TEACHING TO THE TEST: PERSPECTIVES AND POSSIBILITIES

In Sri Lanka, the attitude towards teaching to tests largely seem to stem from two opposing ends: some language teachers believe that their teaching material and teaching practices should be solely geared towards national level and classroom tests while others cringe from the idea. Where exactly should language teachers position themselves? Is teaching to tests as feasible and rewarding a practice as some experts advocate or should it be shunned at all costs?

Commonly known as washback or backwash, the test impact on teaching and learning processes remains largely hypothesized but rarely researched. This is particularly true of Sri Lanka. Since the groundbreaking study on washback conducted by Alderson and Wall in the late 1980's in the country, no research has been published on the topic, up to date. This vacuum is indeed interesting, given the fact that in the late 1990s there were several innovative changes at the level of national testing: the introduction of the G.C.E Advanced level General English paper and the introduction of new syllabi for English language from primary to secondary level, which was followed by the "new" Ordinary Level English test.

Though we often discuss the link between teaching and testing, we seldom realize that tests do have the potential for positive impact. Of course a test can possibly have either a negative or a positive impact. This partly depends on the design and status of the test. It also depends on teachers' understanding of the test, and in the case of the local O/L and A/L language tests in Sri Lanka which are achievement tests, their understanding of the course objectives as well. If a test influences "good" teaching and learning practices, then it is believed to have "positive" impact. However, it has to be noted that what exactly constitutes "good" teaching and learning practices is indeed a controversial and contextual issue. What might work for one particular teaching/learning context might miserably fail in another. Despite the good intentions of the experts in the field who believe otherwise, many language teachers in developing countries like Sri Lanka in particular, would tell you that there are no magic or stock formulas to be applied in their classrooms. This is perhaps why in such contexts the need to maximize the potential of positive test impact is more intense.

Unlike proficiency tests, for instance IELTS and TOEFL, which do not follow a set syllabus, achievement tests are based on course objectives and course content. In Sri Lanka, the central education department (a state sponsored body) makes course material for both O/L and A/L English courses freely available for teachers (and students as well). But have we made sure that all English teachers who are involved in teaching the relevant courses understand not just the course material but also the course objectives? In other words, are the teachers made aware of why they teach what they teach? Unless this awareness is created, it will be impossible to maximize positive test impact.

Empirical studies done by researchers have pointed out that the potential tests have to positively influence the methodology teachers use in classrooms, goes largely unrealized (Alderson and Wall: 1995, Watanabe: 1996, Nambiar and Ransirini: 2006). Communicative language tests, which include authentic test tasks, are fertile ground to be exploited in this regard. Theoretically, such tests have the potential for influencing teachers to step aside from the routine to create
more innovative, student centered classrooms. As Hughes (2003) points out, test impact is one of the most crucial considerations in communicate language teaching and testing. But is this really possible in practical terms? An almost “crude” yet “authentic” example for the affirmative, would be the writing task in the 2004 GCE Advanced Level General English paper. Instead of the traditional essay writing, the rubrics asked the testees to write an article for the school journal. The task was to a great extent authentic-it simulated a real life task-it was also contextualized and the readership was specified. In our classrooms how do we allow our teaching to be influenced by this test task? Do new make our students write articles because it appeared as a test task and therefore might possibly reappear? Or do we appreciate the principle behind the test item and recognize it as a move towards simulating a real life task and design our classroom activities more on those lines? The second approach will be an instance of positive test impact while the first is clearly negative. And since tests are constrained by “unavoidable” realities, like concerns of practicality and reliability, they are often by nature “limiting”: they cannot possibly encompass everything that needs to be tested. Hence, if our decisions in class rooms are restricted by test formats or test items, we would invariably neglect certain tasks and skills that students need to master. On the other hand, this can be so easily avoided if we grasp the principles behind the test and the course (for an achievement test like the one mentioned above ) i. e. the test and course objectives.

Though the design of national level high stakes tests are done by the testing authorities, school teachers play a significant role in designing school level assessment. But the importance of such assessment seems to be generally underrated and subsequently it has become common practice to replicate national-level tests at school level. And the main problem which arises from such practices is it becomes uncertain whether our students who obtain at least a credit in English language tests at the national level, have ultimately achieved a satisfactory level of English proficiency or have they simply mastered the skill of being test-wise. If we ultimately end-up training our students to master the skill of answering tests but not train them in the necessary skills that would ultimately make them proficient users of the language, then the test however much reliable and valid it is, in other words however much a “good” test it is, invariably culminates in negative test impact. Another important thing that should not be over looked is, while national level tests are achievement-oriented, school or even district level tests for that matter, can lean towards been treated as more diagnostic or progress tests. Such an approach would help students and teachers to recognize the progress students have made and identify the areas they need more help in.

As this article has attempted to point out, test impact on teaching should not be merely dismissed as an obstacle to teaching and learning goals. On the other hand, it should not be unquestioningly embraced for the sake of convenience. As teachers, we need to understand that test impact can and should be made positive and adopt teaching practices that maximize positive test impact: for our ultimate goal is to help our students become proficient users of the language.

References

