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Assessments beyond Writing: An Attempt to Provide a Fair Chance to the Learners**Dr. Ankita Khanna***Assistant Professor, English & Communication Skills, Auro University, Surat, Gujarat, India.***Abstract**

Assessments are an integral part of teaching-learning process. Educational assessment is the method of documenting, sometimes in measurable terms like skills, knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes. Assessments normally specialize in the individual learner, the educational community (class, workshop, or different organized cluster of learners), the establishment, or the academic system as a whole. What are the other ways in which assessments can be conducted and how can these techniques be implemented in the classrooms? This paper talks about the purposes of assessments with reference to Language teaching. It also throws light on the innovative tools and methods that can be used for the language assessments.

Key Words: Innovation in Assessments, Classroom Assessment Techniques, ESL Assessments

Introduction

The written format of assessment is very popular in our country due to growing classroom sizes and due to ease of implementation. With a shift in teaching paradigm from teacher centric to learner centric, the assessments too need to be looked into. Our assessment structure in higher education consists mostly of a Mid-term Exam followed by an End-term Exam. Some institutes also offer some submissions and assignments, project works and reports somewhere in the middle of the term. All these assessments are either handwritten or electronically typed, but more or less they adhere to a single form i.e. written. Other forms of are much neglected and mostly not even considered as a tool of assessment. Imagine a situation, where a student has illegible writing or poor writing skills but he is thorough with the content and its practical application. Does this student not deserve a chance to use any other mode of

communicating his knowledge, other than the written format?

As educators across the globe are becoming more and more aware of the teaching learning processes and the shift is from the teacher to the learner centric approach, it is highly inadvisable to design assessments using the techniques that are time-worn. One size fits all but unfortunately not in the classroom where each individual is different and has one's own strengths and weaknesses. As educators we need to take the call and start designing assessment based on the needs of the learners. This is where we need to think beyond 'written' assessments and come up with something that caters to the need of each individual.

Literature Review

Katie Lepi in her paper "The 6 Types of Assessments (And How They're Changing)" talk about the importance of assessments in students' life. This paper states that testing,

especially any sort of standardized testing tends to get a bad rap. Teachers complain that they spend too much time teaching to a test. But assessments do have value, and an important place in our learning structure. By measuring what students are learning, we as teachers can look at how we are approaching different subjects, materials, and even different students.

An article "Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs)" by Haugen Lee, states that Classroom Assessment Techniques are formative evaluation methods that serve two purposes. They can help you to assess the degree to which your students understand the course content and they can provide you with information about the effectiveness of your teaching methods. Most are designed to be quick and easy to use and each CAT provides different kinds of information.

Dr. Kamlesh Misra while addressing faculty members in a meeting spoke about need of different kinds of assessments catering to the needs of students. He stated that learners have different fields or areas where they excel and assessments should be designed keeping in mind the different abilities of students.

Barton, 2002; Kifer, 2001, in "Staying on Course in Education Reform" states that large scale assessments are designed for a specific purpose but they are generally not good instruments for teachers to improve on their teaching as they not provide them instant feedback. Also the paper explores the issues relating to not rectifying the errors of the students in a comprehensive manner.

Discussions & Findings

Many theories including the one from the Howard Gardner has proved that each individual is born with some or the other kind of intelligence. Now the term intelligence is viewed as 'the capacity to solve problems or to fashion products that are valued in one or more cultural setting' (Gardner & Hatch, 1989). Howard Gardner of Harvard has identified seven distinct intelligences. This theory has emerged from recent cognitive research and "documents the extent to which students possess different kinds of minds and therefore learn, remember, perform, and understand in different ways," according to Gardner (1991). According to this theory, "we are all able to know the world through language, logical-mathematical analysis, spatial representation, musical thinking, the use of the body to solve problems or to make things, an understanding of other individuals, and an understanding of ourselves. Where individuals differ is in the strength of these intelligences and in the ways in which such intelligences are invoked and combined to carry out different tasks, solve diverse problems, and progress in various domains."

Gardner says that these differences "challenge an educational system that assumes that everyone can learn the same materials in the same way and that a uniform, universal measure suffices to test student learning. Indeed, as currently constituted, our educational system is heavily biased toward linguistic modes of instruction and assessment and, to a somewhat lesser degree, toward logical-quantitative modes as well." Gardner emphasizes that "a contrasting set of

assumptions is more likely to be educationally effective. Students learn in ways that are identifiably distinctive. The broad spectrum of students and perhaps the society as a whole would be better served if disciplines could be presented in a numbers of ways and learning could be assessed through a variety of means." However, most of the times, educators do not identify assessment beyond the written form, which is unreasonable for all the subjects in general and languages in particular. Language is invariably a combination of four major skills and it would be unfair on the part of the educators to assess the learners only for one skill i.e. writing and neglecting the other important components. Today's learners require to be evaluated for all the aspects; be it listening, speaking, reading, or writing. If the educators empathize with the learners and put on the thinking cap they may get a number of options of assessments that can be used to measure the learning outcomes. Some suggestions for the same are as follows:

