

Teachers' Perception on Current Testing Methods Used in English as a Second Language Classroom

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Abstract

English language plays a crucial role as a global language. In Sri Lanka, English has been taught as a second language in schools. Testing in English as a Second language (ESL) has become important in measuring learners' knowledge. This study examines how do the teachers design test items to evaluate students in the ESL classroom and what are teachers' perceptions on the current testing methods. This research follows a diagnostic research design, and a mixed research methodology was used to collect data. As the sample, 32 English teachers from three schools, 3 in-service advisors (ISAs) from three different areas were selected. The data was collected by conducting a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The analyzed data emphasized that the test papers have been used as the main method of testing in ESL classroom and reading and writing are the only skills that are evaluated with these papers. Hence, speaking and listening skills are not tested in the ESL classroom. Due to this testing method teachers have a negative attitude towards the current testing methods used in testing English as a Second Language. Thus, the teachers emphasize on revising the current testing methods. The majority of the teachers lack the preliminary knowledge and practice on testing to develop valid and reliable test items. Thus, the current testing methods should be changed to facilitate a productive learning environment to the students while emphasizing the significance of learning this language in Sri Lankan context.

Keywords: English as a Second language, Testing, Current Testing methods, English language teachers, ESL teaching in Sri Lanka

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching and learning English as a Second Language (ESL) have become crucial in Sri Lanka due to the identity one can achieve with the fluency in English language. English was introduced to Sri Lanka with the British colonization, and it had to undergo a contact situation, with the main vernaculars of Sri Lanka; Sinhala and Tamil. As a result of that Sri Lankan English or Lankan English emerged. (Gunasekara 2005, Fernando 2011). In the Sri Lankan Education system, English has been taught as a second language and it is considered as a compulsory subject in the English Language Teaching (ELT) curriculum. Testing ESL is significant as it provides reliable data about the learner's level as well as the progress in learning. According to Fulcher (2010), "Tests are about measuring knowledge, skills or abilities and expressing their existence, or degree of presence, in numerical form. The assumption is that, once we are able to do this, we have 'genuine' knowledge" (p.32). Hence, tests are being conducted to understand whether the students have gained the competency levels they are expected to be competent in and to evaluate teaching methodology. In the Sri Lankan ESL testing system, the main prominence is given only for two main language skills; reading and writing. The test papers can be presented as evidence to prove that the papers have not focused on listening and speaking.

In Sri Lanka, the test items and papers are mainly designed by the teachers, in-service advisors, and university lectures. As the standard methods of testing are only testing on reading and writing this study was conducted with the main aim of investigating the perceptions of the ESL teachers on the current testing methods which are used to test the ESL learners in ESL classroom. Thus, in order to achieve the above purpose, the following research questions were designed. The first research question was, how do the teachers design test items to evaluate students in the ESL classroom and the second research question was, what are teachers' perceptions on the current testing methods.

Testing has been considered as a significant procedure in the teaching and learning process in Sri Lanka as

examinations are the benchmarks to reach high standards in employment and the society.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language testing has been emphasized as a crucial phenomenon in language learning. According to Fulcher (2010), “language testing, like all educational assessment, is a social phenomenon” (p.01) Testing has been interpreted according to the situation in which that test is being used. Language tests have been identified as significant to evaluate learner’s knowledge about the target language domain use; hence, the test should be created to evaluate learner’s performance in the target language. Mill (1873), cited in Fulcher (2010), argues “three principles on what can be done with tests. They are, who makes tests, test content and what may not be tested and test usage and test scores.” (p. 18). As Bachman & Palmer (1996) highlight,

Language tests can be a valuable tool for providing information that is relevant to several concerns in language testing. They can provide the evidence of results learning and instruction and hence the feedback on the effectiveness of the teaching program itself (p.08)

but Bachman (2004) emphasizes that,

If the language tests we use do not provide reliable information and if the uses we make of these test scores cannot be supported with credible evidence, then we risk making incorrect and unfair decisions that will be potentially harmful to the individuals we hope to benefit (p. 01)

Validity of a test has been defined as the central concept in language tests and assessments. Hughes (1989) cited in Davidson & Fulcher (2007) highlight, “validity in testing and assessment has traditionally been understood to mean discovering whether a test measures accurately what it is intended to measure” (p.04) and Lado (1961) cited in Weir (2005) argues, “does a test measure what it supposed to measure? If it does, it is valid” (p.12). When ‘what is supposed to be measured’ is measured, the test scores obtained by the test takers should be able to be justified with certain constructs, abilities.

