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Investigating Alternative Assessment Practices in Pre-service English Teacher Education Programs

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Abstract

The general purpose of this study was to examine the place of alternative assessments in the Egyptian pre-service English teacher education programs. A hundred fourth year student teachers of English participated in the present study on a voluntary basis. A closed response questionnaire that included thirty two alternative assessment strategies, followed by five options: always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never, was developed, judged, modified, and distributed to the participants to complete. The findings of the study indicated that the response "never" got the highest percentage followed by "rarely", then "sometimes" for most of the suggested alternative assessment strategies. Such findings imply that the frequently used assessment strategies are traditional (paper-and-pencil achievement tests). This indicates that English teacher educators need real and immediate guidance in designing and using alternative methods of assessment.

Keywords: Assessment, Classroom Assessment, Alternative Assessment, Performance Assessment, Authentic Assessment, Portfolio Assessment, Traditional Tests

1. Introduction

Assessment is an integral part of teaching. The student's learning assessment has multiple objectives: placing students in appropriate instructional levels, measuring their ongoing progress, qualifying them to enroll in academic or job training programs, verifying program effectiveness, and demonstrating their gains in order to justify continued funding for a program. However, the match between significant learning goals, instructional programs, and assessment tools is a key element in any effective educational system. The concept of assessment broadens the kind of information that is collected about students and the way that this information is used in the evaluation of student learning. Assessment needs to tap and build upon the strengths that learners, in all their diversity, bring to the learning situation. In fact, the influence of assessment on curriculum and instruction is now widely acknowledged.

Classroom assessment serves many purposes for teachers such as: grading, identification of students with special learning needs, student motivation, clarification of students' achievement expectations, and monitoring instructional effectiveness (Koloi-keaikitse, 2012). It is a key part of any teacher's job (Guay,1997), plays a key role in identity formation (Gipps, 2004), enables teachers to understand their students and to match actions with accurate assessments (McMillan, 2008), is a systematic process used to collect information that can be used to make inferences about characteristics of students or objects (Reynolds, Livingstone, & Wilson, 2009), is a means by which the education system is enhanced and defined (Nenty, Adedoyin, Odili, & Major, 2007), is the application of knowledge to actual, real-life situations (Dochy, 2001), is the process by which we gather evidence to help answer the question "How is it going?" (Schloemer,1997), appraises students' knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills and it is inextricably linked to a course or program's intended learning outcomes (Marriot & Lau, 2008), enhances students' effort, engagement, and performance (Hammerman, 2009), encourages students to learn accountability in their work and in their personal lives (Wormeli, 2006), and helps make informed effective decisions on the ability of teachers to understand their students and to match actions with accurate assessments (McMillan, 2008). Therefore, teachers' proficiency in assessment and evaluation practices should be viewed as a requisite skill for improving the quality of teaching and learning (Volante & Fazio, 2007).

2. Review of Related Literature

The current system of assessing students' learning, referred to as the 'traditional approach' (i.e. teacher-made tests, commercial tests, and standardized tests) dates back to the 1800s, when Horace Mann advocated tests to monitor quality of instruction, allowing for comparisons among teachers and schools. Since then, tests have been used in classrooms to determine what students have mastered. According to Rotham, (1995**),** 90 percent of teachers report using teacher-made tests at least once a month. Wilcox and Zielinski (1997**)** stress that in traditional practice, assessment is used by teachers primarily to assign grades at the end of a unit of instruction and to distinguish the students who are successful from those who are not. Although traditional tests are improving (Kapinus, Collier, & Kruglanski, 1994; Mitchell, 1992; Snider, Lima, & DeVito, 1994) and will continue to provide some useful general

information for outside audiences, literature on testing and evaluation confirms that using the traditional approach in assessing students' learning result in many problems and challenges (Hansen, 1998; Ozar, 1997; Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994). Traditional tests show only some of what we hope and expect students to learn. The most obvious limitation of traditional tests is the lack of room for students' input into the assessment process. They also lack authenticity which makes many students consider schools meaningless. Gielen, Dochy and Dierick (2003) argue that authenticity of the assessment tasks is an imperative condition to achieve the expert level of problem_solving. They often fail to account for specific learning needs and abilities of students. Further, the focus of traditional assessment is limited to content and factual information that is removed from the learning context. Traditional assessment strategies often assess isolated skills rather than real ability; emphasize lower level comprehension rather than deep understanding; rely on multiple-choice formats that are unfamiliar and confusing for students; produce scores that are not informative or useful for planning instruction; rely on recognition rather than production of abilities; and do not involve students in their own assessment. Thinking skills, decision-making competencies, values and attitudes, physical and motor skills, creativity, individual abilities, and social and interpersonal dimensions seldom are included in such traditional tests. In short, traditional tests reveal little about the assessment of the student. They may only show whether a student is a good test taker.

