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Assessing English Through Culture, Stories and Digital Tools- A Case Study of Undergraduate Students in a   Rural English Classroom

Dr.T.Malathi Gabriel
Lecturer in English,Govt Degree College for Women,Srikalahasti

Abstract
This paper examines how context-sensitive, multimodal assessment practices can enhance English language learning among first-generation rural women students in a Government Degree College in Srikalahasti, Andhra Pradesh. It documents classroom-based innovations that integrate local culture, prescribed literary texts, global issues, and digital tools within a continuous internal assessment framework. The interventions include a project on the Shivaratri festival, a home-based food description task linked to an online course, creative alternative endings to Ruskin Bond's short story "The Night Train at Deoli," and student speeches inspired by Greta Thunberg's "How Dare You" address on climate change. By allowing learners to use their mother tongue, bilingual strategies, and technology-mediated translation and editing tools, the assessment design aims to reduce fear of English, encourage critical and creative thinking, and promote a sense of ownership over both language and content. The paper argues that when assessment is rooted in learners' cultural worlds and digital literacies, it becomes an instrument of empowerment for rural Gen Z women rather than a mechanism of exclusion.

Key Words : Multimodal assessment, Rural English learning, Cultural integration, Digital tools, First-generation learners

Introduction

      English language teaching in rural India continues to be shaped by structural inequalities related to schooling, socio-economic status, and limited exposure to English outside the classroom. First-generation college students, particularly women from rural and semi-urban backgrounds, often associate English with fear, failure, and social distance. Traditional evaluation practices in higher education typically emphasize written examinations and memory-based reproduction, which do little to address learners' communicative needs or draw on their rich cultural and experiential resources. In such

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contexts, there is an urgent need to reimagine assessment as an integral part of learning—continuous, formative, and contextually grounded.

This paper presents a set of classroom-based assessment practices implemented at a Government Degree College for Women in Srikalahasti. The innovations combine culturally rooted projects, literary response activities, and global citizenship themes with digital tools that are familiar to Gen Z learners. Assessment is used not merely to "test" English, but to create spaces where rural women students can express their identities, explore their creativity, and participate in critical discussions, while simultaneously developing linguistic competence.

Institutional and Learner Context

The Government Degree College for Women at Srikalahasti caters mainly to students from rural and small-town communities, many of whom are first-generation learners in higher education. English is typically a second or additional language, with Telugu as the dominant medium of communication in homes and communities. Students' exposure to English before entering college is largely textbook-bound and examination-oriented, with little opportunity for authentic communication. As a result, learners often possess some passive knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but lack confidence in speaking or writing English for real purposes.

At the same time, the current cohort of students belongs to the Gen Z generation, which is highly engaged with smartphones, social media, and short-form video content. Reels, shorts, and memes form an integral part of their daily digital lives, although these platforms are rarely harnessed systematically for educational purposes. The teaching context thus presents an interesting paradox: learners who are anxious about English in formal spaces are simultaneously active in informal digital environments where English, images, and multilingual expressions often coexist.

Objectives of the Study

The classroom interventions described in this paper were designed to meet the following objectives:

- To design assessment tasks that are culturally responsive and rooted in learners' local festivals, home practices, and prescribed literary texts.
- To integrate global issues and critical thinking into language assessment through speeches and creative writing.
- To make use of digital tools (translation, paraphrasing, presentation design, grammar and originality checkers) in a guided manner to support language development rather than encourage dependence.

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- To reduce learners' fear of English and increase their willingness to speak and write through mother-tongue and bilingual pathways.
- To develop clear, learner-friendly rubrics that assess content, creativity, critical thinking, and language in a balanced way.

Methodology

The study follows a qualitative action research model conducted over one semester with undergraduate women students enrolled in compulsory English courses. The teacher-researcher designed and implemented a series of assessment tasks linked to the existing syllabus and continuous internal assessment requirements. Data sources included:

- Student project reports, written tasks, and recorded speeches.
- Classroom presentations and discussions.
- Informal interviews and oral feedback from students.
- Teacher's reflective journal entries and observation notes.

The interventions were grouped under two broad strands:

1. Culture- and life-based assessment (Sivarathri project, food description task).
2. Literature- and issue-based assessment (creative ending for "The Night Train at Deoli," speeches inspired by Greta Thunberg).

Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns related to learner engagement, confidence, creativity, and language use.

Strand 1: Culture and Everyday Life as Assessment Content

Sivarathri Festival Project

Sivarathri is a familiar festival in the local socio-cultural landscape, and most students have grown up participating in its rituals. Capitalizing on this familiarity, a project was assigned in which students, working in small groups, interacted with villagers, elders, and family members to collect stories and anecdotes about Sivarathri and associated marriage rituals. The data collection was allowed to happen in the mother tongue, removing initial linguistic barriers. Students then collaborated to translate, summarize, and present their findings in English through short write-ups and oral presentations.

