

## **Rethinking Assessment – A Multilingual Perspective**

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### **Abstract**

Assessment is defined as a systematic basis for making inferences about learning and development of the students (Erwin, 1991). In a multilingual classroom, individual and group activities are often narrowly assessed with traditional assessment system which purely focusses on finding the facts (Smith et al., 2004) and generalizing them on the basis of it. As a result, it fails to measure holistic learning outcomes of the students and it becomes more exclusive rather than being inclusive. In this scenario, if multilingual perspective of assessment is adopted, it can measure a child's progress in a holistic way as it takes into account the personal, cultural, social and linguistic diversity of the learners. It has the potentiality to measure facts as well as the ability of the students and makes the assessment system more feasible, effective, holistic and more inclusive by creating equal opportunities to all the learners. This paper aims to discuss how the inclusion of multilingual assessment can make the assessment system holistic and inclusive by creating space for the diverse learners and can bring equality and justice in the assessment system.

**Keywords:** Assessment, Multilingual classroom, Holistic learning

### **Introduction**

One of the most significant disciplinary mechanism of society (Foucault, 1977), assessment is an integral part of the teaching-learning process. Assessment is defined as a systematic basis for making inferences about learning and development of the students (Erwin, 1991). It is an important tool to find out the evidences of students' learning (Cheng and Fox, 2017). Smith et al. (2004) opined that assessment is all about gathering information about students' learning. It is often used for the purpose of making qualitative and quantitative judgement about what students have learned. Elwood (2006) remarked that assessment is a complex cultural activity situated within the relationship of "the learner, the teacher and the assessment task in a social, historical and cultural context in which it is carried out". Sutherland (1996) also says that assessment is a social activity and it can only be understood by taking into account cultural, social, political and economic context of an individual. Hence, it is proved that holistic assessment is impossible without taking into account the students' social, cultural and historical contexts.

But, the traditional classroom assessment system is often rooted on a narrow view of language testing (Shohamy, 2011) and it often ignores the aforesaid social, historical and cultural contexts of the students. It is based on a hierarchical level, where the students are at the bottom

of the hierarchy and the teachers exercise their monopoly over them. On the other hand, the assessment which is practised in the classroom is very much monolingual in nature and it often fails to capture the actual reality of the classroom. It often assesses the students on the basis of some fictional constructs which certainly fails to capture the multilingual resources of the students at a time (Shohamy, 2011). The existing assessment system often penalizes the use of mother tongue (Gorter and Cenoz, 2016) and considers using various languages at a single conversation or translanguaging is an offence (Garcia, 2009). As a result, multilingual students feel problem when they are assessed through dominant languages (Heuge et. al., 2016) and they feel uncomfortable in the classroom, which creates stress on them. Hence, we need an assessment system which is culturally appropriate, sensitive and will accept the diversity of different kinds of learners. Above all, we need an assessment system that will assess the participants differently according to their diverse linguistic background.

### **Need and Significance of the Study**

Assessment is one of the important pedagogical tools in the teaching-learning process (Kirova and Henning, 2013). A good assessment system should always reflect the actual classroom practices and it should never be a single time standard examination process (Short, 1993). An assessment should always include a wide range of tools to measure students' various learning styles, their needs and their existing skills. Above all, it should assess their holistic learning environment. But, the traditional classroom practices often digress itself from this ideology and introduces an assessment system which is hegemonic and creates a power struggle between majority and minority language speakers. This kind of assessment is very much keen to preserve the interests of majority language speakers by excluding the interests of minority language speakers (Gipps, 1999). Gradually, this kind assessment system is decentering the power of the minorities by suppressing their voices and turning them out from the classroom discourses.

On the other hand, it is very much mechanical, assesses the rote memory and generalizes the overall scores at the end of the examination which certainly creates burden for the children.

Hence, we need an assessment system which will cure the ills of the traditional assessment system by rejecting it vehemently. We need an assessment system which will accommodate the diversity of the learners who are coming from diverse linguistic background, will endeavour to measure their actual competencies without letting their linguistic knowledge as the barrier of their learning. This kind of assessment system will be culturally fair, sensitive; will measure the different learning styles, needs and current competencies of the students. This kind of assessment will never treat the minority languages as the barrier; rather it will treat it as a resource in the classroom and will aim to promote it in the classroom. Gradually, it will bring social justice and equality in the classroom. Above all, our assessment system should capture both the formal and informal educational experiences of the students (Smith et. al., 2004) by incorporating a wide range of parameters for assessing the performance of the students. Hence, we are striving towards an assessment system which is holistic, inclusive and will abandon "one size fits all" technique. In this scenario, multilingual assessment is the need of the hour to address the heterogeneity of the multilingual classroom. It is also necessary to capture the wider understanding, awareness and comprehension of the students. Above all, it is necessary to promote equality and social justice in the classroom.

## Literature Review

Gipps (1999) says assessment plays a prominent role in the society. It has both the positive, negative and long term influence on the students. Smith et al. (2004) claimed that assessment have social, affective, cognitive, linguistic and academic consequences over students. Hence, it should be carried out carefully. Shohomy (2011) states that assessment should be conducted in the wider context, since it is the powerful devise to contextualize students' learning experiences. She also remarks that our assessment system is not based on the realities of how languages are learnt and are used in the social praxis, rather the students are assessed on some arbitrary constructs which fail to measure their actual competencies. Simultaneously, it also fails to assess various needs, learning styles and current skills of the students (Short, 1993).

NCFTE (2009), India pointed out that current assessment system should go beyond the syllabus based testing, it should rather make an attempt to assess the social context of education of the child.

While talking about the inclusion of social environment, some scholars talked about including the resources from mother tongue while assessing the students. Gorter and Cenoz (2016) warned that we need to stop penalizing the use of mother tongue in the ESL classroom, rather we should use it as a resource to accelerate child's communication in other resources. Smith et al. (2004) says that the students who are coming from minority language background should be assessed initially in their first language. But their first languages are often ignored in the traditional assessment system (Gipps, 1999). Gonzalez (2012) also says that the first language of the students should not be totally ignored to assess the students as it plays a mediating role in recognizing the competencies in other languages. White and Jin (2011) opine that first language has predictable influence on second language. Hence, we need an assessment system which will assess the entire linguistic repertoire of the students. In the words of Padilla and Borsato (2008), we need to introduce an assessment system which is culturally appropriate and sensitive.

Gipps (1999) lamented that the traditional assessment system is hegemonic which creates power struggle between minority and mainstream language speakers. The assessment system, which is supposed to create an equal chance for everyone, is instead promoting power, culture and interests of the ruling class by marginalizing interests of the minority and claiming it to be inferior to their language and culture. It is gradually legitimizing the role of ruling classes by segregating the linguistic minority students from mainstream education. So, the traditional assessment system becomes a pure device to control the existing power structure. As a result, it develops as an assessment type which is definitely not precise but instead is covert in its nature and includes very few criteria for evaluation which certainly is neither holistic nor exclusive in their approach. Above all, it is very much unrealistic.

Gorter and Cenoz (2016) found out that multilingual speakers often face problems when they are assessed through dominant language and certainly it creates negative impact on the minority student. Elwood and Morphy (2015) said that assessment is a social practice. Hence, it cannot be segregated from cultural, historical and social context of the students; they should become the active participants of the assessment system, rather than merely being an object of

assessment. Sardareh and Saad (2012) opined that assessment system should capture the entire educational experience of the students. It shall promote collaboration, active learning, authenticity and scaffolding in the classroom. Sierens and Avermaet (2014) argued that we need an assessment system which is multilingual and will allow interactions among students. Shohomy (2011) says that though multilingual teaching and learning have been promoted very often in the classroom, there are very few voices to argue in favour of promoting multilingual assessment in the classroom. As a result, multilingual assessment system often got scant attention, which results in misdiagnosing multilingual students (White and Jin, 2011). As a result, it creates negative impact on them.

In this scenario, we need an assessment system which is inclusive, holistic and will provide the learners a chance to include their real life experiences inside the classroom. In India, students come from very diverse linguistic, social and cultural backgrounds and their real life experiences completely differ from each other. Hence, everyone cannot be measured on the single parameter of assessment, rather we need a system which is flexible and should be based on diverse set of parameters, approaches and methods. The present paper will discuss about various approaches of multilingual assessment systems and how these approaches work effectively in the multilingual classroom.

### **Principles of Multilingual Assessment**

**Useful:** An assessment tool is useful to the learners when it can be administered practically in the classroom and it is also feasible with the changing circumstances. A useful assessment tool will also aim towards enhancing knowledge and skills of the students by improving their performances or by giving them the opportunity to learn something new. It will also focus on developing their critical thinking, knowledge and skills and will be useful to the various level of learners irrespective of caste, gender and socio-economic backgrounds. Gradually, this kind of assessment will support their learning by improving their performance, and will finally generate some educative value among the teachers and the students.

**Equitable:** Assessment should give equal chance to all the students by imparting them equal probability of success and it should respond to their individual and unique needs. An assessment tool should always include a wide range of parameters to judge each and every student properly inside the classroom and give each of them the chance to bring out the best within themselves. It should also introduce a system which is fair, appropriate and equitable and is free from the biasness of the dominant culture. When an assessment system is equitable, it exerts positive influence on the students, by minimizing negative influence to an extreme level (Smith et. al, 2004), and gradually it brings about social justice inside the classroom.

**Efficient:** Efficiency is also one of the important criteria to design a good assessment tool for multilingual students. An assessment tool should be efficient enough to capture the knowledge, skills and potential of the diverse learners and judge them accordingly. An efficient tool always portrays a clear picture of students' progress and learning.

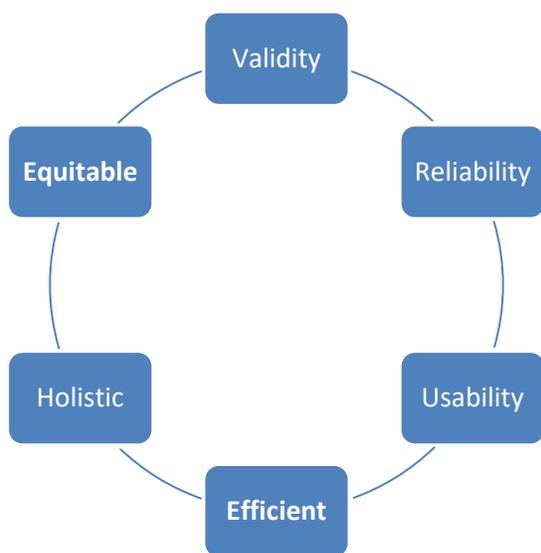
**Reliability:** Measuring the reliability of an assessment tool is necessary to ensure the quality of education. A multilingual assessment tool can be called reliable if it generates

trustworthy and consistent results across various situations. Hence, it relates to the accuracy of a certain measurement tool. A teacher should be assured of the reliability after formulating the assessment tool and before administering it inside the classroom. He can do so by sharing it with other teachers in the school and can include their views regarding the assessment tool. On the other hand, same kind of test can be taken across different examining conditions (Anastasi and Urbina, 2002). If the result is nearly same, then the tool is reliable and can be successfully incorporated inside the classroom. This procedure makes the assessment tool reliable and comprehensive both to the teacher and the students.

**Validity:** It is one of the important components of assessment because it aims to find out how accurately an assessment can answer a particular question. Freeman (2006) says “an index of validity shows the degree to which a test measures what it purports to measure, when compared with accepted criteria”. It also measures the constant error, accuracy and truthfulness of a test score.

**Holistic:** In a multilingual classroom, assessment should be made holistic that aim towards discovering the learning potential of a student, therefore emphasising less on single-point assessment techniques and considering it to be an overall process. Hence, it should intend towards improving sociological and psychological conditions of the students. When a teacher introduces an assessment that aims to capture the holistic development of a child, he encourages the student to think and reflect critically inside the class, provides continuous support to bring out the best in the child, and tries to measure the various levels of knowledge, skills and creativity possessed by the student. Gradually, he tries to capture a full picture of the child’s progress and overall development.

The abovementioned principles are very much important in formulating the assessment tool and these are interconnected to each other. If one principle is reduced from the cycle, it can exert negative influence on the assessment tool. These interrelationships have been presented graphically through Figure: 1.



## Figure 1: Principles of Multilingual Assessment (Source: Author)

### Sociocultural Approach of Assessment

Sociocultural perspective of assessment is essential to measure the competencies of the students who are coming from diverse linguistic background (Smith et al. 2004). This perspective of assessment asserts that assessment do not exists in isolation, rather it can be considered to be a part of broader system of social structures, culture and learning (Jill, 2009). Sociocultural assessment breaks the limitations of traditional assessment system and considers assessment as the continuous, ongoing and two-way process. It is based on the assumptions that individual's use of language is inseparable from their social and cultural background. Hence, language assessment should be done by taking into account the social, cultural, historical, economic and political backgrounds of the students (Gipps 1999).

Sociocultural cultural assessment is based on the premise that a student learns through social activities. They construct their personal understanding through interactions and negating meaning with others. Here, culture also plays an important role in formulating his knowledge. Hence, assessment should capture the unique talents of an individual in a social context and one student should be interpreted on the basis of it. It also considers that teaching is a process of assisting. Hence, affective teaching will always aim towards engaging both the learners and teachers to trace out various skills of the students and it is never an one way process. In sociocultural assessment, a teacher assists a student to contextualize his knowledge through various social situations and try to correlate it with the assessment activities to bring out the best in him in the assessment process. In this way, he attempts to make the assessment system a two-way process where both the teacher and the learners engage each other in the classroom to assess the students. The assessment is done to trace out various skills of the students. The students receive feedback at two levels – (1.) peer-to-peer (2.) teacher-to-learner. They both reinforce each other to construct a social version of reality (Smith et al. 2004) and interpret it with their colours. This kind of assessment system makes them an active participation in the classroom and also creates an environment of collaboration, active learning, authenticity and scaffolding. It gives the learners freedom to assess each other and they start learning various social skills by assessing each other (Sardareh and Saad, 2012). Above all, it attempts to evaluate child's entire communicative abilities within their wider environment (White and Jin, 2011).

### Translanguaging Approach of Assessment

Translanguaging is said to be a hybrid process of languaging or it is the process of hovering between, across and among languages (Garcia, 2009). Various scholars say translanguaging is the natural phenomenon in the multilingual classroom (Canagarajah, 2011; Garcia, 2009). Hence, it should be reflected in the assessment system as the latter is the process of capturing the happenings of the classroom realities. Gorter and Cenoz (2016) protested vehemently against the act of separating languages and opined that multilingualism should be used as a resource in the assessment system. Canagarajah (2011) also opined that translanguaging also can be used as a strategy to tap students' multilingual skills and language proficiency. Lopez et al. (2017) says translanguaging as a process of assessment is necessary to assess a complex and new languaging practices in the classroom because it helps them to

demonstrate what they know and can do even if their English language and literary skills are not fully developed.

There are various strategies of translanguaging approach of assessment in a multilingual classroom. Canagarajah (2011) talks about including emic perspectives of translanguaging assessment process, where a student will be told to write the content using translanguaging process and he can evaluate it by himself. Here, the teacher will just provide him the minimum assistance to find out his faults or it can be given to some peers to assess. Lopez et al. (2017) have described two principles of translanguaging practices. These are – (a) To allow students to use various linguistic repertoires in a single assessment practice; (b) To engage both the students and the teachers in the assessment process. In the first process, when students are allowed to translanguage inside the classroom, they draw resources from multiple languages and demonstrate their personal knowledge and skills both in their mother tongue or the target language. Gradually, it gives the examiners flexibility to draw resources from the students' entire linguistic repertoire and assess the content area produced by them. In the second process, both the students and the teachers are engaged effectively in the content assessment process. When one peer assesses the other, it also promotes an environment of collaboration and new language practice. Gradually, it brings flexibility to the assessment system and students get chance to execute their knowledge in their native language. Gorter and Cenoz, (2016) said translanguaging can be done by mixing various languages and students can be judged on the basis of their spellings, writing skills and structural elements, language-specific approximation etc. In this way, it assesses their various linguistic competencies. Lepoz et. al. (2017) says students can be allowed to code-switch and code-mix in the language classroom and an evaluator can assess their content knowledge at the end of the programme.

Translanguaging obviously promotes an alternative approach to assessment to the multilingual students (Gorter and Cenoz, 2016). It is not only relevant to the minority speakers but also just to the majority students because it provides a definite yardstick of assessment to the all language speakers (Gorter, 2016). Above all, it creates an adaptive linguistic environment which helps them to make a bridge between their native language and school language. Lepoz et al. (2017) says this process of assessment is more useful than the traditional concept of assessment and it has positive influence on the students.

### **Dynamic Assessment**

Dynamic assessment is based on the discussion that classroom assessment should support students' learning by opening a new direction of formal testing (Poehner et al. 2017). It is claimed to be a shared activity, which aims to measure what a learner can do by himself and what is his level of performance after providing him the assistance (Lantolf and Poehner, 2004). Hence, it always aims to promote development and cooperation among the students.

It is mainly based on the works of Vygotsky's (1978) "Zone of Proximal Development" which strongly believes in enhancing the knowledge of children by the support of MKO (more knowledgeable other). In this assessment, a student is tested to diagnose the problem, assistance is provided to learners to improve his performance and an examination is conducted to reassess the performance. When a student improves significantly in his/her examination, the assistance is

withheld; gradually a teacher encourages him/her to become a self-dependent learner. When the learners become self-dependent, they engage themselves comfortably in the assessment system, where they (student-to-student, student-to-teacher) provide feedback, share knowledge with each other and build up an environment of cooperative learning and assessment.

In the dynamic assessment system, both assessment and teaching is done by integrating it with each other or by one substituting the other (Poehner et al. 2017). This kind of assessment follows “test-teach-retest” model and it is often used as a diagnostic therapy because assessment and diagnosis of students’ problem are done together and they are given feedback on the basis of it. It is a holistic process which monitors a child’s performance and outcomes at regular level. This kind of assessment aims to diagnose the students’ actual needs and tries to fulfil the needs by providing them regular interventions.

This kind of assessment focuses on development of an individual both at “intra” and “inter” level. The assessment is done at intra level when a teacher diagnoses a student’s problem and gives feedback based on it and it is done at inter level when all the peers and teachers give positive feedback to each other by helping and supporting each other. It makes the learning and assessment environment holistic by bringing up the best in a child, and promotes an environment where the students actively take part in the examination system. Gradually, it reduces anxiety among the students by making the learners self-dependent, reflective, and creative. It also promotes an environment where they understand their potentiality well and work on it (Gajek, 2011).

In this assessment system, a student is assessed regularly, he/she is given feedback and the performance is monitored based on it. The teacher maintains a portfolio to keep a record of the child’s continuous and cumulative performance. This kind of assessment takes into account a student’s cultural and linguistic background before making any judgment of their performance level. It can also be considered the most reliable method of assessment since it is used to bridge the ethnographic, linguistic and knowledge differences of the students (Ukrantz et al., 2000). Gipps (1999) says that this kind of assessment is helpful to find out the information about individual learning strategies.

One of the major limitations of this type of assessment system is that it is time consuming and requires intensive support from the examiners. But, it does not follow any rigid pattern and hence gives flexibility to the examiners to design their assessment procedure accordingly. Above all, it mainly attempts to fulfil the needs of individuals by giving importance to their requirements.

### **Multilingual Assessment – An Overview**

Multilingual assessment is necessary as an alternative assessment system in the twenty-first century. This kind of assessment certainly challenges the “one size fits all” technique. By implementing the various approaches (socio-cultural assessment, translanguaging, dynamic assessment) of multilingual assessment, the following things can be promoted –

1. Students can willingly participate in assessment system which reduces their anxiety and burden.

2. It creates responsibility for self-assessment.
3. It creates an environment of interactions among teachers, students and parents, which certainly creates a collaborative learning and a student-friendly assessment environment inside the classroom.
4. This kind of assessment makes the students independent and they gradually learn to take charge of their own learning.
5. It promotes the students' ability to think critically and make them reflective of their own learning.

Multilingual assessment can be done in threefold ways. First, self-assessment can be promoted among the students where they can assess their own learning by reflecting the study procedure and judging their knowledge critically. Here, a student can choose his/her remedy according to the introspection. Second, peer-assessment can be done where one student will write something and it can be given to his peers for critical evaluation, who will in turn provide positive reinforcement for further improvement of his friend. It improves both their learning skills, motivates them and develops learner autonomy. Third, a teacher assessment can be promoted which is a friendly environment of assessment and creativity. Generally, triadic assessment (self-peer-teacher) can be promoted together to make it a holistic process.

### **Conclusion**

Assessment is key to any educational process. Hence, it should be fair. Multilingual assessment provides an assessment system which is useful, holistic, meaningful, equitable and inclusive. It also encourages the stakeholders to bring the people into the assessment system where the culture and social background never become a barrier to the students; rather it is used as resources. This kind of assessment never accepts teacher's monopoly; rather an environment is promoted where all the stakeholders cooperate with each other to promote an equitable assessment environment. Hence, multilingual assessment can unfold a new paradigm for learning and assessment in the classroom of twenty-first century.

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