Chapter One

Statement of Intent

In education theory evaluation is generally cited as one of the key elements of curriculum design (e.g. Taba, 1962; Kerr, 1968). It is the element that makes the difference between a one-way, or ballistic curriculum in Bell’s phrase (1982), a sensitive cybernetic process that includes feedback (Wilhems, 1967). Equally generally it is considered the least well-specified of the elements, and the most under-exploited, with a consequent reduction in efficiency and effectiveness of the educational process it is meant to monitor and develop (cf. Taba, 1962; Wilhems, 1967; McCormick et al., 1982). (Murphy, 1985:02)

The above view by Murphy (1985:02) speaks volumes about the issues relating evaluation in language teaching, especially in ESL / EFL contexts. While it talks of evaluation as a cardinal constituent of a curriculum, it also refers to the limited application and operation of evaluation principles into practice.

Before we go on to state the intention of the present research project, it becomes relevant to define and distinguish such terms as ‘evaluation’, ‘assessment’, and ‘testing’ with regard to English Language Teaching (ELT). Longman Dictionary of Applied Linguistics (Richards, Platt and Weber (eds.)) explains ‘Assessment’ as “the measurement of the ability of a person or the quality or success of a teaching course, etc.” It further explains that “assessment may be by test, interview, questionnaire, observation, etc”.

The above definition shows that a ‘test’ is used for the ‘Assessment’ of individual learners and / or a programme of study.

This dictionary defines ‘Evaluation’ as

...in general, the systematic gathering of information for the purposes of decision making. Evaluation uses quantitative methods (e.g. tests), qualitative methods (e.g. observations, ratings) and value judgments. In Language Planning, evaluation frequently involves gathering information on patterns of language use, language ability, and attitudes towards language. In language teaching programmes, evaluation is related to decisions to be made about the quality of the programme itself, and decisions about individuals in the programmes. The evaluation of programmes may involve the study of curriculum, objectives, materials, and tests or grading systems... In evaluating both programmes and individuals, tests and other measures are frequently used.” (Richards, Platt and Weber :98).

For a better distinction of these terms, it becomes important to understand two more terms - “Formative” and “Summative” Evaluations; ‘Formative Evaluation’ refers to “the process of information to curriculum developers during the development of a curriculum or programme, in order to improve it. This is also used in syllabus design and the development of language teaching programmes and materials.” (Richards, Platt and Weber :110).

‘Summative Evaluation’, on the other hand, refers to the process of providing information to decision makers, after the programme is completed about whether or not the programme was effective and successful.” (Richards, Platt and Weber :110). Murphy (1985:04) calls ‘Summative Evaluation’ as concerned with ‘the product of a course’ ‘most often realized as assessment
of learner performance ... dealing with something fixed”; while ‘Formative Evaluation’ as concerned with the ‘processes and functioning’ ‘more likely to be sensitive to promoting development’. The above definitions of the two terms – ‘assessment’ and ‘evaluation’ – so far show that ‘evaluation’ is a means to ‘assessment’. It also shows that ‘tests’ are tools/instruments for both ‘evaluation’ and ‘assessment’. Richards, Platt and Weber (291) define ‘tests’ as “any procedure for measuring ability, knowledge, or performance”. This definition appears to limit the term ‘test’ mainly to learners. But the term ‘test’ has also been given broader perspective, when it is perceived as ‘Summative’ and ‘Formative’. Here ‘Summative Test’ refers to the “one given at the end of a course of instruction, and which measures or sums up how much a student has learned from the course. A Summative test is usually a graded test, marked according to a scale or set of grades”. ‘Formative Test’, on the other hand, is defined as “a test which is given during a course of instruction and which informs both the student and the teacher how well the student is doing. A Formative test includes only topics which have been taught, and shows whether the student needs extra work or attention” (Richards, Platt and Weber 291).

