

## **Language assessment literacy of teachers of English: implications for assessing speaking and listening skills of students in the classroom**

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### **1. Abstract**

Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) is essential for a teacher of English to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses, to ensure that they are progressing while learning and also to see that the students show fair levels of achievement at the term end evaluation. Teaching, learning and assessing speaking and listening skills of students is carried out inadequately in the Sri Lankan classrooms due to gaps of LAL among teachers. A quick intervention is needed to address this matter at policy level in order to produce teachers of English equipped with LAL through both pre-service and in-service teacher training programmes. Furthermore, implementation of formative classroom assessment methods is a great need at present to help students acquire the necessary language skills. Classroom assessment must take place as an ongoing process which is ideal to assess speaking and listening skills of students as those skills cannot be assessed through the national level summative paper pencil test. Also, the teachers must have a precise understanding of the sub-skills of speaking and listening and how to teach and assess those sub skills. Effective feedback provided to students on their performance will support their ongoing learning process to master the skills of speaking and listening. An efficient monitoring mechanism is also needed for quality assurance in the proposed ongoing classroom assessment process.

### **2. Sub-theme**

This paper belongs to the sub-theme of the 'speaking and listening challenge'. Teaching, learning and assessing speaking and listening skills in the classroom need to undergo a lot of transformation. Practicing teachers must be empowered with necessary skills to teach and assess speaking and listening skills using authentic material giving students ample opportunities to practice the sub-skills of speaking and listening.

### **3. Story**

#### **Language Assessment Literacy (LAL)**

Taylor (2009) claims that the term 'Assessment Literacy' encompasses what language teachers need to know about assessment matters. Fulcher (2012) specifies that Language Assessment Literacy should fall into a classification of (a) Practical knowledge, (b) Theoretical and procedural knowledge and (c) Socio-historical understanding. In addition, he argues that practical knowledge is the base and more

important than all other aspects of language assessment literacy. Learning and assessment are intertwined. Hence, in the classroom learning cycle, the teacher has to act dual roles of an instructor and assessor of progress (Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Furthermore, LAL includes multiple aspects a language teacher needs to be equipped with; knowledge of language and language methodologies (Davies, 2008), skills needed for test design (e.g. item-writing), use and interpretation of statistics, and test evaluation (Davies, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Inbar-Lourie, 2013a) because they are used to assess language ability. Besides, in McNamara and Hill (2011), there are four stages of language assessment defined that the language teachers must follow. They are the ability to effectively plan, execute, evaluate and report assessment processes and data.

### **Major Issue**

In the Sri Lankan context, the teachers of English pass out from National Colleges of Education (NCOEs) with a National Diploma in (Language) Teaching. The teacher trainees at NCOEs offer Measurement and Evaluation as a subject at their final examination. Even though practical knowledge is more important and form the base according to Fulcher (2012), the content they learn in this subject is highly theoretical and they merely aim to pass the examination. Therefore, linking and applying LAL and evaluation concepts in the real classroom to trace evidences for learning has not yet become a reality. In that case, the syllabus content of the subject must be transformed into a more practical oriented component to raise LAL among teacher trainees so that they can apply their knowledge meaningfully to the teaching learning process so as to improve language skills of students when they are appointed as teachers. Furthermore, the Teacher Educators in NCOEs must be given an advanced course in LAL including item-writing, use and interpretation of statistics, test evaluation, report assessment processes and analyse data as suggested in research. The practising teachers also should be given thorough in-service language assessment training to empower their practices in the classroom.

### **Focus on development rather than competition**

It is high time to do away with the present competitive education system in Sri Lanka which is dominated by high stakes public examinations whose main functions have been to rank, grade, select and certify learners. The most productive option would be to assess learning outcomes throughout the system and enable improvements in the teaching learning process so that the learners will take the necessary skills with them when they leave school.

### **National level examination vs assessing listening and speaking skills**

The English Language which is considered as the second language in Sri Lanka is a core subject in the G.C.E (O.L) curriculum. After two years of studying in grade 10 and 11, the candidates' achievement is measured by a three-hour summative paper pencil test at the G.C.E (O.L) Examination. It includes items to check reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar. However, listening and speaking skills of candidates cannot be assessed through the paper pencil test. For this reason, two out of eight competencies in the English Language syllabus are left out without being tested which leads to construct underrepresentation issues. Therefore, listening and speaking skills have to be learned and assessed in the classroom.

### **Teaching and Assessing Listening & Speaking skills in the classroom**

The aim of teaching and assessing listening skills in the classroom is to make the students able to comprehend information in the second language in real life.

Therefore, the present classroom practices of teaching and assessing listening skills have to be changed. The students should be exposed to authentic and natural listening material which includes features of normal speech such as fillers, repetitions, false starts, utterances, pauses and differences in pronunciation. The present listening material used in the classroom which include complete sentences, standard pronunciation and slower speed will not help students in real life situations as listening happens in real time in life. The student in real life cannot listen to the speaker/s for the second time as done in the classroom. The student has to rely on information heard only once and he/she has to comprehend ungrammatical sentences that the speakers utter. The speaker variation also makes listening challenging. Some speakers can be more intelligible and at the same time some speakers can be unintelligible. But the listener has to grasp the message conveyed. Field (2009) states we assume that “learners’ listening skills improve if they are exposed over time to a large number of spoken texts in the target language”. Hence, more and more authentic listening experiences must be provided to students and the sub skills of listening must be sharpened for their mastery of listening.

There are some deep-rooted myths which should be eliminated with regard to learning and assessing speaking skills in the classroom. The students have a belief that they will be humiliated if they make mistakes when they speak. They think they should pronounce the words like a native speaker would pronounce them rather than being intelligible. They think the ones that have accents are better speakers. All these myths should be shattered, and students should be encouraged to speak English more and more in the classroom through raising maximum participation providing them with ample opportunities to sharpen the sub skills of speaking in the classroom.

#### 4. Lessons and/or Recommendations

Language teachers should have solid assessment literacy. Language teaching programmes must provide quality LAL. They should be able to plan, design, implement, monitor, record, evaluate, provide and improve opportunities for the development of students’ language ability. It is very important that a policy level decision is taken to allot a proportion of marks to be integrated into the national level examination through formative classroom language assessment. However, this has to be done very carefully. To make this venture a reality, the teachers must be able to adhere to best assessment practices and judgements. A massive teacher educator, officer and teacher training programme must be conducted by experts to put formative assessment methods in place. The guidelines and criteria for assessment should be developed to capture the skills of students and at the same time to maintain consistency in scoring. An effective monitoring mechanism must put in place to ensure the quality and success of the proposed ongoing classroom assessment process.

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