MEANINGFUL ASSESSMENT OF LINGUISTIC COMPETENCES WHEN TEACHING ENGLISH TO YOUNG CHILDREN

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Abstract:
In many cases teachers have been reluctant to administer regular tests when teaching English to young children. Some general reasons might be that many teachers consider testing too time-consuming, taking away valuable class time. They identify testing with mathematics and statistics or think testing goes against humanistic approaches to teaching. Or they simply have received little guidance in constructing tests during their training period. We must also admit that testing puts the teacher face-to-face with his/her effectiveness as a teacher and, in this sense, testing can be as frightening and frustrating to the teacher as it is for the children. If we refer to the condition of teachers in our country we may add that many teachers feel that the time and effort they put into writing and correcting tests is not acknowledged with additional pay or personal praise.

Keywords*: assessment, principles, problems, purpose, testing.*

Reasons for testing. Testing tells teachers what children can or cannot do, in other words they show teachers how successful their teaching has been. It provides wash back for them to adjust and change course content and teaching styles where necessary; it will also help evaluate the effectiveness of the programme, course books, materials and methods. By identifying children's strengths and weaknesses, testing can help identify areas for remedial work. Testing also tells children how well they are progressing, fact that may stimulate them to take learning more seriously.

A great value of classroom tests is their effect upon attitudes. A teacher can indicate where his/her priorities lie by the tests he/she gives. If classes have nothing but written and formal grammar tests, they will perceive this as a lack of interest on the teacher's part in their listening, reading and speaking abilities.

Another important aspect is the diagnostic element – the feedback obtained is of value to both the teacher and the children.

Tests can even be used to enhance learning. By giving advanced notice of the ground to be covered in a test, the teacher can virtually ensure that the learning is done beforehand.

Purpose of testing. The overall purpose of testing is to provide information about ability and about the learning and teaching process. Roughly, this overall purpose can be divided into two:

- *proficiency testing*: its purpose is to find an answer to the question 'What is the child's level of ability?';
- *achievement testing*: its purpose is to find an answer to the question 'Has the child learnt what he/she is supposed to have learnt according to the teacher's teaching?'.

Testing principles. The theoretical requisites that tests must achieve are *validity*, *reliability* and *practicality*.

A test is <u>valid</u> to the extent that it actually tests what it is supposed to test. So, a valid test of learner ability to read and understand English must test exactly and only that ability.

Many things can prevent measurement from being valid. As far as the classroom teacher is concerned, the first requirement for validity is that the teacher should have a clear idea of exactly what it is about the children's English he/she is trying to assess. The best way of getting a clear idea is to state in operational terms what it is to be measured, that is 'the children's ability to…'.

A test is <u>reliable</u> to the extent that it produces the same result under the same circumstances. So, if two people of the same ability did the test, or if the same person did it twice, they should score the same.

Finally, a test is <u>practical</u> if it does not involve much time or money in its construction, implementation and scoring.

Problems with testing. Good testing is, as far as possible, non-threatening to teachers and children. External examinations and sometimes internal school examinations are often felt by the teachers themselves to be a threat to their reputation. If their children do not do as well as those of another school or another class, they fear that they will be blamed. One way of combating this is to associate teachers more in the examining process.

Testing that is felt by the children as threatening often leads to lowered achievement. This can happen in two ways. Firstly, the actual test results may not give an accurate reflection of what the child could have done, because of the child's excessive anxiety. Secondly, a few experiences of this kind quickly reduce the children's motivation for further learning.

It is part of a teacher's job to look for ways of reducing the anxiety associated with testing. In a good class with a fairly narrow ability range, to be near or at the bottom is not necessarily to be inadequate. In such circumstances there is no point in publishing information about rank order and little point in even keeping such information. The teacher's role is to give the children specific feedback on the strong and weak points of their work. For the more frequent progress testing the standard demanded should be such as most of the children who have made reasonable efforts can satisfy. Formal testing should not be too frequent and teachers should not spend too long revising in preparation for it and should include at least a few easy items that everyone can do at the beginning of the test, in order to build up confidence.

There are strict limits to the amount of time that the teacher can profitably spend on test techniques. A little time is beneficial. A lot of time may even be counter-productive, if it causes tension or boredom, or wastes valuable teaching-time. It must be admitted, though, that some children certainly prepare for and perform in exams rather better when there is some tension (not too much!) than when there is none.

