CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

5.0 INTRODUCTION

Testing validates teaching and learning. It is the crux on which teaching and learning rest. Tests provide information about a student's learning that cannot be obtained otherwise. They fulfil the aspiration of all the stakeholders involved in the education process by enabling them to ascertain what is the outcome of the transaction between teachers and students in class. They provide the teacher information on the amount of learning by students over a period of time, and also give the teacher valuable feedback on his success in promoting the right kind of learning in the student, consonant with the aims and objectives of the course. As Brown states, "Good assessment of students' knowledge, skills and abilities is absolutely crucial to the process of learning" (Brown, 1999).

Tests, in an ESL or EFL teaching context can be used to accomplish a wide range of objectives within the language classroom. Teacher-constructed class tests can be used within the classroom to: diagnose areas of learner need or sources of learning difficulties, reflect on the effectiveness of materials and classroom activities, encourage student involvement in the learning process, track learner development in the second language and provide students with feedback about their language learning process and also give input for the design of suitable tests.
Heterogeneity is a major problem faced by language teachers at the tertiary level in India. The language teacher has to necessarily address the language needs of students with limited proficiency in English. From the teacher's point of view tests help them in:

- identifying LEP students in a general class and placing them at the right instruction level.

- diagnosing the specific areas which pose serious problems to the students. In other words tests help them in identifying their strengths and weaknesses in the language.

- selecting the right methodology and designing suitable teaching materials based on the diagnosis of the test.

- tracking the rate of progress made by the students over a period of time.

- checking to see if the progress made in English has helped the students to improve their grades or scores in the core subjects. Tests help them to see if academic achievement of the students has been enhanced because of progress in English.

- analysing the feedback from the test to evaluate one's own success or otherwise in helping these students develop their communication skills in the language.

- taking decisions relating to the exit of students from the remedial course based on their performance over a period of time.
For the language teacher to be successful in accomplishing the course objectives through tests he should have the answers to the following four questions that form the basis of testing:

'Why do I test?'

The answer to this question will give the teacher a clear idea of the purpose of the test. This clarity of purpose is important because it will help the teacher use the information obtained from the test purposefully.

'What am I going to test?'

An answer to this question will help the teacher decide on the particular skill, skills or sub-skills that will be assessed in the test.

How do I test?

Finding an answer to this question will help the teacher decide on the type of test items and format of the test.

Besides these three basic questions the teacher must also know the people who will use the information from the test. In the classroom testing situation it is obviously the language teacher himself who is the primary user of the information obtained from tests because it is he who is responsible for making decisions relating to methodology and materials to be used within the classroom on a daily basis. In other words, the teacher is solely responsible for taking decisions relating to the promotion of language learning within the classroom.
5.1 PROGRESS TESTING AND THE LEP STUDENT

As the terms 'formative' or 'progress' suggests, these types of tests give information to the teacher at regular intervals on classroom teaching and learning. No doubt all tests give feedback on learners' performance and effectiveness of teaching in the classroom. But the feedback given by progress tests is productive because it is ongoing which means that the teacher can use it to suitably modify materials and methods in order to optimise language learning in the classroom. With respect to LEP students feedback is critical because it provides them proof of the progress they are making over a period of time. Thus they are motivated to work harder. Conversely a poor performance means that no progress has been made and this can demotivate them and hinder their sustained interest and motivation in learning the language. However, if the language teacher explains and discusses the reasons for their poor performance in the test then they can objectively evaluate their performance and with the help of the teacher adopt better learning strategies. As Pearson states, "A good progress test should encourage the student to perform well in the target language in a positive manner and to gain additional confidence. Its aim is to stimulate learning and to reinforce what has been taught" (Pearson, 1988).

The following paragraphs will analyse the use of tests from the standpoint of the immediate beneficiaries of testing.

- Students
- Teachers

5.2 WHAT STUDENTS WANT FROM TESTS

The primary interest in tests for students as for other stakeholders in education is the information regarding their performance in a test.
Students 'want to know' how they have fared in a test so that they can improve their learning and consequently their ranking in class. Students suffer as much from the 'learning to the test' syndrome as much as teachers suffer from the 'teaching to test' syndrome. They are influenced by tests more than any other activity in the classroom as Boud remarks, "Assessment methods and requirements probably have a greater influence on how and what students learn than any other single factor. This influence may well be of greater importance than the impact of teaching materials (Boud, 1988).

To students their performance in a test is a way of showing the world both academic and non-academic their accomplishments. It justifies their occupation as students. Tests act as great morale boosters for them because they spur them on to constantly improve their performance. This motivation to better their performance is related to the feedback that students obtain from the teacher after the test. An excellent performance by a student is apparent to him by the grades or scores received by him. However, feedback is necessary for all students to have a comprehensive understanding of their grades and scores.

