

Second Language Testing in Sri Lanka: A Reexamine

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Abstract

This paper tries to reexamine the practice of the second language testing in Sri Lanka. Testing is considered a way to systematically measure a person's ability or knowledge, and it is formalized as a set of techniques or procedures. Testing also plays an important part in language learning and evaluation in classroom settings. In fact, there are no Second Language Development and Language Testing researchers have discussed the roles of testing and its development in Sri Lanka. Government of Sri Lanka has taken an action to teach Tamil or Sinhala as a L2 in different levels - School students, University students, Government servants - and evaluate them in many ways. Fundamental concepts and criteria which are thought to underpin good language testing. Discussing the importance of the interface and different perspectives between Language Testing and Second Language Development which explore learners' test-taking process and strategies. This article suggests that it is essential to examine not only final linguistic products of tests but also the entire test taking process to make language tests more communicatively relevant.

Keywords: language testing, Tamil, Sinhala, Second Language Development, Sri Lanka.

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INTRODUCTION

Language testing at any level is a highly complex undertaking that must be based on theory as well as practice. A language assessment system focusing only on Reading and Writing is outmoded and need to be modified, especially in this electronic era when the oral skills are dominating other skills. This paper analyses various techniques employed in language testing and examines the guiding principles of assessment. It investigates the assessment systems followed at Sri Lankan school, undergraduate, and the government officers' level. It advocates the urgency of assessing all the four skills which will be beneficial for students of different levels of intelligence. The four skill assessment and alternative assessments are suggested remedies for improving the standard of Tamil or Sinhala amongst the students.

Language Testing in Sri Lanka

Last ten years of developing and administering language proficiency tests for different levels has helped to gain a deep understanding of the needs of language testing. Sri Lankan standard proficiency tests, available especially in two national languages, are designed and developed to assess general language proficiency that applies to a variety of students within

different levels. Ministry of Education (MoE) has implemented Tamil or Sinhala as a L2 in government schools where students are evaluated by school and national level tests. GCE ordinary level is the higher examination for school students. Under the guidance of Ministry of National Languages and Social integration, Department of official Languages (DOL) and National Institute of Language Education and Training (NILET) are conducting Tamil or Sinhala as a L2 for government and non-government servants. Examinations are held in Sinhala and Tamil Media under level I, II, III or I,II, III, IV based on the service category. This examination consists of two parts, written and spoken. The Written Examination is conducted by the Department of Examinations twice a year island wide and the Oral Test is conducted by the Department of Official Languages at Province level. (The employees to whom the Public Administration Circulars No: 03/2007 and 07/2007 are applicable, can sit this examination.)

When students learn Tamil or Sinhala as a Second Language in Sri Lanka, they face various problems. These problems can be partially categorized as problems caused by mother tongue interference and partially those caused by the method of language teaching and assessment. The greatest curse of the

modern educational system is the lack of harmony between what is taught and what is tested. Up-to-date methods are implemented, curriculum is innovated but the questions remain traditional to the core. Most of the questions asked in the second language paper focus on the rules and regulations; practical oriented questions are ignored. Students naturally study with the purpose of scoring good grades in the exam. They are not concerned about the practicality of what they are studying. In this context, four-skill assessment plays a vital role. Unfortunately, the second language teaching in the school level, university level and even at the government officers' level gives importance to Reading and Writing and neglects Listening and Speaking.

Only when the four skills are tested independently, the purpose of language learning will be fulfilled. Testing is an integral part of the curriculum. Even though students are nervous and curious of exams, they will not be happy with a course which provides a pass certificate to all those who have attended a course. Graduates passing out of a university should be able to communicate in oral and written Tamil or Sinhala. This would be possible only if the test is designed in a systematic manner. Tests help teachers to measure the progress of their students. Through tests, teachers can find out if their teaching has been effective. Tests help teachers to discriminate between good and bad learners. Tests provide proper feedback to the learners and understand their progress. Based on the feedback from the tests curriculum designers can modify or change the curriculum. Moreover tests serve as the tool for the researchers. There are mainly two techniques employed in testing. They are objective and subjective. The questions which fall under the objective category are true/false, multiple choice, matching, completion, rearrangement, transformation etc. The subjective questions are short answers, translation, interview, essay etc.

Heterogeneity of the classroom is a common problem that most teachers face. Handling a mixed ability class is not easy because each student has his own interest, attitudes, level of intelligence, learning style and linguistic background knowledge. So the teachers should conduct continuous assessments and individualise them as much as possible. The test should be congenial to all students. A good test should have certain guiding principles. They are validity, reliability, practicability, security, wash back and transparency.

1. **Validity:** A communicative language learning approach must be matched by communicative language testing. It should also have face validity which means that the test should measure what it is supposed to measure. It should also have content validity.
2. **Reliability:** Reliability suggests the consistency of the test scores. The result of a test should be the same if it is conducted at any other time. There

should be consistency in the format, content and time of the exam. Exam administration and the ambience in which the test is conducted are also important.

