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ATTITUDES TOWARDS TESTING SPEAKING SKILLS: A CASE FOR CONSIDERATION

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ABSTRACT

There is a positive correlation between teaching and testing in the teaching-learning process. The same correlation applies to teaching /learning speaking skills and testing speaking skills. As there is a need to learn speaking skills to communicate in different academic situations, testing such skills is vital. So, this paper tries to explore the much neglected area in English language teaching (ELT) i.e. test of speaking skills at the UG level in Telangana. In almost all the public and private colleges, there is no testing (or systematic testing) of speaking skills in the target population. In fact, there is lot of literature on testing/examining speaking skills these days. Though, one may attribute many reasons for not conducting speaking tests, this study would like to enquire the attitudes of the teachers and learners towards testing speaking skills. Therefore the researcher conducted a small scale research to study the attitude of the teachers and learners towards English examinations in general and speaking tests in particular. In this study researcher used students' focus group discussion and oral interviews of teachers to identify the attitude of the teachers and learners. From the obtained data, the attitudes of the learners as well as the teachers towards testing speaking skills, and their attitudinal implications on learning speaking skills (oral skills) are interpreted.

Key Words: Teaching/Testing speaking skills, Examinations, attitude of teachers and learners, testing methods, washback.

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching is a process and it involves many factors in the teaching and learning process. The important factors which influence teaching learning process are- motivation and needs of the learner, classroom environment, teacher knowledge, teaching aids, administration, testing or examination, etc. Testing is a very essential aspect which can affect positively or negatively the teaching/learning process. Though testing is

widely used around the world for different purposes, the aspect of testing in language teaching-learning is for the purpose of effective learning and assessment.

The teaching and testing have been there at UG level in Telangana since the beginning of the formal English education. Teaching has been changing from time to time in terms of approaches, methods and techniques, but the testing methods and techniques have never been changed much with the teaching purposes. Testing started with pen or pencil-paper tests and still continuing in the same traditional way. The method of testing in target colleges is very limited to testing of certain aspects of the language, like grammar testing, content testing, testing only a few areas of skills testing, leaving all the needed essential components. In one word a test or examinations is conducted just for awarding degrees, but not for any beneficial purpose of better teaching or better learning. It is very clear if one examines the testing or examination situation of UG level learners.

As we know, it is a high time of English for specific purposes or English for specific uses. This brought a sea change in the methods of teaching and the techniques used, in contrast to this, there is no change in the testing pattern. The objectives of the UG Degree Colleges are to impart listening, speaking, reading and writing skills including grammar. In spite of having the above objectives, the target learner have been failing to achieve equal success in all the areas of language. The learners show good performance in written tests than their actual speaking when needed. In contrast to this, most of the current research on needs analysis of the UG level learners reveals that they also need strong oral communication skills. In spite of their strong will to be fluent speakers, they have been still failing in the due course. In nutshell, it is very clear that the learners at UG degree college level need speaking skills very much. They want to use English for both general purposes (i.e. interaction out of classrooms) and academic purposes (i.e. interaction with in the classroom). The underachievement of speaking skills may be attributed to invalid tests or ill examination system for language courses or lack of systematic assessment for speaking skills.

Why testing

Testing has backwash or washback effect on the teaching and learning. Alderson and Wall (1993) define backwash as “the effect of a test on teaching and learning process. “It can effect positively or negatively the teaching-learning process. A positive wash back is the product of good test and negative washback is the product of bad test. A good test is always valid and reliable which measures what it is intended to measure. A good test is always beneficial and yields good results whereas the bad test is always harmful and detrimental for good learning. It also affects the mode and methods of teaching and learning process. Therefore, a good test which has validity and reliability is essential in the teaching-learning process. Therefore, most of the ELT experts, especially Heaton (1990), Harold Madson (1983) and Luoma (2005) opine that testing is essential for better teaching. Without testing, teachers teaching or learners understanding cannot be measured. Measuring such teaching or learning is very essential and it also has a positive effect on teaching learning process. Therefore, as there is a need to teach/learn spoken or oral English at UG level there must be valid and reliable speaking tests too. Speaking tests will certainly have their backwash or washback effect on teaching and learning of speaking skills. Therefore, this small scale research considered the following questions to conduct the research.

- 1) The first research question: Are the tests being conducted at UG level helping to learn the language?
And
- 2) The second research question: Do the speaking tests conducted at UG level really have any positive backwash effect on teaching/learning speaking skills?

