Coping with the Curriculum: Examining Critical Issues in Assessment of English Language

Learners in the Secondary Classrooms of Bengal

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Abstract

In the last few decades there has been a paradigmatic shift in English language teaching all across the world with extensive research being conducted in the planning and preparation of an appropriate language curriculum- one that will address the manifold needs of learners in a given context and time. In the post-Independence phase of English language teaching in India, the necessity of upgrading the existing language curricula and making it at par with global standards was recognized. In West Bengal too, a similar understanding underlined the series of revisions in the syllabus, methodological approach, and development of TLM (Teaching-Learning materials) and assessment of learners, especially after the 1950s. Interestingly, the curricular revision of English in 2011 in the aftermath of the political turnover in the state, overhauled the earlier curriculum with a new functional, communicative approach that led to massive changes (from the primary level through the higher secondary level of school) in the syllabus, course content, methodology and assessment of linguistic and communicative competence of the learners. Replacing the previous mid-term and annual evaluation process, the new curriculum has introduced continuous assessment pattern with special focus on formative assessment.

This article traces the evolution in approach and techniques of assessment in the light of changing curricular needs worldwide and then studies the revised assessment approaches adopted in the present curriculum (after the curricular revision in 2011) of West Bengal Board of Secondary Education (WBBSE).

Keywords: Curriculum, language, classrooms, assessment, evaluation

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In the last few decades, there has been a noted expansion in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) all over the world, with the discipline gaining a significant status in not only academics and research but emerging as a major concern in global socio-politics. There has been a radical shift in approach and perspectives towards ELT; views and perspectives that are grounded on concerns and ideologies that clearly contest and debunk their traditional counterparts. Language analysts, policy makers and administrators have actively collaborated with language teachers to probe into the fabric of language teaching attempting to find an appropriate English language curriculum- one that will cater to the diverse needs of learners in diverse contexts. This search for the 'right' curriculum has a long history attached to it, one that has witnessed constant revisions and modifications in approach and technique. With the drastic change in the world-order during the 1950s and English language emerging as a universal connecting medium, there was a growing need to revise and reshape existing language curricula and almost immediately, delineate the definition and components of curriculum in general. The need to redefine the existing term 'method' was envisaged by Edward Anthony as he proposed the terms 'approach' and 'technique' in his seminal article "Approach, Method and Technique" (1963) to identify levels of "conceptualization and organization" of language teaching practices (Richards and Rogers 15). The term 'method' was contested by scholars, language analysts and language teachers; and was later substituted by the term 'curriculum'. John Kerr defined curriculum as "all the learning which is planned and guided by the school, whether it is carried on in groups or individually, inside or outside the school" (qtd. in Kelly 7). Curriculum is

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significantly different from 'syllabus' which refers to specific linguistic content outlined in a

course or method (Richards and Rodgers 21); the former takes into account major factors

concerning ELT, namely, a well-defined syllabus, course structure, clearly defined role of

teachers and learners, instructional resources, methodology and evaluation techniques (Richards

2). With the need for a curriculum that would blend practical demands associated with language

learning and theoretical sub-structures that govern teaching methodologies, designing a language

curriculum, or rather, curriculum development became the need of the hour. Jack C. Richards

viewed curriculum development as "an essentially practical activity since it seeks to improve the

quality of language teaching through the use of systematic planning, development and review

practices in all aspects of a language program" (xi). The focus on curriculum development began

around the 1960s, coinciding with changing concerns and demands of the language and having a

pronounced impact on the teaching- learning scenario that was moving towards a learner-

centered/ student- directed approach.

Besides the changing roles of teachers and learners in a language classroom and

redesigning of the course content and teaching methodology, curriculum development called for

developing appropriate evaluation parameters to assess the learner and trace the learner's

progress. Evaluation was identified as not only the resultant product of intersection of all other

components of a language curriculum but also as the determiner of validity of the entire

curriculum. For an outcome-oriented society, assessment and evaluation became integral to

curriculum development and designing skill-based tests became one of the major agendas of

curriculum developers. In her discussion of evaluation and assessment of language learners, Prof.

