

ENGLISH LANGUAGE TESTING AND EVALUATION IN A CONTEXT OF LINGUISTIC PLURALITY: TRENDS, CHALLENGES AND IMPLICATIONS

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Abstract

In teaching, Testing and Evaluation (T&E) is an important practice with implications for both learners and teachers alike. In English Language Teaching (ELT), the conventional understanding of T&E is becoming increasingly challenged. This is due to the reconceptualization of English as plural rather than monolithic. Against the backdrop of this shift in thinking, this study explores contemporary arguments that challenge the traditional assumptions of T&E in ELT, ideological and practical obstacles which hinder the revision of conventional T&E practices, as well as the implications of these arguments to English Language T&E in Sri Lanka. Since the study is based on secondary data, the study takes the form of a desk research. In order to collect data for the study, a keyword search was conducted on the University of Peradeniya library catalogue and the JSTOR database, and based on the relevance of the literature, 27 scholarly publications were selected. The study finds that the argument for the plurality of English has been catalytic in conceptualizing certain fundamental assumptions of T&E, and that this has led scholars to revisit conventional approaches to language testing. Although there are certain ideological and practical challenges to implementing these suggestions on test designing and marking key/ rubric development, they are nevertheless relevant to the Sri Lankan context since Sri Lanka has its own variety of English: Sri Lankan English. Based on these findings, this study recommends further research on the role of Sri Lankan English in T&E since there has been very little research conducted on the topic, as well as because of its practical relevance.

Keywords: English Language Teaching, Testing and Evaluation, World English

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Introduction

Testing and evaluation (T&E) i.e. language assessment has been defined as “methods and techniques used to gather information about student ability, knowledge understanding and motivation” (Tosuncuoglu, 2018, p. 163) as well as to the practice of “appraising or estimating the level or attribute of a person” (as cited in Brown and Abeywickrama, 2019, p. 3). At an institutional level, English Language T&E is crucial in assessing the proficiency and progress of students, for programme and curriculum development and revision, as well as for grading and certification. However, at a broader, macro level, T&E also performs a gate-keeping function that determines students’ access to higher educational and employment opportunities. Because of these reasons, T&E should not be conceptualized as a mere technical activity but as a socio-political and value-laden act. Given these implications of T&E on the learners and the society at large, scholars like Bachman & Palmer (1996) and McNamara (2000) argue that the core tenets of T&E should constantly be (re)evaluated through ethical and critical language testing which not only calls for testing that is “socially responsible” (McNamara, 2000, p. 72), but also challenge the ideological foundations of T&E.

One way in which ethical and critical language testing has challenged the fundamental assumptions of English language T&E is through contesting the normative assumptions about English. According to scholars like Kachru (1985; 1986; 1996) and Kandiah (1998), the monolithic view of English which claims that there is only *one* English, is extremely problematic since the English language is becoming increasingly diversified and pluricentric. Based on this argument of linguistic plurality of English, scholars contest the normative assumptions of English which “act as a reference point” (McNamara, 2000, p. 73) in testing, and stress the importance of critically thinking about “the appropriate variety of the language to be tested” (McNamara, 2000. p. 73) in T&E in English language teaching (ELT). Against the backdrop of these arguments, this paper critically reviews and engages with the following research questions:

1. What changes are suggested in literature to existing T&E practices in ELT, in recognition of the plurality of English?
2. What are the challenges to implementing T&E practices that acknowledge the plurality of English?
3. What implications do these current trends of thinking have on T&E practices in ELT in Sri Lanka?

Methodology

Since this study was based on the critical review of secondary data, it takes the design of a desk research. In order to collect data for the research, first a search was conducted on the JSTOR database and the University of Peradeniya library catalogue using keywords in line with the research questions of the study. Based on the relevance of the literature to the research questions, 27 scholarly publications under the categories of books (8) and articles from journals (19) were selected. The contents of the literature were then analysed thematically in order to explore trends, challenges and implications of conducting English language T&E practices in a context of linguistic plurality.

Results and Discussion

In this section, the findings of the study are presented and discussed under several themes. These are the arguments that challenge conventional assumptions of T&E, suggestions made by scholars to improve English language T&E practices in recognition of the plurality of English, ideological and practical challenges to implementing these suggestions, and the implications of these current trends in thinking on T&E in ELT in Sri Lanka.

Arguments that challenge conventional assumptions of T&E

The view of English as plural rather than monolithic, challenges certain fundamental assumptions of T&E. Two such concepts which have been reconceptualized are the notions of language standards and the notion of proficiency.