Apart from the natural curiosity to find out about their performance in tests and the genuine interest that they evince in feedback, students of all classes, groups and levels want their test papers to be assessed objectively. Objectivity in marking is partially ensured in public examinations because the assessor does not know the student personally and therefore can have no personal prejudices while marking answer scripts. Fair assessment of test papers means that the grades or scores awarded to them are a realistic appraisal of their performance. Conversely, subjective assessment means that the teacher is being judgmental of their capabilities. In the case of students with limited proficiency in English this means that their progress is not acknowledged by the teacher.
In such teaching-testing situations the classroom is not a place where the teacher and the students participate actively in negotiating ways by which the language can be learnt successfully but an arena where each party is keen on upstaging the other. The students most often become withdrawn and refuse to participate in the classroom activities and the teacher stops making that extra effort to help them.

Finally, students want a testing practice that is transparent and not something that is mysterious and secretive and where students have to make guesses regarding the test format, marking procedure etc. The following description by Brown aptly captures a students's dilemma the night before a test.

'I am going to be assessed tomorrow. I know where I have got to go and what time. I know the format of the assessment what I don't know is what they want. I've never had any kind of human response to what extent I am required to remember things and how much I am supposed to put it into my words. They keep saying "You need to demonstrate you have understood the material" but I don't know how to do this' (Brown, 1999).

Students have a right to know the marking procedure and what kind of learning will be assessed in a test. For example, language teachers should inform their students about the purpose of the test and the specific parameters that will be used to mark their essays and paragraphs.

5.3 WHAT TEACHERS WANT FROM TESTS

Brown (1999) lists the following reasons why teachers wish to assess their students. Teachers wish to assess their students in order to:
provide feedback to students so they can learn from mistakes and build on achievement.
• classify or grade student achievement.
• enable students to correct errors and remedy deficiencies.
• motivate students and focus on their sense of achievement.
• consolidate student learning.
• help students to apply abstract principles to practical contexts.
• estimate students’ potential to progress to other levels or courses.
• guide selection or option choice.
• give as feedback on how effective we are being at promoting learning.
• provide statistics for internal and external agencies.

Of the points listed above, the one which is of utmost importance to teachers is the feedback that tests provide them on their students’ performance which is to some extent a reflection of their success in helping students learn. It is this role of tests that helps teachers demonstrate to their administrators and other stakeholders the quality of their teaching which has been instrumental in promoting learning.

5.4 IMPLICATIONS OF THE PRESENT STUDY

An English for specific purposes syllabus aims to equip students specialising in a particular profession with special skills in English. An ESP course presupposes an average proficiency in English on the part of the students who take the course. It naturally follows that those students who have limited English skills will not be successful in the course because of the fact that their proficiency in English is limited. For example, in the textbook currently being followed at the university, there are topics such as "Preservation of the environment" based on which students are
asked to write paragraphs describing the ways in which the environment can be preserved and make recommendations for the same. While LEP students may have pertinent views to be expressed on the topic they may not have the necessary linguistic resources to able to express their ideas clearly and coherently.

- This point naturally follows the first, a language course for LEP students must be designed keeping in mind their existing linguistic resources. The objectives of such a course must be to help these students develop their communication skills in the language. Syllabus designers and curriculum planners must be sensitive to the reasons for which these students need English. The crucial question that must be answered by course planners and syllabus designers is: Are these students ready for an ESP course? A language course for these students must be grounded in reality. It cannot be ambitious in terms of equipping them both with the basics in the language and at the same time helping them learn special skills in the language.

- Class tests in the second language classroom must necessarily be made formative in nature and skills based. As explained earlier students in universities and colleges in India write a number of tests. But whether anything positive issues from this testing practice is debatable. The notion of class tests being formative in nature is still alien to most language teachers in the country. This means that LEP students do not receive much help in their language classes. The accent on testing, as far as these students are concerned must be solely on the progress that they are making in learning the language.
The parameters used to assess LEP students' answer scripts need to be different from the parameters that language teachers use to assess the answer scripts of their average and above average students. Variation in the marking criteria does not mean lowering of standards. On the other hand it only means that language teachers are sensitive to the varying levels of proficiency among their students. If they fail to recognise this then they will not be responsive to the changes or to the progress made by these students over a period of time. Reporting the scores obtained by these students in tests should also be done separately.

Feedback given to students after tests is of crucial importance in helping language development in LEP students. Feedback is important for all students but more so for students with limited proficiency in the language. Feedback will show them the progress that they have made between two tests and this will motivate them to further improve their performance in the succeeding tests. Feedback acts as a catalyst for learning by the students. Otherwise there are chances that they will be conscious of their errors and overlook the progress they have made.

Language teachers, especially those handling remedial courses for LEP students, need to network amongst themselves. It is only through networking that they can check if their tests are valid assessments of their students' progress. Formative testing should not be an insular activity which means that teachers have no channel by which they can verify whether their testing practices are reliable and valid. Teachers need to share their ideas, materials and tests so that they are sure of the success of all three in promoting learning amongst their own LEP students.
Teachers and syllabus designers in India at the tertiary level need to rethink on the use of the communicative methodology to help promote language learning in LEP students. They need to be conscious of the fact that the communicative method of teaching ESL requires a basic proficiency in the language for students to participate in class activities. The focus in teaching English to LEP students is to help them develop their skills in the language. Language teachers have to be aware of the communicative ability of these students in English at the start of the course and be more eclectic in their choice of teaching methods. So also with alternate forms of testing that are becoming popular among language teachers. Performance assessment may initially be too demanding on LEP students. There has to be a combination of performance tests with the conventional test procedures.

