ASSESSING LISTENING COMPREHENSION AT THE SECONDARY LEVEL IN BANGLADESH: CHALLENGES AND POSSIBLE MEASURES

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ABSTRACT

The current National Curriculum 2012 of Bangladesh recommends all four skills of English language education to be assessed in school and public exams. In the curriculum, there is a suggestion to evaluate the listening abilities of students through a formative assessment throughout the year at schools. The marks of the listening assessment need to be counted with the other three skills while grading students’ English language papers for the secondary level in the Secondary School Certificate (SSC) examination. However, the existing exam evaluates only reading and writing tasks. Although various attempts are underway to reform the current language assessment procedure by including listening and speaking skills, nothing has come out in concrete so far. With this article, I provide expert insights into the challenges of listening assessment with the goal of helping policymakers and the secondary school teachers. In-depth interviews with policymakers and secondary school teachers and (n=16) are qualitatively analysed to gain reflection into the existing challenges to assess listening and how to make the assessment procedures. The findings and discussion of the article propose a conceptual framework that can be helpful for the teachers and policymakers to deal with the challenges.

Keywords: Listening Comprehension, Challenges and Possible Measures, Bangladesh

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

1. The assessment challenges of listening skills are created because of problems related to technical resourcing, training, resource restrictions, and lack of motivation by teachers and non-cooperative attitudes of headteachers.
2. The teachers who teach listening, apply a product-based approach to the teaching of listening as they only practice listening tasks in a piecemeal fashion.
3. The assessment of listening has been determined by the negative influence of the examination, known as the washback impact.
4. The policymakers predict the probability of unfairness in the assessment of listening comprehension.

GRAPHICAL ABSTRACT

Fig. 1. Challenges of assessing listening comprehension
Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to:

1. Identify the existing challenges of assessing listening comprehension and help policymakers and secondary school teachers to deal with the challenges while assessing listening comprehension.

Methodology

This research engages a qualitative lens to look into the data. Therefore, the interpretive approach is necessary (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). To interpret the in-depth interview data from the policymakers and secondary school teachers, a thematic analysis method was applied. Sixteen participants were chosen through purposive sampling as the research participants to carry out this study. There are three sets of participants: a. policymakers, b. urban teachers, and c. rural teachers. The data from the policymakers help us explore the assessment challenges related to policy and the data from both urban and rural help us explore the assessment challenges related to implementation. Furthermore, after exploring the challenges of listening assessment, all three sets of data helped us recommend some possible measures to assess listening.

Results

A cohort of participants reported their opinions related to the challenges of assessing the listening skill in the existing context. They identified multiple challenges in conducting a listening assessment. Two of the statements are as follow:

*Rahim: Most of the teachers are new to listening skill. They have fewer experiences of listening skill in English. We also lack sufficient teacher educators to train the teachers on how to conduct a listening assessment.*

*Nurul (Urban teacher): Listening skill should be assessed in the classroom. Besides, public examinations should also include listening skill in their English language assessment. The inclusion of listening skill for both types of assessment will motivate the students to practice it.*

The participants also reported that the secondary school examination (SSC) did not include listening skill in the assessment and grading for the probable reasons of practicality and fear of unfairness. Two of the policymakers stated:

*The Head of the Curriculum: The practical test of science education is done at schools, and the grade of students are also done at schools. Education boards that conduct theoretical exams only grade for the theoretical part. Unfortunately, the process of grading and assessing the practical test of science education has become a farce in our system. Yes, the possibility is there for a listening test as well. This anxiety is in us, and this will be a great challenge for us. This is why we would like to see how the teachers are doing in the school-based assessment. If the report is impressive and properly done then we will think of introducing it in public tests.*
Goutum: I must say that Bangladeshi teachers need to be prepared, trained, and skilled; it will be a huge test as you know that we have almost 1 million JSC and SSC examinees. We are still digging the opportunities and planning on how to do the process. It is still in progress.

Findings

The study finds multiple challenges to assess listening comprehension at the secondary level of Bangladesh. In reply to the challenges, the study further suggests several possible measures to be undertaken to help assess listening comprehension. The measures can be taken at both policy and practice levels. These are:

For policymakers and curriculum developers:

- To research and carefully consider local problems so they can shape policy related to listening assessment strategically and effectively.
- To ensure the provision of relevant resources for practicing listening skills in secondary classrooms.
- To provide training to teachers on how to conduct a listening test for SSC examination and to develop sample question papers for practising in the classroom.
- To deal with the issue of unfairness in assessing listening, the policymakers can set up a new wing at each Board of Intermediate and Secondary Education to conduct, monitor and assess listening for the SSC examination.

For teachers:

- Need the motivation to practise and assess listening comprehension in the classroom. They also need to explore readily available and authentic English audio-visual inputs.
- The more the teachers will be able to conduct and assess students’ listening comprehension the more the students can improve their vocabulary, syntactic knowledge, accent, pronunciation, and different grammatical aspects in a communicative way.

References

Author's Biography

S M Akramul Kabir works for the Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education under the Ministry of Education, Bangladesh. He is also attached to Otago University for research. He holds a PhD in Education from the University of Canterbury. He did his MA in TESOL from Macquarie University, Australia. Previously, he obtained both his Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the Aligarh Muslim University. He has taught English to both local and international students for more than 12 years. His areas of research interest include second language acquisition, listening skill for language competence, teacher education, discourse analysis, and ICT in education.