In T&E, the notion of language standards is crucially important. This is because practices related T&E including test construction, development of marking keys/ rubrics and rating/ marking student performance take place in relation to this “threshold of performance” (McNamara, 2000, p. 3) which is language standards. Traditionally, the notion of language standards has been aligned with the language standards of British and American varieties of English. However, scholars like Kachru (1985; 1986; 1996) and Kandiah (1998) problematize this practice of defining language standards according to language standards of inner-circle varieties. They argue that that language standards are variety-specific, i.e., that each variety of English has its own standards, and that no variety of English is structurally inferior or superior to another. This reconceptualization of language standards as pluricentric has profound implication for T&E since it challenges the conventional understanding of what is understood as “correct” language and “errors”. Indeed, Kachru’s (1996) “different not deviant” perspective argues that differences in language standards should not be labelled “deviant”/ erroneous forms simply because they do not adhere to centre-based norms of “correctness”. This view of language standards also suggests that ELT professionals should rethink which variety of English they should adopt as the model for teaching and for T&E, since adopting inner-circle varieties of English such as British/ American English run the risk of being irrelevant in “non-native” contexts.

The second concept in T&E that has been reconceptualized, is the notion of proficiency. In linguistics, “proficiency” refers to a combination of “competence” and “performance”, i.e., to the “knowledge of some version of the language system” and “the necessary skills to activate and use of that knowledge in the real world” (Brown, 2020, p. 707). However, in ELT, “proficiency” has traditionally been defined as the language knowledge of and ability in “native speakers’ standard English” (Davies, 2004, p. 435). This view of proficiency has been problematized by scholars who define proficiency in terms of its communicative aspect. For example, Canagarajah (2006) states that “proficiency is the ability to use the English language effectively for specific purposes, functions, and discourses in specific communities” (p. 235), and calls for a shift in the definition of proficiency “from language as a system to language as social practice, from grammar to pragmatics, from competence to performance” (p. 234). Taking this argument further, Tomlinson (2021) recommends that students should be tested on the variety “which the learners are likely to need to communicate in” (p. 650). Similarly, Brown (2014) argues that there can be no “university valid” (p. 7) tests since tests are specific to communicative contexts. These views of proficiency highlight the need for T&E practices that are sensitive to the communicative needs and culture of specific communicative contexts. The reconceptualization of the concepts of proficiency and language standards also form the theoretical basis for arguments made by scholars for altering existing structures of T&E, which are discussed next.

Suggestions for improving T&E practices in recognition of the plurality of English

Scholars who recognize the plurality of English are supportive of communicative language testing over earlier models of language testing such as discrete point testing and skills testing, integrative and pragmatic testing. This is because unlike communicative language testing which highlights the communicative function of language use in socio-cultural contexts, discrete point testing focused “too exclusively on knowledge of the formal linguistic system for its own sake rather than on the way such knowledge is used to achieve communication” (McNamara, 2000, p. 14); skills testing focused on testing language skills separately which failed to replicate the reality of language use in real life; and

integrative and pragmatic tests measured the ability of the learner to “integrate grammatical, lexical, contextual and pragmatic knowledge” (McNamara, 2000, p. 15) in a psycholinguistic rather than a sociolinguistic sense. Since communicative language testing highlights the importance of measuring the communicative proficiency of test takers, it also advocates certain orientations to test construction. One such orientation is developing test items that measure communicative competence rather than grammatical competence, when designing tests. In fact, Tomlinson (2021) states that T&E in ELT should focus on “holistic tests of performance rather than discrete tests of knowledge” (p. 653). He makes this statement based on his observation that test items/ tasks that measure communicative proficiency are more useful for test takers since they “can provide the learners with information which can help them progress” (Tomlinson, 2021, p. 653).

The second premise on which scholars make concrete recommendations in recognition of the plurality of English, is with regard to criteria development for assessing communicative test tasks. Tomlinson (2021) states “We need tests and examinations which reflect the reality of language use. Effective communication should not be penalized in examinations simply because it is considered to break a native speaker rule” (p. 651). This statement implies that proficiency should be defined not only as communicative competence, but as communicative competence *in appropriate varieties of English*. Some notable scholars who explore how to develop rating scales/ marking criteria that measure test takers’ ability to use international and national varieties of English for effective communication, are Sandra Lee McKay, Suresh Canagarajah and James Dean Brown.

