

Assessment for Improving Learning in Schools in India : A perspective

ABSTRACT

Teaching for successful learning cannot occur without high quality assessment. Assessment, therefore, needs to be integrated with the process of teaching and learning. The greater the integration the better the outcomes of learning. Assessment has to be so designed that it can be used as a powerful means of influencing the quality of what teachers teach and what students learn. While doing so, special care must be taken to ensure that it is humane and it enables the learner to grow in to a responsible and productive citizen.

Assessment refers to collecting information on the progress of students' learning using a variety of procedures, and evaluation refers to making judgements on the basis of the information collected. The process and purpose of assessment should shift from merely assigning grades/awarding marks to include constructive feedback and assist with the learners' improvement. Learner-centred teaching should also use assessment as a part of the learning process.

In the Indian education system, the present trend in evaluation lays too much emphasis on scholastic aspects, ignoring co-scholastic ones. Memorisation of facts is given precedence over abilities and skills involving higher mental operations such as problem solving and creative thinking. In effect, the real potential of the child is not assessed. The proposed paper will suggest methods of making assessment continuous and comprehensive in the Indian context.

Teaching for successful learning cannot occur without high quality assessment. Assessment needs to be integrated in the process of teaching and learning. Greater the integration better the outcomes of learning. Assessment needs to be designed in such a manner that it becomes a powerful means of influencing the quality of what teachers teach and what students learn. It must, however, be flexible enough to the extent that it can be experimented with and adapted according to the specific situations and needs of the learner groups.

Assessment must serve, motivate and not discourage or demoralize the students. We must remember that it directly or indirectly affects the lives of the students. It can change the course of their lives. Assessment should serve the students' interest by guiding them properly and also by providing meaningful inputs.

What do we understand by evaluation and assessment?

Evaluation is the systematic determination of merit, worth and significance of something or someone and assessment is the process of gathering and analyzing specific information as part of an evaluation process. In the context of school education evaluation stands for a structured process of collecting, analyzing and interpreting students' progress and achievement both in

curricular and non-curricular areas. It involves taking into consideration factors like the content, classroom processes and the growth of individual learners along with the appropriateness of the evaluation procedures. Assessment is also a means to provide constant feedback to the learner to make the course effective. And while doing so special care must be taken to ensure that it is humane and it enables the learner to grow into a responsible and productive citizen.

The Present Scenario of Evaluation

The present system of assessment and evaluation for school education in India is exam based. Therefore, it focuses only on cognitive learning outcomes and in the process co-curricular domains are neglected, even though co-curricular areas are an equally important and significant part of child development. Even in curricular areas the focus is on rote learning and memorization, characterized by a neglect of higher mental abilities such as critical thinking, problem solving and creative ability.

In India, The National Curriculum Framework – 2005 developed on the basis of 21 position papers has looked into every aspect of school education. The document states that examinations require systemic reforms in the context of evaluation and assessment. The high failure rates, increasing number of school drop outs, unhealthy competition, stress, nervous breakdowns and suicides among learners make it imperative for Indian educationists to look into the evaluation system of the country which is at present examination oriented.

The need of the hour is to prepare our young learners as innovative problem-solvers and not as rote-learners. However, the present system of examination is inflexible. It is based on a 'one-size-fits-all' principle, wherein the individuality and creativity of the learner are not taken into account. There is a failure to measure the real potential of the learners, and the marks awarded to the students are raw marks which do not give a real picture of the learners. The pattern followed in the school leaving exams known as board exams, is adhered to even in schools and the emphasis is on scores thereby defeating the whole purpose of education. This backlash effect of examination has taken its toll on the pedagogical principles of teaching and learning. To correct this distortion National Curriculum Framework 2005 has proposed some guiding principles for school education, which are

- connecting knowledge to life outside the school,
- ensuring that learning is shifted away from rote methods,
- enriching the curriculum to provide for overall development of children rather than remain textbook centric,
- making examinations more flexible and integrated into classroom life and,
- nurturing an over-riding identity informed by caring concerns within the democratic polity of the country. (*National Curriculum Framework 2005*, p. 5)

These guiding principles show a major shift in the approach towards teaching and learning, as compared to the traditional methods i.e. a shift from behaviorism to constructivism. The new approach to teaching is learner-centered and the process of assessment also aims at enhancing the learning capabilities of the learner by taking in to cognizance their overall progress. This shift in approach in itself requires a major change in assessment tools and techniques as well.