It is clear that the majority of current research in the area of classroom assessment confirms the inadequacy of using tradition tests and the necessity of using alternative assessment strategies. Many educators and linguists criticized the standardized tests (Hansen, 1998; Linn 1993, Ozar, 1997; Valencia & Pearson, 1987; Valencia, Hiebert, & Afflerbach, 1994). Others criticized the use of commercially available language tests for their inadequacy of assessing the individual learner strengths and weaknesses (Lytle & Wolf, 1989; Solorzano, 1994). Therefore, there is a general consensus for assessment reform and an increased call for using alternative assessment strategies. Current literature on alternative assessments or authentic assessments emphasized the appropriateness of using alternative assessments to assess students' progress toward standards naturally and accurately while students are engaged in real-world tasks. Several educators, linguists, and researchers have concentrated on types of alternative assessment strategies, how to use them, how to promote student reflection, issues related to effects on teaching, and how to develop rubrics to grade such strategies (Achibald & Newman 1988; Ardovino et al., 2000; Dutt-Doner, & Maddox, 1998; Grace,1992; Gronlund, 1998; Guay, 1997; Hamayan, 1995; Hancock, 1994; Hansen, 1998; Huerta-Macias, 1995; Isserlis, 1992; Janesick, 2001; Johnsen, 1996; Kelner, 1993; Kulieke et al.,1990; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989; Mohnsen, 1997; Ozar, 1997; Pierce & O'Malley, 1992; Posch, 1994; Salend, 1998; Schloemer, 1997; Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991; Trumbull & Farr, 2000; Wiggins, 1984, 1997). Darling-Hammond et al. (as cited in Bagley, 2007) defined alternative or authentic assessment as having four common characteristics:

1) It is designed to be representative of performance in a particular field.

2) It reflects essential performance standards which are made clear ahead of time to students.

3) It enables students to develop the capacity for self-reflection and self evaluation.

4) It provides students with the opportunity to publicly present their work.

3. Purpose of the Study

In schools of education, student teachers of English are supposed to be involved in various assessment strategies to help collect the multifaceted types of information needed to analyze their learning, knowledge, abilities, attitudes, achievement, skills, and improve their performance, so as to be able to convey such assessment strategies to their classes after graduation-that would be the ideal situation, but in reality, the situation is different. English teacher educators require student teachers to take tests that produce scores for moving them from grade to another. This is confirmed by Valencia (1997) and Wiggins (1993).

Through taking part in the English teacher education program at Assiut School of Education and reviewing the exam papers of different subjects, the researcher noticed that assessment and grading in the English teacher education program was based on test scores and paper-and-pencil achievement tests that are given to the English majors at the end of each semester for the sake of moving them to the next grade. Such tests are not usually useful in measuring the broad range of abilities fostered in the curriculum. Most tests measure only a narrow slice of the student teacher's linguistic abilities. And even in these areas, the tests fail to reflect the student teacher's ability to think critically and creatively, his/her motivation to learn, or his/her capacity to engage in self-assessment. Wiggins (1990) says that our tests such as multiple-choice tests mislead students and teachers about the kinds of work that should be mastered. These current assessment practices are not being used to understand what students truly know and understand or even to provide a comprehensive, in depth assessment of the knowledge and skills that indicate mastery of a given subject matter. According to Hansen (1998), educators realize that tests show only some of what they hope and expect their students to learn. Rarely are scores used to improve instruction or help an individual student teacher. Instead, they serve a more public purpose: informing university officials and the public how a particular college is doing compared to others. Policymakers rely on the scores of such traditional tests to dictate improvement. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to answer the following main question: Is there a place for alternative assessments in the current Egyptian pre-service English teacher education programs?

4. Research Questions

The following were the two specific guiding research questions for my study:

1. What are the most common alternative assessment strategies suitable for the Egyptian prospective teachers of English?

2. How frequently are Egyptian pre-service English teachers involved in alternative assessment strategies?

5. Research Hypotheses

In light of the literature review and research questions, the present study was concerned with

testing the following directional hypothesis:

"There would be a statistically significant difference at 0.01 level of confidence between the observed frequencies and the expected ones of the participants' responses for each of the alternative assessment strategies."