Using tests in teaching English. Keeping all these facts in mind we are going to refer further on to the most used tests and the advantages of using them in teaching English.

It is possible to test children's ability in English by setting a task and seeing whether or not they can carry it out. This is called *criterion-referenced testing*. It gives the teacher yes/no

information about children's specific abilities in English. It does not give the teacher detailed linguistic information, nor does it allow he/she to rank children in a class. The point here is to find out whether a child can perform a particular task or not. For example, can the child write a letter asking for information about something, or give personal details about himself/herself with only occasional errors of language?

Norm-referenced testing allows teachers to rank children and it focuses on the language itself by <u>recognition</u> (where teachers provide language options and ask children to choose the correct one) and by <u>production</u> (where children have to make up their own language responses). Norm-referenced tests can also show how a child's performance compares with the performances of the other children in the same group: is the child in the top part, in the middle part or in the bottom part of the group? How many children in the group are better or worse than that child?

As we have already said, recognition items require choice from the children. If there are several options to choose from, this is called *multiple choice testing*. It is useful for testing vocabulary. The teacher can give the children some sentences and list options (**A**, **B**, **C**, **D**) under each sentence. Multiple choice testing also offers a good way of testing children's reading comprehension. It is often used for testing discrete points of grammar. The marking is quick, easy and, in itself, objective.

Another way of testing vocabulary in context is through *matching items*. Matching can also be done by finding the words that rhyme with a given word.

Cloze tests call upon the children to produce the missing word. They are given a text from which target words have been removed and replaced by blanks; the teacher reads the full passage or plays a tape with the full passage and the children fill in the blanks with the words they have heard. These tests are easy to produce, acceptably valid, reasonable reliable and quick to mark.

In addition to cloze in its pure form, various modifications of cloze can be used: the teacher can close the gaps so that the children are not shown where there is an omission. In this case it would be a good idea to give the children some instructions, indicating the number of the missing words or making clear that no line will have more than one word missing. Rather than simply omitting every 10th word or so, the teacher can omit particular types of word (verbs, articles, pronouns, etc., depending on the level of the class). The cloze test could be combined with a multiple choice: at each gap, instead of a blank, the teacher provides three or four choices, only one of which will suitably fill the gap.

Multi-mode tests are tests which contain a task (or a number of tasks) requiring the use of more than one language skill for its satisfactory completion: first the children listen to a recording, then discuss what the recording is about and finally write a short report. They are very useful when testing group work activity.

The purpose of *pronunciation tests* is not only to evaluate knowledge and award grades, but also, and probably more importantly, to motivate children to be sensitive to this aspect of English. Pronunciation tends to be neglected by many learners as long as they know they will not be tested on it. Obviously, pronunciation is tested globally in different types of conversational exchange, interview, reading aloud, etc., that go on in the classroom. What seems to be insufficient is the testing of accuracy – that is, testing to assess the learner's management of specific features. For example, one method of testing word stress derives from the very nature of English stress. In native English speech, stress is so strong that it is generally accompanied by a movement of some part of the body (head, eye, hand, etc.). To exploit this characteristic, especially at beginner levels,

the teacher may ask the children to identify the stress of a word by a bodily movement, like tapping, shaking one's fist, moving one's head, etc.

Dictation is not simply a test of spelling; although it may include an assessment of spelling, it tests a wide range of skills, providing a useful means of measuring general language performance. This testing method is based on the assumption that, most often, if the learner has a deviant pronunciation of a word, he/she will not understand it when it is read with a different pronunciation.

When giving a dictation, the teacher should begin by reading through the whole dictation passage at almost normal speed. Then, he/she should dictate meaningful units of words (phrases and short clauses) reading them aloud as clearly as possible. Finally, after finishing the actual dictation of the various phrases and clauses, the teacher reads the whole passage once more at slightly slower than normal speed. The children will then be given an opportunity to check the spellings of words and their overall understanding of the text. Some teachers try to make the dictation easier for their children by reading out the text very slowly word by word. This way of giving dictation can be very harmful as it encourages children to concentrate on single words. Clearly, the teacher should give children enough time to write down what he/she is dictating. To do this, the teacher should simply pause at the end of a meaningful unit (or sense group) to allow the children time to write down what he/she has just read out. It is also important to choose a suitable text for dictation with this in mind and to prepare beforehand by dividing the text into intelligible segments.