This task transformed assessment into an exploration of community knowledge. Students were not merely repeating textbook content; they were curating real voices, negotiating meaning between languages, and making decisions about what to include and how to express it. The project simultaneously assessed multiple dimensions: language use, cultural understanding, teamwork, and presentation skills.

Food-Based Online Course and Home Observation

To further extend the link between assessment and lived experience, students were encouraged to complete a basic-level online English course on the theme of food. The

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course exposed them to vocabulary for ingredients, dishes, and simple sentence patterns. Following this, learners were instructed to observe the preparation of a dish cooked at home, take a selfie with their mother (or guardian), and describe the ingredients and the cooking process in English either as a short written piece or an audio/video recording.

This home-based assessment strategy was learner-centred and emotionally meaningful. It recognized domestic labour and the role of mothers in students' lives, turning kitchen spaces into language learning laboratories. It also gave students the confidence that they could talk about something deeply familiar in English, instead of struggling with abstract topics disconnected from their reality.

Strand 2: Literature, Global Issues and Digital Tools in Assessment

Creative Ending to "The Night Train at Deoli"

The short story "The Night Train at Deoli" by Ruskin Bond, a prescribed text in the syllabus, narrates a tender, unfinished teenage love encounters between a young boy and a girl at a small station. Instead of only asking comprehension questions or summary writing, students were given the task of imagining and composing an alternative ending to the story. They were told that there was no single 'correct' ending; their creativity and coherence would be valued. Students responded enthusiastically and participation levels rose significantly. They produced a range of endings: some reunited the characters years later, some turned the story into a tragedy, while others gave the girl a voice and agency beyond the boy's perspective. The task assessed not only language but also interpretive skills and creative thinking. Importantly, it allowed students to see themselves as co-authors, not just consumers, of English literature.

Speeches Inspired by Greta Thunberg's "How Dare You"

Another text introduced in the course was Greta Thunberg's powerful speech on climate change, "How Dare You," which reflects a young person's moral outrage and call for action. After studying the speech, students were encouraged to prepare their own speeches on any burning contemporary issue—social, environmental, or educational. To lower the linguistic barrier, they were allowed to first draft and deliver their speeches in their mother tongue or in a bilingual format.

Students chose topics such as water scarcity, farmers' struggles, gender-based violence, social media addiction, plastic pollution, and unemployment. After scripting their speeches in Telugu or bilingually, they used digital tools like Google Translate to generate an English version as a starting point. The teacher then guided them to refine the translated text, correct errors, and improve naturalness.

To further support language accuracy and originality, learners were introduced to:

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- **Grammarly:** To identify grammatical errors, spelling issues, and basic style problems.
- **Paraphrasing tools like Quill Bot**: To rephrase awkward sentences and learn alternative structures.
- **Gamma or similar tools:** To design simple, visually appealing slide presentations.
- **Plagiarism checkers:** To ensure that borrowed content (statistics, slogans, quotations) was properly paraphrased and not directly copied.

These tools were not presented as shortcuts, but as aids to learning. Students were reminded that the ideas must be their own and that automated tools could only assist in expressing them better. This approach made assessment multimodal: students researched, wrote, spoke, designed slides, and engaged with digital literacy skills that are increasingly essential in academia and beyond.

Rubrics for Multimodal Assessment

To maintain fairness and transparency, simple rubrics were shared with students in advance.

Rubric 1: Cultural/Life-Based Projects (Shivaratri and Food Tasks)

Criterion	Indicators (High → Low)
Content and cultural insight	Depth and accuracy of information; meaningful explanation of rituals/practices; relevance
Organization	Clear introduction, logical sequence of ideas/steps, effective conclusion
Language use	Appropriateness of vocabulary, grammatical correctness, clarity of sentences
Personal engagement	Evidence of personal voice, reflections, feelings, or family/community involvement
Presentation and collaboration	Equal participation, confident delivery, effective use of visuals or examples

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Rubric 2: Creative Ending and Issue-Based Speech

Criterion	Indicators (High → Low)
Idea and originality	Imaginative ending
Coherence and structure	Logical flow, clear beginning–middle–end, use of transitions
Critical/ethical awareness	Sensitivity to social issues, depth of reflection, responsible message
Language and style	Appropriateness of tone, vocabulary, sentence variety, limited errors
Use of digital tools	Effective and ethical use of translation, paraphrasing, grammar and design tools
Delivery (for speeches)	Voice modulation, eye contact, confidence, audience engagement

By using rubrics, assessment shifts from being traditional and exam-centric to being criterion-referenced, where students understand what is expected and can chart their own improvement.

