Testing as an inevitable Instrument in Today's Language Learning Environment

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Abstract

In the foregoing analysis, we have unequivocally declared that testing or assessment is an inevitable instrument in present day's language learning environment and that testing is the other side of teaching itself. In teaching any aspect of language, learner must be tested to determine the progress made so far as well as data for other uses by the stakeholders in the education industry. This paper commenced by closely examining the issues of testing/assessment and affirms that reliability and validity are the hallmark of good assessment. The reasons for the emphasis on testing in any learning environment and the functions served by testing are highlighted in this discourse. Testing in the four main aspects of language skills namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing are tested and finally, several useful suggestions are made to improve and give credence to testing in the educational system.

Introduction

Testing in teaching/learning, and especially in language learning environment is not novel as every step in the process of teaching is evaluated to determine the extent of acquisition of such a learning task. Language testing and assessment are often used interchangeably to mean the same thing but assessment, the collection of information

and making judgement regarding a learner's knowledge of a language and the ability to use it seems fairly wider than testing. Every educational setting where teaching/ learning takes place, there is an objective to achieve and this is realized through the build ups in the programme curriculum, syllabus and the narrower lesson plans. At the centre of this programme is a cognitive or/and affective results in these domains, the former being mental process of understanding while the latter is change in behavioural patterns. Change in behaviour is an index of learning because every learning affects a change in behaviour. For example, at the beginning of a programme, a learner may utter sentences such as:

1. Mary and John goes to school every day

2. The man with his wife and six children are waiting at the door.

But in the course of a learning programme similar sentences such as: (1) Martha and her mother go to church every Sunday (2) The principal with his teachers and all the prefects is attending the morning devotion - are uttered by the learner which will clearly make the teacher know that "concord" in English grammar have been mastered by the learner. Whatever that has been set out to achieve through a programme of instruction must be evaluated to examine the success level recorded, hence the idea of language testing.

Language testing is the process of evaluating the proficiency of an individual in using a particular language in the speech community. Through testing, an individual's knowledge in a given language is determined and therefore can be discriminated from others in a group. Anyanwu (2002) observes that "a test is that measurement which is consistently accurate and also relevant" in what it is set up to measure. In other words, in determining one's proficiency level in a language, a test must have two basic qualities, namely, reliability and validity. A test is reliable to the extent that it measures accurately the affective and cognitive domains in the various learners so that distinctions can be made among them regarding their abilities. A test that can take care of this vital measure of differentiating abilities among learners is regarded as reliable. On the other hand, a test is valid to the extent that it measures exactly and relevantly what it's suppose to measure as its end. Therefore, validity is with reference to specificity and relevance attainable in the system. No doubt that these twin activities of reliability and validity in the educational system give credence to the age long practice of testing with an increasing burden in today's language learning environment.

There are basically two stages of testing served in any instructional environment, namely formative and summative evaluation. Formative testing is the one undertaken in the course of a programme or course, that is, at the beginning, the middle or the end of a unit but obviously before certification. It is an assessment intended to

discover relevant information regarding the learner's progress, modify the curriculum or that of the teaching or delivery strategies. Before a particular programme commences, a test is necessary to determine the learner's level of mastery as a base for starting, and during the progression of the programme. In this sense, formative tests serve as remedial measures for the teacher to correct the weaknesses in his teaching approach. Beside the feedback mechanism of the nature of formative tests, learner's motivation is evaluated and his strength and weaknesses are explored for possibilities on the part of the learner. Ur (2012, p. 168) notes that it provides clear feedback in the form of error correction and suggestions for improvement, and has the primary aim of enhancing future learning.

