

COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND TESTING IN INDIAN CLASSROOMS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Introduction

A glimpse into Indian classrooms teaching English would show students copying from the board and listening to lectures, instead of actually indulging in real time conversations. This highlights the criterion that questions the basic need for language learning. Indian students are poorly informed of their choices, and it seems that they do not have the inclination to learn more about the necessity for a particular choice. All they need to achieve are passing grades and the objective or the learning outcome flies right out the window.

Today, English language learning is the rage in countries where it serves as either EFL or ESL. There is a definite increase in the emergence of many language learning academies in India. Given such extensive and wide spread opportunities, learners still fail to reach even a basic benchmark of language competence. There are many reasons that can be attributed to the emergence of English as lingua franca.

India's population in 2014 is estimated to be 1.27 billion with fifty percent population below the age of twenty five. The numbers alone are staggering and this is the most important factor that influences language teaching at primary, secondary and tertiary levels. India boasts of 1576 or more languages that are active mother tongue languages. There are 4 language families that these languages fall into. There is a constant struggle and tension among people from the South and North regarding the use of a single acceptable language. South Indians have a language system unlike the Devanagiri script and thus find it difficult to interact in Hindi. Therefore, the native language gets precedence over any other language. There are lost and endangered languages in India that researchers are still working on. There are languages that only served phatic function without any orthographic representation as was evidenced by the loss of a language in Andaman and Nicobar Islands recently. Amidst all this confusion, English emerged as the obvious choice for a common language between speakers of other languages. Since 1600s this language has been in use in India. As with all languages, English in India continues to be used by a multitude of people, growing and morphing to suit the needs of the non-native speakers that it became a language with differing accent, pronunciation

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and grammar thereby creating different dialects that collectively fall under Indian English. English also became the language of instruction, higher studies and commerce. It afforded a place of pride to people who use the language effectively. The influx of social networking sites, search engines and email and instant messaging made sure that English is going nowhere, at least not out of India. Employment opportunities at multinational companies have also brought to the fore, the necessity of English language competence.

Excluding the top 15 percent institutions, most schools still adopt the method of grammar translation method for language learning. The fact that it had been successful for earlier generations validates its use even today. But, there are other methods that can be integrated into the system that prove to be successful in terms of SLA (Second Language Acquisition). Theoretical frameworks of language learning and SLA have given various models to the facilitators of language learning upon which they can base their teaching upon. Much thought has been put into creating the ideal language learning method, while language testing is treated with casual indifference. The loss of link between the 'what' of testing and the 'what' of learning is the most significant issue at hand. Without clear knowledge of learning objectives, testing is a lost art. Therefore, there is a need to understand the objectives of the language programme, the intended learners, the trainers and the learning method and material required. These provide the background for understanding the testing system.

This paper looks at the possible language acquisition methods prevalent in tertiary methods and the testing systems used to determine the level of achievement obtained by the learners at that level. The paper deals primarily with the testing methods and the implications of using high-stakes examinations for testing English language proficiency in India. For this purpose, the paper looks into the model used for training and testing first year under graduate students belonging to the engineering stream in select colleges of Tamilnadu, South India. This paper also analyses the results of BULATS certification administered to these students to understand the implications of high-stakes examinations and their viability in Indian institutions.

Training

With a multitude of training methods available, the model for training the I year engineering students was based mainly on Communicative Language Teaching, Cooperative Language Learning and Content Based Instruction. (Richards and Rodgers).

Even though language learning encompasses all of the LSRW skills; vocabulary and grammar, this paper will deal mainly with ideas pertaining to implementation of the training programme and the manner of testing. Though language cannot be learnt by isolating any particular component, most communicative based language techniques use activities of particular skill to learn / teach the language. For example,

a spoken English course cannot help much, if other skills are not concurrently developed.

The teaching material as well as the methodology employed in this model was relatively new for the trainers and the learners. The key points that are crucial to understanding the training programme are as follows –

- I Semester – Listening & Reading, II Semester – Speaking & Writing
- “Business Benchmark” – CUP – Material used in both semesters
- Audio files of all activities were made available online
- Students were grouped as teams in the I semester
 - 60 in a classroom
 - 6 in a group
 - 1 Team Leader per group
- Faculty orientation every weekend / fortnight
- BULATS assessment at the end of each semester

Language learning at the tertiary level aims at training learners to use English effectively for studying other subjects and improving their communicative language proficiency. The curricular objective is very simple and effective – there is just one drawback! The nature of learning, particularly in Indian schools has always been passive. Learner autonomy is less or even negligible, the classrooms are always teacher centred and it is the preferred system in large class rooms.

Skill based English language courses at college level concentrate on vocabulary and activities dealing with language at the work place. Ideally, all activities should be related to work environment or real time office instances. The book, “Business Benchmark” is one instruction material that fulfils this need. Any well structured book that fulfils the course objective may be used.

The Language Classroom

As passive learners, the students had never been introduced to a more inter-active classroom system. Given that most students come from schools that employed regional language as the medium of instruction, an English classroom created natural inhibition and erected barriers to learning. A training model loosely based on community language teaching method (Richards and Rodgers, 195-199) was used. This provided a base for creating peer-to-peer interaction and helping build trust and cooperation in teams.

Each class had a maximum strength of 60 learners. They were divided into ten teams with six members in each team. Each team was led by a team leader. The idea of creating a team and sustaining the team through two semesters was to help lessen their shyness and inhibition. They formed a bond that definitely aided their language learning.

The Team Leaders helped the weaker learners complete their activities. Each class was provided with a tape recorder and 3 cassettes per group. These cassettes were used to record their speaking activities. Most skill based training materials contain audio / video CDs for listening activities. A listening activity can inversely be used as an example for a speaking activity.