The above attempt to define and distinguish the three terms – ‘assessment’, ‘evaluation’, and ‘test’ – shows that there is a marked difference among
them. Yet they are often used interchangeably by the stakeholders of ELT, if not by the researchers and professionals. However, Murphy (1985: 01) further tries to clarify the term ‘evaluation’ when he states:

> Evaluation is not clearly defined. If its scope and purpose are taken to be broad and general, encompassing goals and overall operation, then it tends to be classed as the domain of select group of experts, the curriculum designers. The narrow approach sees it as simply concerned with ends; examining and testing learners, the domain of teachers.

Without considering it as ‘the narrow approach’ (Murphy 1985:01), the present study will use the term ‘Testing’ in place of ‘evaluation’ for the second scope and purpose of ‘evaluation’ as propounded by Murphy (1985:01) in the above paragraph. (Reframe the sentence) Richards, Platt and Weber (          :291) define the term ‘Testing’ as “the use of tests, or the study of the theory and practice of their use, development, evaluation, etc.” Wilkins (1976:81) equates the term ‘testing’ with ‘evaluation’ when he says:

> “it should perhaps be self-evident that the process of evaluation in language teaching is closely related to objectives. We test a learner’s language skill in order both to establish what he knows (or what he can do) and to assess how successful we have been in our teaching in adding to his linguistic achievement.”

We find this view repeated even in White (1983:73). Hughes (2003:05) establishes the relationship between ‘testing’ and ‘assessment’ with clarity when he says that “Informal tests or quizzes may have a part to play in
formative assessment”, while “formal tests are usually called for” ‘summative assessment’.

For the present study, the term ‘testing’/ ‘language tests’ will be considered in the light of the following aspects:

- as a tool for the assessment of a person’s linguistic ability and knowledge in a given context.

- as a method to assess a person’s linguistic ability involving a set of techniques, procedures and test items, expecting an active participation and performance of both the examinee and the examiner.

- of various types - while, on one hand, it can be intuitive and informal, e.g. in the assessment of the authenticity of pronunciation of a person and, on the other hand, it may be structured as in a multiple-choice technique.

- With the purpose of measuring the learners’ proficiency in the language use, having ‘Informal’ testing which is done everyday by teachers for ‘formative assessment’ and ‘formal’ testing carefully planned techniques for ‘summative’ assessments.
Language testing is an important, integral part of the complex process of Language learning and teaching. It has been considered as one of the four interdependent elements of a rudimentary model of a curriculum, the other three being: purpose or objective, content or knowledge, and methodology or learning experiences (Hooper, 1971, cited in Murphy 1985:02). Testing is as important as any other constituent of the curriculum. It is so important that the success or failure of the overall language teaching programme is assessed on the basis of learners’ performance in tests. That is, the effectiveness of tests is perceived as instrumental to the effectiveness of a language teaching programme. A language test, therefore, is expected to be well framed depending on and achieving the aims and objectives of the prescribed syllabi. This means that testing in a course of study is a ‘part of potentially continuous process’ (Murphy 1985:03), giving its feedback on the learning and teaching process, the effectiveness of materials and methodology, the parameters of tests, and other planning and policy matters. Hughes (2003:01) asserts the same view when he says that “the effect of testing on teaching and learning is known as backwash, and can be harmful or beneficial. If a test is regarded as important, if the stakes are high, preparation for it can come to dominate all teaching and learning activities. And if the test content and
testing techniques are at variance with the objectives of the course, there is likely to be harmful backwash”.

There was a time when ‘a large number of examinations encouraged a tendency to separate testing from teaching’ (Heaton, 1988:05), but off late it has been realised that language teaching and testing go hand in hand. While Davies (1968:05) observed that “a good test is an obedient servant since it follows and apes the teaching”, Hughes (2003:02) considers testing as having both harmful and beneficial backwash on teaching programmes and claims that “the proper relationship between teaching and testing is surely that of partnership. It is true that there may be occasions when the teaching is good and appropriate and the testing is not; we are then likely to suffer from harmful backwash.” Heaton (1988:05) finds a stronger bond when he states that “both testing and teaching are so closely interrelated that it is virtually impossible to work in either field without being constantly concerned with the other”.

