
Research Notes

A Critical Analysis of Class X English and Social Science Question Papers

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ABSTRACT

Examinations play a very important role in Indian system of education. They are so important that they direct the entire teaching learning process in schools. These examinations use mainly one tool to evaluate the achievement of the students and that is the 'question paper'. So, if the public examinations have to stay till a viable mechanism of evaluation comes into effect, question papers used by the State Boards of Education in their public examinations need to be continuously examined and improved specially for the purpose of improving the quality of education at school stage. It was in this backdrop that a study of Class X English and Social Science Question Papers of Punjab School Education Board was undertaken. The objective of the study was to find out whether the question papers are valid and reliable and whether they fulfill the criteria of balanced question papers and what were their strengths and weaknesses.

Introduction

Assessment of performance is an integral part of teaching learning process. The National Policy on Education-1986 and its Programme of Action (1992) envisaged an improvement in the programme of evaluation to make it serve as a powerful instrument of quality improvement in the teaching learning process in schools. The National Curriculum Framework – 2005 (NCF – 2005) has also laid special emphasis on the quality of questions used in the evaluation process. The NCF points out, as long as examinations and tests assess children's ability to remember and recall textbook knowledge, all

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attempts to redirect the curriculum towards learning will be thwarted. First, tests in knowledge-based subject areas must be able to gauge what children have learnt, and their ability to use this knowledge for problem solving and application in the real world. In addition, they must be able to test the processes of thinking to gauge if the learner has also learnt where to find information, how to use new information, and to analyse and evaluate the same. The types of questions that are set for assessment need to go beyond what is given in the book. . . . Questions that are open ended and challenging could also be used. (NCF – 2005. p: 74).

It is a well known fact that examinations are very important in our system of education. Examinations are so important that they direct the teaching learning process in schools.

Teachers teach only what is being tested and similarly students adjust their studies according to the examination. In fact, the first Board Examination i.e., Class X examination plays a significant role in dictating the teaching learning process in schools.

If the wash back effect of these examinations is so great, why not exploit it for the betterment of education? If the Board examinations are improved, the teaching learning methodology in schools will automatically improve.

Board examinations are basically written examinations in India and they use only one main tool to assess students' achievement. That tool is the question paper. If the question papers are improved, the impact percolates down to schools. Therefore, the question papers used by the Boards of Education in their public examinations need to be continuously examined and improved. The analysis of existing question papers is the first step towards improving the quality of testing.

Keeping in view the importance of the analysis of Question Papers and the Marking Scheme, the Department of Educational Measurement and Evaluation trains Key Resource Persons of various states in the Analysis of Question Papers and Marking Scheme in different subjects. During the training, the question papers in different subjects and their marking schemes are analysed in order to provide feedback to the paper setters and in turn to improve the quality of future question papers.

In one such programme, the question papers of Class X in the subjects of English and Social Science were analysed for the Punjab School Education Board.

Objectives of the Study

The analysis of Question Papers and Marking Scheme is a post-examination activity. The purpose is to re-examine the question paper and marking scheme to see if something is amiss, so that the same errors may not be repeated in future. The errors in the question paper may be of various kinds and may occur at various points like:

- The weightage to different objectives is not adequate – the question paper is more memory based and lacks higher order abilities like critical thinking, problem-solving, application, etc.
- The weightage to different forms of questions is not balanced.
- The weightage to different units is not balanced.
- The questions are mostly from the textbooks – not from beyond the textbooks. The language of questions is vague or ambiguous.
- Instructions are vague, inappropriate and inadequate.
- Sections – inappropriate division of content and questions.
- Options are not comparable in terms of objectives, content, form of question, difficulty level, etc.
- Too many options – overall options in place of internal options. Difficulty level is too high or too low.
- Time for answering the questions is not appropriate.
- Marking scheme not properly designed -left to the discretion of examiners, value points not fully given, outline answers not given, etc.

The objectives of the study, therefore, were to find out:

- Whether the questions papers in English and Social Science are valid in terms of coverage of the instructional objectives and course contents?
- Whether the question papers have appropriate difficulty level catering to different capabilities of all kinds of students?
- Whether the question papers have appropriate questions in terms of their form, language and scope?
- Whether the options are comparable and time given is adequate?
- Whether the marking scheme has been designed properly in order to have uniformity in scoring ?

In short, the study tried to find out whether the question papers fulfilled the criteria of balanced question papers and what were their strengths and weaknesses.

Methodology

The Punjab School Education Board was requested to provide the copies of Question Papers in English and Social Science for their public examination at Class X level for the year 2005, along with their design, blue print and marking scheme. The Board was also requested to provide syllabi and textbooks of these subjects.