On the other hand, Summative assessment has a broader scope and objective than formative in the sense that, the learning objective is drawn from the entire programme unlike the former. Summative assessment results in the award of certificates, used as research material for the comparism of standards and curriculum evaluation and feedback for teachers for the assessment of methodologies. Like in the case of the former, the qualities of reliability and validity are the hallmarks that will never be compromised when summative tests are administered to any group of learners. Summative test can be administered by an individual teacher but mostly by an examining body such as the ministry of education, WAEC, JAMB etc in Nigeria and the British Council of Cambridge Assessment (ESOL) in the West.

Why Testing?

Although some of the essence of testing have been mentioned in passing, this unit takes a cursory look at the main reasons why testing is vital in language learning environment. But mention must be made that the aim of administering a test varies from person to person just as it is with emphasis but views are unanimous of some of the aims in language testing. Some of them include the following.

(1) Provision of materials for educational research: In language test results are used for implementing certain decisions in educational research as in the case of experimental researches which receives educational treatments in areas of new methodology and curriculum. Test results are parameters to measure the effectiveness of the treatment given and compare the outcome with the control group. Test results also provide data for future use especially when scholars wish to compare standards from period to period or place to place. Results of language testing will enable a teacher use students' data to investigate the nature of errors generated by students and correct them to forestall future occurance. Such information may be used for decisions in new curriculum planning and modification of methodologies in the classroom. Test results will also facilitate the accurate placement of students in their prevailent language

abilities, for instance, in the classroom and the subsequent decisions regarding individual differences in teaching.

(2) Provision of data for comparism: Test results in language are veritable source of comparism of data in many ways. It may be from age to age, place to place, or learner to learner with a view of evaluating performance in students' standard test results will provide data which will point to the direction of progress made or the areas of deficiency in the curriculum or language programme which needs improvement. With results, it is easy for the practicing linguist to study the linkages and differentiations and explain the various dimensions involved.

(3) Provision of data to smoothen the curriculum: The culmination of test results will enable education planners to evaluate and re-evaluate the language programme in the system. A studious study of such data will enable planners to make categorical statement about the relevance, adequacy, and richness of an existing language programme. If test results are positive they are encouraged for maximum outcome, but if results are negative, programme must be modified to respond to societal needs. Again, a given programme may be too broad or narrow, or mentalistic or behaviouristic and its only through testing that such deficiencies are identified and appropriate reports made to the curriculum designers for necessary actions.

(4) Provision of data on the learner for certification: A well known purpose testing serves in the educational system uptil date is certification. Through testing in the form of examination organized by bodies such as West African Examination Council (WAEC) certificates are awarded to successful testees to indicate their level of educational attainment. This may be Ordinary level (O' level) or Advanced level (A' level) and indicating the specific quality level of attainment with regards to grading in the specific areas being tested. For example, a candidate may score '1' meaning, Excellent/Distinction or '9' meaning failure in that examination. Testing, either internally by the teacher or in this case, externally by the body, is done at all levels of the educational system. Although, like any other phenomenon testing has its financial, administrative, reliability and validity implications on testing, yet research has not been lucid on a viable alternative to testing in the educational system.

Categories and Functions of Testing

In the educational system, there are different kinds of tests which serve various functions. As we have earlier said, different tests are administered to achieve specific purposes. The most outstanding types include: achievement tests, proficient tests, aptitude tests and diagnostic tests.

Achievement tests: These are tests administered to the learners with the aim of determining the extent to which he has mastered what he has been taught on a language programme. Also known as attainment tests, achievement tests are based on the premise that the learner has been exposed to some learning experience overtime and that he has to be summoned to give account of himself in that respect. Achievement tests are always based on a set of syllabus or a particular aspect of the syllabus as a distinctive feature of testing. Quick-tests are examples of an achievement test where it is administered to individual or collectively as a class to determine the attainment level of a particular language programme. It may be a periodic test of a period longer than quick test in the form of a mid-term test on semester test in the course of language learning. It may also be a yearly examination which captures the learning experience, both cognitive and affective of the session. Achievement tests serve the purpose of promoting deserving students who attain the required level of a given period of time. A good achievement test must be reliable and attain both face and construct validity in the eye of all stakeholders in the educational system.