Reliability is another significant component in test development. Weir (2005), manifests that “reliability and validity were often seen as dichotomous concepts, a question of where the priorities were to be placed” (p. 07). Accordingly, reliability can be defined as the consistency of the test scores from a set of tests and test-takers to another. (Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

In the process of test development, test specification has been emphasized as the foundation as it deliberates how the test should be constructed. Davidson and Lynch (2003) explain, “the chief tool of language test development is a test specification, which is a generative blueprint from which test items or tasks, can be produced. A well-written test specification (or “spec”) can generate many equivalent test tasks.” (pp. 3-4). Additionally, Alderson, Clapham and Wall (1995) cited in Fulcher (2010) define, “test specifications are the most detailed level of test architecture. They are also sometimes called test ‘blueprints’”. (p.127).

Brindly (1989) & Stiggins (1999) cited in Xu & Liu (2009) points out, “Teachers are often torn between two conflicting beliefs; assessment should be for the facilitation of learning or assessment should be for reporting achievement” (p. 495). Xu & Liu explain that “the complexity of teacher’s knowledge and the poverty of their practice in formative assessment demonstrate the significance of teacher development in the assessment.” (p. 495). Davidson (2004) cited Xu & Liu (2009) explain that “individuals may interpret rating rubrics differently on the basis of their different assessment beliefs.” (p.495). Furthermore, according to Wharton (1998),

Many EFL teachers find themselves involved in language testing from the very beginning of their careers. They often need to devise tests for their own classes, and they may be asked, in conjunction with other teachers, to contribute to tests to be used throughout the school. Equally, they may find themselves teaching classes where the students are entered for a public examination.(p.127)

Most of the studies focuses on how test items are developed but very few number of research can be found on test development and teachers’ perceptions on the current testing methods used in Sri Lankan ESL context. Hence, this study attempts to investigate the validity and practicality of the current testing methods used in ESL classroom to test ESL learners.

III. METHODOLOGY

As the main purpose of this study is to investigate teachers’ perceptions on the current testing methods, a diagnostic method was followed with a mixed data collection. A questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were conducted to collect qualitative and quantitative data. In the questionnaire, teachers respond to prompts by selecting answers; Likert scales, multiple-choice responses and open-ended questions provide the teachers to write necessary details they think that are relevant to the questions. (Harris & Brown, 2010). As questionnaires assist in collecting a large number of data within a small period of time, a questionnaire was used as the initial stage of collecting data. Interview is a common research tool used in collecting qualitative data. Accordingly, in order to collect qualitative data, a semi-structured interview was conducted with randomly selected 4 English Language teachers from each school and 3 In-service Advisors (ISAs). Berg (2017) cited in Alshenqeet (2014) explains “it builds a holistic snapshot, analyses words, reports detailed views of

informants; but also, because it enables interviewees to speak in their own voice and express their own thoughts and feelings” (p.39). Thus, semi-structured interviews provide the platform to investigate certain factors and information through

