Authenticity and Challenges: Crucial Elements in the Process of Language Testing

Mrs. G. Janet[1], Mrs. Alamelu G[2]

[1] Assistant Professor (SG), Department of Humanities and Sciences – English, Rajalakshmi Engineering College, Thandalam, Chennai, Tamilnadu, India.

[2] Assistant Professor (SS), Department of Humanities and Sciences – English, Rajalakshmi Engineering College, Thandalam, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.

`{alamskrish76,janetwesley123}@gmail.com`

Abstract. Testing has always been an essential part of the teaching and learning process. The goal of language testing is to provide reliable and valid assessments of a person's language abilities, in the field of education and employment to make important decisions. Testing helps to develop oneself in the process of attaining the goal. "Testing in language" typically refers to the process of assessment and evaluation of the individual's proficiency, competence, or skills in a particular language, such as English, German, etc. Language testing can take various forms, and it plays a crucial role in education, employment, immigration, and other contexts. This paper discusses testing from different dimensions like the purposes,

	key aspects, essentials of preparation, and more importantly, examines the authenticity and challenges faced by the stakeholders. Additionally, a critical analysis on the testing environment is done to give way for further research and make the act fairer. Shahomy states that critical perspectives on testing promote inclusion, equity and Justice (2022).
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	**Keywords:** Language testing, Authenticity, Reliability, Validity, Fairness, Challenges

1   Statement of the Problem

Testing has always been questioned on the basis of its fairness and authenticity until today. Language testing on the whole, is considered to be complex and abstract because of its multiple variables. Since it lacks concrete data collection and is barricaded by the heterogenous milieu, mostly the test giver is prejudiced in marking the test taker. This paper tries to analyse the questions stated below:

- Are the reliability and validity of the test form examined thoroughly before conducting the test?
- Is the test conducted for language assessment fair enough across the globe?

Can a particular methodology be applied in all contexts?

2   Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of the teacher's and the learner's daily routine. One monitors oneself at various levels and stages of life. It includes health conditions, environmental conditions, traffic flows and so on. Sophisticated instruments are used to measure and get concrete and

reliable data for the benefit of the human kind. But the disparities in the measurement of language is beyond discussion because of its complexity. The test outcomes have far-reaching effects on individuals impacting future opportunities in gaining an admission in an institution and getting a better job. So, it is momentous to examine the aspects, authenticity and challenges of language testing for the benefit of the present and future generations.

3   Motives of language testing

Testing is an imperative act in language acquisition for any individual. The motives for language acquisition may be varied. It can be for education, research, proficiency, cross cultural communication, translation and standardization. In the field of education, teachers evaluate students' language skills and the progress that help them design a curriculum to support the learners. In research, linguists explore the properties and limits of human language. Since language evolves overtime, testing helps to track these changes. Cross-cultural communication is essential these days for trade and international diplomacy. Translation is another domain where testing is done to measure the efficiency of the translators to produce accurate and meaningful content. Standardization of languages helps establish norms and standards of grammar for maintaining a common language in different regions. Apart from these purposes international testing like TOEFL and IELTS are also conducted for migration. Broadly, language is tested to gauge the proficiency of the learners. DF Anderson in his book "Tests of achievement in English language" affirms that 'Examinations are a necessary evil '. This is the opinion of most teachers of English (1953). It is much more important for the teachers than the learners, since it will help the teachers improve the methodology to be used in their future work. It is in the hands of the teachers to examine all the possible ways of conducting an examination to make it a lesser evil.

4   Facets of language testing

There are multiple facets to be considered in the testing of language development. Languages can be assessed from the smallest unit, the morpheme to the largest unit, the sentence. This article first focuses on the phonological assessment that includes identifying sounds and words and blending sounds to form words. For example, identifying the first

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sound in the word 'ice cream'as a vowel sound. Next being morphological assessment which caters to the knowledge of word structure. This can be measured by asking the learner to affix syllables to the root word. For example, the prefix 'un' combined with the root word 'just' produces 'unjust'. Moreover, finding out the plurals, different forms or appropriate verb tenses and recognizing how affixes change the meaning of words, are the other ways to assess morphologically. Assessment on the structure of sentences known as syntax includes tasks like sentence-picture matching, sentence completion and identifying errors. The ability of the learners is assessed in order to make them create grammatically error free sentences. Assessment is also done to evaluate the knowledge of vocabulary through standard tests, learners' understanding of the meanings of words in context and identifying the relationships between words.

