

**THE ROLE OF TESTING AND EVALUATION IN THE ENGLISH
LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF RURAL LEARNERS**

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ABSTRACT

Generally, the rural learners are discouraged by the harsh assessment in the subject General English. As a result, they think that English is a difficult language. This paper focuses on the role of testing and evaluation on English language acquisition of rural learners. Testing and evaluation endorse rote learning which is quite demanding for many learners who get excluded from the teaching-learning process. Contextual learning is essential for language acquisition, which is not promoted by testing and evaluation. Testing and evaluation have an impact on the teacher's teaching strategies, the learner's learning style, the learner's psychology, and thereby impacts the language acquisition of the learners.

KEYWORDS

Rural learners, Rote learning, Testing, Evaluation, Contextual learning

INTRODUCTION

The rural learners pursuing their higher education in Arts and Science colleges in Tamil Nadu face difficulty in communicating in English despite the exposure to the English language for more than twelve years. There has been a constant disparity on

the rural learners and disadvantaged learners in English language acquisition. There are various factors such as biological factors, personal factors, social factors, academic factors, etc that are responsible for the language acquisition of a learner. Academic factors include objectives, rationale or theory used, materials used, teaching strategies, learning, testing, evaluation, and expected learning outcome. It is to be understood that materials, pedagogy, learning, testing, and evaluation are interconnected and interdependent. This paper focuses on the role of testing and evaluation on the rural learners in English language acquisition.

TESTING

Generally, questions are usually asked from the lessons used in the language program. But this does not provide a platform for the learners to exercise their creative writing and writing skills because the learners may very well manage the answers by writing memorised answers. Testing needs to give scope for the learners to practice their acquired language competency in real life contexts. For example, if the learners are prescribed the poem “Night of the Scorpion” by Nissim Ezekiel, they may be given the text of a poem with similar context and linguistic quotient and asked questions based on that text. This will build the confidence of the learners in course of time. It is to be understood that the objective of a language program is not to teach the content. Rather, the General English course aims at making the learners speak and write in the English language in real life contexts. Hypothetical questions and open-ended questions can help the learners to practice their writing skill.

UNIFORM EVALUATION FOR ALL LEARNERS

The goal of a language program is to improve the learner from his/her present state of competency and skill and make him/her stronger in his/her knowledge and skill. However, the evaluation system expects all learners to be highly fluent and standard in the language production. The evaluators need to keep in mind the present linguistic quotient of the learners and evaluate their answer scripts. Harsh assessment can discourage and demoralise the learners and does not facilitate further language acquisition and language production.

ZERO TOLERANCE TOWARDS GRAMMATICAL ERRORS

During the evaluation of a General English answer script, one could observe that many evaluators maintain a zero-tolerance towards grammatical errors. The answer scripts are given low marks if the learner commits grammatical mistakes or errors. As a result, the learners are forced to memorise essays and reproduce them in the examination. Besides, the teacher, in a way, is forced to give essays to the learners. In fact, such an evaluation technique endorses rote learning. According to the renowned American linguist, Noam Chomsky, language is not mere imitation but a creative process. He says “Language is a process of free creation; its laws and principles are fixed, but the manner in which the principles of generation are used is free and infinitely varied.”

ROTE LEARNING

Rote learning is the method of learning by continuous repetition. Usually, it is also referred to as learning by heart. One of the important techniques used in schools in India is rote learning. In rote learning, the learners are made to memorise and

reproduce facts. This methodology can be very effective in learning mathematics tables. However, rote learning may not be very effective in acquiring a second language since it lacks contextual learning, and it can provide learning without understanding. This problem is not unique to rural tertiary level learners in India. The problem of rote learning has been a chief concern in American education. E.D. Hirsch, a renowned American academician, in his book *Knowledge Deficit*, describes the havoc created in American education by adopting rote learning. According to him, mere memorisation of disconnected facts is meaningless. He further states that the acquisition of broad knowledge is important for transforming a child into a good reader. However, this acquisition of knowledge will be better if it happens through hands-on experience. In his book *The Knowledge Deficit*, E. D. Hirsch says:

One of their most effective rhetorical tips is to identify the acquisition of broad knowledge with "rote learning" of "mere facts" — in subtle disparagement of "merely verbal" presentation in books and through the coherent explanations of teachers. Just like Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Dewey, our schools of education hold that unless school knowledge is connected to "real life" in a "hands-on" way, it is unnatural and dead; it is "rote" and "meaningless." It consists of "mere facts." But nobody advocates rote learning of disconnected facts. Neither Milton nor Thomas Jefferson nor any of their more thoughtful contemporaries who championed book learning advocated rote learning. What they did advocate was the systematic acquisition of broad knowledge. And such knowledge is precisely what it takes to become a good reader (14).