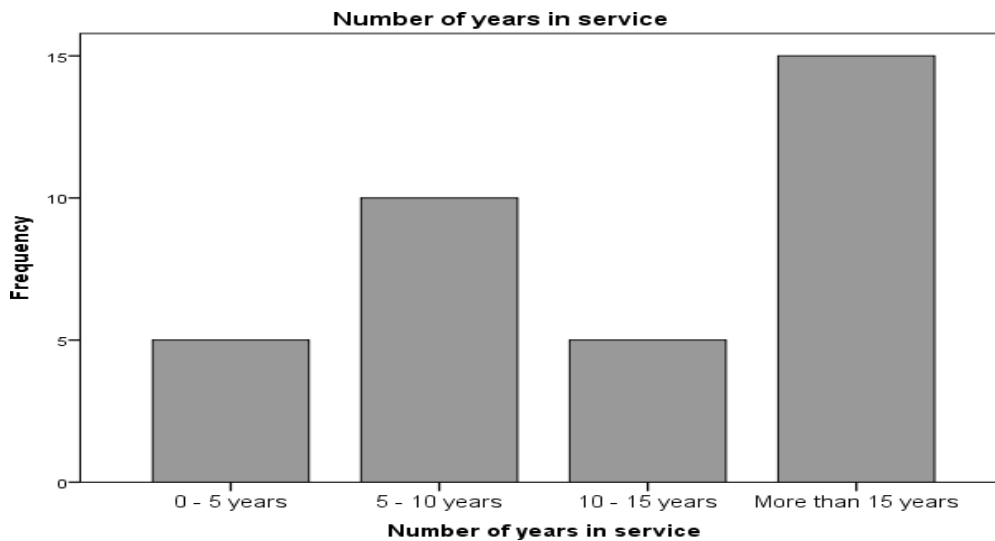
situational questions.

As the sample for this study, ESL teachers from three different national schools in a selected educational zone were selected following the purposive sampling method. The questionnaire was given to all the ESL teachers in the three schools (32 ESL teachers) as the initial stage and for the next phase teachers were given the opportunity to participate for the semi-structured interview; hence, their participation was voluntarily. For the interview, ten ESL teachers from the three schools participated. As this study followed a mixed data collection method, the collected data was analyzed using two different methods to conduct an accurate analysis. Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003), cited in Onwuegbuzie and Leach (2006) point out, “When analyzing quantitative and qualitative data within a mixed-methods framework, researchers undergo at least some of the following seven stages: data reduction, data display, data transformation, data correlation, data consolidation, data comparison, and data integration” (p.491). Quantitative data collected from the questionnaires and the tests were analyzed using IBM SPSS in order to obtain the statistical output. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis and narrative analysis because in the semi-structured interviews the researcher has conducted in-depth discussions with the participants to analyze their perceptions with regards to the current testing methods used to test ESL learners.

As ethics are crucial in research all the participants were informed about the research prior to the data collecting process and their consent was taken. It was assured to them that their identity and personal information would remain anonymous and collected data would only be used to support the findings, but the participant’s anonymity is secured.

IV. DISCUSSION

First the collected data from the questionnaire and the interview were analyzed to gather general information about the participants. Teachers’ years of service in the field as an ESL teacher was analyzed and categorized under four main categories as 0-5 years, 5-

