

Teacher Training: Testing and Awareness

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1. Introduction

It is generally acknowledged that the primary aim of both 'training' and 'development' is to achieve change in what the teacher does and why. These words imply different meanings, but we must recognize that they are interrelated. Development exists in relation to training and training does contribute to development. The ultimate aim of both training and development is to enable the teacher to perform better in a classroom context.

Training can be evaluated, but the influence of training on teacher development is difficult to assess. One is not sure whether the word 'development' has a fixed definition. The concept, critics say, changes in relation to social and political conditions in which people use it. Teacher development, Olson (1992) asserts, aims at enhancing the capacity to understand one's own practice. Freeman (1989: 27-45) observes that it involves attitudes, awareness and decision-making.

What are language teachers' attitudes towards professional development? Does critical awareness help decision-making, both in teaching and testing? To what extent do concrete classroom experiences bring about change in teacher thinking? A little reflection on these issues will perhaps help us to adopt a positive attitude towards language teacher education.

2. ESL teacher training programmes

Language training programmes have too often focused attention on knowledge areas such as:

1. Principles and Methods of teaching
2. Linguistics and Phonetics
3. Grammar
4. Language skills

It is wrong to assume that mastery of these areas or acquisition of information and teaching techniques or skills alone will equip teacher-trainees for their job. Furthermore, too much emphasis that has traditionally been placed on knowledge areas has led to the neglect of performance areas such as language testing. This paper draws attention to this fact and argues that familiarity with the principles of language testing is crucial for raising critical awareness in teacher trainees and for augmenting their classroom performance.

3. Classroom teaching performance

The actual teaching performance [TP] has received little or no attention in many ELT teacher-training programmes. We, therefore, need to develop an understanding of:

- What language teaching is
- How to train teachers in such programmes
- The basic challenges faced in training individuals as teachers of English
- How to develop critical awareness in teachers

Mere transmission of knowledge and methodology may not facilitate an understanding of language teaching performance. We should also show how these components interact and lead to decision-making.

3.1 Teacher supervision

One of the major preoccupations of teacher trainers for several decades has been supervising language-teaching performance. Teacher trainers generally agree that an important goal of supervising practice teaching is to provide opportunities for trainees to cultivate decision-making skills, which is, however, a formidable task. It is argued that teacher trainers can contribute to this development by including activities that will enable trainees to reflect on testing issues and make their own decisions.

3.2 Prosecuting errors

Teacher trainers have often been accused of being narrow and provincial in observing teaching practice and assessing teaching performance. Many of them tend to employ what may be called a technicist approach, that considers teacher trainees mere technicians who are required to carry out a prescribed plan of teaching strategies and who, in turn, are assessed by a pre-determined checklist of criteria. Bruce King (1993:103) draws our attention to assessment as a form of examination that 'combines surveillance with normalizing judgement'. Teacher trainers, thus, believe that they have the right to classify, punish and prosecute errors. We must, therefore, become aware of the changing focus in teacher preparation.

3.3 Teacher trainees and professional practices

The role of trainee-involvement in TP needs reviewing from time to time. In an ELT programme, teacher trainers talk about how to plan a lesson to teach a concept, to understand students' progress or achievement, to assess students' tests or assignments etc. But we do not always provide them with a package for self-analytic thinking or systematic reflection. Teaching practice may well be utilized to bring about change in teacher thinking.

Teacher trainees are in a unique situation. They are not wholly students nor are they wholly teachers. They do, however, play the dual role of student and teacher simultaneously. Gunstone et al. (1988) suggest that in teacher training, we aim at improvement in 'specific task-related competencies', development in teachers' beliefs about effective teaching, their self-confidence and their perceptions of interpersonal relations. Practical knowledge must also take into account such aspects as the role of the teacher, teacher-student relationship, classroom management and

student learning. Teachers must be taught to view professional practices as social practices (Popkewitz, 1993:8). They must be made to realize that testing is a form of social interaction and public responsibility, which demands the mutual trust of the examinee and the examiner. The responsibility of the teacher is, therefore, to have critical awareness of social and ethical implications of testing (Sax, 1974: 25-41). In a training programme, an attempt must be made to bring pre-conceived notions about the testing process to the forefront for close examination.