NCF – 2005 has proposed a shift in the approach towards teaching and learning, from the earlier behaviorist approach to the constructivist approach. Under the behaviorist approach the student's achievement was determined on the basis of memory, as a result of which, the meta-cognitive skills such as critical thinking; reasoning ability and problem solving were totally neglected.

Constructivism, on the other hand, believes that learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience, and that learning should be situated in realistic situations, should promote social interactions and use authentic learning materials/tasks. In a constructivist class students are encouraged to take the initiative in the process of learning. Students are encouraged to ask questions, interact freely and develop independent thinking. This in turn helps them develop critical thinking and problem solving attitudes. As a part of this approach, students are asked open-ended and extrapolatory questions and their ideas are given due recognition. Group work and pair work are encouraged because sharing of ideas helps in conceptual clarity and language learning. The constructivist approach is based on the premise that all human beings construct their own knowledge and that given the right opportunity and environment, learners will be able to construct their own knowledge. This new approach to teaching demands corresponding changes in evaluation as well.

In India, data obtained from the exam results of the Central Board of Secondary Education shows that the maximum number of failures and dropout rates are in two subjects i.e. Math and English. As far as English is concerned, the evaluation and assessment procedures need to be reviewed in order to make learning English a worthwhile experience.

Language learning and teaching has undergone rapid changes in the late 20th century. In English, language teaching assessment and evaluation have always remained an area of concern. This in turn has had a direct implication on language policy, curriculum and syllabus design, language teaching methodologies, materials and teacher preparedness. Therefore, the changes in assessment become imperative. To improve language assessment, we need to appreciate the fact that only language is not being assessed, but the process is equally important. More specifically, questions that need reflection are, how does one learn languages and its parameters for assessment.

Assessment can be Summative, Formative or Diagnostic. Summative assessment is usually carried out at the end of a course or academic session to assign the students grade. It involves judging overall competence and sometimes assigning grades, levels or scores to individual pupils.

Formative assessment is usually carried out throughout the academic session also known as educative assessment. The main purpose of this kind of assessment is to aid the process of teaching and learning. This can be done by teachers as well as peers of the learner by providing feedback on a student's work. The feedback may not necessarily be used for grading purposes. A number of researches have shown that formative assessment has a strong impact on children's progress in primary and early years' settings (McCallum, 2000; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 7). Diagnostic assessment is part of formative assessment. The purpose of diagnostic assessment is to measure a student's current knowledge and skills to identify an appropriate course or syllabus or materials for learning. It is also used to have an in-depth analysis of a learner's difficulties and needs in a specific area and is followed by appropriate educational support and guidance. Then there are proficiency tests and achievement tests. Proficiency tests are used to measure an individual's general competence in second language. They can be independent of any curriculum or course and may directly or indirectly assess skills. Achievement tests are closely related to curriculum and they only test what has been taught. The purpose of the achievement test is to evaluate students' acquisition of certain specified course content.

An English language classroom (second language learning) advocates a classroom situation similar to the one described for a constructivist classroom where the learners are exposed to a variety of texts, and an input rich communicational environment is created through activities and real life situations. Learners are actively involved in the process of language learning and the assessment of language skills should reflect the underlying goals and objectives of the course/syllabus. Since language proficiency is viewed as central to all aspects of education, evaluation of the learners must be based on the assessment of both basic understanding of the language principles and communicative skills/language proficiency.

In a language classroom different strategies/methodologies can be used to evaluate the learners. Evaluations can be done through oral presentations, peer assessment, portfolios, projects, activities, discussions etc. 'Language evaluation need not be limited to 'achievement' with respect to particular syllabi, but must be reoriented to measurement of 'language proficiency.' (Pg.15, NFG – Teaching of English) NCF – 2005 has advocated continuous and comprehensive assessment of the learners. Assessment should be an ongoing process, wherein the teacher starts assessing the learner from the very first day of their interaction.

