

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN TEACHING AND TESTING

Tunku Mohani Tunku Mohtar

Universiti Malaya

ABSTRACT

Teaching and testing are classroom practices, which all English Language teachers engage in. The latter usually follows the former. Classroom tests are constructed and conducted by the classroom teachers themselves and hence, they are familiar with language testing. However, a lot of misunderstanding occurs regarding principles and objectives of assessment, particularly of public examinations. Many teachers feel that these examinations do not test what has been taught in the classroom.

This article thus examines the discrepancies between teaching and testing in the field of English as a second language and suggests ways of reducing or eliminating these discrepancies. It looks at aspects of testing, which reflect those of teaching, and examines the common elements involved in both teaching and testing. The discrepancies that exist between what is taught in the classroom and what is examined at the end of the school term are highlighted. It also looks at test items, taken from past year papers of public examinations and explains the existence of the gap between teaching and testing and how this can be bridged. In conclusion, recommendations are to enable teachers to teach without experiencing the constraints of testing, yet fulfilling the test requirements. Ideas on how to make testing pleasant and enjoyable for both teachers and learners are also suggested.

Teaching and testing are two components of classroom practice the language teacher uses. Very often these two areas are fused. At best, testing becomes a teaching strategy. At worst, teaching and testing are conducted as separate entities which are unrelated to each other. Hence, it becomes quite a common practice among classroom practitioners to use the teaching syllabus during the first half of the academic year and the examination syllabus, that is, the examination paper, during the second half.

There have always been a lot of misunderstandings and criticisms regarding assessment principles and objectives (Wallace and Larsen, 1978). Ebel (1975) claims that tests are criticized and the reasons are:

The tests themselves are imperfect. Indeed, some are seriously flawed. They are sometimes used unwisely, misinterpreted, over-interpreted, or handled as weapons rather than as tools. They reflect particular perceptions of the goals of education which not all educators share (p. 83)

It is not surprising then, that until today, teachers in Malaysian schools are not clear about whether or not there is a difference in the objectives of testing compared to the objectives of teaching. What they often do is to use the examination paper as the teaching syllabus and thus 'teach to the test'. They are not convinced that whatever is included in the teaching syllabus will be tested. To find support to this statement we need to examine the aims of teaching the English language as contained in the teaching syllabus. This paper thus, first looks at aspects of testing which reflect those of teaching within the Malaysian School Syllabus. It examines the common elements involved in both teaching and testing.

We will look at the Form Five syllabus because the examination at this level is a standardized one. For the purpose of this paper, and because of time constraint, only the reading skills are examined.

Aspects of testing and teaching

Two important aspects of testing which are considered in this paper are content validity and construct validity. A test should contain elements of what has been taught to ensure that it has content validity. Construct validity refers to the approach used in testing, which normally reflects that used in teaching. The approach used in testing is apparent in the format of the examination paper.

A perusal of the SPM English Language examination paper shows that it has content validity. It examines the language skills and items which are specified in the syllabus.

However, not all the skills specified in the syllabus are tested at any one time because 'only a representative sample of skills can be tested due to constraints of time and the type of skills ... tested ...' and 'all the main skills are tested and the subskills are tested in conjunction with the main skills either directly or indirectly' (Marlin et al., 2000:6).

Nonetheless, many teachers are not satisfied with the examination paper and they make claims such as:

"The format of standardized tests is different from classroom tests"

"Standardized tests do not reflect teaching and learning practices".

(Marlin et al., 2000:5)

These comments essentially pertain to the structural validity of the test. Classroom practices are usually implemented with the aid of the textbook and other teaching materials. The formats used in these materials are suited for teaching and not testing. There is 'scaffolding' or guidance given for students to master the skills taught, warming-up activities to get students ready to learn the main skills and there is also repetition of the skills in practice sessions. The test, hence, looks different from the teaching materials because none of these activities is given. The standardized test has to have a standard format as it is administered only once a year to a large number of students. But the format of teaching activities varies so that learning is interesting and effective.