4. Conceptualizing ESL ability

What does language testing have to offer language learning and language teaching? The concept of language as performance has received a good deal of attention over the past four decades. Many language-testing researchers have proposed models and theories of SL proficiency/ability (e.g. Oller, 1979; Bachman, 1990; Bachman and Palmer, 1996). Two important developments in the past two decades are noteworthy:

- A theoretical view that considers language ability to be multi-componential and considers the influence of the test method and test taker's characteristics on test performance, and
- Communicative language tests prepared in accordance with CLT principles.

Thus, a theoretical model of second language ability (Bachman and Palmer, 1996) has emerged on the basis of research in language testing which, it is believed, has the potential to contribute to ESL learning and teaching. The model defines language ability essentially, in Widdowson's terms, as the capacity for using the knowledge of language in conjunction with the features of the language use context to create and interpret meaning. Discussion of this model of language ability is beyond the scope of this paper. It is important to say that, even though it is a testing model, it has the capacity to provide a basis for conceptualizing ESL ability, the acquisition of which is the main object of teaching English as a Second language. Alderson, for example, states,

we need to be concerned not only with... the nature of language proficiency, but also with language learning and the design and researching of achievement tests, not only with testers and the problems of professionalism, but also with testees, with students, their interest, perspectives and insights (ibid: 1991:5).

5. Teacher attitudes to testing

The importance and relevance of teacher attitudes to testing must be discussed here. As Smith (1971: 8) has observed:

There is little doubt that the attitudes a teacher has towards himself influence his behaviour in the classroom. And there are strong reasons for believing that the attitudes towards his pupils

– e.g., his expectations of them – will influence their achievement.

6. Content and test construction

Awareness plays a critical role in constituting the test content. Teachers need to learn not only what questions to ask, question formats to include, techniques to use, methods to apply. In learning about ways of asking questions, they need to become aware of the process of test construction. Asking them to look critically into question papers and to study rubric-formulation and task construction is an attempt to develop reflective inquiry into the inclusion of various question formats, leading to the ability to identify language objectives.

Reflecting on the routines of testing is a way of understanding teaching better. However, it must be added that it is not enough to say that teachers should be reflective. There is a need to provide in language teacher education such activities as can promote systematic reflection and self-introspection. The advantage of such change is that it offers clarity and decisiveness where traditionally there has been doubt and vagueness. We need to pass such efforts on to those not yet in the know, which is not altogether impossible.

7. Course requirements and traditional practices

How might we interpret teachers being in favour of more familiar goals and methods instead of problem-solving and critical thinking? Many teachers are reluctant to spend time on tasks and activities included in the textbook, but not measured by the examination question papers. Moreover, there can be pressures from the administrators to use techniques that are contrary to teachers' understanding of effective testing practices. We have also seen the incongruity between personal views of teaching and testing and those presented in the programme's curriculum.

Quite often, teachers are offered a carefully designed plan of strategies to achieve 100 per cent results in the examination. An example may be relevant here. Teachers are required to prepare pupils to pass examinations. This task has to be accomplished based on their expertise, examination requirements, examination question types, requiring recall, access to previous question papers, time to revise, student notebooks containing the answers and essays to be memorized. There is yet another factor to be considered: trust, above all, on the part of students that what has been taught is relevant to what might be tested in the examination. It is not difficult to understand why a large number of teachers as well as students do not feel at home. Are they doing the wrong thing?

Making sure that pupils pass the examination is an important goal to achieve. We cannot, therefore, blame teachers if they spend a good deal of time gathering information and imparting facts and figures, instead of problem solving or critical thinking. It must be pointed out that the lack

of clearly defined language testing objectives creates significant problems for teachers, particularly in classroom test construction.

