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RESEARCH PAPER

Testing Reading Skills of Social Science Students in English Language

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
 *Corresponding Author dpicolleges.hed @gmail.com	The subject of social science is taught in the elementary English medium schools of Pakistan from grade 03 to 08. The authorities have introduced this subject due to the wide scope of social sciences in the modern world. In the English medium schools, this subject is taught in English language. This paper has been designed to evaluate the present system of evaluation of testing reading skill of the students by the teachers of social sciences and then suggests suitable strategies to improve testing reading skill. The objective of the study is to evaluate the techniques of testing reading skills by the teachers of social science in English medium schools. The main aim is to highlight the shortcomings in testing and reading skills so that this deficiency may be removed by the authorities and syllabus designers. The subject of social science has been in vogue before the creation of Pakistan. In the developed country suitable techniques for testing reading skills are applied but in Pakistan this aspect has been neglected. The present research focuses this important issue.

Introduction

The present paper is meant for the teachers of social sciences in English medium school of Pakistan who are not familiar with the professional Literature on English Language teaching. It is also assumed that they have little or no training in ELT but they want to improve their language teaching skills. The paper attempts to enable our teachers to make their own classroom tests which can become a good tool of language learning. The aim is to demonstrate how to design meaningful classroom test items and tasks for the students which help them learn reading skills. Since this paper is addressing our social science teachers, who may not be familiar with the terminology popularly being used in literature on language testing, the use of technical terms is either generally avoided or the terms are explained in simple

and plain English. Only those terms and concepts are introduced which are directly relevant to the needs of our teachers.

Literature Review

A lot of researches on testing reading skill has been conducted by the eminent linguists because without testing reading skill a proper feedback from the students cannot be taken. Langan, john taught the reading skill at Atlantic community college new jersey. He points out that with effective testing, the interest of the students towards reading skill can be improved. Therefore, he introduces best items for testing. In Pakistan Shafi Surriya designed her thesis on the reading skill Patricia Miller from US Aid Islamabad also suggested some techniques for the teachers regarding the improvement of reading skill.

Material and Methods

Different types of research are used by the researchers. For example, Descriptive method, Historical method, Experimental method. In the present research, Descriptive as well as experimental method was used different tools of data collection were also applied. For example, test, interview observation and questionnaire. Many of the teachers were reluctant to give feedback. However, through these tools the researcher was able to collect data regarding the present strategies which are being applied by the teachers of social sciences working in English medium schools of Pakistan.

Results and Discussion

As per data received from the teachers, students and owners of English medium schools, It is clear that the teachers use old/traditional methods of testing reading skill of the students 82% teachers are in favor of the latest techniques of testing reading provided that they are equipped with the training. They themselves are not satisfied over the present system of testing. Only 08% teachers are in favor of traditional method while 10% do not give any opinion.

What is Testing?

One of the purposes of any test is to assess a learner's skills or abilities: whether he or she can carry out a required task in specified amount of time. The nature of a test depends on the type of the test. There are different types of language tests learner's present or future performance, about what they have already learned, about what the areas of difficulty for them are, etc. For instance, proficiency y tests measure the ability of candidates without reference to any teaching or learning that may have taken place earlier. In these tests learners are asked to demonstrate sufficient control over the language for a specific purpose. Progress tests are classrooms tests which can be used as a teaching tool. They inform learners about their progress and they also help the teacher learn about what he/she has already achieved. Formative tests are those which are given in the beginning or during the

learning period. For example, placement tests, which are used to rank students according to their performance, or aptitude tests which measure students ability to follow a future course, are formative tests.

Hughes (1989) is of the opinion that in order to be a good tester, it is not enough to have a collection of good test items. A teacher of English as a foreign of second language must have a knowledge of the basic principles of testing besides having a good knowledge and understanding of English language teaching theory.

Can Tests be used as teaching Tools?

In Pakistan the words "tests" examination "strike terror in students. In my opinion, this is so because of various reasons:

- Sometimes, tests are used as a form of "punishment"
- Learners are always afraid of tests because they are more concerned with the results: they dither fail or pass. In most cases, this anxiety kills all interest in learning.
- Usually tests are given at the end of the term and learners never learn about their errors. They only know whether they have passed the test of has failed.

In Pakistan, language tests are not generally representative, e.g. they do not test what they intend to test. For instance, they aim to test reading comprehension but they actually test writing which h is seldom taught in the classroom.

Read (1983) argues that there are at least three good reasons why classroom reading tests are useful:

1. The primary purpose of a classroom test is provides the teacher with information on how effective his teaching has been.
2. Correspondingly, a good classroom test also provides feedback for the learners, to inform them of whether they are making satisfactory progress and to help them identify areas of weakness requiring further study or practice.
3. A third reason for giving a test in the class is to provide the learners with an incentive to study (Read 1983:1-2).