In addition to all these reasons, the textbook is often used in the classroom. The formats of the activities and exercises in the textbook are different from the format of the task in the examination paper. Although there are differences between classroom practices and the standardized test, what is more important is to find out whether or not the test reflects the objectives of teaching as stated in the syllabus.

a) Aims and objectives

The syllabus

It is stated in the syllabus that *'the English Language Programme for the upper secondary school level aims at building and extending upon the proficiency of the students from the lower secondary school level so as to equip them with the skills and knowledge of English to communicate in certain everyday activities and certain job situations; and also provide points of take-off for various post-secondary school needs'* (Malaysian Schools Syllabus for Form Five, 1991).

Students are expected to be able to master the skills taught. The objectives of the syllabus are specifically that students should be able to

- listen to and understand spoken English in the school and in real life situations;
- speak effectively on a variety of topics;
- read and understand prose and poetry for information and enjoyment; and
- write effectively for different purposes.

Testing

There is no clear description of the testing syllabus, hence the aims and objectives are not specified. However, it is understood that the aims are the same as those in the teaching syllabus. According to Marlín (2000: 7) “the objectives of standardized tests are global and focus on the overall product of teaching and learning objectives. Teaching and learning objectives reflect the aims and objectives of the English language programme which is broader in intent and scope in comparison to that of standardized tests”.

The reading skills

Since the reading skills are those in focus in this paper, it is important that those stated in the Form Five syllabus be examined. The reading skills which reflect the objectives of teaching reading are clearly specified in the syllabus. Students are expected to acquire the following skills:

1. Read and locate main and supporting ideas and details, follow sequence of events and ideas, predict outcomes, find proof to support statements, locate cause and effect relationships, draw conclusions, use context clues, make comparisons, classify, determine relevance, infer, differentiate fact and opinion, distinguish fact and fiction, generalize, summarize, relate content to own experience, understand different language registers, interpret information.
2. Read and enjoy:
 - poems by famous poets
 - plays

What is involved in the teaching of reading?

Generally, the aim of teaching is to impart new information or knowledge and skills to the learners. In the teaching of a language, new information or knowledge may come in the form of vocabulary items, language functions and forms. New information will depend on the texts selected. Some aspects of it are specific to the topics.

In the teaching of reading, focus is on the skills to be developed. A few objectives of reading are specified before a lesson is conducted. The teacher

normally provides warming-up activities to prepare students for the actual reading session where the reading skills are used. Ample practice is given for students to develop the reading skills. The teacher guides and supervises the students so that the skills are properly used.

Teaching involves the imparting of knowledge and skills to the learners. The teacher, having the knowledge and skills, uses a variety of techniques to make sure that students acquire them. The teacher has to ensure that learning takes place and students become responsible for their own learning.

What is involved in the testing of reading?

In reading comprehension tests, students are tested on the reading skills taught. They have to use these skills in order to produce the output required. The teacher or assessor marks or assesses students' output or performance. In school-based tests, the person who teaches is usually the person who sets the questions and assesses the students' performance. In public examinations the teacher and assessor are two different persons. Hence what is examined depends on the content of the syllabus. The criteria for marking have to be clearly defined. How are the students' products assessed? Teachers who have been trained to mark examination papers have the advantage of knowing what to look for in the students' answers in a school-based test.

The questions testing reading comprehension indicate the level of cognitive processing students is engaged in. Bloom's (1972) taxonomy gives a comprehensive classification of questions based on the cognitive domains. The taxonomy shows the various levels of thinking ranging from knowledge which is the lowest level, to evaluation, the highest. Many teachers would have used questions based on these cognitive domains in the classroom, particularly questions requiring students to give their opinions. Such questions are evaluative in nature.

The following table shows the levels of cognitive processing.

Cognitive Domain Questions

1. Knowledge question	It requires students to recall or repeat information from the text. Little or no understanding of a message or idea is required.
2. Comprehension question	It requires students to show understanding of a message or idea; cause and effect; reason and result; vocabulary and structure. Students need to restate an idea using their own words and make inferences and predictions based on their understanding of the text.
3. Application question	It requires students to use information that they have learned and apply it to other situations.
4. Analysis question	It requires students to analyze a problem, solution or idea and show how the parts are related. Students use information from the text as well as own knowledge and experience.
5. Synthesis question	It requires students to use pieces of information in the text and put them together into a structure or pattern.
6. Evaluation question	It requires students to make reasoned judgments or form attitudes or opinions based on information in the text. Students can use information in the text or draw upon their own knowledge and experience of the world.