6. Significance of the Study

It was hoped that the findings of the present study would contribute to the improvement of the assessment strategies used in assessing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes (KSA) of the prospective teachers of English in schools of education. They might help Egyptian experts of assessment in designing their assessment courses and programs for both the pre-service and the in-service teachers of English. They might also be useful for prospective teachers of English in assessing their future students' knowledge, skills, and attitudes and improving their performance.

7. Definition of Terms

The terms used in the present study are operationally defined as follows:

1. Assessment. It is any interactive process that engages both educator and student teacher of English in monitoring the latter's progress for the sake of improving his/her performance.

2. Alternative assessment. It is an ongoing process involving educator and student teacher of English in making judgments about the latter's progress in language using non-conventional strategies.

3. Authentic assessment. It is the assessment process that is performance-based, realistic, and instructionally appropriate. It requires student teachers of English to: (a) be involved in tasks that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful; (b) demonstrate performance and ability; and(c) think critically while applying skills to solve real-world problems rather than recognize correct responses in order to determine the repertoire of skills they have at their disposal and how they strategically make use of them.

4. Authentic assessment strategies. They are the believable, trustworthy, genuine activities that resemble the activities that student teachers routinely use to learn.

5. Authentic classroom assessment activities. They are the assessment activities that resemble real-life literacy tasks and involve the application of skills and strategies in many different contexts rather than assessment of isolated, decontextualized skills.

6. Performance assessment. It is a form of testing that requires student teachers of English to perform a task rather than select an answer from a ready-made list.

7. Portfolio assessment. It is an ongoing process involving the student teachers of English and educator in selecting samples of student's work for inclusion in a collection, the main purpose of which is to show the student teacher's progress. In other words, it is a record of the student teacher's process of learning that enables him/her to participate in assessing his/her own work, keep track of his/her progress, and provide a basis for evaluating the quality of

his/her overall performance.

8. Method and Procedure

8.1 Participants

The closed response questionnaire developed by the researcher and used in the present study was given to a group of one hundred and twenty fourth year English majors enrolled in the English Section, Assiut School of Education. The participants were selected on a voluntary basis. Only one hundred completed questionnaires returned. So, these one hundred respondents who completed the questionnaire were considered the participants for the present study.

8.2 Instruments of the Study

For the purpose of this study, a closed response questionnaire was given to the participants to complete. The questionnaire was developed by the researcher through reviewing literature on alternative assessments and analyzing the various alternative assessment strategies which teachers use in their classes in different parts of the world. In its original form, the questionnaire comprised 49 classroom assessment strategies. It was given to five American and Egyptian classroom assessment experts to judge the clarity, appropriateness, and validity of its items, as well as the feasibility of using such alternative assessment strategies in the Egyptian pre-service English teacher education program. In light of the judges' comments, seventeen strategies that were not appropriate to the Egyptian environment or overlapping were omitted. Therefore, the final form of the closed response questionnaire that included feasible alternative strategies consisted of thirty two alternative assessment strategies followed by five options: always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never. (See Appendix 1). In its final modified form, the questionnaire answers the first question, "What are the most common alternative assessment strategies suitable for the Egyptian prospective teachers of English?" The calculated test-retest reliability of the questionnaire was (0.82), and its statistical validity was (0.90). The instructions of the questionnaire were simple, brief, and clear. They contained information about the objective of the questionnaire and the directions of how to record responses. The researcher confirmed that the participants have understood all the components of the questionnaire by holding a short orientation session where he made the meaning of all alternative assessment strategies included in the questionnaire clear.

9. Results and Discussion

In light of the hypothesis and questions of the present study, the results are presented and discussed in the following section. To answer the second question, "How frequently are Egyptian pre-service English teachers involved in alternative assessment strategies?" the frequencies and percentages of the participants' responses to the questionnaire items were calculated. These frequencies, percentages together with the X values are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Frequencies, Percentages and X Values of the Participants' Responses to the Questionnaire Items