Lynne Cameron aptly remarks:

In the world of foreign language teaching, assessment, usually in the form of 'testing', has become a multi-million-dollar global business, in which the need for internationally recognized certification of language proficiency works with learners' or their parents' understandable demands to see proof of the outcomes of their struggle to learn and the money they have invested in it. (216)

This growing concern regarding evaluation and assessment parameters and techniques had a direct impact on EFL scenario. English language curriculum in the former British colonies was gradually changing, evolving and accommodating global issues concerning teaching and learning of the language. India, one of the major British colonies, was already enmeshed in debates concerning the position of English in the national curriculum (particularly in the early years of post- Independence phase) and developing a curriculum based on the needs, approaches, utilities and scope of the language. "The journey of English from a colonial master plan to a post-colonial global metaphor has cast many shades and shadows over the plurilingual milieu of the Indian society... which characterize so many changes in the government policies in both pre and post- independence" phase (De 17). However, over the past few decades, there has been a gradual shift from debates over inclusion of the language in the national educational curriculum to attempts of curriculum designers and planners in India to understand rapidly changing ELT scenario across the globe and modify the language curriculum in order to meet global standards. This article draws upon my Doctoral dissertation that contains analysis of the evaluation system and assessment approaches and findings involving the English language curriculum in schools affiliated to WBBSE.

Assessment is perhaps one of the least understood areas of language teaching and learning", notes Cohen (515) about the general reaction of students/ learners towards 'tests'; a statement reiterated by Douglas Brown who says, "the anticipation of a test is almost always accompanied by feelings of anxiety and self-doubt- along with a fervent hope that you will come out of it alive" (Brown1). Brown further underlines the common error in equating 'assessment' with 'test', clarifying that tests are "a subset of assessment:

Tests are prepared administrative procedures that occur at identifiable times in a curriculum when learners muster all their faculties to offer peak performance, knowing that their responses are being measured and evaluated. Assessment, on the other hand, is an ongoing process that encompasses a much wider domain. (4)

While a test is a "method of measuring a person's ability, knowledge, or performance in a given domain" (Brown3), assessment focuses on recording the overall performance of the student. Florin Mihai cites Bachman who identified three fundamental concepts associated with the process of assessment of student performance, namely, measurement, test, and evaluation (cited in Mihai 22). Measurement is "quantification" of achievement of specific skill sets; test refers to an "instrument" that elicits a certain response or "behavior" and evaluation, according to Bachman is gathering "reliable and relevant information" (qtd. in Mihai 22-23) - thus, "assessment is a combination of all formal and informal judgments and findings that occur inside and outside a classroom" (24). In a nutshell, testing measures the student's performance by quantifiable measures; assessment is the process of recording the student's performance, the data so collected is then used for evaluation that helps the teacher make judgements about the student's skill vis-à-vis his/her performance (Cameron 222).

Palomba and Banta rightly comment that assessment is a continuous process comprising three major phases, namely, planning, implementation and sustainability (Banta, and Palomba15). On these grounds, one of the greatest challenges faced by curriculum designers and language teachers today is the choice of assessment that will suit a particular curriculum; the choice of assessment takes into account two major factors, namely, the purpose of the assessment and use of the information (Cameron 222). Depending on these two factors, assessments have been classified thus:

a) Informal and Formal Assessments

b) Formative and Summative Assessments

c) Norm Referenced and Criterion Referenced Assessments

d) Diagnostic and Achievement Assessments

e) Classroom-based and Large Scale Assessments

(Mihai 27, Cameron 222-224, Brown 5-7, Richards 288- 289 et al.)

Out of these, formative and summative assessments are widely used terms especially in elementary, middle and high school settings. While 'validity' and 'reliability' are terms associated with qualitative description of the evaluation and assessment processes, 'feedback' enables a quantitative analysis of the assessment techniques and helps in, as mentioned previously, making judgements. Formative assessments are continuous assessments and they draw in immediate feedback while summative assessments do not "feed back into the next round of teaching" (Cameron 222).