A well-framed language test, therefore, can help teachers and learners in many ways. According to Heaton (1988:05) such tests can help create positive motivational attitudes among learners for an efficient instruction which in turn will help them in mastering the language. A good test can also
help the teachers in the assessment of their own teaching targets. On the basis of test results the teachers can evaluate the following:

- How far are the curricular aims and objectives met?
- Are the instructional materials effective? Or is there any need for modification, supplement or adaptation?
- How about teaching methods, techniques and strategies?
- Where is the root of problems in achieving the teaching objectives?

Responses to such queries as above can guide the teachers and the administrators in redefining or modifying the teaching programmes. In the same way even learners can do their self-assessment on the basis of the results of any type of test, they undergo. They can ask themselves:

- How far has (s)he achieved the overall proficiency?
- How far is (s)he able to achieve the learning aims and objectives?
- What are his/her strengths and weaknesses?
- Where does (s)he need to pay special attention?
- What are the learning problems and their way outs?
Seeing such a constructive role of the language tests, the test setters are required to be very careful in framing the tests. They should know what content is tested, how it is tested, and what criteria will be used in rating.

In recent years the move towards communication-focused, learner-centered ESL pedagogy has resulted in an impressive research output in the areas of syllabus design (Wilkins 1976, Munby 1978, Widdowson 1979) and teaching methodology (Alwright 1979, Brumfit 1979, Reves 1980). In striking contrast, however, language tests, in general, have so far remained less sensitive to the theory and practice of communicative language teaching (Rea 1985, Weir 1990, Paltridge 1992), especially in the ESL and EFL contexts. But this would be grossly misleading if we suggest that research in language testing has remained totally static over a period of time. There have been significant research initiatives in the area of language testing, particularly in quantifying the concept of ‘communicative competence’ for the following purpose of tests:

- What is to be tested in a communicative syllabus?
- How to test communicative competence?

The above wide range of research over the last half a century and a continuous shift in approaches to ESL pedagogy, with language being perceived as ‘communication’ has brought in new ideas about language testing and new ways of evaluating the performance of second language learners. Yet much the greater part of this shift is still to be incorporated within the framework of communicative curriculum and practice. In the actual classroom practice, it is very often believed by both teachers and learners that testing is the last item to be completed at the end of an academic year and so it is often casually conducted. One major reason in making testing one of the most neglected areas in the field of language learning and teaching is the lack of proper application of the theories into practice. This is
why perhaps most of the tests produced so far are of poor quality. Therefore, the present study attempts to investigate the following issues in the following four chapters:

Chapter Two intends to focus on an historical overview of language testing with a review of the available literature. In addition, this chapter will provide a brief survey of the types, approaches and characteristics of the available English language tests.

Chapter Three will mainly concentrate on providing the theoretical framework, principles, and characteristics of Communicative language testing. In this backdrop, this chapter intends to suggest the mechanics of test construction as per communicative parameters, the techniques used for testing basic language skills such as listening, speaking, reading and writing, the available format and models for these communicative skills, the scoring criteria, and the problems and limitations of implementing the Communicative Testing Theory in practice while designing tests.

Chapter Four proposes to make an analytical study of the actual language tests in use at the undergraduate level for Compulsory English Courses at the Aligarh Muslim University. This chapter will try to investigate the factors causing a gulf between principle and practice and will provide
sample tests premised on the communicative testing theory for the above mentioned course.

Chapter Five will sum up the study in the form of conclusion, along with a few suggestions and recommendations in order to shorten the gulf between theory and practice in testing the English language. This chapter will also conclude the study by providing a descriptive summary of the overall investigation.

References:


Murphy, D. F. 1981. ‘Developing Secondary Teachers’ evaluation of their work.’ In Practical Papers in English Language Education. Vol. 4, University of Lancaster.