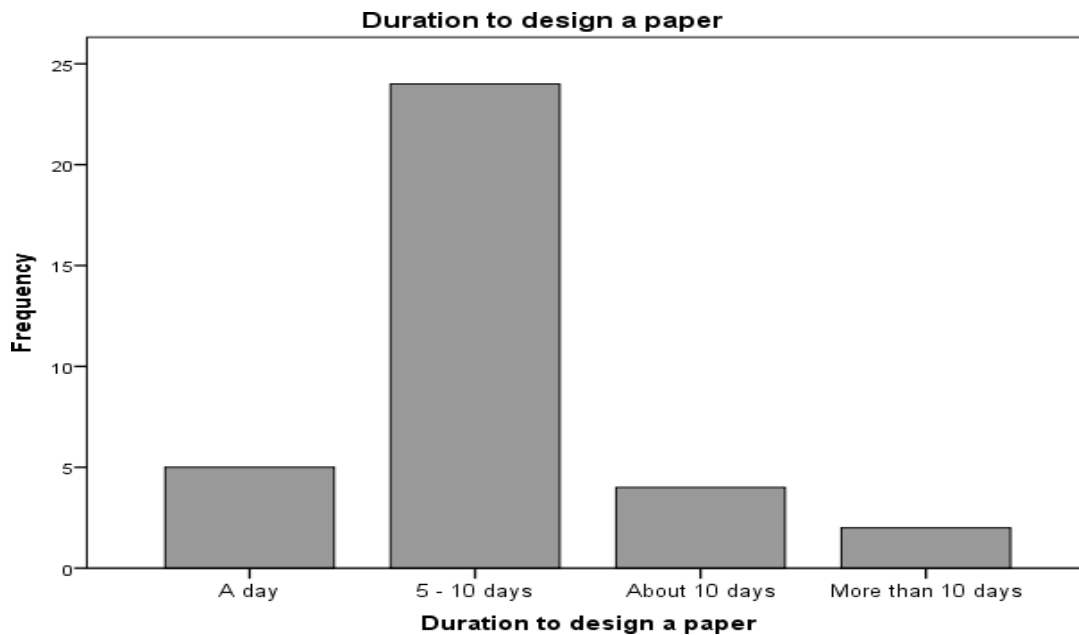


(Figure 1.1 – Number of years of service)

Hence, this graph clearly shows that nearly half of the teachers have more than 15 years of service in teaching English as a Second Language. The levels teachers teach and have taught in the school were categorized as primary, secondary and post-secondary. From the answers of the teachers, it can be highlighted that 11 teachers teach all three levels while 10 teachers only teach secondary classes, and 8 teachers teach primary and secondary classes. 5 teachers have mentioned that they teach secondary and post-secondary levels and 1 teacher who teaches only the post-secondary level.

The first research question of this study was, how do the teachers design test items to evaluate students in the ESL classroom. In the questionnaire there were several questions that were designed focusing on this research questions. Hence, the time duration to design a paper, the training they have received on designing test items, frameworks used to measure students’ competency level, usage of a test specification document and the factors influence in test item designing.

The time duration to design test items can be considered as a significant component. The participants’ answers can be analyzed under 4 categories: within a day, 5-10 days, about 10 days and more than 10 days. Their answers can be summarized as follows.



(Figure 1.2 – Duration to design a test paper)

Hence, it is clearly visible that most of the teachers only take 5-10 days to design test items to a paper. There are 24 teachers out of 32 who have mentioned that they take about 5 to 10 days to design a paper. According to them, 10 days are sufficient to design a test paper.

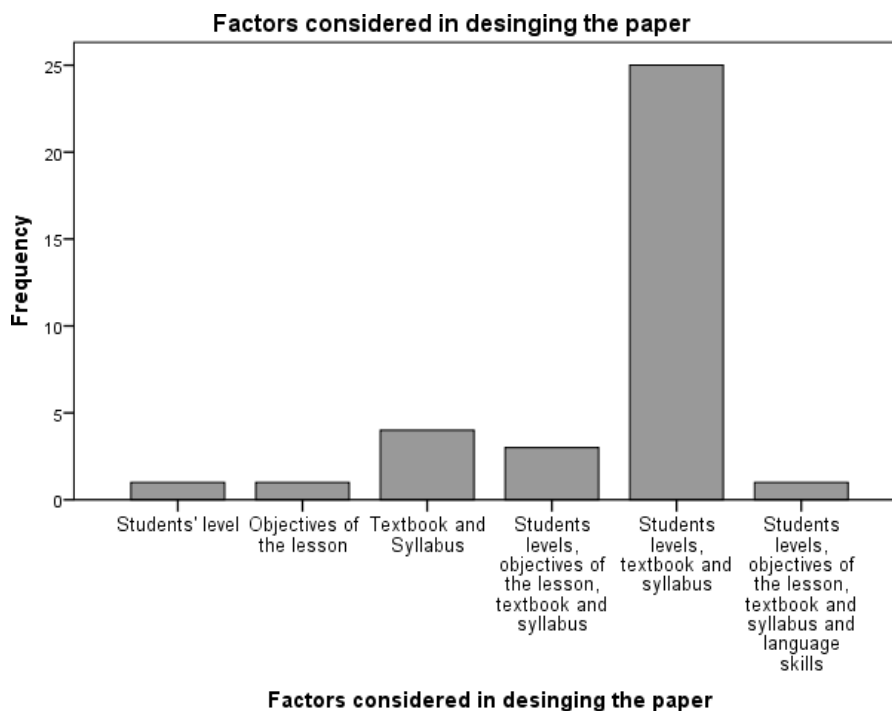
Teachers' knowledge and practice on test development are essential components in designing test items. One of the questions on the questionnaire questions about the training they have received to design test items. It was remarkable to identify that 12 teachers have not provided an answer to this question. 10 of the teachers who participated in this research have studied and learned about test development from the College of Education and other teachers have learned it from seminars or from the respective schools. It was astonishing to see that 10 teachers have either completed as "no" or they have kept the blank space. Moreover, 10 teachers have been trained in test paper designing in the College of Education while the other teacher has only participated for the workshops conducted by the National Institute of Education (NIE) or the zonal education office. They pointed out that the zonal office or the NIE conducts seminars to practice on test paper designs but most of the time a very few numbers of teachers are offered this opportunity.

