Educational Decision Makers' Views on Language Learning and Teacher Development

Vijayapadma Srinivas

Senior Assessment Services Manager – South Asia, Cambridge English Language Assessment

Email: vijaya@cambridgeenglish.in

Background: Setting the Context

The study described in this paper was conducted by Cambridge English Language Assessment, and explores views of educational decision makers in South Asia on various matters related to language learning and teacher development. Views of educational decision makers are critical as they are the people who would be informing future decisions and policies in the South Asian educational arena.

The data was gathered from the participants of the Cambridge English South Asia partnership summit 2016, hosted by Cambridge English Language Assessment and Cambridge University Press, both departments of the University of Cambridge, along with Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry (FICCI).The aim of the summit, was to bring together key policy makers from different sectors-government, academia and industry, to share knowledge, and through developing partnerships, find ways to transform education.

Sample Population

This data was collected through the administration of questionnaires to all 117 attendees of the summit and interviews with selected participants. Attendees of the summit include:

-strategic stakeholders e.g. national and state government representatives, employers, business and employers' associations such as FICCI, NASSCOM etc... 24 of the participants were of this category

-technical stakeholders e.g. educational institutions, professional bodies, training and training content providers and skills/ employability assessment vendors. 97 of the participants belonged to this category.

Methodology

We wanted to understand a sample of the population's collective views on various aspects related to language learning and teacher development. However, we also wanted to explore the reasoning and thoughts behind these views. In order to get an in-depth understanding of these perspectives, we opted to use mixed methods of research. In order to develop a more complete understanding of the research problem by obtaining different but complementary data, we conducted

convergent parallel mixed method research design, where qualitative and quantitative data were collected simultaneously but the analysis of the two strands of data was conducted independently of each other. The interpretation of the results drew on both strands to build a richer picture and understanding of the findings.

Instruments

Quantitative Data Collection: Questionnaire: The quantitative data was wider in scale than the qualitative data collection. This data was collected through the administration of questionnaires to all the attendees of the summit i.e. 117 participants. The questionnaires consisted of 8 questions, 7 were close-ended and 1 was open-ended. The close ended questions consisted of multiple-choice questions or used a 5-point Likert scale.

Qualitative Data Collection: Interviews: The qualitative data was collected by way of one-on-one interviews lasting 30-60 mins.13 interviews were conducted with a balance of decision makers from higher educational institutions, schools and government organisations. Participants who showed an interest to be part of the research were engaged in an in-depth interview. The instruments included a semi-structured interview guide, described by Hoepfl (1997:52) as 'a list of questions or general topics that the interviewer wants to explore during each interview'.

Both the survey and interview sought stake-holders' perceptions on the investigative points such as:

- Importance of students' English language/ communication skill and who the responsibility to develop this lies with

- Factors affecting the quality of teaching in schools and colleges as well as methods of improving teaching standards

- Challenges to English language/ communication skills development programmes

- Relevance and usefulness of various English language initiatives and best tool to measure progress in such programmes

Data Analysis

The quantitative data i.e. results of the questionnaires were tabulated and analysed. Closed-ended questions were tabulated and subsequently analysed using descriptive statistics. The open-ended questions were studied for possible patterns.

The qualitative data i.e. the interviews were analysed for emerging ideas and varied perspectives. This data was also reviewed for information that supported the conclusions arising from the quantitative data.

Results and Discussions

The results below show the summary and discussions about the perceptions of the respondents.

Perceptions about the role of English language skills in education and employment

56% of the respondents saw language/ communication skills as important factors

contributing towards students' growth and success (further education and employment).Some illustrative comments by educational decision-makers on how language skills affect success in higher education:

We find that the students who are very good in communicating in English get employment easily. Even after getting employment, the speed with which they go up the ladder depends on how good they are in communication. (Dr. Anand A Samuel Vice Chancellor, VIT, Vellore)

Because we are a multi lingual nation therefore the only common language we have is English and therefore English becomes important. (Dr Sunil Rai Vice Chancellor, - The Assam Kaziranga University)

Perceptions about the role of English language skills in education and employment

The results suggest that the primary responsibility of students' English language/ communication skills development lies with primary schools followed by secondary schools. The survey results can be further explained by the comments such as:

Skills can be easily developed at the school level where children can be clearly molded and taught. (Dr Vandana Lulla, Director and Head and Principal Poddar Group of International Schools, Poddar Group of Institutions)

Perceptions about the factors that impact the quality of teaching in schools and colleges

Results clearly show that language/ communication skills were distinctly identified as the factor having the highest impact on the quality of teaching in schools and colleges. Teaching methodology is also seen as having a substantial impact. Analysis of the comments from the interviews show that one of the reasons for this perception was that the message may be lost due to lack of English language and communication skills:

For teachers I am very confident that communication skill is very important because we have seen teachers with very good knowledge but are unable to communicate. They are not able to become successful teachers. But there are mediocre teachers who can communicate much better and can reach the students very well. Ultimately what you know is not as important as what you communicate. (Prof Mahesappa H, Vice Chancellor, Visvesvarya Technological University, Belagavi)

Perceptions about the methods to improve the teaching standards in educational institutions

The results show that peer support and learning is seen as the most effective way to improve teaching standards in an educational institution followed by rigorous recruitment processes.Comments during the interviews show that they strongly felt that continuous support is essential e.g.:

It's definitely the responsibility of the school, once you employ someone, to see how best can you support that teacher, how best can you make sure that she moves on from an

average teacher to a good teacher and then moves on to a very good teacher and then to an outstanding teacher. (Dr Vandana Lulla, Director and Head and Principal Poddar Group of International Schools, Poddar Group of Institutions).

