

Full Length Research Paper

Exploring challenges of preparing authentic English language tests in secondary and preparatory schools: The case of Gamo, Gofa and Konso zones in Southern Ethiopia

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The main objective of this research was to study challenges of preparing authentic English language tests in Ethiopian six secondary schools. The focus was to assess current challenges in the preparation of authentic and communicative language tests. To this end, interviews and FGD with English language teachers were made and hence, 61 teachers were taken as the sample for the study from six secondary schools: Arba Minch, Chamo, Konso, Chench, Gidole and Sawla secondary and preparatory schools using available sampling technique. Finally, the finding of the study shows that teachers have problems in preparing authentic language tests because of six main challenges: Large class size, student's low motivation, teachers' language proficiency, the test setting and absence of authentic materials.

Key words: Challenges, test, authentic test.

INTRODUCTION

English is the lingua-franca with which more than half a billion people speak as a second language. To be competent in today's "Global Village", it is true that understanding English language and communicating by this language is a prime requirement for the international economic transactions and international relationships, and digital communications. Accordingly, the primary goal of teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) in most EFL programs is to ease the communication throughout

the world. Therefore, there is the curriculum of teaching English as a subject from grade one and making her a medium of instruction starting from high school through the University of our Country (Ethiopian) is an evidence for this argument.

Basically, the four macro-language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking are the focus for improving student's language proficiency in the classroom teaching learning atmosphere. Thus, the advancement and

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development of the student's language proficiency can be ensured when these language skills are taught in a way they are designed to be taught. However, teaching only cannot realize the students' achievements of these basic language skills. Hence, students' performance and achievement of the language should be assessed through language testing mechanism.

It is impossible to focus on teaching alone without focusing on testing parallelly. Scholars like Bachman (1990), Alderson (1991), Weir (1993) cited in Teshome (1995) and others agree that testing plays a considerable role in teaching-learning process. Testing aids teaching learning in that it helps teachers encourage their students towards learning and assists teachers to monitor their students' progress in learning, etc. Moreover, feedbacks from tests provide information to the concerned bodies to revise a program or curriculum. In line with this idea, Nuru (1992) explains "Testing is assumed to play a considerable role in such important matters as the development of curriculum objectives as well as the production of textbooks and other instructional materials." Similarly, Weir (1993) says, "A test contributes to the improvement of curriculum." In a general sense, we can say a test is another continuum of teaching and they are like two sides of the same coin.

These days, the approaches of teaching all language skills are based on the theory of communicative language teaching. Therefore, the evaluation of the students' achievements of the language skills should be based on the theory of communicative language testing, which is designed based on the theory of communicative language teaching.

Therefore, the process of realizing the students' achievement of particular language skills should be addressed through different mechanisms of communicative language testing.

It is stated that the quality of teaching English language skills can be affected by the quality of the tests. Therefore, the qualities of testing English language should be parallel to the qualities of teaching methodologies.

A number of studies were conducted on the issue of testing English language skills both at international and national levels. In connection to this, studies that are quietly related to this research work are revised, and the gaps that this study touched are addressed.

In our country, especially in higher educational institutions, scholars made a number of studies to improve the qualities of teaching and learning from time to time. In line with this, the issue of keeping the quality teaching and learning through standardized test is not well addressed. Most of the previous studies conducted in these areas were not focused on the challenges in preparing tests through communicative approach. Some of them focused on the match between teacher made test and syllabus (Abreham, 2010) and the others focused on assessing the content validity tests (Asmare, 2016;

Nigussie, 2010). However as far as the researchers' knowledge is concerned, these studies were not focused on the teachers practices and perceived practices of keeping the quality of tests through authenticating the language tests. Therefore, the current study has focused on exploring the challenges in preparing the authentic language tests at secondary school level of some Gamo and Gofa high schools in Ethiopia.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

This study aimed to explore challenges of preparing authentic English language skills-tests at high school level and it was exploratory research in nature. In order to achieve the objective of the research, the researchers used qualitative data gathering methods. Specially, interview was employed to access the required data on the challenges of preparing the communicative language tests.

Sample and sampling method

The target populations of this research study were high school English teachers who were teaching grades 9 to 12 in the selected schools. Among six high schools which were selected for the study, a number of English teachers were 72. English language teachers of the schools who were teaching at high school level were taken through simple random sampling. Furthermore, schools were taken conveniently due to the assumption that schools at different sites might have different testing mechanisms, and schools of the same area might share the same experiences on their testing mechanisms. This may in turn question the validity of the research result. Accordingly, six high schools were selected as the researcher's study areas. In connection to this, Williams (2008) suggests that when the research site is convenient for the researcher, it has its own effect in determining the quality of the final findings. As a result, Chamo, Arba Minch, Sawla, Konso, Gidole and Chencha secondary schools were taken as the focus of the study areas. Therefore, the researcher took 24 English language teachers of the selected high schools using simple random sampling technique.