Number	Alternative Assessment Strategies	Response										Chi Square	Priority
		Always		Often		Sometimes		Rarely		Never			
		F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%	F	%		
1	Anecdotal records	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	94	94	303.6*	3
2	Audio and video cassettes	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100	400*	1
3	Checklists	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	100	100	400*	1
4	Constructed response questions	0	0	6	6	7	7	7	7	80	80	226.7*	13
5	Content area logs	0	0	0	0	0	0	6	6	94	94	303.6*	3
6	Discussions	0	0	3	3	8	8	7	7	82	82	242.3*	11
7	Essays throughout the academic year	0	0	0	0	10	10	10	10	80	80	230*	13
8	Exhibitions	0	0	0	0	7	7	10	10	83	83	251.9*	10
9	Extended tasks	5	5	0	0	5	5	7	7	83	83	249.4*	10
10	Interactive diaries	4	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	81	81	232.6*	12
11	Interviews	0	0	4	4	5	5	7	7	84	84	257.3*	9
12	Inventories	0	0	0	0	0	0	8	8	92	92	326.4*	4
13	Journals	0	0	0	0	5	5	0	0	95	95	352.5*	2
14	KWL charts	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	3	95	95	351.9*	2
15	Learner self assessment	0	0	5	5	0	0	10	10	85	85	267.5*	8
16	Observation measures	0	0	0	0	10	10	0	0	90	90	310*	5
17	Open-ended extended response	0	0	0	0	10	10	10	10	80	80	230*	13
18	Oral presentations	0	0	6	6	5	5	10	10	79	79	220.1*	14
19	Physical demonstrations	0	0	0	0	2	2	10	10	88	88	292.4*	6
20	Pictorial products	0	0	3	3	5	5	10	10	82	82	242.9*	11
21	Portfolio	0	0	3	3	0	0	10	10	87	87	283.9*	7
22	Projects	0	0	3	3	3	3	10	10	84	84	258.7*	9
23	Questionnaires	2	2	5	5	10	10	3	3	80	80	226.9*	13
24	Rating scales	2	2	1	1	8	8	10	10	79	79	220.5*	14
25	Reading conferences	1	1	0	0	4	4	15	15	80	80	232.1*	13
26	Reading response logs	0	0	0	0	0	0	10	10	90	90	310*	5
27	Research project	0	0	4	4	0	0	15	15	81	81	240.1*	12
28	Retelling	2	2	0	0	15	15	4	4	79	79	224.3*	14
29	Role plays	0	0	5	5	5	5	3	3	87	87	281.4*	7
30	Rubrics	0	0	3	3	10	10	4	4	83	83	250.7*	10
31	Screening tests	3	3	0	0	10	10	10	10	77	77	206.9*	15
32	Writing conferences	5	5	0	0	8	8	10	10	77	77	205.9*	15

* $P > 0.001$

Table 1 indicates the frequencies and percentages of the five responses that followed each statement. It is clear that the response "never" got the highest percentage followed by "rarely", then "sometimes" for most, if not all the suggested alternative assessment strategies. A close look at the column of the "never" response shows that the suggested alternative assessment strategies are never used. These frequencies answer the second question of the study. It is evident that 'audio and video cassettes', and 'checklists' occupy the top position

(100), followed by 'journals and 'KWL charts' (95), then 'anecdotal records' and 'content area logs'(94). 'Inventories' comes in the fourth position (92), followed by 'Observation measures' and 'Reading response logs' (90), then 'Physical demonstrations'(88).'Portfolios and 'Role playing' have the seventh position (87), followed by 'Learner self assessment' (85), then 'Interviews' and 'Projects' (84). In the tenth position come 'Exhibitions', 'Extended tasks', and 'Rubrics' (83), followed by 'Discussions' and 'Pictorial products'(82), then 'Interactive diaries' and 'Research projects (81). "Constructed response questions', 'Essays throughout the academic year', Open-ended extended response', 'Questionnaires', and 'Reading conferences' come in the thirteenth position (80), followed by 'Oral presentations', 'Rating scales', and 'Retelling' (79).'Screen tests' and 'Writing conferences' occupy the bottom position (77). It is evident from these high percentages devoted to the response 'never' that most of the proposed alternative assessment strategies are never used in the pre-service English teacher education program.