Perceptions about the biggest challenges to English language/communication skills development programs in educational institutions with regards to learners

42% of the respondents felt that learners' lack of understanding about the need for communication skills development programs is the biggest challenge closely followed by 34% of the respondents indicating that it is the lack of motivation and fear of failure. Comments during the interviews further supported this e.g.:

Language learning takes a lot of time and a lot of effort which needs a lot of motivation. (Prof Premendu Prakash Mathur, Vice Chancellor, Kalinga Institute of Industrial Technology)

Perceptions about the biggest challenges to English language/communication skills development programs in educational institutions with regards to teachers

The results of the questionnaire indicate that teachers' focus on and pressure to complete the curriculum is the biggest challenge closely followed by teaching/training capability. Comments made by educational decision-makers in the interviews further substantiate these results:

Schools are driven by government policies. If it's a part of the syllabus then we are responsible for it. (Mr Amalan S.J, Chief Skill Officer, Visvesvarya Technological Institute)

The biggest challenge that we are facing and will be facing in the days to come is definitely to get the right kind of people. It's about people if you have to make progress. (Dr Vandana Lulla, Director and Head Principal, Poddar Group of International Schools, Poddar Group of Institutions)

Perceptions about the biggest challenges to English language/communication skills development programs in educational institutions with regards to stake-holders (parents and management)

Results shows that the lack of understanding about the need for communication skills development programs as well as the additional effort required to conduct/ participate in such programmes are the biggest challenges. Comments made by decision-makers during the interviews further highlighted challenges:

While we would like international standards it's very expensive and I don't think we can insist on it. (Prof Rajiva Wijesinha, Chairman, Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, Sri Lanka)

They have not yet realised the importance of being good in communication skills. Dr. Anand A Samuel, Vice Chancellor, VIT, Vellore

Perceptions about the relevance and usefulness of various English language initiatives

Table 1 shows that all the options seemed to be somewhat relevant but blended learning, language labs and online interactions seem to be considered most relevant.

Number in order of relevance and usefulness (1 being the most relevant and 5 being the least relevant), the following English language initiatives, in the context of your organisation/institution:

Options	1	2	3	4	5
Massive online open courses (MOOCs)	27%	15%	26%	15%	12%
Blended learning (computer plus face -to-face)	44%	25%	9%	11%	6%
Online/computer self-study resources	21%	26%	29%	12%	8%
Mobile phone learning apps	22%	17%	23%	19%	13%
Online interactions: Webinars, forums, online tutoring	20%	28%	21%	12%	12%
Language labs	32%	24%	16%	9%	11%

Table 1

Responses in the interviews clearly indicated that the role of technology in language learning is seen to be extremely important for its appeal to learners as well as the flexibility it offers:

*Anything that is of interest to the students will definitely help and as of now I think the internet and mobile is something which is trending now. (*Mr Jayakumar Krishnaswamy, Asst. Prof. English Department, Bannari Amman Institute of Technology)

Perceptions about the best tool to measure progress in an English language/ communication skill development programme.

Results shows that internationally recognized tests/certificates are the most preferred option followed by group discussion/interviews and finally written assignments and tests set by the teacher.

Comments made by educational decision-makers in their interviews also recognized the impact of assessing all 4 skills at an international standard:

A combination of the right tools, which can assess and which can be compared and internationally acceptable, should include writing and speaking assessments. (Prof Mohan De Silva, - Chairman, University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka)

Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrate that educational decision-makers in the region place high importance on English language skill and they also feel that the language levels of teachers have a great

impact on the quality of teaching in schools and colleges. However, while the requirement for English language skills is acknowledged, there are a number of challenges in developing these English language skills - from pressure on teachers to complete the curriculum to their own teaching capabilities and from parents and management the lack of understanding of the need for language development skills to lack of student motivation and the additional effort required to implement such programs. While peer learning is considered to be the most effective way to improve teaching standards, blended learning, language labs and online interactions seem to be considered most relevant for student language development in initiatives.

Internationally recognized tests/certificates are considered the best tool to measure progress.

References

Hoepfl, M (1997) Choosing qualitative research: A primer for technology education researchers, Journal of Technology Education 9(1), 47-63.

Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2011). Designing and conducting mixed methods research (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Farrel, Lesley, Singh, Udaya Narayana & Giri, Ram Ashish (Eds., 2011) English Language Education in South Asia: From Policy to Pedagogy