In America, English is the first language. But rote learning has a negative impact on the reading skill of American children. In India, English is the second language or third language. Therefore, the predicament of rote learning should have a more adverse effect on the reading skill of the Indian learners than that of the American learners.

“Learning is the conscious effort of rote memorisation of facts in English. Training is a subconscious activity of the learner in which he/she develops the skill of thinking in English and speaking in it effortlessly” (Arkady Zilberman)

Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman in his *Thinking, Fast and Slow* brings the concept of two kinds of thought: System 1 and System 2. The former is fast, instinctive and emotional while the latter is slow, deliberative, and logical. To fill the learning gap in the learners, they should be trained to System 1. Rote memorisation falls under System 2. Priority should be given to the training of language skills than rote learning. Stephen Krashen described this kind of 'acquisition method' as follows:

Language acquisition is a subconscious process; language acquirers are not usually aware of the fact that they are acquiring language, but are only aware of the fact that they are using the language for communication. The result of language acquisition, acquired competence, is also subconscious. We are generally, not consciously, aware of the rules of the languages we have acquired. Instead, we have a "feel" for correctness. Grammatical sentences "sound" right, or "feel" right and errors feel wrong, even if we do not consciously know what rule was violated. (Language Acquisition and Language Education, 1985)

The researcher does not deny the language acquisition involved in rote learning. In rote learning, the learner memorises essays and reproduces them in the examination. One major merit of rote learning is the fact that the learner memorises a lot of words and sentence structures in the target language. This memorisation if done properly, would constitute the English language competency of the learners. This memorised lexis and syntax play a complementary role to the learner's understanding of the English language. Memorised facts serve as the grist in the mill of the understanding which can be recalled and processed or combined for new unique conclusions when needed. Therefore, rote learning has its benefit in English language acquisition. However, the efforts that the learner has to take to memorise an essay is quite high. Moreover, the process of memorisation is time-consuming. In addition to this, the learner should be well equipped with the strategies involved in memorisation. Since rote learning is quite demanding, many learners exclude themselves from the teaching-learning process. As a result, the language acquisition of the learners will be slow, which in turn leads to a deficit in the English language competency of the learners.

THE LACK OF CONTEXTUAL LEARNING

Learning words by understanding the text is not time-consuming, unlike rote learning. Besides, not all learners may have the determination, patience and time to memorise essays. In such a scenario where the learner gets excluded because of the demands of rote learning, contextual learning may come in handy. Moreover, the learner's confidence to use the language will enrich when he/she gets the opportunity to practice the already learnt lexis, phonology, and syntax of the language in the appropriate context. When the learner is not given the opportunity to practice the

lexis, phonology and syntax of the language in the appropriate context, he/she will not become familiar and feel comfortable in using the target language. As a result, the learner will not be confident to use the target language despite the fact that his/her linguistic competence is good to a certain extent. Generally, the rural tertiary level learners pursuing their undergraduate course in Arts and Science colleges in Tamil Nadu are not provided with the opportunity to use lexis and syntax in real-life context as they are taught texts and expected to write memorised essays in semester examinations. Besides, synonyms antonyms, idioms, and phrasal verbs are asked in isolation and not in context in the examination.

Generally, testing and evaluation deviates completely from the objective of the curriculum and the expected learning outcome. The objective of the curriculum is to develop speaking skills and writing skills. Evaluation may focus on memory and gives importance to the learners' ability to reproduce. Skills will develop only when the learners are given the opportunity and freedom to create sentences.

Testing and evaluation will have an impact on the way classes are organised. Since Testing and Evaluation give importance to reproduction, classroom activities will be restricted to memorisation and reproduction. As a result, there is little scope for creativity and freedom inside a language class. The teacher is governed and controlled by the Testing and Evaluation methods.

To overcome such harsh impacts on the process of English language acquisition of the rural learners, steps should be taken to change the mind set and beliefs held by English teachers.

CONCLUSION

Initially, the Testing and Evaluation system was introduced in educational institutes as a feedback tool. In other words, the testing and evaluation system aimed at checking whether the learners understood the subject, whether the program was useful, whether the teaching-learning process was effective, etc. This feedback was essential for enhancing the quality of the teaching-learning process. However, in the modern education system, this feedback system got transformed into an assessment system where the learners are awarded marks, which was not the original aim of the testing and evaluation system. To make things worse, this assessment system endorses competition and does not build co-operative learning and teamwork. Thus, academicians should work together to bring about changes in the testing and evaluation system to make the teaching-learning process inclusive, productive, comfortable, and useful.

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