How teachers decide students' proficiency levels to design the test paper was another important question. None of the teachers used or recognized the University Test of English Language (UTEL) or the Common European Framework of References for languages (CEFR). They questioned these two scales when they were answering the questionnaire. Thus, what they use to measure students' proficiency levels are classroom assessments, monthly tests, classroom activities. However, there was a teacher who does not use any method to investigate students' level, but this teacher emphasized that the paper is designed according to their thoughts/ methods.

The test specification document plays a crucial role in this study. Hence, the main focus was given on the usage of a test specification document in designing the test papers. The analyzed data emphasized that 24 teachers use a test specification document and eight teachers do not use it, while there was a teacher who has not answer for this question. Furthermore, the teachers were asked to provide reasons for using or not using this document. There were only 4 teachers who have written down the reasons but there were 7 answers saying that they are not requested to design this document. According to these 4 teachers, the test specification document is used because *"it provides the scope of the papers, which helps to design a suitable/balanced paper including all the necessary skills."* Additionally, most of the teachers have referred to it as the "blueprint" as well. Hence, during the interviews, interviewees emphasized the test specification document which was referred to as the "blueprint". Thus, using the "blueprint" as the structure to develop the test paper, was another emerging theme of the analyzed data. All the teachers described that they include the objectives, types of questions such as vocabulary, grammar, writing and reading and the language functions but they highlighted that they do not allocate the marks in the "blueprint". According to them they write the objectives first and one by one they write the types of questions and number of questions from each type. Most of the teachers explained that they design the papers using the "blueprint".

Factors influence in test paper designing manifest how the test paper has been constructed. In the questionnaire, students' level, objectives of the lessons, textbooks and syllabus were highlighted as the main factors while a box was provided as other to mention the factors, they use to design the paper. Teachers have mentioned that as the other factors they focus on language skills but most of the teachers have preferred all the three categories as the factors that influenced designing the test paper.

(Figure 1.3 – Factors considered in designing the test paper)



Thus, teachers' preferences can be summarized as above.

One of the main objectives of this research was to investigate how the teachers design test items to evaluate students in the ESL classroom. Hence, teachers were requested to explain the test item designing process they used. The majority of the teachers have pointed out that they use model papers and past papers as the structure to develop test items. Not only that but also some teachers have explained that they design simpler test items, and they increase the complexity of the test items with time. Another teacher has explained that the syllabus and the objectives of the lessons are used to design the test items focusing on those lessons. None of the teachers have explained a particular model or structure they follow. Furthermore, teachers were questioned whether they introduce new test items in the paper and whether they practice these new test items in the class prior to the exam. In the questionnaire, most of the teachers have mentioned that they "sometimes" introduce new test items. Further, during the interview, it was highlighted that introduction of new test items take additional time as it is essential to familiarize the test items to the students prior to the test but with the time period they have, practicing the new items for a sufficient number of times was mentioned as difficult. Due to this reason, most of the teachers rarely introduce new test items.

Previous papers or literature can be used as the foundation to develop the paper. As teachers are openly referring to these papers why teachers refer previous papers was inquired as well. Very few numbers of teachers have answered the question and they have mentioned that previous papers help to understand how the question should be designed and what language skills should be focused on. During the interview, the teachers elaborated that they refer to past papers mainly because a proper standard model is not available or introduced. They emphasized when they design the paper, they refer to past papers as they follow it as the "model" to design the paper.