The purpose of a test for LEP students should be clearly defined. The teacher should inform students of the purpose of the test and the criteria that will be used to assess their papers. This will ensure that the students are conscious of the purpose(s) served by the test. Moreover, they will be aware of the fact that teaching and testing are working in tandem with each other.

Testing in core subjects can, for a minimum specified period of time, till the students have acquired passable fluency in English, be done in the first language. LEP students at the tertiary are expected to write their tests in core subjects in English and score well in them. This can be very frustrating to the students and make the experience of writing tests negative. For example, in the university as explained in the earlier chapter subject teachers use the first language liberally in their classes to explain concepts to the LEP students. But assessment of their comprehension is done
only through English. When the first language is used for teaching them, then core subject teachers must also accept answer scripts in the first language till such time that the students have acquired passable fluency in the language.

- Selection of teaching materials for LEP students must be done with utmost care and caution. As explained earlier the term ‘LEP’ in developing countries such as India refers to the social and economic milieu from which these students come. Seemingly simple topics such as, ‘my pet’ or ‘the holiday that I last had’ may not be suitable for these students. The safest bet for the language teacher would be to encourage these students to share their personal experiences in the second language.

- It is not sufficient if second language teachers chart the progress made by LEP students in their classes but they need necessarily to check with the subject teachers to see if improvement in English has led to a corresponding improvement in their performance in core subjects. This would give vital information regarding proficiency in English and academic achievement.

- Discourse analysis of student’s writing offers a good framework, provided the learners are able to write simple, grammatically correct sentences. If they are not even able to write single sentences correctly, then it is very difficult for a researcher to use discourse as the basis of a research study with LEP students. Focus of discourse would form the logical next step to a study such as the present one.
5.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

• More research studies have to be initiated to study the impact of tests on students at the secondary and at the tertiary level.

• The teaching, learning and testing of English in vernacular medium schools must be studied comprehensively and the outcome of such studies must be recorded for reference by language teachers at the tertiary level.

• The learning pattern of LEP students must be researched into in greater detail because this will give good insight into whether improvement in English language means better performance in content subjects by these students. Research at present does not provide very conclusive answers on this issue.

• Collaborative action-research can be carried out by language teachers within a college or a university to study the impact of testing on LEP students to see if testing leads to positive changes in the learning behaviour of these students.

• The use of alternate assessment methods and their success rate compared to conventional assessments especially portfolio assessment in the Indian teaching context can be researched into.

• Indepth study of the wash back validity of tests and their influence on teachers and students alike can also form the subject of future research.
5.6 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

- Though students chosen for the study made good progress during the period of the study, time was a major constraint. If the study had been carried out in the second semester also then the researcher would have had the opportunity to track the progress made by all the students chosen for the study more comprehensively.

- Student 3 could not be given extra help during the period of study. This was a major drawback. Perhaps if more time had been available then he could have been given special coaching.

- The researcher did not collaborate with core subject teachers to see if progress in English led to better scores in the content subjects by the students.

- Students could have been made to do more writing in class. In the present study they wrote answers to nearly seventeen questions. More writing would have meant greater practice in the writing skill. In short, they would have concentrated more on the writing process. Again, genre writing could have been introduced to the students during the later stages of the study.

- The research was primarily teacher-directed. Therefore one of the minor aims of the study which was to do with making LEP students take greater responsibility for their learning was not achieved.

- The sample chosen for the study was small. Definitely the number of students who can be categorised as limited English students in
a single class in the university is more than the number chosen for the study. Perhaps if the researcher had chosen more students then more valuable data would have been obtained.

- The present teaching-testing module used in the study was not tried out in other classes within the university nor in other colleges. If this had been done, then the efficacy of the present module with relation to helping LEP students develop their writing skills would have been greater.

- Students' perceptions of their progress would have been sharper if they had been given time to introspect and then verbalize after each test. This was done by the researcher most of the time and only after the second test did the researcher elicit students' perceptions of their progress by way of a questionnaire.

5.7 CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that LEP students can and do progress if they get some feedback on their performance and guidelines on how to do better. Tests need not frustrate or depress them. On the contrary tests could be exploited as catalysts to activate progress. The Test-Teach-Test chain could motivate LEP students and lead them on to self-direction—the ultimate goal of all learning. This thesis has been a modest attempt to demonstrate that the primary role of tests is not to assess or discriminate, but to teach. Tests need no more be negative, frightening experiences. When both learners and teachers develop a positive attitude to tests and exploit them as learning opportunities, language acquisition will automatically be taken care of; and learners will start looking forward to the excitement of tests.