- Reading with partners
- Retelling stories
- Role playing
- Giving descriptions or instructions using visual or written prompts
- Oral reporting to the whole class
- Telling a story by using a sequence of three or more pictures
- Completing dialogue or conversation through written prompts
- Debating, either one-on-one or taking turns in small groups
- Brainstorming
- Completing incomplete stories
- Playing games

- Group Discussions
- Presentations

If we talk about Large-scale assessments, they like all assessments are designed for a specific purpose. Those used in most states today are designed to rank-order schools and students for the purposes of accountability—and some do so fairly well. But assessments designed for ranking are generally not good instruments for helping teachers improve their instruction or modify their approach to individual students. First, students take them at the end of the school year, when most instructional activities are near completion. Second, teachers don't receive the results until two or three months later, by which time their students have usually moved on to other teachers. And third, the results that teachers receive usually lack the level of detail needed to target specific improvements (Barton, 2002; Kifer, 2001).

This is when intervention is required. CATs or Classroom assessment techniques as continuous assessment techniques help learners not only to understand the errors that they may have committed in writing their assessments, but also get a chance to work on it, and improve it. They being continuous in nature are an effective tool to improve the teaching and learning that occurs in a class. More frequent use of CATs can:

- Provide just-in-time feedback about the teaching-learning process
- Provide information about student learning with less work than traditional assignments (tests, papers, etc.)

- Encourage the view that teaching is an ongoing process of inquiry, experimentation, and reflection
- Help students become better monitors of their own learning
- Help students feel less anonymous, even in large courses
- Provide concrete evidence that the instructor cares about learning

Results from CATs can guide educators in fine-tuning their teaching strategies to better meet student needs. A good strategy for using CATs is the following.

- Decide what you want to assess about your students' learning from a CAT.
- Choose a CAT that provides this feedback, is consistent with your teaching style, and can be implemented easily in your class.
- Explain the purpose of the activity to students, and then conduct it.
- After class, review the results, determine what they tell you about your students' learning, and decide what changes to make, if any.
- Let your students know what you learned from the CAT and how you will use this information.

Assessment (and instructional) activities that are geared to the ELLs' current level of English proficiency can also be developed. Performance-based assessment activities that concentrate on oral communication and/or reading should be emphasized to provide a fair chance to the learners.

Another important aspect that one needs to look into deeply is that the assessments are in sync with the instructional objectives of

the course that is being taught. If the objectives of the course are not in accordance with the question paper it clearly indicates that the learner is not being tested for what he is taught. And doing this would be highly unfair to the learner. Why is it that we fail to assess the learner in the way it should be done and start looking for other options? Sometimes it may be out of ignorance or lack of awareness but most of the times it is due to ease of implementation. With a rapid expansion in classroom size it is definitely challenging for the teacher to accommodate such assessment techniques but certainly not impossible. Moreover the educators, parents, and students also should understand and accept failure as a learning process and indication to work harder.

Assessments should also be made useful to the students. They should not be considered just to fail, pass or promote a student but as a tool to learn and explore. To learn about one's weaknesses and explore one's strengths. Nearly every student has suffered the experience of spending hours preparing for a major assessment, only to discover that the material that he or she had studied was different from what the teacher chose to emphasize on the assessment. This experience teaches students two un-fortunate lessons. First, students realize that hard work and effort don't pay off because the time and effort that they spent studying had little or no influence on the results. And second, they learn that they cannot trust their teachers (Guskey, 2000a). These are hardly the lessons that responsible teachers want their students to learn.

Informal assessments (also called authentic or alternative) allow teachers to track the

ongoing progress of their students regularly and often. While standardized tests measure students at a particular point in the year, ongoing assessments provide continual snapshots of where students are throughout the school year. By using informal assessments, teachers can target students' specific problem areas, adapt instruction, and intervene earlier rather than later.

Conclusion

Ongoing assessments are particularly important for English language learners (ELLs). Standardized tests in English do not usually reflect ELLs' true content knowledge

or abilities. On the other hand informal assessments can provide a more accomplished picture of their skills, abilities, and ongoing progress. Such assessments also provide opportunity to an educator to move beyond the concept of written examination and explore other forms of assessments as well. The educators should realize that ultimate goal of teaching is not the assessment but learning and development of skills. Assessments are just a tool to measure this. To offer choices to the learners within a boundary and allow them to express is the next step to the learner centric approach.

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Flat No. 01, Nirman Sagar CHS,
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