Discrepancies between teaching and testing

It has been discovered that there are some discrepancies between what is taught in the classroom and what is tested at the end of the year. It seems that the teaching syllabus covers a lot of the reading skills but the examination questions deal with only a few sub-skills. One objective that cannot be tested is that of reading to enjoy poems and plays. It is obviously not suitable to be tested although it is perfectly all right for teaching.

An examination of the reading comprehension section of the 1998 English Language paper reveals that only a few of the reading skills described in the syllabus are tested. There are fifteen questions altogether but most of them deal with finding proof to support statements, locating information, and using context clues. There is only one question, which deals with cause and effect. There seems to be a concentration on skills of getting information rather than of using information. It is thus, not surprising that teachers claim that not all the skills taught are tested. There are many more reading skills that can be tested from one passage.

Although the subskills of reading are referred to as thinking skills by some writers (e.g. Morgan and Saxton, 1991), the levels of thinking the students should engage themselves in are not indicated in the syllabus. The types of questions normally indicate the type of thinking skills required. A question, the answer to which is found in the reading text, merely tests knowledge or recall. But if the answer has to be inferred, then the question tests comprehension. An examination of the 1998 English Language Examination paper reveals that the comprehension questions deal with knowledge and comprehension only. Questions using the interrogative 'why', for example 'Why was the buffalo tied to a tree?' 'Why was Sanjay horrified that the tiger had circled back past him?' (Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia, 1998) appear to be open-ended. However, the answers are restricted to the explicit information given in the text. They are thus merely testing knowledge. These questions can be contrasted with a more challenging question such as 'Why did Sanjay 'take a look around' alone although he knew that the tiger was at large?' The answer is not explicit and the students have to reason out based on their understanding of the passage and their general knowledge. It is a question which requires students to analyze the situation and the facts given. The higher order thinking skills are unfortunately, missing.

Another area where there is discrepancy between teaching and testing is the construction of different types of questions for different ability groups. In the classroom the teacher normally prepares activities to cater to different groups of learners who differ in their language ability. They are normally categorized as the high English proficiency group (HEP), the group with some English proficiency (SEP) and the low English proficiency group (LEP). The more conscientious teachers often give different sets of questions to different ability groups. Whereas, in the examination, the same questions are meant for all the students to answer. In the classroom, the weak learners are encouraged to do the language activities. These activities are usually not too difficult for them to do, so that they can experience a sense of achievement and hence be motivated to learn. The questions in the examination paper are set to cater for able as well as weak learners. There are items which are simple so that the weak learners are able to attempt them. However, there are also some difficult tasks which they may not be able to do. It has to be understood that the standardized test is norm-referenced and hence it has to discriminate between the good and the poor learners. The classroom tests are for all intents and purposes, criterion-referenced and are meant for many students to pass. This sort of discrepancy will obviously persist.

The activities given in the classroom are to a large extent student-centered and student friendly. They allow students to perform in a conducive environment and work according to their own pace. They can easily get help from the teacher

whenever they encounter problems. The examination situation is different. Apart from requiring students to work individually, and unaided, an examination also tends to be quite intimidating. Students are exposed to rules and restrictions given orally by the test administrators, as well as those in written form in the examination paper. Hence, the situation in which students do their work in the regular classroom is different from that in the examination room. Test anxiety among students is bound to arise.

The gap between teaching and testing has existed for a very long time. As long as it remains, teachers will be dissatisfied with and disillusioned by the teaching syllabus as well as the examination system. Teaching and testing cannot be conducted in the same manner but the differences between them can at least be reduced.