The curricular revision by WBBSE in the year 2011 not only replaced the existing text books of English from primary through secondary level of education but overhauled the existing discourse of evaluation and assessment. While the previous curriculum focused mainly on the summative assessment (mid-session and term end examinations) with little attention to formative and continuous evaluation of students, the new assessment pattern takes into account both formative and summative assessment of learners from Classes V to X, highlighting the importance of continuous evaluation of learners. The Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE) method, termed as the Peacock Model was implemented in evaluating students from Class I- VIII in 2013 and subsequently, internal formative assessment was included in the evaluation pattern at the Madhyamik Level (Classes IX and X) as well. The official memo (D.S. (Aca)/207/ 22.01.2015) issued by the Deputy Secretary of WBBSE noted:

...the Expert Committee on School Education has attempted to redesign the evaluation pattern at the Madhyamik Level (Classes IX and X). In this new pattern there are two premises of evaluation: Internal Formative Evaluation & Summative Evaluation.

Replacing the half-yearly and annual assessment practice, the new evaluation divided the academic session into three assessment sessions –

  i.   1st Term (to be held in the first week of April),

 ii.   2nd Term (to be held in the first week of August)

iii.   3rd term (to be held in the first week of December).

Besides refashioning the schedule of the examinations, the new evaluation system had clear instructions issued by the competent authorities from the Government of West Bengal regarding –

a) scope and components included in the formative assessment of the learner

b) marking scheme of both formative and summative assessments and

c) it provided a model question pattern which was indicative of the rationale behind the curricular revision.

Modeled on constructivist theories of language learning as espoused by Vygotsky and Piaget, the new curriculum, as noted previously "emphasizes upon the active participation of the learners thereby ensuring learner autonomy" (Blossoms 124). The attempt of the curriculum designers and planners to ensure a holistic development of the learners accounts for the increased stress on formative evaluation; and as rightly noted by Paul Black, "evidence shows that formative assessment, which assumes "untapped potential," does help all pupils to learn and can give particular help to those who have previously fallen behind" (18). According to the new evaluation pattern for Classes IX and X, for the first two terms, the maximum marks allotted for summative and internal formative components are 40 and 10 respectively and for the third term, the maximum marks for summative and internal formative components are 90 and 10 respectively.

The handbook for new evaluation pattern, issued by the Govt. of West Bengal titled Internal Formative Evaluation: Theory and Practice (2016) enlisted the modalities that were to be followed for Internal Formative Evaluation, namely,

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1. Survey Report

2. Nature Study

3. Case Study

4. Creative Writing

5. Model Making,

6. Open Text Book Evaluation.

Stressing on integration of the assessment techniques with classroom teaching, it further noted:

Out of these six options noted above, any three are to be chosen in an academic year vis-à-vis Internal Formative Evaluation in each of the seven subjects. Therefore, each term will have one modality in relation to a particular subject. Subject teacher(s) are expected to correlate the modalities of Internal Formative Evaluation with the learning competencies of the concerned subjects. (5)

Among diverse kinds of assessment techniques and approaches, formative assessment is believed to provide greater scope of learner autonomy and learning opportunity for both learners and teachers (Witte 35; William 283–289). Along the lines of Black and William, contemporary approaches towards assessment patterns view formative evaluation as facilitators of active learning process that happens in a classroom setting (Witte 35). Drawing from extensive research conducted in the field of curriculum design, Gavin Brown enlists the aspects regarding which assessment provides specific information according to which appropriate educational decisions are taken; he notes:

Assessment provides information that allows valid and appropriate educational decisions to be made about such things as

a) *what to teach students,*

b) *what order to teach important content,*

c) *which students to choose for certain teaching,*

d) *which programs to place students into,*

e) *how to classify students,*

f) *identify degree of progress being made,*

g) *determine if they are learning less or more than expected,*

h) *ascertain if they have learned enough,*

i) *ask how much learning is present,*

j) *ask how good learning is,*

k) *identify student readiness to learn,*

l) *determine personal characteristics of students,*

m) *detect which students require specialist help,*

n) *determine if students have realistic self-awareness concerning their abilities, or*

o) *how good the curriculum is*

(Airasian, 1997; Cronbach, 1970; Gronlund and Linn, 1990; Mehrens and Lehmann, 1984; Thorndike, 1997). (14)