Tests can be used as a good and useful classroom activity if they are given frequently and learners are familiar with the test format and test items; and if after every test their answers are discussed in groups. It is better if, instead of teacher giving the feedback first, they are asked to discuss their responses in groups. Then they will learn about their errors and mistakes and in the next classroom test they will try to perform better. They are afraid of tests because they fear ridicule and humiliation in case of failure.

This problem can be overcome very easily. Instead of the teacher assessing all the scripts (which is tedious job anyway) he/she, immediately after the test, can given the correct responses on the black board and students can correct responses on the black board and students can correct their own scripts and may learn about their performance in the test.

Criteria of Good Tests

Validity

A test should test what it is intended to test and nothing else. If it is measuring more than, or other than, what it has to measure it is not a valid test: it lacks validity. For example, when we ask our students to write an essay on Traffic Problems in Karachi, our assessment will be influenced by a lot of elements. The objective of this test item, e.g. essay type, is to measure writing skills, but writing an essay involves other things too. For example, student's knowledge and awareness, his/her attitudes towards something, our point of view on the same topic, etc. Similarly, a test of reading must test only reading skills and nothing else. That is the reason that some people think reading cannot be tested because, first, it takes place in the mind of the reader, decode, in order to show his/her comprehension a student has to write. But new testing techniques have partially made it possible to test reading skills without much involvement of other skills.

There are different types of validity, but as far as classroom testing is concerned, content validity and face validity will be discussed here. Backwash validity is dealt with in section 1.3.3. As Backwash Effect.

Content validity is the extent to which a test includes items to cover a large part of the syllabus being followed in the class. Definitely, everything cannot be tested but a test should at covering as much as possible.

Face validity is the extent to which a test appears to measure what it aims to measure. For example, if a test is very easy but looks very long (because of print, number of pages, etc.) learners will lose interest and will falsely thing that it is difficult.

Reliability

A test must be reliable as a testing device. If the same test is administered to the same group of learner after some time; or if the same script is given to two or more markers; or if the same script is given to two or more markers or if the same marker marks the same script a few days later and the results are different in each case, then the test lacks reliability. The type mentioned in the first case is referred to as test re test reliability; the type mentioned in the second and third is known as mark re mark reliability.

Back Wash Effect

The effect of testing on teaching is known as backwash. It can be good or bad. Therefore it is very important to make tests which have good effects on teaching and learning. A lot Pakistani Learners of English hate English because of many factors including English tests and their results. Since any reaching that takes place in the classroom is exam oriented, even good teachers may find it difficult to use new and useful techniques in the class; and they spend all their time in "completing" the prescribed syllabus which is not based on learners' needs analysis. The teacher's goal in that situation is to "complete" the syllabus and the learner's goal is to pass the test. In such a situation, it can be said that our tests have a harmful backwash effect in learning and teaching. In other words, they lack backwash validity.

Table of Specifications

As has earlier been said in this paper, it is not easy to test reading comprehension because reading is a complex activity which takes place in the mind of the reader. Nevertheless, scholars like Bloom and Barrett have classified reading activity into various discrete sub-skills; and it is possible to test these sub-skills.

Teachers have to be very careful in the selection of reading passages to be used in the test. They should know what it is they are going to test. That is why it is essential to prepare a table of specifications, which serves as a summary of a test. Neither can all skills be tested nor can all test items be used in a single test. Teachers have to select specific test items to be included and particular reading skills to be tested. It also helps teachers construct a test that contains a representative sample of the material taught in the class. The teachers will be able to make balanced tests. Test items that are to be included are written in the right hand column and particular skills and sub-skills are written on the top columns. In the following section a number of sample reading test items are presented and discussed for teachers.

Construction of Test Items

Pumfrey (1977) has given some useful hints in reading tests and it is advisable to keep them in mind while construction reading tests. They are summarized below:

- All tests of reading contain a margin of error.
- The rest takers's attitudes and motivation can greatly affect the results.
- The reading tests should be related to the reading programme designed by the teacher.
- Reading involves many skills; therefore there is a wide range of reading tests.
- No one test of reading can be used as an overall estimate of a student's total range of reading skills.

It is better to use different short passages rather than using one long passage in the test. Variety of reading materials allows learners to show their abilities more fully. There are different test items which can be used in classroom tests. Selection of any one of the following or the reading passage. It is also very important to select a reading passage according to the ability and linguistic level of the students.

Matching

There are different types of matching items. Candling (1981) has given a number of them. These can be used to test comprehension and recognition of form and meaning of words and sentences.

Multiple-Choice

Heaton (1988) has discussed a number of multiple Choice Questions (MCQ) item types in details. Multiple-choice items have been very widely used. In the tests of reading comprehension because they are easy to mark and objective. But the construction of these items is very difficult and time consuming; and testees can guess correct answers quite easily if the items are not prepared with extreme care. The teachers, therefore, are advised to use MCQ items judiciously.