8. Language testing and critical reflection

A clear understanding of the meaning of 'awareness' helps us to relate critical awareness and testing. Freeman (1989: 33) defines awareness as:

the capacity to recognize and monitor attention one is giving or has given something. Thus one acts on or responds to the aspects of a situation of which one is aware.

Significantly, Freeman asserts that one can be aware of many aspects of a situation while attending to particular ones. In order to lead teacher-trainees towards inquiring into their actions and thinking critically about their practice, we should develop in them a truly reflective stance. In this context, it is interesting to note that Donald Schon (1983) considers teachers to be reflective practitioners. He has suggested that their understanding is theoretic. Change in professional awareness comes if the awareness is situated in practice, a kind of reflection-in-action (Jarvis, Jennifer, 1992: 134). Interestingly, Esther Ramani (1987) speaks of the importance of 'raising the theoretical awareness of teachers by encouraging them to conceptualize their practice.'

When we examine the relationship between language testing and critical reflection we need to consider the following questions:

- Are teachers aware of their attitudes towards tests and examinations?
- Are they aware of how a particular question format may influence test performance?
- Are they aware of what students think of teachers' ability to construct classroom tests?

These are questions for critical reflection, which might perhaps allow teachers to probe the meaning for their practice. This kind of systematic reflection might conceivably lead to more effective outcomes. It may also be argued that systematic training in item writing as well as test construction helps the teacher:

- To realize the learning problems
- To make him think critically
- To train students in test-taking strategies

It should be noted that many teachers need greater assistance at the technical level as they lack the conceptual and technical skills needed for planning and implementing teaching and testing. How do they plan? What guides them? Are they alive to what goes on in the classroom? Are they able to explain or justify testing decisions? Being able to critically reflect on these questions in relation to testing practices is valuable.

9. Language testing and teacher development

In this section of the paper I report a study through which I tried to assess the relationship between testing and teacher development. This study was conducted at The Regional Institute of English, Bangalore [India], which has been organizing courses in ESL Testing since 1995 for teachers of English undergoing an English Language Teaching Programme.

The methodology of the course was closely based on communicative language teaching and testing with the main focus on techniques, activities and procedures and the production of testing materials. The course could be described as more practical than theoretical. By the end of the course, teachers were able to objectify the processes they had undergone.

10. The study

10.1. Background

The Regional Institute of English, Bangalore, undertook the Language Testing Research Project, a three-year project [1991-94] that involved 14,000 students from all over South India. The aim of the project was to develop a new design for assessment of English at the secondary school level for four southern states. The project was sponsored and funded by the Government of India. As it was decided to implement the new assessment design, there was pressure from the Departments of Education, which led to the introduction of a course in ESL testing. There was, however, concern about the practicality and usefulness of the course.

10.2. Subjects

76 teachers took part in this study, of whom 77.63% were male and 22.37% female. They belonged to four southern states and worked in government and private schools in urban and rural areas. They spoke a variety of Indian languages and were from diverse educational backgrounds. They had undergone the course in ESL Testing that included basic testing principles, practical work [e.g. item writing], a seminar and a workshop to prepare test papers in groups.

10.3. Methodology and procedure

- A questionnaire was used to gather data. The preliminary version of it was discussed with a few ELT experts and the faculty members of the RIE. In the light of the discussion, it was modified and finalized.

The study undertaken examined whether testing played a key role in the professional development of teachers. It considered the following questions:

- Do teachers realize the interdependence of teaching and testing?
- What is the role of testing in developing critical awareness?
- To what extent does testing influence their attitudes towards students?
- What is the impact of testing on classroom practices?

In seeking to address these issues, the questionnaire was administered to seek the views of teacher trainees about the effectiveness of the language testing course in developing in them critical awareness. In addition to this, information was gathered through informal talks held with groups of trainees. Their initial observations provided specific information concerning training in language testing and critical awareness. The limited results of this study suggest that language testing has a significant role to play in teacher development.