Findings and Classroom Observations

Across both strands, several positive patterns emerged:

IncreasedParticipationandConfidence

Students who previously hesitated to speak in English became more willing to participate when tasks were anchored in their own experiences—festivals, food, local issues, and youthful concerns. The literary and speech tasks particularly tapped into their emotional and moral worlds, turning assessment into a form of self-expression.

Enhanced Creativity and Critical Thinking

The alternative endings to "The Night Train at Deoli" revealed students' capacity to question narrative norms and gender roles. Some endings gave the female character independence, education, or a career, showing emerging feminist consciousness. Similarly, the speeches inspired by Greta Thunberg encouraged learners to articulate strong positions on injustice and environmental degradation.

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Bilingual Pathways to English

Allowing students to think, plan, and even first draft in their mother tongue before moving to English removed psychological barriers. Bilingualism functioned as a bridge rather than a hindrance. The translation process, when guided, became a powerful learning experience, drawing attention to vocabulary, syntax, and idiomatic differences.

Constructive Use of Digital Tools

Students quickly took to using Google Translate, Grammarly, paraphrasing tools, and presentation software. Initially, there was a tendency to copy-paste and rely heavily on automated outputs. However, with clear instruction on academic integrity and with the help of plagiarism checkers, students began to view these tools as aids for refinement instead of replacements for thinking. They learned to compare their original text with the suggested edits, thus internalizing better forms.

Shift in Teacher Role

The teacher's role moved from that of an examiner to that of a facilitator and co-learner—designing tasks, co-constructing rubrics, guiding tool use, and providing feedback. Assessment became dialogic and developmental rather than punitive.

Challenges and Limitations

Despite encouraging outcomes, some challenges remained:

- **Time and Workload:** Project-based and creative assessment require time for planning, monitoring, and feedback, which can be demanding when class sizes are large and institutional schedules are tight.
- **Digital Divide:** Not all students have equal access to smartphones, stable internet connections, or laptops. Group work and institutional support (e.g., computer labs) partially addressed this but did not eliminate disparities.
- **Over-reliance on Tools:** A few learners showed a tendency to depend excessively on translation and paraphrasing software, sometimes producing unnaturally complex sentences. Continuous guidance was necessary to maintain authenticity and simplicity.
- **Assessment Standardization:** While rubrics improve clarity, aligning such innovative assessments with university-wide examination norms and external evaluation systems remains a challenge.

Pedagogical Implications

The interventions discussed in this paper point towards several broader implications for teaching English in rural India:

1. **CulturalResponsiveness**

   Assessment tasks should recognize and validate students' cultural capital.

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Festivals, local stories, family practices, and community issues can serve as powerful content for language work, making English feel relevant and respectful of rural identities.

2. **IntegrationofLiteratureandLife**

Prescribed literary texts need not be approached only through comprehension questions. They can become springboards for creative writing, alternative narratives, and critical discussions that strengthen both language and literary sensibility.

3. **BilingualandTranslanguagingApproaches**

Permitting students to draw on their full linguistic repertoire reduces anxiety and facilitates deeper thinking. Structured bilingual tasks, followed by guided movement into English, can be especially impactful in first-generation contexts.

4. **EthicalDigitalLiteracy**

Instead of banning sites and tools that students already use, teachers can integrate them into assessment with explicit discussion of ethics, plagiarism, and originality. This fosters digital literacy alongside language skills.

5. **AssessmentasEmpowerment**

When assessment is continuous, process-oriented, and multimodal, it can empower rural women learners to see themselves as capable communicators and thinkers. Marks become only one outcome among many; more importantly, students gain the confidence to speak, write, and take positions in English.

Conclusion

This paper has described a set of interrelated assessment practices implemented in a rural women's college in Srikalahasti, combining culture-based projects, creative literary responses, issue-based speeches, and digital tools. By situating assessment within learners' everyday worlds—festivals like Shivaratri, home kitchens, teenage love stories, and global climate activism—English is repositioned as a living language rather than a distant subject. The use of mother-tongue pathways, bilingualism, and guided digital resources helps first-generation rural learners negotiate the challenges of English without losing their cultural roots or their authentic voices.

Such practices, while context-specific, offer a broader model for rethinking assessment in rural Indian ELT classrooms. Instead of treating evaluation as a final judgment of learners' deficits, assessment can become a continuous and creative process of enabling students to tell their stories, critique their world, and participate in wider conversations—locally and globally. For rural Gen Z women, this transformation is not merely academic; it is a step towards linguistic, cultural, and social empowerment.

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