Such enumeration underscores the essential relationship that exists between teacher, testing and assessments but does not take into account another significant component of a language curriculum- the language classroom; the crucible where knowledge is forged by authentic teaching-learning interactions. With changing ELT scenario in the past few decades, hence, classroom assessment has become an indispensable element in the examination and analysis of language curriculum. Classroom Assessment has been understood as "an active process of systematically collecting and analyzing student learning evidence in order to make effective educational decisions, which are designed to promote student learning" (Witte 8). This kind of assessment focuses on identification of the learners' level of proficiency, placement of the learner according to his/her proficiency level, progress monitoring and reclassification of the learners (Bailey 224). Four actions associated with classroom assessment, as underlined by Witte are:

1. Evidence and information collection of classroom assessment

2. Examine the evidence to find out the validity of the assessment

3. Instructional decisions depending upon review of such information

4. Instructional decisions fostering learning in classrooms (Witte 4)

The significance of this assessment is that besides being intertwined with pedagogic principles governing the curriculum, it also draws upon authentic instructional resources, teaching methodology and most importantly, learners' feedback.

Consistent with the recommendations of National Curricular Framework, 2005 and Right to Education 2009, the evaluation pattern so designed by WBBSE has created certain rubrics for

formative assessments; they are: Participation, Questioning and Experimentation, Interpretation and Application, Empathy and Cooperation, Aesthetic and Creative Expression. All these parameters are supposed to help the teacher assess the progress of the learner and develop further strategies. Interestingly, in the course of my survey of opinions regarding this new evaluation system, I noted how the teachers and the learners have a mixed approach about the scope, aim and implementation of this assessment system. Most of the teachers have limited ideas about the prerequisites of such evaluation process, and concepts like self-assessment and learner autonomy find almost no practical application. Students on the other hand have no clear idea about the rationale and scope of an assessment system which does not involve their familiar set-up of question papers and answer sheets. Discrepancies in marks (due to absence of any fixed marking scheme) often lead to students questioning the basic foundations of this evaluative method-validity and reliability. Reasons behind this widening gap between theoretical underpinnings of the present curriculum and its implementation in classrooms can perhaps be traced back to the education system in general, around the world. Interaction and intersection of the domains of learners, academia and commerce have a visible effect on testing and evaluation of language learners. In an ideal situation, "teaching and learning needs should dictate the form and timing of the assessment" but, as Cameron rightly points out, "social realities, in the form of political, commercial and cultural dynamics underlie several conflicts around the role of assessment in language teaching and particularly, when we are concerned with assessing children", thereby accounting for the negotiation of teaching-learning needs with assessment outcomes (214-15). This accounts for the increasing gap between curricular expectations and the outcomes, both at

the micro (learners and teachers) and macro level (curriculum designers, language analysts and researchers) of the education system.

Possible solutions to overcome this situation, particularly in the case of West Bengal will include- imparting continuous and appropriate teacher training through workshops and seminars, clarifying the rationale, scope and objectives of the revised evaluation pattern, motivating the learners towards understanding the scope of formative evaluation and how such evaluation can drive them towards identification of their individual learning needs and attain autonomy in the classroom.

When it comes to implementing effective assessment techniques in classrooms, the major issue that concerns educators worldwide is the constraint of time and the pressure of syllabus completion within a specific time period. Cameron aptly summarizes the predicament of evaluation system in curriculum by noting how the "washback from assessment to learning has an impact on learners, teachers and the wider system" and how the demands of assessments stress the learners whose individual learning needs are weighed down by the constraints of course completion thereby limiting educational reforms governed and limited by the power of "the assessment machinery" (216). Cameron aptly summarizes the present predicament of the evaluation system by noting how the "washback from assessment to learning has an impact on learners, teachers and the wider system" and how the demands of assessments stress the learners whose individual learning needs are weighed down by the constraints of course completion thereby limiting educational reforms governed and limited by the power of "the assessment machinery" (216). This paradox underlines the fissure between theoretical assumptions and practical applications concerning not only the assessment mechanism but also the other

components of curriculum, viz., syllabus design, instructional resources, and methodology and teacher-learner interaction. It reveals the fact that despite context- specific modifications and revisions in different components of a curriculum, this is a global concern concerning objectives and outcomes of any form of learning. There is, indeed, a desperate need to scrutinize the evolving dynamics of curriculum and society and understanding the impact of such dynamics on curricular outcomes, negotiate curricular revisions prioritizing learners' needs and autonomy.

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