

Student Assessment Strategies in Saudi Arabia: A Case Study of Pre and Post Classroom Practices

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Abstract

To understand the behavior of learning and teachers overall development, students always play an active role. With the help of students, overall assessment of the classroom can be judged. So Questions represent a major technique used by teachers to assess their students. Questions in the classroom can be student-teacher interaction, teachers questioning for learning or for assessment purpose. This form of assessment does not require the creation of tests or additional materials or resources. Neither does it necessarily require additional time. During classroom interaction, teachers use different types of questioning methodologies. Questions can be asked either through open questions or close questions. For this paper, data was collected at the end of the semester. Data was collected mainly by Class observation schemes which were conducted through observing student-teacher interactions for their overall development.

1. Introduction

To understand the behavior of learning and teachers overall development, students always play an active role. With the help of students, overall assessment of the classroom can be judged. To understand the learning process well, assessment is important. Assessment is the process of gathering and interpreting evidence to make judgments about student learning. It is the crucial link between learning outcomes, content and teaching and learning activities. Assessment is used by learners and their teachers to decide where the learners are at in their learning, where they need to go, and how best to get there. It is obvious that the purpose of assessment is to improve learning, inform teaching, help students achieve the highest standards they can and provide meaningful reports on students.

There are common classifications of assessment which are formative and summative. Formative assessment is used to provide feedback to students and teachers to promote further learning. Summative assessment, however, contributes to the judgment of

student learning for reporting and certification purposes.

2. Educational system Saudi Arabia

The Saudi government has considered the education as a priority because of the awareness of its importance [1]. Many educators state that improving the Saudi education is difficult job [2] [3]. On the other hand, the Saudi education has faced numerous periods of improve and reform. In each period of improvement, there are some factors that have played vital roles in shaping the concept of the local educational approach. Logically, this concept has affected the classroom assessment practices. Currently, Ministry of Education in Saudi has conducted several initiatives to improve the assessment system in schools.

3. School system in Saudi Arabia

Educational system in Saudi Arabia is divided into three stages: primary, intermediate and secondary. Each level has a separated building. Boys and girls are studying in different schools because of cultural should be separated. At primary schools, students start with 6 years old and spend six years, at the intermediate schools they spend three years, while they spend three years at the secondary schools. There are a certain textbooks which have been approved by the Ministry of Education. Teachers have to follow these textbooks. The academic calendar in Saudi Arabia is divided into two semesters and each semester has eighteen weeks. There is an automatic progression system in primary schools, while in intermediate and secondary schools, there is a comprehensive exam at the end of each semester (twice a year). Passing the comprehensive exam at the end of the school year is essential for students to go to the next grade. There is a supplementary exam for failed students before the end of the school year as a final chance, otherwise, the student will repeat the grade [4].

4. Assessment systems in Saudi Arabia

Assessment system in Saudi Arabia has faced several attempts in order to improve. The importance of alternative methods of assessment to enhance the quality of educational system, guides this efforts. The Ministry of Education has, therefore, introduced a new form of assessment in primary education in 1998 in order to enhance the quality of instruction.

On the other hand, Saudi education system is facing some challenges that affect these reforms. For example, one of the most important barriers facing education in Saudi schools is that memorisation routine which leads the teaching and learning process in Saudi schools. Rugh states that ‘rote memorization of basic texts continues to be a central feature of much of the educational system of Saudi Arabia even today’ [5]. Al-Buhairi claims that students are merely required to follow the strategy of memorising [6]. Hence, this traditional teaching style is not compatible with the new form of assessment, because it focuses on memorisation and neglects using of higher-order skills, critical thinking and problem solving [7].

Another challenge that facing the Saudi education is related to lack of teacher training for practising effective assessment. As a result, many difficulties have emerged during the teaching and learning process. Al-Abdulkareem found that Saudi teachers have a lack of skills to assess their students appropriately [8]. Therefore, it is strongly recommended that reforming the assessment practices the Saudi education system is essential.

Moreover, the large number of students in classroom imposes limitations on the classroom activities. Educators in Saudi Arabia have discovered that oversize class can affect the application of the new form of assessment in primary schools [9] [10]. High numbers of students in classrooms prevents the teachers to follow students’ progress and give suitable feedback.