The focused dictation is different from a traditional one (which evaluates both listening and writing). In the case of a focused dictation, instead of writing everything, the children write only specified words. For example, they could be asked to write all the nouns, all the verbs heard in the present continuous form, and so on. The passage is spoken at a natural speed twice, and the children write the words as they listen and between the readings.

A number of listening tests contain short statements in the form of instructions or directions. *Listen and draw* is a pure listening test, involving no reading, speaking or writing. Yet the teacher knows at once if the children have understood what they heard. It is enough to check their drawings, as to earn a mark they have to follow the teacher's exact instructions.

Other listening tests contain short conversations on which questions (or pictures) are based.

Testing speaking skills can be made by different procedures: re-telling stories, using pictures for description or comparison or sequences of pictures, pictures with speech bubbles, maps, oral interviews, etc. In a traditional *role play test* the teacher designs a series of situations and play one role while a child plays the second. The teacher has to provide children 'talk cards' which are put face down on the desk. The child takes one at random, looks through it and prepares while the teacher is role playing with the previous child. As each child is called for interview, the next one comes forward for a card, and so on. Each role play takes only a minute or so. Grades are awarded (fail, pass, pass with merit) as the test is conducted.

Testing reading comprehension is, perhaps, the easiest skill of all to evaluate and the teacher has plenty of interesting formats to choose between. Here are some of them: *true/false items* offer a very reliable way of testing a child's reading comprehension. *Completion items* are useful in testing a child's ability to understand a reading text as well as recalling information. They can range from one-word completion answers to the completion of sentences: reading texts with blanks or texts followed by summaries with blanks. *Split sentences* are simple to produce and the

chances against guessing correctly are very low indeed if the teacher has twenty or more items. There is no point in making the children write out the sentences; it is wasteful of the teacher's time as well as theirs. They simply write the appropriate letter of the completion against the number of the stimulus. Reading comprehension can also be assessed by asking learners to identify the order of *scrambled sentences*, taken from one paragraph.

Testing writing skills can be made through *error-recognition items*, *re-arrangement* and *changing words*.

When testing children through error-recognition items, the teacher can use the errors his/her children make in their homework or compositions. In re-arrangement tests, the children are required to unscramble sentences: they must write out each sentence, putting the words and phrases in their correct order. This kind of tests are useful for testing an awareness of the order of adjectives, the position of adverbs, inversion and several other areas of grammar.

By requiring children to re-arrange sentences, the teacher encourages them to pay careful attention to such grammatical markers as connectives and pronouns.

Changing words tests require children to put verbs into their correct tense.

Conclusion. **In order to develop confidence in the children, teacher-to-child feedback should always be *supportive* and *positive*. In closed activities, the children can assess their own achievements by matching their results with the predicted outcome, while the teacher keeps an overview of their competence and progress. The language focus of the lesson can be tested orally or in writing, depending on the age and ability of the children. Testing, however, is only encouraging to those who do best. For some children poor test scores can signal the beginning of the end of their motivation.**

The teacher needs therefore to balance testing with assessment based on classroom observations. Levels of confidence and fluency can best be measured by listening in to the children's interchanges. Levels of motivation, attitudes to problem-solving and overall development can also be noted. Through regular, informal tests, teachers obtain feedback for themselves and the children on the efficiency of the teaching and learning process.

Teachers should try to evaluate all the skills, in isolation and by means of mixed skill tests. Where they face pressures of time, it helps if listening and reading tests are in the multiple choice format, with a preprinted answer paper.

Written and oral tests have to be marked by impression if creativity is not to be stifled. There can be a pass-fail criterion or the teacher can design a simple marking grid to reduce subjectivity. Oral tests can be conducted more communicatively as well as more quickly if they are done in small groups.

Teaching and testing are two inseparable aspects of the teacher's task. In spite of the current reluctance to profit from the latter, testing has an essential role in the development of the children's communicative competence. The brief nature of the study does not allow for an exhaustive description of progress testing. Our intention is to encourage teachers to read more on the subject and to try some of the suggestions given above.

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