3. **Practicality:** The practicality of the test can be obtained only when the tests are marked and the students are given proper feedback.
4. **Security:** It is part of both reliability and validity.
5. **Wash back:** It refers to the effect of testing on teaching and learning. The students accomplish the desired result when they perceive the tests are markers of their progress.
6. **Transparency:** Students should be provided clear, accurate information which is known as transparency.
7. **Usefulness:** It is an important quality of testing.

A good test should stick on to all the above mentioned features. A language assessment should stick on to the four skills. If the assessment is confined to one or two skills, we will not recognize the skill in which a student excels or in which he/ she keeps a low level of performance.

Assessment system in Sri Lanka

Four skill assessments will be beneficial for students of different intelligence level. When the four skills are tested independently, the purpose of language learning will be fulfilled. Each student will understand in which skill she excels and in which one she requires improvement. It is necessary to explore the language assessment system presently followed in the School exams- Grade 11 of GCE O/L (General Certificate of Education in Ordinary Level), Examinations of Sri Lankan Universities and Examinations conducted for government sevenths under level I, II, III, IV based on the service category.

In the language assessment system of School exams syllabi only Reading and Writing are tested, whereas curriculum of Universities also assesses Reading and Writing along with some times oral exams. A student will be given a pass certificate in Tamil or Sinhala only if (s) he goes through all these assessments. But in other systems a student who can memorize some part of literature will be able to get through the examination. Hence, after 10 years of English language learning, in order to perform marvelously in an interview or a job by conversing in good Tamil or Sinhala, students need to join some spoken language classes. They may be excellent in writing but the first impression of a man is formed through the words he utters rather than the words he writes.

In GCE O/L examination, there is only one paper in L2. It includes questions from poem, passages, supplementary reader and language elements. In short, it gives importance to Reading and Writing; Listening and Speaking are neglected. The focus is given on

literature and writing: Listening and Speaking are not assessed. Literature can be considered as a comprehension passage given in advance to the students, the answer to which can be memorized even by weak students. It rarely gives any chance for skill development. Any student who mugs up the literature section will be able to get through the L2 examination.

a) Tamil /Sinhala – Paper - I is for two hours.

There will be 4 broad questions.

1. A composition of 450 to 500 words
2. A letter
3. An unseen passage and related questions
4. Questions to test grammar

b) Tamil /Sinhala – Paper - II is also for two hours, but purely based on literature

1. Section – A, 2. Section – B, 3. Section – C, 4. Section D

Designing and writing the GCE O/L test, requires that paper setter have to consider just what it is we want to measure and why. One way to describe language assessment instruments is according to their function or purpose. The test can be included the following skills.

1. Oral Communication: The students can be given a test card based on which they have to converse with examiner for nearly 15 minutes.
2. Reading and Writing: Students have to comprehend passages, brochures, advertisements etc. which they have to do in their daily life too. Moreover they must do some creative writing in this paper.
3. Listening: Students have to listen to the audio clippings and answer the questions provided in the question paper

If a student fails to obtain the minimum standard in any of these 2 papers in L2, he will not be provided a pass certificate. Students may sit for the next attempt in next year.

In the undergraduate level, the curriculum has been revised and kept in balance with the standard. The common course of the Universities as: Communication Skills in Tamil or Sinhala are aimed at the development of the four skills of the students. But unfortunately in the real sense it tests only writing. The main emphasis of the syllabus is the use of language in communicative situations. Some of the questions asked are purely based on theory. Students can prove their mettle if questions aid them in involving in imaginary debate or discussion on a particular topic.

The real problem of L2 Language Teaching lies in the assessment system followed. The international standard in the assessment is compromised because of the constraints of time, energy and money. Assessment in many parts of the world has focused

primarily on high stake examination. Writing a three hour theory examination is of no significance. Instead of that Alternative Assessments can be employed. Alternative Assessment is a non-conventional ongoing strategy involving both student and teacher in making judgments about the students' progress. It is different from traditional standardized testing. The principal aim of Alternative Assessment is to gather data about how students are processing and completing authentic tasks in the target language. Question paper should not be prepared during the last hour. Much care and attention should be given in the setting of the question paper so that it really tests the skills of the students rather than their memory.

The traditional tests are based on recall and reproduction whereas Alternative Assessment asks students to show what they can do. It is unfortunate that even the pattern of international examinations, the competitive examinations of Universities, is restructured and gives opportunities only to those students who can memorize the answers. The students are not given a chance to exhibit their language proficiency. The evaluation is based on what the students can integrate and produce. The important techniques employed in Alternative Assessment are Self-Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, Student Designed Test, Learner Centered Assessment, Project, Presentations.

- Self-Assessment: It refers to students' evaluation of his or her performance at various stages in a course.
- Portfolio Assessment: Portfolios are collections assembled by both teacher and student. It contains a variety of work in various stages.
- Student Designed Test: It results in greater learner awareness of course content, test format and test strategies.
- Learner Centered Assessment: Students can select themes, formats and marking schemes to be used.
- Projects: Projects are content based. It requires individual or group work. It can be a poster, brochure, display or many other options.
- Presentations: It is a real life skill that gives learners an opportunity to address socio-cultural aspects of communication. It helps them to use appropriate register and discourse.