In language teaching all the four skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – should be taught in a holistic manner, but in the Indian education system the focus of testing is only on the writing skills. Present assessment techniques have not been developed with a holistic perspective. All the four language skills should be assessed in a variety of ways. And as Pauline Chater states in *Marking and assessment in English* "It is pointless giving pupils wide experience in reading, writing, listening and speaking if we only assess their writing." (Chater, Pauline, 1984, p. 3)

The aims and objectives of language learning are an integral part of assessment.

Assessment should help the learners move beyond their ability by providing them with constructive feedback about their strengths and weaknesses. Assessment cannot stand by itself and any language assessment should give students an opportunity to demonstrate what they know and can do with language. “First and foremost, assessment must encourage students to reflect on their own reading and writing in productive ways, to evaluate their own intellectual growth, and to set goals.” (IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994, p. 13)

Through constant interaction with students, teachers can assess the learner’s work and the wide range of work presented by different students makes the assessment easier.

Assessment for better learning can take various forms such as:

Self assessment, which enables students to monitor their own progress against specific objectives and evidence from their own work.

Peer assessment, which helps to improve learning and to develop social and cooperative skills.

Teacher's assessment, in which progress and strengths are recognised, difficulties diagnosed and strategies to overcome them planned.

Assessment which promotes learning is characterised by:

- it is embedded in a view of teaching and learning of which it is an essential part;
 - it involves sharing learning goals with pupils;
 - it aims to help pupils to know and to recognise the standards they are aiming for;
 - it involves pupils in self-assessment;
 - it provides feedback which leads to pupils recognising their next steps and how to take them;
 - it is underpinned by confidence that every student can improve;
 - involves both teacher and pupils reviewing and reflecting on assessment data.
- (Assessment Reform Groups, 1999)

Portfolios which have long been a standard form of assessment can be defined as “a purposeful collection of a student’s works that exhibits to the student (and/ or others) the student’s efforts, progress, or achievement in a given area” (Northwest Evaluation Association, 1991: 4, cited in Wolcott, 1998).

Hamp-Lyons and Condon (2000) have given nine characteristics that are present to a greater or lesser degree in portfolios

- A portfolio is a collection of written works, rather than a single writing sample.
- It enables the writer to display a range of writing performances, in different genres and for different audiences and purposes.

- A portfolio possesses context richness insofar as it reflects closely the learning situation and demonstrates what the writer has accomplished within that context.
- An important characteristic of most portfolio programs is delayed evaluation, giving students both the opportunity and the motivation to revise written products before a final evaluation is given.
- Portfolios generally involve selection of the pieces to be included in the portfolio, usually by the student with some guidance from the instructor.
- Delayed evaluation and selection offer opportunities for student centered control, in that students can select which pieces best fulfill the established evaluation criteria and can revise them before putting them into their portfolios
- A portfolio usually involves reflection and self-assessment, in that students must reflect on their work in deciding how to arrange the portfolio, and are frequently asked to write a reflective essay about their development as writers and how the pieces in the portfolio represent that development
- Portfolios can provide a means for measuring growth along specific parameters, such as linguistic accuracy or the ability to organize and develop an argument.
- Portfolios provide a means for measuring development over time in ways that neither the teacher nor the student may have anticipated.

(Weigle, Sara C. 2002, p. 199)

Portfolios provide a meaningful view of a student's progress in learning. The concept of portfolio preparation should be thoroughly discussed with the students so that they understand the purpose of the portfolio. It is like any other form of writing assessment. The factors integral to the designing of a portfolio include the purpose, content, scoring system and the overheads involved. The evaluation of the process of learning is more important than simply evaluating the end product. Portfolios can be evaluated by peers or self evaluation or by the teacher.

By following the methods that we've just seen one can ensure a better participation on the part of the learner. He/She will feel involved in the whole process of learning. This in itself is important because till date the child has been perceived as a passive receiver of knowledge. We must remember at all times that the child is an active learner and is also capable of evaluating his/her own intellectual growth and has the ability to set individual goals.

In a language classroom one should encourage the learners to come out with different answers. There is no right or wrong answer. The criteria for assessment should be that the answer is presented in a logical and coherent manner and the language is used appropriately with correct grammar, spelling and pronunciation. Uniformity in answers should not be demanded, learning should be less judgmental and value-laden and more directed to the process of learning. Questions framed should be such that they represent real-life situations, are open-ended and extrapolatory. Multiple representations or meanings of texts should be encouraged. Also, questions that encourage multiple answers are indicators of literacy achievement. Different

opinions, creativity of thought and expression should be encouraged. Providing students with an opportunity to present their own thinking and perspectives will help them become confident users of the target language as well.