True-False

This is one of the most popular items in reading comprehension tests. It does not involve writing and the answers can be reliable. It can encourage guessing but as far as classroom testing is concerned, it will not be a major problem because guessing is also one of the important treading skills. In true-false items a third category can also be included: Not Stated. So instead of two options,

Open-Ended

They are called open-ended because more than one response may be possible and all of them can be correct or acceptable. These responses are also completely subjective. In one form, where a short answer is required they are not different from short answer items; but in more advanced forms, the testees have to give answers according to their interpretation of the text or sometimes they have to make inferential judgments in order to answer such items.

Transfer of Information

There are a lot of occasions in the Pakistani context where the learners have comprehended the text but do not have the productive proficiency in writing and speaking to answer the comprehension questions on the text. In such a situation transformation of information is a very good device to test the learners' comprehension without asking them to produce language-either in the spoken or the written. Students are asked to label a diagram or to complete charts.

Cloze

In all cloze type items there are enough semantic and grammatical clues for a reader to help him/her guess the right or appropriate word in the blank slot. Since these items are easy to construct and easy to mark they have become very popular. There are various forms of cloze which are available to the teacher.

2.6.1 Simple cloze in which every fifth, sixth or seventh word is deleted. The first sentence is left intect.

2.6.2. In another type of cloze, one word is deleted in every line but the space is not left open. The text looks as if nothing is missing. It is the task of the deleted. Only the second half of the word is deleted. If the word is composed of an uneven number of letters then one letter more is omitted.

For example:

Button butt _____, but believe bel _____, house ho _____ etc.

Learner to locate the place of the missing word and to write it in the place of missing word and to write it in the space provided at the end of the line. This type of cloze may prove to be quite difficult for weaker student and therefore should be used judiciously. T is a good global test of reading skills.

2.6.3 Modified cloze in which either all or some prepositions, articles, pronouns, conjunctions, etc. are deleted.

2.6.4 C-test in which every second word is partially.

2.6.5Cloze-elide. This test item is also considered very difficult, but it is also regarded as an authentic communicative test because it tests learners' prediction skills and it creates in them a sense to locate errors or irrelevant words which is good reading skill. In this item a certain number of words are omitted and instead of omitted words such words are inserted which do not logically belong to the text. The learners are asked to do two things: they cross out the irrelevant words and supply the relevant words to make the text meaningful and coherent. Different formats are possible. For classroom purposes every logical replacement can be acceptable, but it is also possible to elicit only the "correct" word. But instead of deleting the inserted wrong word a learner can delete a correct but redundant word.

Example

In the following passage five words have been replaced by those words which do not belong to the text. Read it carefully and (a) strike out the words which do not belong to the text; and (b) supply the appropriate words to make the passage coherent and meaningful..

The sun is a sphere of hot gases. It is usually 150 million kilometers from earth. Solar milk is produced in the central core of the sun. The surface of the sun is called the photosphere. On the surface the comprehension is about 6000^0C. Below the surface the temperature is about 35 million kilo centigrade. Above the photosphere is a thin layer of gas dressed as the chromospheres. The chromospheres are only a few thousand miles thick. It is located between the photosphere and the corona. The corona, the outer atmosphere, extends millions of miles into space.

Revision of Tests

The process of testing of testing does not stop at the distribution of results. Teachers should study their test items and results after the test. They should learn what happened in the test. Which items were easy for every one? One of the aims of any test is also to differentiate between good and bad learners. If the test includes an item which is difficult for most of the testees, it is not differentiating between good and bad. The item must be either removed or altered for future use. Similarly, if an item was easy for the majority, it should be removed or kept aside for a lower class because it is not suitable for the present class. A close study of test items at the end of the test is also beneficial for the purposes of teaching and learning. Students get information about areas they have to concentrate on. Teachers learn about areas they have to concentrate on. Teachers learn about their performance too. It also develops back wash validity in the test.

Findings

From the findings of the research, it has been proved that the techniques used by the social science in English medium schools are not effective either the teacher asked the students to read the passage or instruct them to comprehend the lesson and answer the questions given at the end. In large classes, every student does not get a chance to read the passage in the classroom. He waits for his turn for many months. In this way, his reading skill ability is not evaluated in an effective way.

Conclusion and Recommendations

It can be said that the testing on reading skills of social science students studying in English Medium schools in not given impotence. Neither, the teachers are trained about testing the reading skills nor the authorities are aware of this significant issue. The data shows that the teachers of socials science adopt old method of testing the reading skills of the students. They focus their attention on the revision of the test items instead of adopting statistical analysis and items analysis of test. In this way they are unable to get feedback about reading the topics of social science in English language. The necessity is that only those items of testing reading skills should be included which contain validity, reliability, back wash effect, skimming scanning and various discrete sub-skills of reading. Then, the students will be able to develop their interest in reading the topics of social sciences in English language on one hand and their concepts about social science will be clear on the other hand. It is recommended that the size of the class should be from 20 to 25

students so that every student may be able to show his reading skills ability in the best way. The students should be given the activity of close test by the teachers. They should be instructed to read the passage and suggest suitable title of the passage then they may be asked to answer the question which should be asked by the teachers after reading the lesson. The students should also be motivated towards interesting activates regarding searching out the words producing the same sound at the end of the syllable.

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