Proficiency test: Proficiency tests are major tests types in the educational system but has distinction characteristics from the achievement tests. Proficiency tests are concerned with what skill has been learned which can be applied to some other extra-linquistics social situations. The language mastery level of the testee and his ability to apply same to other extra-linquistic environment such as on L2 context is the target of proficiency tests. By virtue of the proficiency tests, the instruments are specifically designed to find out whether a student's knowledge of L_2 is adequate enough to enable him undertake a programme, for instance, in a foreign country. In proficiency test, no known set syllabus is used, learners of various levels, such as O'level or A'level and even graduates will be admitted to be tested for the same language skill. Tests of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). The Michigan Tests and Cambridge Proficiency Examinations are classical examples.

Attitude tests: Like the proficiency test, attitude test are designed without a definite syllabus but with the aim identifying talents relevant to the study of English. Its essence is to ascertain that the testee is capable of mastering the subject in which he is tested. The testee's strengths and weaknesses are known and predicted in learning the language at the same time considering such variables as learner's age, sex, intelligence, motivation and so on. Attitude tests are undeniable means of determining learner's competence for further work in language and the identified capabilities may even exist before or without any teaching experience at the moment. Career guidance and counseling experts use attitude tests extensively in the course of their job and because of its relevance, most educational institutions have department of guidance and counseling.

Diagnostic tests: The place of diagnostic tests in an educational organization can never be viewed lightly in the realization of set goals. Diagnostic tests enable the teacher to know the perceived error of the learner, what the learner needs to master and importantly, what has been mastered wrongly. Like the earlier mentioned ones, the teacher is the centre of diagnostic tests and must ensure that all aspect of a diagnostic test is realized to achieve the desired objective in the system. A diagnostic test may be a pre-test programme intended to identify such problem areas, selecting and deciding what needs to be done so as to ameliorating it. It may be a mid-term programme administered to ascertaining what the learner has learned and what he has not learned and therefore to plan a remedial activity in the case of the later. It can also take place at the end of the programme to identify persist recurring problems which must be dealt with in all its variegated aspects.

Various testing modes are recognized in the educational system the world over and the most popular modes are the objective and subjective instruments patently depending on the needs of the tester. *Objective testing method* is the one in which the testee has the option of chosing any one of the answers as the correct one in his response to the question. No value judgement is required on the part of the testee, marking schemes are usually provided and objective tests are easier to mark but difficult to conduct. It is the view of testing experts that in language, knowledge of grammar and usage are subjected to mostly objective testing. The cloze test, sentence combining and multiple choice tests are typical examples of the most popular types.

The subjective test forms are alternative to the objective mode in test administration. Unlike the later, in subjective tests, the testee is expected to express himself not only in content but also in linquistic abilities. Therefore, as noted by Alo, (1995, p. 114) words such as "discuss, explain, expartiate, compare, contrast, and so on are common in the use of subjective test type. Essay tests belong to the subjective category and are used to measure linquistic skills, non-linquistic skill including organizational and argumentational which are also measured in essay tests. Subjective tests are easy to conduct and administer but difficult to mark. The subjective nature of this testing type is often the generator of doubt among stakeholders about examination in the educational system.

Testing the Main Language Skills: Testing Speculations

Language programme all over the world, especially, in L2 situations are intended to develop in the learner four main language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. The curriculum is so designed in such a way that a certain level of his education, the learner is competent in each of these areas. But the question is that how does the teacher knows if the learner is making progress and the approach he is adopting is working. Testing is the only means and this unit will consider the four language skills in this respect.