4.1. Formative assessment

A formative assessment is an assessment for learning. It is used at the beginning of an

instructional period to diagnose the students experience and during the process of instruction as teachers check for student understanding. Diagnostic tools determine what students already know and where there are gaps and misconceptions [11]. Formative assessment also includes assessment as learning, where students reflect on and monitor their own progress. The information gained guides teachers’ decisions in how to enhance teaching and learning. Formative assessment enables students to learn through the process of feedback and opportunities to practice and improve [12]. As students reflect on and monitor their progress this process effectively becomes assessment as learning and contributes to students planning future learning goals.

4.2. Summative assessment

Summative assessments are assessment of learning. They are used towards and at the end of the instruction period [13]. Teachers document the culmination of students’ learning achievements through tasks that invite students to demonstrate their mastery and knowledge of the course content. Summative assessment data provides teachers with information about how effective teaching strategies have been, time needed for instruction and how to improve teaching for future students [14].

5. Assessment Strategies

Assessment can be applied by variety of ways. Marsh named some techniques in applying assessment such as questioning techniques, problem-solving techniques, peer assessment and written or oral feedback comments [15]. To demonstrate learners’ progress, Cowie and Bell suggested that using different forms of assessment tools, such as portfolios, observations and projects [16]. For this research, classroom observation is used as method of collecting data.

Table below defines some assessment strategies that can be practiced in classrooms.

Table 1. Assessment Strategies

Strategy	How it can be practiced
Student self-assessment	Self-assessment is a process by which the student gathers information about his or her own learning. It is the student’s own assessment of personal progress in terms of knowledge, skills, processes, or attitudes. Self-assessment leads students to a greater awareness and understanding of themselves as learners.

Quiz, test, examination	A quiz, test, or examination requires students to respond to prompts in order to demonstrate their knowledge (orally or in writing) or their skills (e.g., through performance). Quizzes are usually short; examinations are usually longer.
Essay	An essay is a writing sample in which a student constructs a response to a question, topic, or brief statement, and supplies supporting details or arguments. Through essay, teachers can assess the student's understanding and ability to analyze and synthesize information.
Portfolio	A portfolio is a collection of samples of a student's work. It is focused, selective, reflective, and collaborative. It offers a visual demonstration of a student's achievement, capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, knowledge, and specific skills, over time and in a variety of contexts.
Learning log	A learning log is an ongoing, visible record kept by a student and recording what student is doing or thinking while working on a particular task or assignment. It can be used to assess student progress and growth over time.
Exhibition/ Demonstration	An exhibition/demonstration is a performance in a public setting, during which a student explains and applies a process, procedure, etc., in concrete ways to show individual achievement of specific skills and knowledge.
Classroom presentation	A classroom presentation requires students to verbalize their knowledge, select and present samples of finished work, and organize their thoughts in order to present a summary of their learning.
Interview	An interview is a face-to-face conversation in which teacher and student use inquiry to share their knowledge and understanding of a topic or problem. It can be used by teacher to explore the student's thinking, assess the student's level of understanding, gather information, obtain clarification and determine positions.
Observation	Observation is a process of systematically viewing and recording students while they work, for the purpose of making programming and instruction decisions. Observation can held at any time and in any setting. It provides information on students' strengths and weaknesses, learning styles, interests, and attitudes.
Conference	A conference is a formal or informal meeting between the teacher and a student for the purpose of exchanging information or sharing ideas. Conference might be held to explore the student's thinking and suggest next steps; assess the student's level of understanding of a particular concept, and review, clarify, and extend what the student has already completed.

6. Teachers' Questioning

Questioning is a common assessment practice and plays important roles in teaching and learning processes [17]. It is recommended that higher-level questions should be used in classroom in order to stimulate students' motivations and promote their thinking rather than recalling of information. Questioning practices are a part of the learning cycle. So, questions can enhance student thinking during classroom interaction. Black and Harrison asserted that "questions have become a more significant part of teaching and teachers' main concern now is to think harder about how questions can be constructed and used to develop students' learning [18]. Therefore, students' responses can be determined by the nature of the teacher questions [19].

During classroom interaction, teachers use different types of questioning methodologies. These questions can be used as a part of teaching and learning processes or as a part of assessment processes or both. Teachers have different purposes in asking questions. Questions can be check the students' progress and obtain feedback about the instructional process. When asking questions, teachers can identify the students' knowledge and

understanding. In addition, asking questions keep students involved in classroom discussions as well as evaluate students' learning.

