Factual questions are no way useful in this format. The tasks must be thinking based or the application of language in real life contexts. Students need not cram the grammar rules or memorize the fixed responses for repeated questions in the exams. Open Book exam also encourages students to read extensively and enables them to go beyond textbook. This kind of study methods make the students improve their cognitive abilities besides gaining knowledge. During initial days, students might face problems, since it is a new method and might not show interest in reading. Hence, it is teachers' responsibility to make sure that the tasks they give in Open Book Exam are very interesting. Teachers also should recommend interesting books to make the students habituated to reading. According to Krashen (1984), reading enables the innate capacity to acquire the grammar rules for using accurate English.

Conclusion

The purpose of learning a language is to understand, speak and write accurate grammatical structures in meaningful contexts. Tests should serve this purpose. Their objective must be testing the communicative ability in natural setting but not identifying the bits and chunks of grammatical and vocabulary items. Responding to discrete items does not indicate the true language ability of a student. To test their natural language ability, authentic tests such as Open Book exams can be used. It encourages wide reading. The habit of reading enables the students to acquire good language in addition to gaining knowledge. But unfortunately, most students are not interested in reading books. This is because of Memory based examination system. The change in the examination type might show some improvement in their reading abilities.

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