(1) **Testing listening Comprehension Skill**

In a language programme, listening skill of the learner is evaluated to determine his auditory and comprehension ability in oral test. One way of doing this is to utter the required text while the testee respond appropriately in the oral mode and in writing. In listening comprehension, grammar is tested with the use of substitution tables while balls and number games are very useful for teaching vocabulary. An important aspect of listening comprehension skill which the teacher targets is the learner's ability to discriminate sounds, stress and intonation patterns. In inculcating the skill, the teacher uses short utterances, dialogues, talks, lectures and even dictated materials in achieving the skill in his learners.

(2) Testing Speaking Skill

Speaking skill is generally regarded as dynamic by experts in language education because of the very nature of language itself. Testing speaking skill takes the form of interviews, story telling, oral compositions, description of scenes, role-play among peers and so on. Grammatic structures, idioms, and formulaic usages as well as correct punctuations are also tested through various teaching approaches.

(3) Testing Reading Comprehension

A single reading activity involves a lot of other areas in the language study programme. It main aim is to test students' ability to understand and to extract gist from a passage. Some of the areas a reading comprehension may test include: rhyme within sounds, pausing within sentences, collocations in grammatic structures, use of synonyms and antonyms, idiomatic expressions, cultural influences in expressions and extra-linquistic dimensions in communications. Reading comprehension skill is a receptive one and needs the systematic monitoring of the progress of the learner in terms of the content of the programme, teaching approaches and evaluating proceeding.

(4) Testing Writing Skill.

Writing skill is all that is encompassing and it tests all aspect of language programme. Some of the areas examined include: aim of writing, clear and logical development of paragraphs, enhanced unity in paragraphs development, inter-sententral relationships and effective use of connectives. Others are sentence types, vocabulary, idioms and mechanical accuracy are tested. Tamunobelema (2016) opines that speed and legibility are correct and worthwhile skills to exhibit in creative writing. In testing writing skill, the testee is examined in his ability to creatively write essays of different kinds namely: short stories, narrative, descriptive, explanative, argumentative etc, other are: letter writing, report writing, and so on depending on the level of the testee.

Conclusions/Recommendations

Patently, our discussions above have shown the inevitability of testing in our educational system because it is the means of examining the progress of learners in the course of a language programme, monitoring of teacher's approach to lessons delivery and the yardstick to placement of testees in society among others. In other words, in any learning environment, there must be assessment of a sort to determine the above parameters to achieve educational goals. But it has been often argued that the kind of assessments do not reflect the true nature of the learners' ability due to the attitude of some teachers, cost of test administration and other conditions such as bad weather, poor vision, poor health condition, poor sitting condition and other physical and physiological condition which may inhibit maximum performance of the testees. However, it is the view of this paper that tests or examinations remain the viable means through which the learner must be evaluated and makes the following recommendations for improvement in the system.

(1) Through seminars and workshops language teachers should be made to re-assess the importance of assessment of the learner in a language programme; the need is to get feedback on the learner in the first instance.

(2) The place of formative tests should be properly utilized as it borders on the developmental achievements of the learner for teacher's use, while summative tests take care of others like end of programme assessment.

(3) Cost of test administration in the educational institutions should not be borne by the teacher but the institution, a factor which has made teachers shy away from assessing students regularly.

(4) Every assessment on learners' performance must meet basic criteria of reliability and validity, both face and construct to satisfy all stakeholders in the industry.

(5) Based on data from learners, proper and accurate grading will be done and certificates awarded to deserving learners of a programme.

(6) Data generated from regular assessment from tests must be utilized maximally by the relevant bodies for programme modification and overall language pedagody.

(7) The need for the establishment of language laboratories in our educational institutions cannot be considered less important as they are one sure way of teaching and testing the four basic skills a competent user of any language, especially English needs.

Components of language laboratory have test of orals, speaking, listening, writing, and comprehension skills needed by students in both secondary and tertiary institutions of learning. It is hoped that the import of testing should be well recognized and that teaching without regular assessments amounts to a futile activity by the teacher. There lies the inevitability of testing in our

language learning environment which has only been re-emphasized in this discussion.

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