Standard proformas for analysing the question papers, which already existed in the Department, were used for the analysis of the question papers. The Board identified teachers in each subject and training-cum-workshop was organised in Chandigarh in November, 2005 to analyse the question papers. This kind of workshop served a dual purpose, i.e. the capacity building of the teachers in analysing question papers and marking scheme and also a study of the strengths and weaknesses of the question papers in English and Social Science.

Tools

The analysis was carried out on the basis of two proformas:

1. Question-wise Analysis indicating the objective of the question, specifications, unit of the content, type of question, marks, estimated difficulty level, estimated time required for answering the question, language clarity and remarks if any.
2. Abstract of Analysis of the Question Paper (Based on proforma-I). This proforma indicated:
 - (i) weightages to objectives.
 - (ii) weightages to contents.
 - (iii) weightages to different forms of questions.
 - (iv) difficulty level of questions.
 - (v) comments regarding the distribution of marks over the questions.
 - (vi) comments regarding the estimated time.
 - (vii) arrangement of questions and format of the question paper.
 - (viii) comments on scheme of options.

- (ix) comments on instructions to students-general instructions and specific instructions.
- (x) comments regarding quality of questions (language, scope, relevance).
- (x) general suggestions for further improvement.

In this proforma after calculating the percentage of marks as per analysis a comparison is made with the weightages given in the design. On the basis of all the aspects seen in the question paper observations and suggestions about the question papers are made.

Findings

Format of the Examination

The following table indicates the formats of English and Social Science question papers for Class X.

TABLE 1

<i>Subjects</i>	<i>Marks</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Sections</i>	
English	100	3 hours	Part-A	
			Prose	24 marks
			Poetry	10 marks
			Part-B	
			Extensive Reader	16 marks
			Part-C	
Social Science	100	3 hours	Grammar	20 marks
			Composition	20 marks
			Translation	10 marks
			History	30 marks
			Economics	20 marks
			Civics	20 marks
			Geography	30 marks

It was observed that both the question papers followed the format and weightages given to the content units in the syllabus.

The following table shows the weightages given by the Board to different objectives in their design and the actual weightages found after the analysis.

Weightages to Instructional Objectives

TABLE 2

<i>Subject</i>	<i>English</i>		<i>Social Science</i>	
	<i>Weightages given by the Board</i>	<i>Actual Weightages after Analysis</i>	<i>Weightages given by the Board</i>	<i>Actual Weightages after Analysis</i>
Knowledge	23	28	44	66
Understanding/ Comprehension	24	6	32	12
Application/ Expression	53	66	16	10
Skill	–	–	8	12
Total	100	100	100	100

It can be seen that weightages to objectives in English is not balanced. The question paper has very little weightage to comprehension. In Social Science also the actual weightages did not tally with the design. In fact the question paper in Social Science is largely knowledge based and the weightages to other objectives has been reduced greatly.

Weightage to Forms of Questions

Boards of School Education use different varieties of questions in their question papers.

These are Long Answer or Essay Type Questions (LA/ETQs), Short Answer Questions (SAQs), Very Short Answer Questions (VSAQs) and Objective Type Questions (OTQs).

The following table indicates the types of questions used by the Punjab School Education Board as per design and as per analysis.

It was observed in the English question paper that for Objective Type Questions matching exercise was used. Instead of them Multiple Choice Questions (MCQs) should be used in a Board examination. Secondly, the question paper contains too many varieties of Short Answer Questions which can be reduced.

In Social Science question paper though the forms of questions are not identical with the design but they are not drastically different. Social Science question paper does not use any Objective Type Questions.

A Critical Analysis of Class X English and Social Science Question Papers

TABLE 3

<i>Forms of Questions</i>	<i>English</i>		<i>Social Science</i>	
	<i>Marks allotted as per design</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per analysis</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per design</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per analysis</i>
Long Answer/ Essay Type Questions	14	14	16	20
Short Answer Questions	36	42	48	52
Very Short Answer Questions	42	40	36	28
Objective Type Questions	8	4	–	–
	100	100	100	100

Difficulty Level of Questions

TABLE 4

<i>Difficulty Level</i>	<i>English</i>		<i>Social Science</i>	
	<i>Marks allotted as per design</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per analysis</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per design</i>	<i>Marks allotted as per analysis</i>
Difficult (A)	25	14	20	32
Average (B)	50	59	60	48
Easy (C)	25	27	20	20
Total	100	100	100	100

As is evident from the above table in English question paper difficult questions are very less whereas in Social Science the difficult and average questions are much more and easy questions are very less.