Data collecting tools

Since this research was qualitative in nature it used tools which are appropriate for the objectives of the study. Accordingly, the researchers used two qualitative data gathering instruments: interviews and focused group discussion.

Interview for teachers

Interview was used as the main research tool by which the required qualitative data were gathered. Information about the way in which teachers authenticate their language tests was collected using unstructured interview. The tool had enabled the researchers to collect an in-depth information face to face. Nunan (2004), Gass and Mackey (2005) and Franklin (2012) suggest that interview is flexible and you can produce extraordinary evidence about what you do not get in questionnaire. Secondly, interviews were highly interactive and responsive to the language and concepts used by the interviewee (Fontana and Frey, 2005). Thus, four English

teachers were selected for interview from each sample school. Therefore, interview was made with 24 English language teachers concerning issues connected to the practices and challenges of authentic language test preparation.

Focused group discussion (FGD)

In order to follow up the data collected through interviews, the researchers used focused group discussion. The very purpose of FGD was to get better and more in depth understanding concerning information collected through interviews. As a result, the researchers took three samples from each selected secondary schools.

Methods of data analysis

Interviews and FGD were transcribed. Then responses were classified under the coded main theme. Finally, the analysis was narrated in the way it organized under the themes or topics of the discussion.

Ethical consideration

Before starting this study, its research proposal was officially evaluated, and constructive comments were forwarded for its effectiveness. Upon the approval of the reviewers, acceptance letter was obtained from Arba Minch University Research Directorate office, and the research work was started officially. Again before collecting the research data, both the school teachers and the schools were asked for cooperation. As soon as we get the voluntariness of all study participants, data were collected, and the confidentiality of the research participants was also secured. Therefore, teacher's name was not written on the research paper, and each person was given a code.

RESULTS

The data collected through interviews and FGD was discussed. It was focused on the challenges in preparing the authentic English language tests.

I2C: Interviewee two at Chamo Secondary and Preparatory School

I2K: Interviewee two at Konso Secondary and preparatory School

I1S: Interviewee one at Yela Sawla Secondary and Preparatory School

I1A: Interviewee one at Arba Minch Secondary and preparatory school

I1G: Interviewee one at Gidole Secondary and Preparatory

I2A: Interviewee two at Arba Minch Secondary and preparatory school

To get fruitful information about the test authentication, 24 teachers chosen from the schools were interviewed to share their experience. Particularly, they were asked about, the main challenges in the authentication of tests of the four macro skills (speaking, listening, reading and

writing) and the efforts they make to the minimization of the problems. Accordingly, they all confirmed that the conduct of the language test is not in practice, and even the communicative teaching approach is at a beginning stage. The interviewee-teachers explicitly stated many obstacles in the preparation and authentication of the test which results in the failure of conducting the communicative test on the ground. Above all, the interviewee teachers highly focused on six issues that challenged them in conducting the real-life language tests. Likewise, large class size, student's low motivation, teachers' language proficiency, the test setting and absence of authentic materials are the top listed problems that magnified the problem. Therefore, the following subtopics are the categorized themes based on the data gathered from the research participants.

Large class size

According to the information collected from the school teachers, having large number of students in a language class was a main challenge for the authentication of language test. As to interviewee I2C stated, language class is not the same as another subject class, for it needs an interaction with every student in a class. Interviewee I2K has also added that in a language class where he was teaching more than 60 students in a single class, he could not even control the misbehaving students in the language class. He said:

It is quite difficult for the language teachers to give test within a single class. For me I worry about the large number of my students before coming to the class because it is exposed to cheating and dependency. For me, a language class must not hold more than 20 students since the teacher has a chance of using only 40 minutes for a single class period. Since the classroom time could not allow me to use real life-like language test, I prefer to prepare a test which all the students can exposed to within a given time.

As of other interviewee teachers, testing the language skills they need to assess the student's performance independently where the intended use of test is to see the progress of the students. This process is quite difficult in a large class size, where it is challenging for language teachers.