The objective of language teaching is that the learner should be skilled at listening and comprehending in a non-linear fashion by making connections and drawing inferences. They should also be able to express themselves coherently and logically in a variety of situations. By providing an input rich communicational environment the teachers can ensure that the learners get ample opportunities to listen to the language and speak in the target language. Teachers can get an intrinsic sense of language growth in the child by continuous interaction with the learners and this can be recorded in the form of an entry (as a comment) that is maintained for each child. These can then serve as records wherein teachers can note the growth of the learner and also monitor his/her progress. At a later stage, speaking can be analyzed into sub-skills for testing.

J.C. Alderson in *Assessing Reading* states, "It is important to understand that there is no one 'best method' for testing reading. No single test method can fulfill all the varied purposes for which we might test." (2000, p. 203) However, it is suggested that there are certain techniques, for example, the close procedure, gap filling tests, multiple matching, multiple choice questions, ordering tasks, editing tests, short answer tests that can be used testing reading. Reading evaluation will also vary from stage to stage. Some of the sub-skills of reading are; reading aloud, scanning a text, reading for given information, reading for inference and extended reading. The evaluation of those sub-skills will depend on the age and cognitive development of the learner.

Performance based assessment can be used as a tool for information instruction, to reinforce reading comprehension; and student self-monitoring and self-assessment. Assessing the academic achievement of every student is a necessary form of reform and this is a challenge faced by all the teachers, especially for students who learn English as a second language. Hence, oral testing and group work evaluation should be encouraged. Instead of giving marks or grades, the teacher maintains a record of their assessment in the form of remarks.

The testing of writing and listening can similarly be broken up into sub-skills. A sub-skill approach to evaluation reflects the teacher's intuitions that different students will have different strengths and weaknesses. Some may be good at writing skills and some may be articulate speakers or good at comprehension. The teacher can identify areas of strength as well as areas where help is needed. (NFG – Teaching of English, 2006, p. 17)

India is a multilingual and multicultural country and children use language(s) and literacy in a variety of ways beyond the classroom. They are active and autonomous language learners and use language and literacy for a variety of purposes in different contexts. Therefore, it becomes important to ensure that assessment tasks are purposeful and motivating for children keeping in view the large repertoire and registers of ability in their mother tongue that they bring with them

to the classroom. Hence, the assessment in the second language should not be a demoralizing factor for them. "Assessment in English needs to be carefully planned to achieve a balanced view of children's language literacy development. This means that it is important to collect evidence in a range of contexts." (Myers and Burnett, 2002, p. 175) Therefore, one should use a wide range of texts for assessment because children have a wide range of interests. We need to appreciate the fact that language cuts across the curriculum and English (English medium schools) can be assessed in any subject area as long as assessment focuses on speaking, listening, reading or writing.

To make assessment useful and worthwhile for the learners, the teachers need to be trained. They can be given periodic training in the form of seminars, workshops etc. Teachers need to take note of the fact that the development of language is directly linked with the learner's development as a person and so the evaluation of the learner should be based on the assessment of both linguistic knowledge and communicative skills.

In language teaching a test must be seen as an extension of class work. The three types of test normally conducted are:

- a) Aptitude tests – Used to measure a learner's aptitude for foreign/second language.
 - b) Criterion-referenced tests – Diagnostic and achievement tests. These tests report on the learner's progress in learning and help gauge how successful learners have been in attaining the objective laid down at the beginning of the course.
 - c) Norm-referenced tests – A test of global language abilities. Most of the placement and proficiency tests are norm-referenced tests. The aim of a proficiency test is to assess the learner's ability to apply in actual situations what they have learned and to find out whether the learner has reached a certain standard in relation to specific abilities.
- (NFG – Teaching of Indian languages, 2006, p. 29)

The National Focus Group on Teaching of English has suggested that national benchmarks for language proficiency need to be evolved by first gathering reliable descriptive data in all these respects from representative all-India samples. The benchmarking should lead to a set of National English Language Tests, a bank of tests that learners and teachers can use for self-evaluation by opting to take them. These tests should allow for a much finer measure of proficiency than a broad overall grade or score (NFG – Teaching of English, 2006, p. 17). This will provide curricular freedom to the teacher and she can assess the proficiency of the learners without being tied down to a particular syllabi. This would provide scope to the teacher to bring in plurality of textbooks.