The second research question focuses on teachers' perceptions on the current testing methods. Teachers' opinions on the current test designing methods were inquired in the questionnaire and the semi-structured interview.

When the current testing methods are considered, the majority of the participants elaborated that the main testing method used in testing ESL learners is the test paper. When the current test development method is considered, the test paper consists of different types of tasks. In the questionnaire, teachers were requested to categorize different types of items into 4 language skills in order to clarify which types of items can be used to evaluate language skills/s. These items were given in a table and the teachers were asked to mention whether they were aware of the particular item and whether they used it in test papers. The following table summarizes teachers' most preferred responses according to the language skill/s.

Table 1.1 -Usage of test items with language skill/s

Task type	Focused skill/s				Number of teachers
	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening	
True/False	*	*	-	*	28
Multiple choice	*	*	-	*	30
Matching	*	*	-	*	21
Short answers (min.6 words)	*	*	-	-	27
Long sentences (more than 6 words)	*	-	-	-	25
Personal responses	-	*	*	-	17
Gap filling	-	*	-	*	20
Information transfer	*	*	-	-	27
Intrusion	*	*	*	*	10*
Sequencing/ Ordering/ Numbering	*	*	-	*	31
Summary	*	*	*	-	20
Dictation	-	-	-	*	35
Rating task	*	*	-	*	31
Recording task	-	-	-	*	35
Sentence building	-	*	-	-	30
Transformation	*	*	-	*	23
Guided writing	-	*	-	-	35
Essay writing	-	*	-	-	35
Report writing	-	*	-	-	35
Interview	-	-	*	*	34
Role play	-	-	*	*	32

The above table elaborates on the highest number of teachers who have preferred that task to develop language skill/s. For example, 28 teachers have preferred the task type “true and false” as a task that can be used to develop reading, writing and listening. It was significant to point out that most of the teachers have left out the task “intrusion” and only 10 teachers have checked the boxes. They have marked that intrusion can be used to develop all four language skills. Furthermore, it was important to highlight that most of the teachers have mentioned “intrusion” as a type of task they are not aware of it. Moreover, they have categorized the following task types such as personal responses, intrusion, dictation, recording task, transformation, interviews and role-plays as the tasks that are not being used in the testing learner.

The introduction of new test items in the current test paper development process was another question highlighted in the interview and the questionnaire. In the questionnaire, 23 teachers have answered that they introduce new test items while 5 teachers have mentioned that they have not introduced new test items and 2 teachers have pointed out that they sometimes introduce new test items. 5 teachers have not answered that question. Further, the question inquires how often and why they introduce new test items. Unfortunately, the majority has not answered this question and there only 7 teachers who have mentioned that new test items are introduced monthly or according to the lesson or paper. Hence, the introduction of new task types can be emphasized as either beneficial or non-beneficial but testing these new test items prior to the test is a necessity as during the test, test-takers could face several difficulties. However, the teachers have not answered this question.

During the interviews, some teachers emphasized that the introduction of new test items is not a particular area they are focusing on as according to them the structure of the paper is the same and the same types of items are used only by changing the focusing area or aspect. Hence, the teachers emphasize that the same structure is used with the same types of items in the test paper.

Another important perception was the preference of past papers or literature. Teachers were inquired whether they prefer past papers or literature when they are designing the test paper. It was remarkable to see that 18 teachers refer to previous papers and literature while there are only 15 teachers who have mentioned that they do not refer to past/previous literature. They pointed out that they can use these papers to practice students to familiarize themselves with a certain task type. Even though

the majority have mentioned that they are not referring to previous literature, during the interview, all the teachers emphasized very strongly that they do not take questions from previous papers.

Another participant emphasized that past papers are referred to see the structure due to lack of a standard model or the structure. Even though most of the teachers immediately reject using the past questions to design the test papers, all of them said that there are teachers who take questions from past papers and include them in the test papers.