Social skills of the learners are also observed and assessed. Turn-taking in a conversational task helps in the assessment of pragmatic language skills of the test taker. Narrative skills of the learners are tested to assess how well the learners construct coherent and organized sentences. Literacy skills are assessed based on the learners'comprehension of reading passages, speed and accuracy of reading in various situations like inference, problem-solving, comparing, drawing conclusions, etc. The receptive skills like reading and listening are assessed through auditory tasks. The expression of the speakers is observed during conversation to find out how well they coherently express their thoughts and ideas. Fluency is assessed by observing frequent repetition of the words, fillers, blocks and prolongations. In case of bilingual and multilingual language development, the learner is tested on his ability to switch between languages during the conversation with the pair.

5   Preparation for language testing

Alexander Graham Bell quotes "Before anything else, preparation is the key to success" Preparation is highly important for any kind of test irrespective of the domain. It may be finding out the glucose level of a person, eye check-up, cholesterol and so on. Talking about language testing, its preparation cannot be confined within a shell. The sources and the aspects of language testing are quite exhaustive. So, a systematic and focused approach is mandatory. Some of the areas in which the learners could focus, prepare and succeed are as follows. Firstly, the

learner should be clear with the format and structure of the test he /she is going to take up. The time allotted, number of sections, types of questions and the instructions for the test should be analysed thoroughly. The level of students should be assessed with the diagnostic test to find out the strengths and weaknesses in order to identify the areas that require improvement. The learner can have a target score and be self-motivated. Proper authentic study schedule is imperative for review and practice. Materials for language testing can be gathered from textbooks, online resources and worksheet materials. Vocabulary and grammar need to be strengthened by using language learning apps or authentic materials to read and listen in the target language. To practice speaking, one can converse or have a short talk with a native speaker or a language partner. To practice listening, one can listen to podcasts, Ted talks and movies with subtitles. To practice writing, the learner can exercise free writing, write essays, emails or other written exercises. Reading can be practised from simple texts to complex texts. Time taken to practise the tests can help the test takers to manage time during tests. Feedback from teachers, language partners and tutors are essential for improvement. Maintaining physical and mental well-being significantly contributes to the test performance. Reduction of stress, reviewing and reflecting on the practice done helps the test taker to perform better. Tailored preparation is essential to meet the goal.

6   Authenticity of language testing

Authenticity of testing is much required when we expect the test takers to prepare intensely. More than four decades language ability and language use underwent reconceptualization by the theories of Savignon (1972, 1983), Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983, 1984). This reconceptualization laid the foundation for the communicative approach that spurred the debate of authentic testing. The text for reading and listening are extracted from real life sources that reflect real world encounters. Initially, the concept of authenticity was insignificant as it did not consider the interaction between the test taker and the test input. Over the years there has been a significant shift in the type of activities and tasks used in language tests. Role plays and situated discussions have become activities in the classroom. Consequently, the scheme of assessment varies with different activities. When we focus on high authenticity, the test becomes complex because of its varied facets and this results in score variability.

7   Reliability and Validity of language testing

A test is valid, "if it measures accurately what it is intended to measure" (Hughes, 2003, P.26) The construct validity, the content validity and the criterion-related validity are of utmost importance in language testing. The samples in the test should satisfy the content taught in order to get appropriate results. In the standardized tests like the TOEFL, IELTS and EFL, teachers contribute substantially to the test development process that includes question writing, test assembly, review and scoring. The fact is, the number of teachers who have direct knowledge about how tests are developed are very few. The areas of test development and statistical analysis are rather esoteric career paths, chosen by a lean number of subject specialists. It is the need of the hour for the teachers to gain more knowledge about test construction. Test content should align with the teaching content to encourage the language learners to develop their communicative skills. This impacts the credibility of the professional and educational communities which in turn enhance their reputation and serviceability.