10.4. Findings and discussion

Of the 76 teachers who completed the questionnaire, 18 [23.68%] of them were familiar with testing, having attended a few workshops in evaluation conducted by their respective state examination board while the rest had no such opportunity to get exposed to test construction. In their view [76.32%], teaching and testing were two separate, unrelated areas. 59 of the teachers [77.63%] felt that the language testing course had, to a considerable extent, changed their attitudes towards deep-seated beliefs about item writing and test construction, and that they were, furthermore, in a position to rationalize the inclusion of various formats in tests and question papers. In fact, this had also helped them to uncover their beliefs about teaching/learning problems and to examine their actions. 53 of these teachers [69.74%] admitted that the course had equipped them to train students in test-taking strategies. Also, 41 of these teachers [53.95%] could now make testing decisions on their own and with confidence. They were now sure what activities/tasks needed to be emphasized in order to promote language learning. Since the main focus was to find out whether testing could be a tool for critical thinking, two questions were asked: Had the course helped them to develop, systematically, critical thinking? 35 of the teachers [46.05%] answered in the affirmative. Were they now in a better position to reflect on their thinking process/critical awareness? 37 of them [49.68%] agreed. A total of 39 teachers [51.32%] interviewed felt sure of the role of testing as a tool to promote critical awareness. 51 teachers [67.11%] felt that testing had helped them to have a comprehensive idea of what ESL ability meant and that knowledge of testing had really helped them to plan their lessons meaningfully for their practice teaching. It was assumed that the responses were 100% honest.

The findings also revealed some differences between experienced and less experienced teachers. The differences suggested that they did not share the same attitudes and philosophy. The less experienced, younger teachers were more

willing to open their eyes to change and innovations reflected in the ESL testing course.

In this study we have seen that it is certainly worthwhile proceeding with testing in order to achieve positive goals. At the same time, it might be remarked that this study covered only a minimal area and the aim was two-fold:

- To find credible, supporting evidence for the views expressed in this paper
- To check with the teachers whether they believed that testing had a key role to play in their professional development

11. Conclusion

It must be stated that the ESL testing course offered in Bangalore had tried to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Therefore, a few observations are in order. As teachers are context-bound and have to confront everyday realities of classroom teaching and learning, it is necessary to place greater emphasis on practice. However, it would be wrong to conclude that theory has no place in developing reflective thinking and rationalizing practice. It is an important part of teacher development and teachers can make sense of their practice from a preoccupation with theory, thereby gaining significant insights into aspects of teaching and learning. Continuing professional development also needs an understanding of theoretical principles of testing in order to develop a practical outlook. There is little doubt that teachers do theorize from the classroom context, as Ramani (1987) notes. When they are not able to understand a particular learning problem or try to explain how well or badly each pupil has performed against the standard expected of a pupil of that age, they are into theorizing. The advantage is that these ways of conceptualizing do give an insight into how teachers think and act in the classroom. To this extent, preoccupation with theory generated through practice is indeed relevant within a teaching and teacher training context.

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APPENDIX**ESL TESTING COURSE****Questionnaire**

The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out whether this course has developed in you critical awareness. Please answer each question as truthfully as you can. Your answer must be written in ink, using the space provided.

- 1. Did you consider testing and teaching as two separate areas before taking this course?*
- 2. Were you aware of testing and test construction?*
- 3. Do you think that this course helped you think critically in teaching?*
- 4. Do you now realize the interdependence of teaching, testing and the textbook design?*
- 5. Have you now changed your attitudes towards, deep-seated beliefs about item writing and test construction?*
- 6. Has the study of testing helped you to change your attitudes towards teaching and your pupils and their learning problems?*
- 7. Are you now able to rationalize the inclusion of various question formats in a test?*
- 8. Will you be able to make testing decisions on your own and with confidence?*
- 9. Do you think this course has equipped you to train your students in test-taking strategies? Will it have an impact on your lesson plans?*
- 10. Has the course helped you to develop systematically reflective thinking?*
- 11. Are you now in a better position to reflect on your thinking process/critical awareness?*
- 12. Do you think testing can play a crucial role in your professional development?*

Thank you for your cooperation.