McKay (2005) identifies six criteria that are useful in assessing a learner’s communicative competence. They are interpersonal communication, conversation management, discourse strategies, dialect differentiation, code switching and style shifting. Of these criteria, the first three refer to linguistic and non-linguistic (non-verbal) tactics for initiating and maintaining effective communication between one or more individuals. The last three criteria, i.e. dialect differentiation, code switching and style shifting emerge from a translanguaging perspective which views learners’ ability to simultaneously deploy multiple linguistic codes for communicative purposes in a positive light (Otheguy et. al., 2015; Kubota, 2021). These criteria are particularly relevant and useful for T&E practices in non-native, multilingual contexts because it views the test takers’ multiple linguistic resources as a strength rather than a weakness.

Canagarajah (2006) on the other hand, discusses three main criteria for assessing communicative competence: language awareness, sociolinguistic sensitivity and negotiation skills. Language awareness refers to the understanding of learners that inner-circle language standards may not be effective when communicating with fellow speakers of English in multilingual contexts, and the ability to determine “when to deviate from these norms to facilitate communication” (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 237). Sociolinguistic sensitivity refers to the awareness of language variations within varieties of English, contextual constraints and cultural differences so that learners are able to “adopt the pragmatic strategies from the local languages and cultures that now shape English” to communicate effectively (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 237). Negotiation skills on the other hand refer to learners’ ability to use strategies such as “repair, rephrasing, clarification, gestures, topic change, and other consensus-oriented and mutually supportive practices” as well as to attitudinal factors of learners such as “patience, tolerance, and humility”, in order to negotiate differences when communicating with another party (Canagarajah, 2006, p. 238).

Although Canagarajah’s (2006) criteria are useful in developing rating scales/ marking keys, they are primarily oriented towards assessing oral communicative competence. In contrast, Brown (2020)

identifies seven criteria for assessing both written and oral communicative competence. These are the effective communicator, i.e. the degree to which test takers are able to communicate effectively “in their Englishes” for various communicative tasks (p. 715), the scope of proficiency, i.e. the ability to move between local (community-based), national and international varieties of English; scale of range, i.e. the test takers’ “abilities to produce a range of utterance types in relation to a range of topics” (p. 716); intelligibility, i.e. the extent to which “an utterance is actually understood” (Munro and Derwing, 1995 as cited in Brown, 2020, p. 216); resourcefulness, i.e. test takers’ ability to use whatever linguistic or contextual resources at hand to achieve communication, symbolic competence, i.e., the test takers’ ability to “appropriate” the English language to “shape the very context in which [it] is learned and used” (Kramsch, 2011 as cited in Brown, 2020, p. 716); and the performative ability, i.e. the “versatility” with which test takers’ communicate” (Brown, 2020, p. 717).

A related area of research in WE scholarship that provides further insights to criteria development for assessing communicative ability of students, is research on intelligibility. Although Brown (2020) also makes use of the notion of intelligibility as a criterion for assessment, research on intelligibility suggests that intelligibility is a multidimensional concept which can be further unpacked. Smith & Nelson (2020) note that there are three aspects to the notion of intelligibility. These are intelligibility i.e., the recognition of word/utterance; comprehensibility i.e., the perceived meaning of the word/utterance; and interpretability i.e., the perceived intent, purpose, or the meaning behind the word/ utterance. Smith & Nelson (2020) claim that language criteria such as “good pronunciation, good lexis and grammar” which are commonly used for pedagogical practices like LA in English teaching, are less important than “situational, social, and cultural awareness” (p. 432). They further add that in a continuum on degrees of understanding, intelligibility constitutes the lowest level whereas interpretability constituted the highest level (Smith & Nelson, 2020, p. 432). Since the notion of degrees of understanding can clearly be used to develop criteria to assess communicative ability of test takers, Berns (2020) observes that this “broader interpretation of intelligibility plays a role in assessment of communicative competence in pedagogical contexts” (p. 680).

Based on the analysis of the criteria developed by McKay (2005), Canagarajah (2006) and Brown (2020), and Smith & Nelson (2020), two observations can be made. The first is the importance of disengaging assessment criteria from language structure related concepts such as grammar and mechanics in communicative testing. The second is the importance of testing test takers on their ability to use the most appropriate variety of English. This is because criteria such as “effective communicator”, and “scope of proficiency” explicitly highlight the importance of test takers’ ability to use local varieties of English, while criteria such as of language awareness and sociolinguistic sensitivity advocate test takers’ ability to achieve communication even by defying the so-called “native” norms of English.