To test the study hypothesis, "There would be a statistically significant difference at 0.01 level of confidence between the observed frequencies and the expected ones of the participants' responses for each of the assessment strategies," the 'X values' were calculated. All the X values of the thirty two alternative assessment strategies were significant at the level of 0.001. These results show that the participants of the present study have never been involved in most if not all the suggested alternative assessment strategies during their study in the English section, Assiut School of Education. They also imply that the frequently used assessment strategies are traditional (paper–and-pencil achievement tests). This indicates that English teacher educators need real and immediate guidance in designing and using alternative methods of assessment. It also stresses the bad need for using alternative assessment strategies to improve the pre-service English teacher education program. Based on the aforementioned results, the answer to the main research question, "Is there a place for alternative assessments in the current pre-service English teacher education program?", appears to be a negative one. These results confirm the findings reported by Rotham**, (**1995**)** who indicated that most educators use norm-referenced and criterion-referenced testing, as well as teacher-made tests to collect assessment data.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study aimed to investigate the place of alternative assessments in the current Egyptian pre-service English teacher education program at Assiut School of Education. A five response questionnaire that consisted of thirty two statements was designed, judged, modified, and used by the researcher to examine the opinions of the fourth year student teachers of English concerning the frequency of being involved in the suggested alternative assessment strategies. Statistical analysis was conducted on the participants' responses. The findings indicated that there is no place for the majority of the suggested alternative assessment strategies in the current Egyptian pre-service English teacher education program.

From a practical standpoint, the findings of the present study not only contribute to the ongoing debate about the necessity of shifting to alternative assessments, but they are also compatible with the theoretical assumptions about multiple intelligences, and learning by

doing which are strongly recommended by many educators (Armstrong, 1994; Goleman, 1995). The findings also support the voices everywhere urging teachers from kindergarten to graduate school to challenge and invite students to express their learning in ways that require them to use multiple intelligences, a variety of learning styles, higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills, creativity and decision making (Ozar, 1997). They are also consistent with the general consensus and continued call for assessment reform (Hansen, 1998; Lytle & Wolfe, 1989; Ozar, 1997; Wrigley, 1992).

These findings hold pedagogical implications for classroom assessment. These implications are summarized as follows:

1. Traditional methods of telling "how it is going" become increasingly inadequate, as connections, reasoning, communication, and valuing become more central in the English curriculum.

2. Paper- and- pencil testing is only one way to collect information about the learning of student teacher. Teacher educators should find better ways to assess student teachers of English in the classroom.

3. Educators must develop assessment strategies that would yield richer, more qualitative information about student achievement and performance, and instructional effectiveness.

4. Integrating traditional and alternative assessment measures can provide a better construction of student teachers of English and what they know and can do.

5. Alternative assessment strategies appear to move in the direction of collecting formative and summative data and providing ongoing opportunities for educators and student teachers of English to co-create a powerful learning environment for meeting standards.

6. The more complete the picture, the more appropriate the feedback, instruction, and grades. Alternative classroom assessment includes multiple measures of student learning, all of which are aimed at providing information that is useful for planning and improving feedback, instruction, and grades.

In light of the findings and conclusion of the present study, the researcher recommends that pre-service English teacher educators should:

1. Integrate traditional and alternative assessment measures in order to assess the English pre-service teachers' knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

2. Encourage student teachers of English to assess their own work according to specific criteria.

3. Make assessment fit the student teacher rather than trying to make the student teacher fit the assessment.

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Appendix 1.

Alternative Assessments Questionnaire

Dear fourth year student teacher of English,

The following is a five response questionnaire that consisted of thirty two statements. It has been designed to investigate your opinion concerning the frequency of being involved in alternative assessment strategies. Listed below are the most common alternative assessment strategies. Indicate how frequently you have been involved in such assessment strategies throughout your study in the English Section, School of Education. Please check (x) the option that best suits your opinion.

Assessment strategies	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Throughout my study in the English Section, School of Education I have been involved in the following assessment strategies:					
1. Anecdotal records					
2. Audio and video cassettes					
3. Checklists					
4. Constructed response questions					
5. Content area logs					
6. Discussions					
7. Essays throughout the academic year					
8. Exhibitions					
9. Extended tasks					
10. Interactive diaries					
11. Interviews					
12. Inventories					
13. Journals					
14. K.W.L charts					
15. Learner self assessment					
16. Observation measures					
17. Open-ended extended response .					
18. Oral presentations					
19. Physical demonstrations					
20. Pictorial products					
21. Portfolio					
22. Projects					
23. Questionnaires					
24. Rating scales					
25. Reading conferences					
26. Reading response logs					

27. Research project					
28. Retelling					
29. Role plays					
30. Rubrics					
31. Screening tests					
32. Writing conferences					

Thank you for your co-operation

The Researcher

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