Teachers' classroom questioning practices can take on several forms. The most common classification of teachers' questions contrasts open and closed questions. Open questions are questions require effective communication and positive interaction in the classroom. In contrast, closed questions do not provide effective communication during the classroom interaction. In addition, open questions require unknown answers to the teacher and require quite long answer. While closed questions require short answers and require students to recall knowledge that is already known and has been taught [20]. Open questions have more than one acceptable answer, while closed questions have only one accepted answer [21].

7. Methodology

The data in this study were collected from Hotat Bani Tamim (a region in Riyadh provenance of Saudi Arabia). In this study, observations were conducted to investigate classroom practices related to teachers' questioning by using a classroom observation form in

order to capture the key behaviors relating to teachers' questions. Five science teachers in primary schools were observed in their classrooms in Hotat Bani Tamim. The observation form was conducted at the end of school year. This form was reorganized according to the teachers purpose whether they intended to assess their student formally (formal assessment tasks) or not (non-formal assessment tasks). Quantitatively, the observation form included space to capture a number of different types of moves made by teachers or students during classroom interactions. The observation form was divided into three sections of moves between teachers and students. The first section is about teachers' moves on questioning, and included three types of practices: 'Teacher asks an open question to get an answer (TQO)', 'Teacher asks a closed question to get an answer (TQC)', and 'Teacher checks that the class is following (TCh)'. The second section of the observation form is students' moves to investigate students' responses to the teachers' questions. The student's moves were coded according to whether an individual student answered a question (IA), or there was a choral answer (CA). The third section is follow-up teachers' moves. It is to follow the student response by teachers. It was coded according to whether no feedback was given (none), the teacher affirmed the student's response (affirm), the teacher praised the student's response (praised), the teacher criticized the student's response (crit.), or the teacher elaborated on the student's response (com.).

8. Sample

Five science teachers have been chosen randomly from primary schools at Hotat Bani Tamim. After having their consents, I arranged a meeting to explain the purpose of this study and agreed the time and procedures for visiting them. As observation form was applied, the data collected were analyzed quantitatively by counting frequencies and percentages.

9. Results

During the classroom visit, I captured all teachers/students interactions during the lessons in order to explore how teachers use questions with their students.

The results show that there are substantial variations in practices between the teachers. Some teachers asked open questions nearly double of others. Despite these variations between the teachers in relation to asking open questions, none of them asked open questions in assessment purposes.

Therefore, all formal assessment questions were closed questions. In addition, the teachers rarely asked open questions. A similar pattern appears with the closed questions. As a result, all teachers asked more closed questions than open questions. Teachers asked closed questions in both formal and non-formal assessment tasks was almost the same.

Further differences can be seen in the way the teachers checked if the class was following. More than eleven per cent of the teachers' moves were checking to ensure that the class was following. These checks for all teachers occurred in non-formal assessment tasks.

Despite these differences between the teachers, in the formal assessment tasks, none of them asked any open questions. In the same way, none checked if the class was following or answered students' questions in the formal assessment period.

Since the only purpose of the teachers' question appears to be confirming the attainment of specific, previously taught skills, and none of the questions seems to seek information unknown to the teacher, this result confirms that the teachers are not using formative assessment.

In the results of teachers' follow-up, it was common for students' answers to receive follow-up. However, the crucial matter is the type of feedback the teachers provided. Positive feedback was the dominant practice in relation to the teachers' follow-up moves. Most of these feedbacks occurred in the non-assessment tasks. In addition, positive feedback was merely saying words such as 'yes', 'good', and 'well done' and clapping. The crucial feedback that students benefit from is very rare. Most of feedbacks were in the non-assessment tasks.

In conclusion, the types of questions used by teachers are not consistent with formative assessment. Commonly known, using positive feedback frequently in classroom is a vital aspect in the formative assessment strategy. Students can modify their learning based on teachers' feedback.

10. Conclusion

The research presented the clear picture of assessment strategies for the overall development of students and based on the data and its analysis. As shown, teachers focused on asking questions in order to assess students and give them grades rather than focusing on the students' learning. Assessment is a good tool to improve the students' achievements [22]. Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia has to work hard to enhance the assessment strategies. Improving assessment system should start with the base line.

Based on the findings of this study, the following points are suggested:

1. Policymakers and teachers should emphasise the implementation of formative assessment as a tool for increasing students' achievement levels.
2. Students should be given the opportunity to be active learners who seek knowledge by themselves, to be able to assess their learning.
3. Teachers should be trained on assessment training programs to be updated with new moves.
4. Teachers' questioning should focus on how students learn rather than what students learn.
5. Encouraging students to express their thoughts and opinions is a good way to put them in the room of high order thinking.

11. References

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