The communicative approach has introduced radical changes in syllabus, methodology and curriculum design. But evaluation has not gone through any practical change. The future of testing holds out great promises and challenges the whole process because if it moves in the right direction, the entire process of language learning will be benefited. The acquisition of oral skills would not be a problem for students of affluent families because they get enough exposure to the language. But the middle class category relies only on their school teaching and testing in order

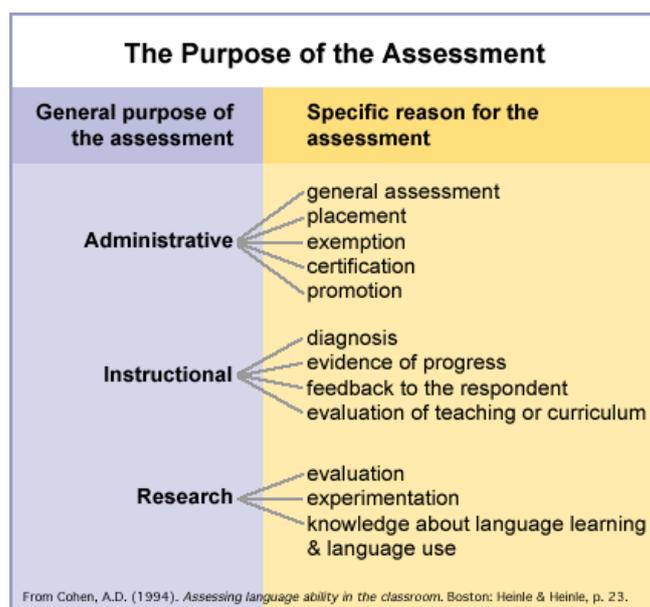
to strengthen their language skills. With the advent of national integration, Tamil/Sinhala has become the language of opportunities and the main motivation for the language learner is to communicate successfully. Instead of teaching students the toughest words which they hardly use in their daily life, my suggestion is to make language learning practical oriented. Or else, students who have mastered literature will fail to comprehend an ordinary pamphlet and brochure and will be bewildered to speak in Tamil or Sinhala, when they go for work and interact with the people of the country.

SL government institutions assist their officers to access their second language skill. Department of official languages and National Institute of Language Education and Training are conducting exams to evaluate officers to get salary increments and promotions. Official language Proficiency Examination which consists of two parts (written and oral) is designed to access one's capability of discharging official duties in the other (second) official language, instead of his/her mother tongue. But they are not

sufficient to meet the standard communicative language abilities.

Testing Communicative and Strategic Competences

In fact, the proficiency test could conceivably be used for twelve different purposes: five administrative purposes (assessment, placement, exemption, certification, promotion), four instructional purposes (diagnosis, evidence of progress, feed-back to the respondent, evaluation of teaching or curriculum), and three research purposes (evaluation, experimentation, knowledge about language learning and language use). The average test will probably only be used for one or perhaps two purposes by a given individual. Sometimes, teachers, administrators, and researchers will use the same test for their respective purposes. When describing assessments, the distinction is often made between proficiency tests, intended for administrative purposes, and achievement tests, intended for assessment of instructional results. Administrative, instructional, and research purposes are represented in the graphic below:



Source: Cohen, A.D. (1994). *Assessing language ability in the classroom*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle p. 23.

A distinction in testing is made between norm-referenced and criterion-referenced assessment as well. A test can be used, for example, to compare a student with other students, whether locally (e.g., in a class), regionally, or nationally as annual tests. Classroom, regional, or national norms may be established to interpret just how one student compares with another. A test can also be used to determine whether a respondent has met certain instructional objectives or criteria

The important effort to define communicative competence provided another set of criteria for describing tests. Tests are seen as tapping one or more

of the four components that make up communicative competence:

1. Grammatical competence was seen to encompass "knowledge of lexical items and of rules of morphology, syntax, sentence-grammar semantics, and phonology" (Canale and Swain, 1980).
2. Discourse competence was defined as the ability to connect sentences in stretches of discourse and to form a meaningful whole out of a series of utterances.
3. Sociolinguistic competence was defined as involving knowledge of the sociocultural rules of language and of discourse.

4. Strategic competence was seen to refer to “the verbal and nonverbal communication strategies that may be called into action to compensate for breakdowns in communication due to performance variables or due to insufficient competence” (Canale and Swain, 1980).

CONCLUSION

This paper has briefly described a process of evolution in language testing and discussed some aspects of good language testing and its main roles in the second language development area by focusing on learners' test-taking processes and strategies in Sri Lankan phenomena. Testing and teaching are closely linked and one can influence the other either positively or negatively. The textbooks should be incorporated with cassettes providing sufficient listening exercises. Students should be made familiar with four skills – writing, reading, speaking, and listening – correspondingly. This will build up confidence of students who are good at all skills. These cooperative skills can be tested relatively passively, but the combined skills require active testing, as they emphasize performance rather than simply knowledge. Though it is a second language, it will help to use day to day communication effectively. Four-skill-assessment will improve L2 competency of Sri Lankans. It will support to the government mission of national integration as well as increase job opportunities of individuals.

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