8   How can authenticity be maintained?

It is the responsibility of the teachers to examine the test form. It includes the relevance of the test content, the purpose of the test, how frequently a particular type of question occurs, level of difficulty and reliability and validity of the items in the test. Tests are to be considered as a whole. If the course focuses on speaking skills, teachers' analysis should not be limited to the speaking section of the test. Instead, grammar and writing skills can be included as tapping skills. The author suggests that inter-rater reliability is a method of examining examinee performance (De Vincenzi, 1995, P.183). Validity is crucial to assess the ability of the test taker. The content of the text should adequately represent the domain it is supposed to measure. For instance, if the test aims to assess the speaking skills, various aspects of speaking skills like vocabulary, pronunciation and fluency should be included in the test items. There are also complex and abstract concepts to be tested like psychological constructs such as intelligence and creativity. Consistent results should be yielded when administered to the same individual multiple times. Valid and reliable tests are quite challenging to be constructed at all times.

9   Challenges faced in language testing

Challenges in the field of language testing have been persistent for decades. The changes in the social, economic and educational contexts have always resulted in new issues in the 21st century (Bachman, 2013). The assessment of the learners' language skills within the classroom and training teachers on language assessment techniques are constant. New ideas and attitudes in language assessment pop up continually. It becomes useless if not applied in the classroom. There are various reasons for the inapplicability of the new ideas like heterogeneous class, limited infrastructure and technology and the presence of inefficient language trainers and testers across the globe.

High stakes testing results in adverse effects especially for teachers who become victims over inequitable resources that are uncontrollable. This is prevalent over decades and is under researched till now. Teachers' lack of knowledge and skills in the domain of language testing is one of the reasons for excluding them from high stakes examinations. Since English is taught widely for various practical reasons, it is least well served. The method followed in one country cannot be applied in other countries, so the demand for effective testing is always on the rise. Studies proved that there is no refined and accepted procedure (George Perren, 1967).

Test constructions are regarded to be secretive and over-specialised, so teachers who wish to look into the existing tests and their information cannot see them as they are 'closed'. Teachers often develop their own criteria in testing their students. They concentrate more on the mistakes of the students than their successes. So, they tend to target the common errors in setting the questions that disrupt the balance in the testing process. As a result, it is highly difficult to design an effective and fair test that assesses the different aspects of language ability.

Unlike Mathematics and other core subjects, the skills of language ability are more complex to be assessed in a closed manner. The variables are multiple and it becomes a difficult task when tested and assessed. Lade (1961) regards the 'four skills' as total skills which can be satisfactorily assessed. Ironically, the sub skills are too many that do not have a particular framework for testing and assessment because of the countless milieus of the learners.

The test content should not favour a particular group or community of test takers. The gender, culture and socio-economic factors should

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not affect the fairness in testing. An unfair test-taker will definitely face stress, anxiety, and poor performance. The overall productivity may come down significantly that results in loss of recognition and job opportunities impacting their life trajectories. The learner may also feel discouraged to pursue language learning that hinders their personal and professional growth.

Providing standardized tests in diverse cultural and linguistic settings are highly challenging. The tests should adapt to different regions across the globe. Mostly these kinds of tests embrace technology as they follow one particular framework throughout. Consequently, many hiccups follow during the process of the examination like technical glitches that disrupt the testing experience. To list out a few-- lack of security, test anxiety, distractions, authentication challenges, reduced interaction and loss of feedback. Most importantly, it is ineffective for certain skills like speaking that need to be practically spoken and observed.

10   Conclusion

The above discussion states clearly that language testing always faces authentic issues and challenges over the years. An overall process in language testing includes various purposes, aspects, preparation and authenticity that includes validity and reliability. Apart from the challenges discussed in the paper, limited test items, misuse of resources and data security are also prevailing. To maintain authenticity in the test construct, the test giver should overcome many challenges which lie in the practical application of language assessments in real-world contexts. They probably are rooted in the actual use of language tests to assess and evaluate an individual or institution. The language testers need to apply their knowledge and skills to get through this pressing assessment. They have to extend themselves in collaborating with the professionals in the educational field and in the realm of practical settings. By applying such a work environment, the language testers play an imperative role in promoting fairness, validity, and reliability within our meritocratic society (Bachman,2013).

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