Suggested Solutions

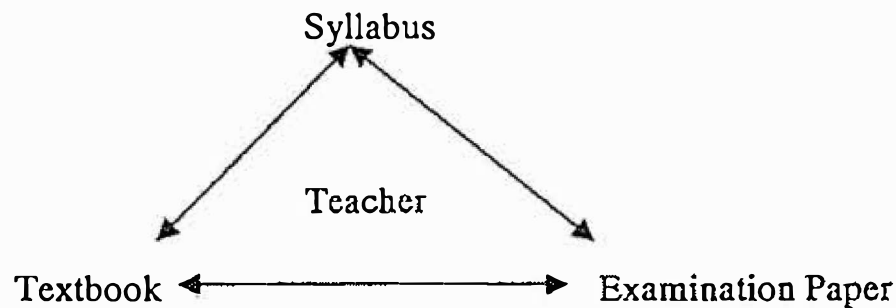
It is fairly obvious that there is a rift between teaching and testing. To bridge this gap some solutions can be considered. It has been felt that a lot of the higher level thinking skills are dealt with during teaching sessions than in the standardized test questions. It is therefore, just appropriate to include these skills in the test paper. The table of specifications for the test has to be carefully drawn up before the questions are formulated to ensure that most of the skills specified in the teaching syllabus are tested in the examination.

In the course of teaching, it is sometimes necessary to refer to the textbook. The language activities and exercises are formatted in such a way in order to make teaching and learning interesting and effective. The formats are strikingly different from the test format. It would be to the students' advantage if a specimen copy of the examination paper is included in the textbooks used, provided the test format does not change as long as these textbooks are used. Once recommended by the relevant authorities, the textbooks are used for a fairly long period of time. The format of the examination paper may change within a shorter period of time. If this occurs, the previous format will cease to be useful. On the other hand, it could be disastrous. Teachers who are not aware of the change in the examination format may continue exposing students to the old format.

One way of solving this problem is perhaps for textbooks to also contain the type of questions used in the examination paper. A variety of question types and texts can be used so that any variety can resemble the type of questions used in the examination paper.

With regard to the difference in ability among students, measures can be taken to produce question papers that suit the appropriate ability levels. In short, separate papers for the HEP, SEP and LEP levels can be constructed. They can be constructed based on the examples set by the Cambridge Examination Syndicate (1991). Such a system can help teachers, particularly those teaching mixed ability classes, prepare their students for the examination more effectively and efficiently. They do not have to worry about some students not being able to pass if there is only one standardized test for all the students.

On the other hand, teachers need to be more aware of the types of questions asked in the standardized test. It is important that they know such questions so that they will be able to incorporate them in their teaching and hence provide practice for the students. It is all right for teachers to refer to the examination paper in the course of teaching their students. They should also be aware of what they are required to teach according to what is specified in the syllabus. At times they need to use the textbook to get materials. Hence the teachers often have to juggle between what is in the syllabus, the textbook and the examination paper. The diagram below depicts the teacher's position.



They should also be told of the marking system so that they will be able to mark their students' work the way it is marked in the final examination. Generally, teachers are not aware of the marking system used in public examinations such as the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). Only those who are trained to mark public examination papers have the advantage of knowing what to look for in a student's answer. Those who are not trained often have their own perceptions of marking.

Conclusion

This paper has highlighted the discrepancies that exist between what is taught in the classrooms and what is examined at the end of the school term. It has looked at some test items, particularly in the public examination, SPM English

Language paper. It has explained the existence of the gap between teaching and testing and how this problem can be tackled. Recommendations have been made to enable teachers to teach without experiencing the constraints of testing, yet fulfilling the test requirements.

Tests within the education system are inevitable. They are meant to evaluate the extent to which teaching and learning have been effective. This purpose however, may not lead to the required results if the gap between teaching and testing is too wide or if the gap is discernible by those who are affected by both teaching and testing.

References

- Bloom, S.J. 1972. *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*. New York: Longman.
- Ebel, R.L. 1975. Educational tests: Valid? Biased? Useful? *Phi Delta Kappan* 57: 83-88.
- Huraian Sukatan Pelajaran Bahasa Inggeris Tingkatan 5. 1991. Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia.
- Lembaga Peperiksaan, Kementerian Pendidikan Malaysia. 1998. Bahasa Inggeris Kertas 1.
- Marlin Abdul Karim, Judith Mohan and Mawarni Hassan. 2000. Curriculum and Assessment: the connection. Paper presented at the MELTA National Conference, English Language Examinations in Malaysia, 28 - 29 May.
- Morgan, N. and Saxton, J. 1991. *Teaching questions & learning*. London: Routledge.
- University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, 1991. *Certificates in Communicative Skills in English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Wallace, G. and Larsen, *S. 1978. *Educational Assessment of Learning Problems: testing for teaching*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc.