

# Testing English at Tertiary Level: An Overview

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## Abstract

The universities in Bangladesh, with their autonomous academic systems, formulate, design, and introduce their own course curricula and syllabi for teaching English. Here, the testing methods are crucial-for the success or failure of teaching or learning is determined by testing the students on their acquired knowledge of language. Unfortunately, the proficiency that the learners achieve at graduate and postgraduate levels is painfully disappointing. Students can hardly write a discourse in acceptable English, nor can they speak the language fluently and correctly. This failure is due not only to inefficient teaching methods but also to outdated and century-old testing systems. For language courses, the learners are usually tested on their typical knowledge of some set items of language, especially; they are tested on reading and writing abilities rather than listening and speaking skills. For literature courses, no skill-based test is taken. So, the present research is an endeavor on the existing testing methods to find out the drawbacks and failures of testing English at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. The researcher proposes some new and effective methods of testing which, if considered and introduced, can substantially contribute to upgrading the teaching and testing standards of these higher education institutes.

**Keywords:** Acquisition, backwash, communication, equipment, performance, testing

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## Introduction

Both teaching and testing are so closely related that it is virtually impossible to work in one field without the other. Language testing is central to language teaching. “A test, in plain words, is a method of measuring a person’s ability or knowledge in a given domain” (Brown 384). It ensures goals for language teaching and it monitors, for both teachers and students, success in reaching those goals. It provides a methodology for experiment and investigation in both language teaching and learning/acquisition. The standard of teaching is measured by the standard of testing. A good classroom test will help to locate the crucial areas of difficulty encountered by the class or by the individual learner. The test enables the teacher to ascertain which parts of the language program have been found difficult by the class. Thus the teacher can evaluate the pragmatic values of the syllabus as well as the methods and materials he is using. A well-constructed classroom test will provide the learners with an opportunity to unveil their latent potentialities. The purpose of teaching English in the universities is to help learners to acquire the four basic skills of English-listening, speaking, reading, and writing. To test one’s proficiency in English, an accurate testing system should be developed. With the change of time, a lot of instruments have been invented to assess the language acquisition of the learners but we are yet to use them. Language laboratories are hardly found in our universities but without them, implementation of equipment-based testing systems is not possible. Most of the tests are paper-based and administered under sub-standard conditions. Answer sheets are returned to the teachers for scoring and analysis. Although the common target is to teach the four skills to the students, little attention is paid to teaching or testing the two important language skills, i.e., listening and speaking.

## Computer Assisted Language Testing (CALT)

“Tests that are administered at computer terminals, or on personal computers, are called computer-assisted tests” (Brown 45). Today, computer technology is used enthusiastically in developed countries to assess the achievement of the learners accurately. So it is regarded as an inseparable part of the education system. “CALT is growing and reshaping, innovating and revolutionizing the field of language assessment and testing by adapting itself successfully with the new challenges in technology and assessment practice”(Pathan 34).It diminishes the administrative and logistical burdens in case of testing as it helps to transmit test materials electronically within seconds. “CALT encompasses computer-adaptive testing (CAT), the use of multimedia in language test tasks, and automatic response analysis” (Chapelle and Douglas 107). It provides more precise and shorter results than traditional paper-and-pencil tests. According to José Noijons, CALT is “an integrated procedure in which language performance is elicited and assessed with the help of a computer” (38). The Educational Testing Service (ETS) has administered the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) by computer in

many parts of the world. The use of computer technology has allowed ETS to introduce a new variety of selected-response type items not easily presented in the paper-and-pencil format. The best known formal procedure is the Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI). It measures language proficiency of the learners more effectively and appropriately in practical life. CALT ensures tests that are suitable for each learner. Language tests should be conducted through online process, video-based, and face-to-face assessments with high levels of validity and reliability. Pathan has given some advantages of CALT:

1. CALT provides self-pacing
2. CALT requires less time to finish
3. CALT helps in overcoming administrative and logistic burdens
4. CALT assures enhanced authenticity and greater interaction
5. CALT provides more accurate assessment of the test-taker's language and it guarantees immediate test results and feedback
6. CALT creates a more positive attitude toward tests (34-36)

## Research Methodology

This study is a critical evaluation of existing English language testing systems at the tertiary level in Bangladesh. So it tries to focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the testing systems and give recommendations to upgrade the existing testing systems. The researcher has followed the content analysis, observation, and survey methods to complete this work. So this is a qualitative and quantitative research. To clarify the concept, books, journals, articles, research papers, review papers, and question papers of different universities on language tests which are related to this research have been studied. As it is an empirical study of English language tests at the tertiary level, the researcher prepared two sets of questionnaires for both teachers and students. Before distribution, model questionnaires were sent to specialists in the field concerned. Incorporating all valuable comments and changes suggested by them, the researcher made the final versions of the questionnaires. These were distributed among 50 teachers and 220 students of Dhaka University, Rajshahi University, Islamic University, Kushtia University, Khulna University, and Northern University Bangladesh. Of the total number of questionnaires received from the respondents, 208 from students and 43 from teachers were found valid. Simple random sampling has been applied for this study. To analyze data, the researcher has used the Likert Scale with its five-point items. The Likert Scale allows the respondent to specify an opinion on statements which relate to the subject being researched. The data have been analyzed according to the objectives and findings portrayed and arranged in various tables. For the sake of precision and easy calculations, the researcher has divided the choices in three groups and given them the following patterns accordingly: Strongly Agree+ Agree= Agree (1st group); Undecided=2nd group and Disagree +Strongly Disagree= Disagree (3rd group). The

data are presented and analyzed through visual tables. Each of the tables is then followed by a short analysis of the data.

### Analysis and Evaluation of Primary Data from Teachers

Data Analysis: (N= 43)

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	The testing methods for English in different universities are outdated and need immediate change.	10	23.3	7	16.3	26	60.5

Table 1: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 1st statement

According to Table1, of the total number of teachers, 10 disagree, 7 are undecided, and 26 agree to the statement. This means that 23.3% teachers disagree, 16.3% are undecided, and 60.5% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
2	The existing English language testing methods are effective for developing language abilities.	30	69.8	5	11.6	8	18.6

Table 2: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 2nd statement

According to Table 2, 30 teachers disagree, 5 are undecided, and 8 agree to the statement. This means that of the teachers, 69.8% disagree, 11.6% are undecided, and 18.6% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
3	The existing English language testing methods are effective only for developing reading and writing skills.	6	13.6	5	11.6	32	74.4

Table 3: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 3rd statement

According to Table 3, 6 teachers disagree, 5 are undecided, and 32 agree to the statement. This means that 13.9% teachers disagree, 11.6% are undecided, and 74.4% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
4	The idea of communicative language teaching is up-to-date and essential.	9	20.9	5	11.6	29	67.4

Table 4: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 4th statement

According to Table 4, 9 teachers disagree, 5 are undecided, and 29 agree to the statement. This means that 20.9% teachers disagree, 11.6% are undecided, and 67.4% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
5	Language testing items should be more practical than theoretical.	8	18.6	3	7	32	74.4

Table 5: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 5th statement

According to Table 5, 8 teachers disagree, 3 are undecided, and 32 agree to the statement. This means that of the teachers, 18.6% disagree, 7% are undecided, and 74.4% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
6	Technology based communicative language testing system should be introduced to evaluate students' language abilities.	3	7	2	4.7	38	88.4

Table 6: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 6th statement

According to Table 6, 3 teachers disagree, 2 are undecided, and 38 agree to the statement. This means that of the teachers, 7.0% disagree, 4.7% are undecided, and 88.4% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
7	The language skills covered by the syllabuses and testing system have little relevance to the professional needs of the students in practical life.	10	23.3	5	11.6	28	65.1

Table 7: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 7th statement

According to Table 7, 10 teachers disagree, 5 are undecided, and 28 agree to the statement. This means that 23.3% teachers disagree, 11.6% are undecided, and 65.1% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
8	The main targets for designing the existing English syllabuses and testing system are to enhance students' grammatical knowledge.	5	12	3	7	35	82

Table 8: Frequencies and percentages of teachers on the 8th statement

According to Table 8, 5 teachers disagree, 3 are undecided, and 35 agree to the statement. This means that 12% teachers disagree, 7% are undecided, and 82% agree to the statement.

## Analysis of Teachers' Questionnaire

On the objective of learning English, 82% teachers hold the opinion that the existing English syllabi and testing systems aim at developing students' grammatical knowledge only. About 65.1% teachers are of the opinion that the language items covered by the syllabi and our testing system have little relevance to the professional needs of the students in their practical life. The tests are related to the development of the student's reading and writing skills, but listening and speaking skills are largely neglected. The teachers say that the purpose of testing of English courses should be to test the learner's abilities and command in all the four language skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking), especially the student's use of English to understand other people and other cultures as well as to express himself/herself. Only 18.6% teachers support our present testing system. Again, 67.4% teachers strongly support that communicative competence in English is the demand of the twenty-first century. They strongly believe that the communicative

competence in English should be the prime goal of English Language Teaching (ELT) at the undergraduate level. On the basis of the teachers' valuable suggestions, the researcher can conclude that the teaching items and testing systems should be closely related and complimentary to each other. As testing plays a vital role in determining the potential language abilities of the learners, it calls for a fresh definition and structuring. The survey shows that most of the teachers are in favor of a change in the field of testing language abilities, particularly in listening and speaking. Maximum teachers (88.4%) think technology-based testing systems can be a pragmatic substitute in this case.

### Analysis and Evaluation of Primary Data from Students

Data Analysis: (N= 208)

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
1	Literature courses are more effective than language courses for learning English.	147	70.7	32	15.4	29	13.9

Table 9: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 1st statement

According to Table 9, 147 students disagree, 32 are undecided, and 29 agree to the statement. This means that 70.7% students disagree, 15.4% are undecided, and 13.9% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
2	Language courses are more effective than literature courses for learning English.	35	16.8	23	11.1	150	72.1

Table 10: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 2nd statement

According to Table 10, 35 students disagree, 23 are undecided, and 150 agree to the statement. This means that 16.8% students disagree, 11.1% are undecided, and 72.1% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
3	The existing testing systems contribute very little to language learning abilities.	52	25	28	13.5	128	61.5

Table11: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 3rd statement

According to Table 11, 52 students disagree, 28 are undecided, and 128 agree to the statement. This means that, of the students, 25% disagree, 13.5% are undecided, and 61.5% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
4	The existing testing methods promote reading and writing abilities rather than listening and speaking skills.	8	3.8	5	2.4	195	93.8

Table 12: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 4th statement

According to Table12, 8 students disagree, 5 are undecided, and 195 agree to the statement. This means that, of the students, 3.8% disagree, 2.4% are undecided, and 93.8% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
5	Technology-basedcommunicative language testing systems are more effective for language learning.	8	3.8	14	6.7	186	89.4

Table 13: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 5th statement

According to Table13, 8 students disagree, 14 are undecided, and 186 agree to the statement. This means that 3.8% students disagree, 6.7% are undecided, and 89.4% agree to the statement.

No.	Statement	Disagree		Undecided		Agree	
		F	%	F	%	F	%
6	Current testing system is only for passing the examination and getting certificates.	33	15.9	34	16.3	141	67.8

Table 14: Frequencies and percentages of students on the 6th statement

According to Table 14, 33 students disagree, 34 are undecided, and 141 agree to the statement. This means that, of the students, 15.9% disagree, 16.3% are undecided, and 67.8% agree to the statement.

## Analysis of Students' Questionnaire

In their response to the first statement on whether literature courses are more effective than language courses for learning English, 70.7% respondents disagreed. In their second opinion on the priority of language courses over literature courses, 72.1% agreed that language courses are more effective than literature courses. Most of them (61.5%) believe that the existing tests contribute very little to language learning abilities. 93.8% students think that the existing testing methods promote reading and writing abilities rather than listening and speaking skills. They (89.4%) argue that technology-based communicative language testing systems are more effective for language learning. Most of the learners (67.8%) believe that the current testing system is only for suitable for passing examinations and getting certificates. In their opinion on the ELT-oriented testing system, they believe the teachers can more profitably motivate the students to develop and consolidate communicative competence.

## Criteria for an Ideal Language Test

An ideal test should be formed with some important elements and meet the essential criteria for testing. These criteria include:

### 1. Validity

Test validity ensures the degree to which a test actually measures what it is intended to measure. “Validity,” in the words of Robert Lado, “refers to whether or not a test measures what test validity refers to the soundness of the interpretations of test scores for a particular purpose” (330).

### 2. Test reliability

Test reliability means the stability of test scores. A test cannot measure anything accurately unless it measures consistently. A reliable test score will be consistent across different characteristics of the testing situation.

### 3. Practicality

Practicality is the most important consideration or characteristic for an ideal test. Effectiveness and acceptance of a test largely depends on practical considerations. Tests should be economical and practicable in terms of time and cost.

### 4. Interactiveness

The interactiveness of a given language test task can be characterized in terms of the ways in which the test taker's areas of language knowledge, metacognitive strategies, topical knowledge, and affective schemata are engaged by the test task.

### 5. Impact

Another quality of tests is their impact on society and educational systems, and upon the individuals within those systems. The impact of test use operates at two

levels, a micro level in terms of the individuals who are affected by the particular test use, and a macro level in terms of the educational system or society.



Figure 1: Impact of Testing  
Source: Bachman and Palmer 30

## 6. Planning

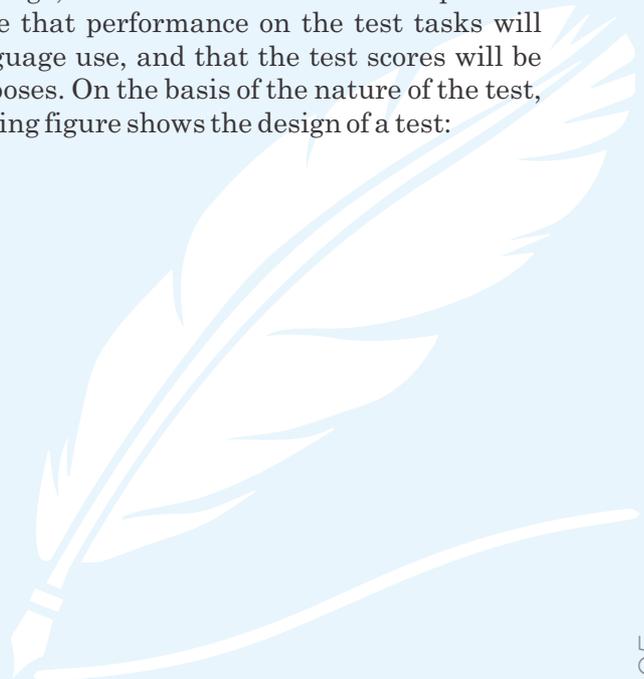
Planning involves deciding how to utilize language knowledge, topical knowledge, and effective schemata to complete the test task successfully.

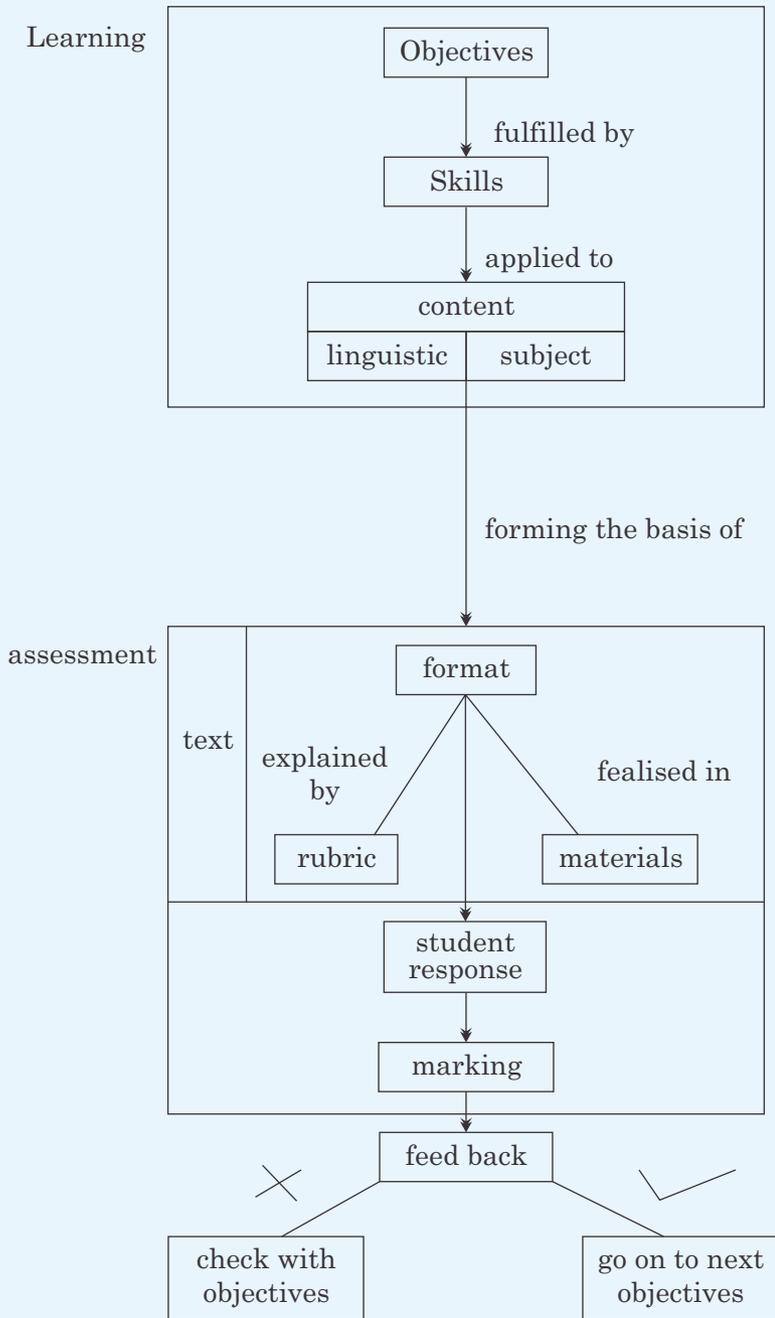
## Test development

Test development is the entire process of creating and using a test, beginning with its initial conceptualization and design, and culminating in one or more archived tests, and the results of their use. So test development may be organized conceptually into three stages: design, operationalization, and administration.

### 1. Design

The success of a test depends on its proper design. The more accurately this can be drawn up the better. Test design justifies the interpretations we make on the basis of language test scores and continues with the gathering of evidence to support our intended interpretations. In the design stage, we describe in detail the components of the test that will enable us to ensure that performance on the test tasks will correspond as closely as possible to language use, and that the test scores will be maximally useful for their intended purposes. On the basis of the nature of the test, the design should be different. The following figure shows the design of a test:





Text design  
Source: (Harrison, 17)

## 2. Operationalization

Operationalization is the process using the components of the design statement that is produced in the design stage to guide us in developing test tasks, a blueprint for the test as a whole, and actual tests.

## 3. Test administration

Fair administration is the precondition of good testing. The best test may be unreliable and invalid if it is not well administered. Preparing the testing environment, arranging the place of testing, material and equipment, personnel, time of testing, and physical conditions are the crucial factors of test administration. The physical conditions under which we administer the test include a spacious, quiet, well-lit, uncluttered room, with least disturbances from outside. Advanced preparation is essential to ensure successful test administration.

## Backwash Effect

The effect of testing on teaching and learning is called backwash. The effect of a test could be positive or negative. If a test has positive backwash effect, it will exert a good influence on the learning and teaching that takes place before the test. Negative backwash, in contrast, has a negative or bad effect and hinders the process of teaching and learning. Davies says “the good test is an obedient servant since it follows and shapes the teaching”(5). Ideal language testing practice should ensure positive backwash effect from tests.

## Testing Literature Oriented Courses

Most courses in English departments for undergraduate and masters programs are literature oriented. But no test is usually taken by the teachers to assess acquisition of language skills or grammatical aspects based on literary texts. Traditionally, the thematic and stylistic sides of the selected texts are tested. It is real that “one of the hallmarks of literary texts” is to provide an ample scope to explore the multidimensional use of language, which facilitates language learning in the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). These can, of course, play a vital role in teaching the four skills if practical measures, such as role playing, group discussion, pair discussion, debate, stage performance, linguistics, and basic grammatical functions are introduced in case of testing. Unfortunately, literature courses are taught more for aesthetic and philosophical purposes than for teaching the four skills. Douglas Brown says, “In short, wherever you look in the literature today, you will find reference to the communicative nature of language classes” (244). And in this regard, literary texts provide a huge opportunity to learn numerous usages of language according to the context. Lazar emphasizes, “Literature provides wonderful source material for eliciting strong emotional responses from our students. Using literature in the classroom is a fruitful way of involving the learner as a whole person, and provides excellent opportunities for the learners to express their personal opinions, reactions and feelings” (3). There is a

well-knit bridge between literature and language as literature uses language which is not amorphous, but is rather structured or organized in such a way that gives a literary text a particular shape. Literature helps to develop students' interpretative abilities. Lazar says, "Literature is a particularly good source for developing students' abilities to infer meaning and to make interpretations" (19). It is clear that literature is one of the best sources of learning language but it is true that there is no acceptable testing process by which the skill based learning will be introduced.

In the following, a matrix is given to test different skills of the learners on literary courses. If this structure is followed in case of testing literary texts, skills based learning will be ensured.

**Matrix showing correspondence between program learning outcomes and course learning outcomes in literary courses.**

**Course Learning Outcomes**

	Program Learning Outcomes	Knowledge Skills						Cognitive Skills				Interpersonal Skills and Responsibility				Communication, Information Technology and Numerical Skills				Psychomotor Skills			
		1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4	1	2	3	4
Knowledge Skills	Mention the modern trends of literature and linguistics																						
	Define grammatical, morphological, and syntactic rules of English language																						
	Recognize linguistic and literary styles and expressions used in English language.																						
	Mention the historical and cultural aspects of English-speaking communities																						
	Specify the different aspects of other human disciplines that help staff members in their majors																						





giver may set questions from 1-6, Cognitive Skills 1-6, Interpersonal Skills 1-4, Communication Skills 1-4, and Psycho-Motor Skills 1-4. So the test items cover all the course learning outcomes and program learning outcomes. We have to follow this matrix to test the learners on literary courses so that the students are able to develop their language skills.

## Recommendations and Conclusion

The analysis of testing systems of different universities and the survey results above indicate that the traditional testing of English language in Bangladesh is defective and lacks the qualities of validity, reliability, and practicality. The major opinions of both teachers and students are in favor of an immediate and thorough change. The reasons for this, in all cases, are related closely to students' needs and teachers' perceptions of the contexts in which they work. The data suggest that students want to achieve a good command in all the four skills which the existing testing systems do not ensure. Both teachers and learners are aware of the disadvantages of the traditional testing methods. So we strongly believe that teaching and testing can only meet the challenges of the 21st century if we introduce technology assisted language testing in all public and private universities and institutes in Bangladesh. Unfortunately, the existing testing methods of English language at universities in Bangladesh seriously lack many of these basic requirements for standard testing. There is inconsistency between the course contents and testing systems. Little correspondence can be found between the objectives of teaching English as stated in the curriculum and the proficiency that the learners gain when they complete their courses. So there must be something seriously wrong with both our teaching and testing methods. As the Departments of English in Bangladesh usually integrate both literature and language courses in their programs, there should be a proper distribution of these courses. There is no harm in that. The literature courses may also play a vital role in teaching English, if these are properly designed and efficiently taught. In that case we have to ensure learning language through literature.

Therefore, on the basis of the findings of the empirical study and other theories and strategies discussed above, the researcher would like to make certain recommendations for the implementation of standard language tests in Bangladesh:

1. The century-old testing systems should be replaced by CALT.
2. To develop the learners' communicative performance in English, emphasis should be given on free writing, conversations, presentations, debates, extempore speech, set speech, pair discussions, group discussions, seminars, workshops, and so on.
3. The tests of literature-oriented courses should be designed in such a way that the test givers can examine the language and linguistics acquisition of

the learners and, if it is possible, the given matrix can be used.

4. An English environment should be established within the classroom, at the department, and on campus, so that all types of communication between the teachers and learners, and among the learners themselves, are carried out in English, i.e., artificial acquisition atmosphere should be introduced.
5. The syllabi should be task-based and student-centered, and teachers should act as facilitators. Student-teacher relationship should be friendly and co-operative.
6. Test validity, acceptability, and reliability must be ensured.
7. The Government should establish a National English Language Institute (NELI) where university teachers (particularly, lecturers and assistant professors) will be placed to complete a ten-week intensive (40 hours per week) course. They will be required to speak no other language but English and take classes on all four skills. The training should be conducted by native speakers of English.
8. Language testing items should be more practical than theoretical.
9. As test administration of the universities is not free from bias, free and fair test administration should be ensured.
10. The test items should be skills-oriented in both literature and language courses.
11. Test related equipment should be available for equipment based testing. These are word processors, multimedia projectors, tape recorders, video recorders, computers, machine scoring devices, computer discs, and so on.
12. The test givers should encourage the development of listening skills and the use of listening strategies by using the target language to conduct classroom business: making announcements, assigning homework, describing the content and format of tests. Listener-speaker rapport should be maintained to ensure standard listening tests.
13. The test givers should carry out the speaking and listening tests in a quiet room with good acoustics.
14. The test items should be selected according to the level of the students.
15. To ensure high scorer reliability of a writing test, the tasks should be restricted or guided and the test-takers should be given little or no choice of tasks so that the test performances of different test-takers can easily be compared and evaluated.

In this research work, the researcher has tried to identify the essential weaknesses of testing methods in the English Departments of our country, and stressed the need for change, keeping pace with international standard testing systems.

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