Listed below are some of the activities that were selected as part of the training programme -

1. Role- play (Dialogues – Work in pairs)
 2. Question – Answer session
 3. Oral presentation
 4. Dialogue Generation - Informal and formal
- Some of the group activities that were used in the classroom
- Slogan formation
 - Dumb Charades
 - Story telling - round robin style

Survey of the recorded files show that the last activity recorded displayed a varying percentage of improvement in comparison to the first recorded activity.

Assessment

Testing and assessment are an inevitable means to an end. The most practical method of evaluation is assessment, especially in large learner groups. The most important function of assessment is to test what needs to be tested and whether the results obtained from the test can be an appropriate indicator of the learner's ability.

The BULATS (Business Language Testing Services) assessment prepared by University of Cambridge, ESOL Examinations is used to assess the learners.

BULATS is designed for the growing number of organisations which rely on the language skills of their employees in order to operate effectively: companies trading in international markets; national and local government departments; or any organisation for which good international communication is an important part of its work. [<http://www.bulats.org/Case-Studies.html>]

The BULATS certification is aligned to the CEFR (Common European Framework) and is an international standardized test. The listening and reading parts were tested in the I semester and the speaking and writing parts in the II semester. The results of the BULATS examination throw light on learner proficiency, differential competencies and also the effect of testing on training strategies. The most important considerations are the face validity and post-test impressions of the learners.

Results

For the sake of this paper, results from three colleges have been included that are normative in nature.

COLLEGE A - BULATS ASSESSMENT AND CEFR GRADING

<i>CEFR</i>	<i>Listening & Reading</i>	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>Writing</i>
A1	7	0	0
A2	102	9	8
B1	110	30	104
B2	36	56	111
C1	12	75	36
C2	3	94	5
Total	270	264	264

COLLEGE B - BULATS ASSESSMENT AND CEFR GRADING

<i>CEFR</i>	<i>Listening & Reading</i>	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>Writing</i>
A1	2		
A2	85	19	10
B1	113	59	77
B2	26	73	84
C1	1	46	35
C2		16	5
Total	227	223	223

COLLEGE C - BULATS ASSESSMENT AND CEFR GRADING

<i>CEFR</i>	<i>Listening & Reading</i>	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>Writing</i>
A1	40	0	40
A2	266	10	0
B1	250	92	200
B2	74	164	251
C1	44	181	115
C2	7	191	31
Total	681	638	637

Interpretation of Results

As can be clearly seen, there is a definite shift in the number of learners moving from a lower grade in the first semester to that of higher grades in the second semester. There are a number of factors that can be attributed to this shift.

The learners were introduced to a new style of testing and thus their nervousness could have impeded better performances. Successful training as well as increased peer activity and learner autonomy has helped improve proficiency. It is also possible that a small percentage of test takers resorted to cheating.

The learner, while aware of the set of questions, is not only tested on content, but also grammar, vocabulary, discourse management, appropriateness and comprehensibility. Thus, the integrity of the test is not compromised.

Washback Effect

A standardized test is both reliable and valid. Thus, the scores are indicative of the test taker's ability to use the language. In order to understand the impact of using a high-stakes examination like BULATS, a questionnaire was presented to 60 test takers. Their replies were consolidated and studied for better understanding of the effect of such a test and its long term effects on the test takers.

The study revealed the following:

51 believed that BULATS helped them understand their level of competency in English.

43 mentioned that this exam helped them improve their language.

44 also mentioned that they would have preferred English for general purposes instead of Business English.

35 candidates answered that they did not learn answers to the speaking test by heart.

56 believed that preparing for speaking test helped them improve their language.

49 answered that BULATS has helped them gain confidence for participation at Campus interviews.

The feedback from students revealed that this style of testing created awareness of their language ability and also improved their communicative skills.

Problems

The Board of Studies at many universities did not approve of speaking tests for most courses that included English language as part of the syllabus, until 2003. Also, the under graduate and post graduate studies in English concentrated on assessing the content rather than the discourse used. The course material included TESL and EFL, but testing was mostly traditional. In engineering streams, there was a change in the way the English communicative skills paper was tested. The problem in actually changing an existing system is that it affects a very huge populace. When dealing with a large number of students that may have a definite disadvantage, the changes can be introduced only in stages. Furthermore, the amount of training extended to faculty members is minimalistic, as most orientation and refresher courses are based on teaching and not on testing. Therefore, all scores in general are made on the basis of personal judgment of the examiner with no back up reference or grading system.

The obvious solution to these problems can be the introduction of standardized tests in the tertiary level. But, the cost of such tests and the collective volume of the test takers make it an unviable commercial option. Indian universities and institutions should collaborate and work on creating standardized English Proficiency tests that can be used as benchmarks in most colleges. These tests will prove to be cost effective and accessible. It is also imperative that learners be more self reliant and autonomic in their learning. The spoon-fed method of teaching in classrooms has led to complete dependency on teacher. But, language learning is

an internal process that involves cognition, behavioral aspects and linguistic competence of the learner.

Conclusion

Based on the factors discussed in this paper, the following factors are of immediate concern. There is an urgent need to create learner friendly English language learning methods and also appropriate assessment patterns. The learners need to be self reliant and for that, the learner autonomy in classrooms must be promoted. Teachers need professional development that encompasses not only training methods but also testing methods.

This paper is an attempt at opening ourselves to more practical and innovative methods that can be put to use effectively. Without change, progress cannot be perceived and this paper serves as an example of the different methods that can be implemented in English language classrooms that can provide a modicum of success.

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