Testing at UG Level

According to the prescribed syllabus of affiliated colleges, Osmania University, at UG level English language is taught focusing on LSRW skills and grammar. The primary objective is to address both spoken and written communication needs of the learner. All the students pursuing degree course (BA/BSc/Bcom etc.) are learning English for general and academic purposes. So, the board of studies set the curriculum based on the

needs of the learners. At UG level, they are expected to listen and understand; speak and communicate in different academic situations; read and comprehend and write and express ideas. To work out this objective the learners are provided with a text book and a non-detailed text for the first year and for the second year they are facilitated with multimedia lab sessions. In the course of study students are expected to sit for some tests/exams. However, the objectives of testing is mentioned nowhere. So, there is no serious thought about testing speaking or its evaluation. Only a few interested teacher conduct speaking test informally as there is no clear cut policy on conducting speaking skills. So, ultimately most of the learners end up without learning speaking skills. In the teaching learning process, teacher timely set only written exams, therefore, learners find the strategies to crack those written exams. Ultimately, they succeed in scoring high marks in written exams but the performance in oral communication is never guaranteed at the same level. Therefore, many learners become good writers but not fluent speakers.

In such a scenario, this study was taken in up 2012 to find out the attitude of the teachers and learners towards testing. Therefore, this study used above two research question with the following research methodology.

Research methodology

- 24 students, who just passed their UG degree (a few months ago) from different towns of Telangana, under Osmania University, participated in focus group discussion (FGD) for 1 and half hour.
- Opinions of learners were sought on examination, speaking skills and testing speaking skills.
- Opinions of 14 teachers-respondents who have been teaching in Degree College in Telangana was taken for consideration.
- A teacher interview questionnaire and students' focus group discussion questionnaire are used as research tools.

Students FGD Analysis

24 Post-graduate aspirant students (who came for counselling at Nizam College, Hyderabad), participated in the Focus Group Discussion. The rationale for selecting these students was that they would give the latest information about tests as they have just completed their course and they were certainly aware of testing methods/patterns and language areas they have taken during their course of study. And the second reason is that they were from different parts of the state. The researcher considered that they were the ideal sample for the study. So, the researcher presented the topic of discussion i.e. testing speaking skills at UG level and asked questions in between to get more information about testing speaking skills. All the students participating in the discussion informed that they have written many tests related to English language but did not take any test on speaking exclusively. All the tests were written tests; most of them tested grammar knowledge, reading comprehension, vocabulary and content of the prescribed text books. None of the students sat for any speaking test. Students felt exams/tests were very important to gain good marks so they worked very hard to earn more marks in the written tests. They also used remembering strategies, tips, market guides and mnemonics to pass the tests and/or exams. All the exams are conducted at the end of the year. In some cases they also had quarterly and half yearly exams. As the tests were on reading and writing, they were forced to give their first priority to reading and writing rather than listening and speaking or learning communication skills. In the view of participants exams are unavoidable and they must pass tests or exams. So, learners give more priority to writing skills. In nutshell 70% students felt that the tests were irrelevant or invalid. They also see that the mismatch between their actual need of the language and its testing methods.

Teacher interview analysis

In the same way, as a part of this study the researcher consulted 14 teachers and among the 14 teachers 12 teachers participated in the oral interviews. Two teachers were reluctant to give any information on testing speaking skills. Among the twelve participants eight were male and the rest were female. Except three-

interviews over phone, all interviews were conducted face to face. The duration of the interviews ranged 10 to 15 minutes minimum. All the interviews were conducted using pre-prepared questionnaire for the purpose.