Students' low motivation

Another headache of the language teachers in the language test was the students' low motivation in the course of making the test communicative. Taking speaking and writing skills tests as example, interviewee I1S, said that preparing the real life-like language test is a

headache for the teachers since students are not volunteering to make interaction in a classroom. The cumulative idea of the interviewee shows that the low motivation of the students during classroom instruction has a direct effect on the teacher's preparation of the tests. Interviewee I1A has confirmed the idea of S1 by saying, "students do not like to take spoken test or a written test as this type of test needs everyone to take a part. Rather they need to hide themselves behind some active students to be covered by their motives and efforts."

Absence of authentic teaching aid

Thirdly, absence of authentic teaching aid is raised by the interviewee focusing on both teaching and testing the four macro language skills. To illustrate, I1S has underlined the necessity of using tape recorder to imitate the native like pronunciation in teaching and testing the pronunciation which is presented in the language curriculums. As to interviewee I2C, teachers could not compare the way they pronounce some English words found in the text book and the correct pronunciation of words in English language. For this reason they lack confidence to teach and test in such a traditional way. School libraries were also not a source for variety of authentic reading materials from which teachers can prepare authentic reading texts, and thus they were dependant only on student's textbooks or some old library books.

Absence of reserved class for language students

Lastly, school setting was among the main challenge for the authentication of language test. By underlining the importance determining time and places (when and where) of the language test, the interviewees have claimed that preparing the real life language test is difficult since this kind of test is time consuming and impractical in a class of 50 or 60 students. Interviewee I1G said:

I personally cannot expect a real life performance from my students, where I am unable to present such kind of language teaching approach in a language classroom. There are no special classrooms prepared for the students to practice in their extra time, or additional time is not budgeted for the language teachers by which students exposed to target language use interactions.

Interviewee I1G has claimed the importance of free classroom arranged for the language class, and this is true for language class by itself needs extra places and free time in which both teachers and students got the opportunity to practice real life-like language. Hence, the

absence of such facilities can directly affect the preparation of authentic language test.

Teacher's professional deficiency

Furthermore, some teachers have also pointed their fingers towards themselves for the causes of limitation on the language test authentication. They claimed that there are various problems associated to the teachers, and one reason is that teachers have not got access to short-duration trainings and continuous language professional development. Because of this they could not update their language teaching and testing methodology. According to interviewee A2A, there is no alternate reference to teacher's guide, and even, some teachers did not use teacher's guide as roadmap to teach and give a test under the umbrella of communicative language teaching and testing.

Results from the FGD also confirm that there is a misconception of teachers on test content validation. Most of the discussion groups confirmed that they do not make their emphasis on the test item representation of the syllabus objectives. Rather, they focus on the categorization of the test items into chapters of the book of syllabus. For instance respondent I3A stated that:

I subdivide the books chapter's as my guide of the continuous assessments. For example, if I covered chapter one in this week: might be week one or week two or whatever, I prepare a test from that chapters. I continue my work until I finish the continuous assessment from fifty percents. But I keep reserve the last two or three chapters for final exam.

From these statements, we can infer that, the content validation of the item is not a representation of item specification based on the objectives of the curriculum or syllabus. Dividing the tests by chapters can help us not to repeat the same contents on the tests in different repetitive tests (that is, continue assessments). However, the final year or semester based exam is holistic in nature and the content of the exam should be representative of all chapters' or syllabuses' objectives.

DISCUSSION

Large class size is the main issues addressed by the interviewees in the research. It was found that large class size is the cause for the academic dishonesty because it is beyond the teacher's capability to control the misbehaving students during the test. One class has more than 60 students and this number is difficult for classroom management. Therefore, the nature of authentic test needs the real life language test which needs more interactive environment.

Another important point raised in the aforementioned interview was the issue of student's motivation. In the authentic classroom atmosphere, student's motivation takes the lion share because authenticating both the language teaching and testing is impossible without student's participation. Additionally, it was found that speaking and writing skills are underlined as the neglected skills in the course of test authentication because these skills need the participation of each student and these two skills are productive skills.

Furthermore, it was found that teachers were not teaching the pronunciation in their classroom. This vacuum is created because teaching pronunciation needs direct native speakers or real like native speakers. Since the falling and rising tone can change the meaning of words, it is difficult for teachers to teach pronunciation in the absence of records of English words that are presented in the curriculum. Teacher's inability of test authentication is more exposed when the sample teachers explicitly talked about their professional gap. Accordingly, absence of continuous professional development programs, the limited reference materials in the school brought the teachers inefficiency in test authentication. In general, the discussed points were presented as the challenges for language test authentication.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors have not declared any conflict of interests.

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