Ideological and practical challenges to revisiting conventional T&E practices

Although the suggestions for improving T&E practices take into account the reality of English in the modern world, the implementation of these suggestions has been challenging due to ideological and practical reasons. Discussing ideological challenges to adopting local varieties of English as the model/standard for ELT practices, scholars like Phillipson (1992) and Pennycook (1994) identify the monolithic understanding of English, i.e. the “linguistic imperialism” (Phillipson, 1992) of inner-circle varieties of English as the most dominant ideological barrier. Perpetuated by powerful international ELT agencies like the British Council, ideologies about the inherent superiority of inner-circle varieties of English have created a number of beliefs that undermine the acceptance of local varieties of English in ELT practices (Phillipson, 1992). These include the monolingual fallacy, i.e. that English should

ideally be taught only in “native” English; the native speaker fallacy, i.e., that the ideal teacher of English is a native speaker; and the subtractive fallacy, i.e. that vernaculars should not be used when teaching English (Phillipson, 1992, p. 183-218), and together, these “myths” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 126) form the mainstream “pedagogical common sense” (Canagarajah, 1999, p. 126) of ELT which has been extremely resistant to change.

Interlinked with these ideological challenges, there are also practical challenges to revisiting conventional approaches to T&E. The most significant of these is the fact that dominant paradigms of testing are based on structures which are centre-based. Scholars like Canagarajah (2006) and Brown (2014) point out that English language testing structures are often based on models of testing introduced by standardized international testing bodies such as TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language), IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) and TOEIC (the Test of English for International Communication) which are biased towards normative ideologies of English. And since tests like TOEFL, IELTS and TOEIC are often considered “the sum total of language testing” (Brown, 2014, p.13), introducing alternative structures of language testing has been a challenging task resulting in millions of learners all over the world “being tested on a variety of English they do not and never will speak” (Tomlinson, 2021, p. 641).

Implications for the Sri Lankan Context

The argument for revising conventional approaches to T&E practices in recognition of the plurality of English, is extremely relevant to the Sri Lankan context. This is not only because Sri Lanka has its own variety of English called Sri Lankan English (Gunasekera, 2010; Mendis & Rambukwella, 2010; Parakrama, 2010), but also because the role of Sri Lankan English in ELT has been a topic of discussion amongst Sri Lankan academics for several decades. Scholars like Gunasekera (2010), Bernaisch (2015), and Herat (2022) observe that the standard for educational practices in Sri Lanka is Standard Sri Lankan English. In fact, Gunasekera (2010) states that the variety of SLE most well-known to educationists in Sri Lanka is Standard SLE, while Bernaisch (2015) claims that “Standard SLE is used in universities and schools, broadcasting companies, courtrooms, letters, literary works and newspapers” (p. 8). Parakrama (2010) and Meyler (2015) also argue that the standard for teaching and assessment practices for ELT in Sri Lanka should be SLE. Indeed, Parakrama (2010) attributes the “failure” of the ELT field in Sri Lanka to the coercing of learners to adopt “an alien and alienating variety and worldview of English” (p. 95) while Meyler (2015) argues in favour of SLE as the model T&E practices because it is “unrealistic and unfair to test students’ English ability according to an alien and outdated standard” (p. 182). However, regardless of scholars’ promotion of Sri Lankan English in ELT, their arguments are rather prescriptive and largely limited to the role of Sri Lankan English in teaching. This leaves ample space for further research on the role of Sri Lankan English in the domain of T&E in Sri Lanka.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The ideological shift in the conceptualization of English from *English* to *Englishes* has had implications for several areas of research. One such area is ELT and T&E. The understanding of English as pluricentric has led scholars to question fundamental premises of T&E such as language standards and proficiency, and this has started a movement which challenges the traditional assessment structures of T&E. The arguments that are made for revisiting conventional T&E practices in recognition of the plurality of English, are extremely relevant to the Sri Lankan context because they invoke questions about the role of Sri Lankan English in T&E. Since ELT in Sri Lanka is a field of education and scholarship which is rapidly developing, the study recommends further research on the possibility of adopting/ adapting guidelines set by scholars on designing language tests and rubrics/ marking keys of assessment which acknowledge local varieties of English such as Sri Lankan English. This is a timely

need for the domain of T&E in Sri Lanka especially in the light of projects such as UTEL (University Test of English Language) which attempts to standardize English language testing at a national higher educational level.

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