Another important aspect of the test paper designing is the marking scheme/script. A separate question was included in the questionnaire to investigate whether the teachers design the marking scheme with the paper and the analyzed data shows that all the teachers make the marking scheme with the paper. Teachers were encouraged to write the reason for designing or not designing the marking scheme. Majority of the teachers have mentioned that as it is compulsory to make the marking scheme after designing the paper but very few teachers have mentioned that designing a marking scheme helps to standardized the marks, to see whether one question has more than one answer, to minimize subjectivity and to design unique questions within a clear manner. Thus, these are the reasons provided by the teachers for making a marking scheme with the paper. During the interview, the mark allocation in the marking script was discussed. Teachers were questioned with the making criteria and the type of grading (holistic or analytic grading) with special attention to the essay or the composition writing. Hence, it was manifested that an analytical grading system is used in marking the essays.

How the test items should be divided focusing on respective skills and the mark allocation was another aspect investigated in the questionnaire. Thus, the number of tasks that should be included focusing on a particular skill/s and the allocation of marks for each task are crucial in test paper designing. A table was given to fill with the number of items, mark allocation and reasons. The majority of the teachers have emphasized that the number of questions and the allocated marks change according to the grade and the level of the students, and some teachers have not answered the question as well.

However, teachers are not aware of a particular number of test items and mark allocations for test papers. They emphasized they refer to previous papers and allocate the marks and the number of test items.

Teachers were encouraged to provide suggestions to develop current testing methods used in ESL classroom. 17 teachers have pointed out that as the test paper has been used as the main method to test students it should assess and evaluate all language skills. As the paper only assesses reading and writing skills, they emphasized that speaking and listening should be focused as well. Furthermore, they emphasized that in Sri Lankan ESL classroom English has been considered as a subject rather than a language.

As the last question in the questionnaire, teachers were asked to explain testing in the ESL classroom. Teachers have pointed out that English is not the first language of the students and during the classroom activities they should be exposed to the language. Some teachers have explained that testing in ESL classrooms has advantages as well as disadvantages. As advantages, they point out that as English is a language, students should be competent with the language and when tests are conducted, students will spend more effort in learning as it is being tested. Hence, their focus will be improved. Further, as the English language is an essential qualification in contemporary society, students will pay more attention, but the testing should be conducted properly. Moreover, teachers pointed out the disadvantages as well. They have highlighted that all four language skills should be focused on. They emphasize that only the writing and reading skills are evaluated and even though listening and speaking tests are conducted, they are not up to the standard because according to the teachers, proper instructions are not given.

V. FINDINGS

The main findings of the study emphasize that the current testing methods used in testing ESL learners are not adequately testing students' knowledge. Hence, most of the teachers are not aware of measuring students' competency levels and they lack the essential preliminary knowledge and practice on conducting and developing test items and methods. Analyzed data emphasizes that most of the teachers are designing test items by referring to past papers as they do not have a model or a structure to be followed. In Sri Lankan ESL classroom, test papers are used as the main testing method to test ESL learners and these test papers are designed only focusing on reading and writing. Thus, speaking and listening skills are neglected.

Furthermore, the analyzed data manifests that the teachers' perception on the current testing methods used in ESL classroom is not positive but negative because they repeatedly emphasized that the tests are not measuring or evaluating students' actual knowledge about the language. They explained that as it has been considered as a subject most of the students are not aware of the importance of this language in the contemporary society as well as in their future. They highlighted that the current testing methods should be changed, and the students should be given the opportunity to see the significance of this language in their future as well as in their career advancement.

VI. CONCLUSION

English as a second language is a compulsory subject in the ELT curriculum in Sri Lanka. Hence every student is learning English language from Grade 1 to Grade 13. However, the testing methods used in ESL classroom and teachers' perception on these testing methods can be considered as significant areas to be investigated. Hence the findings of this study point out that

English should be included as a language to the ELT curriculum rather than a subject as it is important to enhance students' speaking skills as well as reading, writing, and listening. As the teachers have a negative attitude toward the testing methods used

in ESL classroom it is very much needed to revise and elaborate the value of learning the language to the students.

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