The NCF 2005 states that the purpose of education can be achieved only if the teacher is prepared even before the course of teaching begins. While teacher autonomy is important, it is also necessary that teachers keep the objectives of the curriculum in mind and align those with meaningful and constructive assessment. The curriculum objective can only act as a guide.

Teachers need to exercise professional judgement based on the age, interest and cognitive ability of the learners and handle any particular piece of work accordingly. They need to remember that the main aim is to improve learning. Teachers should be flexible and sensitive towards children with limited proficiency. Bilingual children should be given an opportunity to express themselves in the language they know and gradually they can be encouraged to switch over to the target language. In reporting achievement to students or parents, the focus should be on the achievement level so that it can be used as a key indicator for the next level. Assessment is not only important for learners, but it is equally valuable for the teachers as it can help them identify individual and special needs, requirements and interests of the learner. Teachers can then plan teaching and learning situations in a more suitable way. They can observe the changes and progress that have taken place in the child over a period of time, assess the child and accordingly make improvisations in the curriculum. The most vital thing being that the fear of assessment in children is reduced and they perform better. "Assessment must recognize and reflect the intellectually and socially complex nature of reading and writing and the important roles of school, home and society in literacy development." ((IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment, 1994, p. 19)

In conclusion I would like to say that assessment should facilitate the process of learning. Constructive and effective feedback should be an integral part of the learning process and assessment. While assessing the learners the objectives of language learning should always be kept in mind. A well balanced combination of the traditional, innovative, formative and summative assessments can enhance the teaching and learning processes. Assessment should be such that it should enable the learner to reflect on his/her own learning and thus improve. Another important factor is timelessness. If information from assessment is not provided immediately it will not be useful, it'll become a useless, time consuming activity on the part of the teacher. Assessment should give high-quality feedback, thereby helping the students to give their best. If the student cannot use the information given through assessment then the whole purpose of assessment is defeated.

Bibliography

Alderson, J. C. (2000). *Assessing Reading*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 203

Assessment Reform Groups. (1999). *Beyond the Black Box*. Cambridge: University of Cambridge School of Education.

(<http://english.unitecology.ac.nz/resources/units/assessment.html>)

Chater, Pauline. (1984). *Marking and assessment in English*. London: Routledge, 3

Hamp-Lyons, L. and Condon, W. (2000). *Assessing the portfolio: Principles for practice theory and research*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, 32-33.

McCallum, B. (2000). *Formative Assessment: Implications for Classroom Practice*.
[http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/formative\(1\).pdf](http://www.qca.org.uk/libraryAssets/media/formative(1).pdf)

Myers, J. and Burnett, C. (2002). *Teaching English 3-11*. New York: Continuum, 175

National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). (2006). National Focus Group on Teaching of English. *Position Paper*. New Delhi: NCERT, 1-18

National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). (2006) National Focus Group on Teaching of Indian Languages. *Position Paper*. New Delhi: NCERT, 14-22, 30-32

National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT). (2005). *National Curriculum Framework 2005*. New Delhi: NCERT, 5

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Muttock, S., Gilden, R. and Bell, D. (2002) *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years*. London: DfES, 7.

Weigle, Sara C. (2002) *Assessing Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 199

Wolcott, W. (with Legg, S. M.) (1998). *An overview of writing assessment: Theory, research and practice*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 4

Prepared by the IRA/NCTE Joint Task Force on Assessment. (1994). *Standards for the assessment of reading and writing*, International Reading Association and National Council of Teachers of English, Illinois, 13

Dr. Kirti Kapur (B.A., B.Ed., M.A., M.Phil, Ph.D.)

Dr. Kirti Kapur has a total of 20 years of experience in the areas of English Language and literature. She has taught in various schools and colleges across the country and since her appointment in NCERT she has been working in the areas of curriculum, syllabus and text book development, evaluation, training, research and consultancy.