- When the questions sought to know the reason for not conducting speaking tests, the most common response was overcrowded classes, lack of resources and very limited time for English classes. The strength of classrooms varies from minimum 25 to maximum 80. Not only the teachers of overcrowded classroom but also teachers of moderate classrooms are not interested in testing speaking skills.
- For the other question on whether they give any material to learners, half of the teachers said they give notes (important question and answers) to the learners to pass in the exams. It can be understood that most teachers are teaching for the testing.
- Interestingly, three are 25 marks for the internal examination. Even in the internal exams learners write pencil and paper tests which are content based examinations. That belief is that the writing skill helpful in acquiring skills.
- Teaching is for testing: Throughout the course learners just read and reproduce the answers. With these examinations neither the teachers nor the learners are happy because the ultimate goal is just securing the good marks in the exam, not really learning the language.
- Almost 50 % of the teachers do not believe in the tests that help the learners to learn language better. In such a scenario, teacher as well as learners see tests as irrelevant in terms of learning language.
- A lot of weightage is given to only reading and writing in all the exams (internal exams and board exams) learner are indirectly forced to focus their attention on reading and writing rather than actual speaking and communication.
- One of the teachers said that since he did not attend any speaking test, he is not conducting any such tests for his learners. Eight teachers out of twelve admitted they did not conduct any speaking test because of overcrowded classrooms and lack of testing resources. All the official board exams are for awarding marks or grades, and are paper and pencil tests meant for writing. Four teachers said that they test the speaking skills using written tests. One teacher said speaking is tested informally- in elocution, debate, discussion, pair and group activities, etc. Here the information from the four teachers is very crucial to understand the opinions of some teachers towards testing. The important assumptions are:
 - Speaking can't be tested. Many lecturer see that speaking skills are very complex in nature. Speaking tests also give a lot scope to subjectivity.
 - Testing the writing skills is equal to testing speaking skills: Here the primary assumption is written language is equal to spoken language. Therefore written tests indicate the spoken performance. Certainly there are similarities but what about the differences between spoken and written English. The following is an example of difference between written and spoken varieties of the same message/content. E.g.; Apology Offered to Indian Shooters can be put in both written and spoken modes as following.
 - a) The written language:
NEW DELHI/LONDON: Bowing to pressure, the organisers of the ISSF world Cup in Dorset (U.K.) on Sunday apologised to the Indian shooters who were harassed by their transport staff. The officials, Peter Underhill and Stephen Minto, tendered the apology to the Indian team manager M.Padmanabhan at a meeting.
 - b) Spoken Language:
Peter Underhill: We're very sorry for the trouble caused by our transport department.
Stephen Minto: I beg your apology for the inconvenience caused by our transport department.
- Testing writing skills reveals spoken skills performance. Some teachers feel that if we are linguistically competent it leads to communicative competence. But Dell Hymes rightly pointed out that there is clear difference between linguistic competence and communicative competence.

- A well written test is reliable and valid for assessing speaking skills. But, the test items are most of the time are based on the testability of the language components. That is the reason, grammar based tests or content based tests are more in the teaching-learning process.

Conclusion

The universally accepted fact is that there are difficulties in testing the speaking skills. Ignoring it, for the sake of difficulties may leave learners lame in speaking skills. In order to turn learners focus to speaking, there is a need to develop speaking skill tests. As the present trend is learning for tests or examinations. It can be best exploited for the good washback. As there was no testing either in public or private UG colleges there must be some initiation in this field from teachers, administrators and examination boards. I also think teaching and testing should go hand in hand for effective and positive washback in teaching and learning process. The interested teacher or research scholar may develop systematic testing methods for testing speaking skills for overcrowded/large Indian classrooms.

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Students' Focus Group Discussion Questionnaire and Observations

***Clues are provided below the questions**

1. Which skills were there in your UG (English) course?
L(), S(), R(), W() & all (LSRW) ()
2. Was there speaking skills component in the curriculum in your degree course?
Yes(), No()
3. Was your speaking skill tested at your UG College?
Yes (), No()
4. How often your teachers tested your speaking skills in a year?
Never (), once (), twice (), Thrice (), many times ()
5. Was/were the test/s conducted in between the academic year or at the end of the academic year?
In between academic year (), at the end of academic year ()
6. Could you share how your spoken skills were tested?
7. Did your teacher conduct a written test or oral test?
Wt.(), Ot. () and any other ().
8. Apart from written tests did they give any marks for your speaking skills?
Yes(), No().
9. Which activities did your teacher use as part of speaking test?
Like interview activities (), group discussions activities (), pair work activities (), group work activities (), questioning and answering activities (hot seat activities) (), usability tests (task based activity tests) () and any other activities_____
10. Do students really need speaking tests at UG level? Yes (), No ()
11. Does the present examination system at UG level test all language skills?
Yes (), No ()
12. Does good performance of exams lead to good speaking? Yes (), No ()
13. Do you feel testing speaking oral mode is more justifying? Yes (), No ()
14. Do you like test in English language learning?
If yes () or no () give reasons.

Teacher's interview questionnaire

1. Name (optional):
2. Teaching experience at UG level:
3. Name and address of the college (optional):
4. What is average the strength of your classes?
5. Which skill do your students need more and which skill does the curriculum need you to you focus on?
6. Do you test your students' language skills?
7. Which skills do you test in the exams?
8. In which mode do you test your students' language skills?
9. Do you conduct tests on speaking skills?
10. How do you conduct speaking tests?

Bio-note of Author

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