Provision of Options

In English question paper overall options have been used in all the Short Answer Questions, questions on grammar and translation. In Long Answer Questions the form of questions also differs like complete the dialogue by writing questions has been given as an option to

TABLE 5

<i>English</i>	<i>Social Science</i>
1. Overall options in Short Answer Questions and Very Short Questions.	1. Internal options only in Long Answer Questions.
2. Options are not comparable in objective-wise and form of question-wise	2. Options are not comparable in objective-wise, difficulty level-wise and content-wise.

paragraph writing. Thus, paragraph is a long answer question whereas the other one is a combination of seven very short questions.

In the Social Science question paper the options are comparable as far as the form of question is concerned. They differ in objective, difficulty level and content.

Estimated Time for the Question Paper

TABLE 6

<i>English</i>	<i>Social Science</i>
Largely appropriate but some students may complete before time.	Can be completed in 150 minutes.

The Social Science question paper can be completed earlier than the stipulated time. However, the students may have enough time to revise their answers.

Language of Questions

TABLE 7

<i>English</i>	<i>Social Science</i>
1. Largely the language is Comprehensible.	1. Language mostly simple.
2. Some questions have been bodily lifted from the textbook.	2. Some questions are vague as expressions like 'what do you understand by', 'what do you mean by' have been used.

Bodily lifting the questions from the textbook and vague expressions like 'what do you mean by' etc. should be avoided.

Instructions to Examinees

TABLE 8

<i>English</i>	<i>Social Science</i>
1. Detailed general instructions are given in the question paper.	1. All the instructions are given in the beginning of the questions paper.
2. Specific instructions are given with each set of questions.	2. No specific instructions are given.
3. The instructions are clear.	

It was observed that the Social Science question paper lacked specific instructions with the group of questions where they are required.

Coverage of the Course Content

As far as the coverage of the course content prescribed in the syllabus is concerned, both the papers have shown adequate coverage. Thus, the question papers seem to have content validity. Only in Civics part of the Social Science question paper unit III i.e. 'Indian Democracy at Work' has been completely ignored.

Detailed Marking Scheme

TABLE 9

<i>English</i>	<i>Social Science</i>
1. Detailed guidelines have been given for marking letter and application but out of 7 marks, 4 marks have been used for format only.	1. General instructions for evaluation of Question Papers have been provided.
2. Marking scheme does not provide any outline answers for questions on text.	2. Detailed marking scheme along with outline answers is not provided.

In the English question paper outline answers to all questions along with their value points should have been provided. Similarly in Social Science also a detailed marking scheme needs to be provided to bring about uniformity in scoring and thereby making it more reliable.

Some Observations

English

1. Regarding the English question paper it was observed that the paper contained translation from Hindi and Punjabi to English. The translation should be dropped altogether for English language question paper as it hampers learning the language.
2. The question paper in English did not contain any unseen reading comprehension and the skill of comprehension cannot be judged without such a passage.
3. Many questions in prose, poetry and extensive reading were bodily lifted from the textbooks which encourage rote learning on the part of the students.
4. Questions on grammar need to be contextualised and technical terms should be avoided.
5. Weightage to text can be reduced in order to make it a test of language proficiency. More questions can be given on reading comprehension and writing tasks.
6. The extrapolative questions which test imagination, creativity need to be introduced.

Social Science

1. Regarding Social Science it was observed that the question paper is largely knowledge based.
2. Most of the questions asked the students what, who, when and also ask them to describe and write short notes.
3. Only the map questions in History and Geography test the skill.
4. Many of the questions were found to be lifted from the textbook as it is.
5. The question papers did not have any objective type questions.

Suggestions

On the basis of the above findings some suggestions are given below which may help the Punjab School Education Board in improving the quality of its question papers in different subjects.

1. The Board may get its paper setters trained in writing questions testing higher mental abilities like understanding, application, critical thinking, problem solving, interpretation, analysis and creative thinking. At the time of paper setting only trained persons should be appointed as paper setters.
2. While editing the question papers care should be taken in writing the general instructions. Directional words like describe, explain, comment, discuss, etc. should be used judiciously. Vague expressions like, what do you mean by, what do you understand by, etc. should be avoided.
3. As per the suggestions given by NCF-2005 the questions need to be generated by experts only. Through wide canvassing, good questions can be pooled all year round from the teachers, college professors in their discipline, educators from other states and even students. These questions after careful vetting by experts, could be categorised according to level of difficulty, topic/area, concept/competency being evaluated and time estimated to solve. These could be maintained along with a record of their usage and testing record to be drawn upon at the time of generating question papers (NCF-2005, p: 114). In short the Question Banks should be developed by collecting items from different quarters.

It may be concluded that the English and Social Science question papers of Punjab School Education Board need to be improved basically in the area of their objective of testing. More questions need to be introduced for testing higher mental abilities then only an improvement in teaching-learning process at school level can be thought of.

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