

Continuous Assessment in the Saudi Education System: Challenges and Opportunities

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Abstract: Nowadays, there are many methods for evaluating institutional performance in accordance with the productivity and outcomes of learners, teachers and administrators. The utilization of continuous assessment in the Saudi education system has always been characterized as a way for facilitating and monitoring students' learning based on the teaching practices within organizations. This paper sheds new light on the current challenges associated with the utilization of continuous assessment in Saudi education system. It is a state-of-the-art review of the development of general education in Saudi Arabia and discusses in details the concept of continuous assessment. The review is established with addressing potential opportunities of a successful utilization of continuous assessment method in the Saudi education system. In conclusion, it was found out that many essential principles regarding the proper utilization of continuous assessment must be considered and acknowledged by teachers during the utilization of continuous assessment in their classroom practices such as fully understanding the achievement targets of continuous assessment at the initial stage of teaching process, modulating the form and content of continuous assessment to make its objectives more achievable, and conducting a proper preparation program and planning of continuous assessment procedures and activities in the classroom.

Keywords: Testing, Continuous Assessment, Education System Evaluation, Institutional Development.

التقويم المستمر في النظام التعليمي السعودي: التحديات والفرص

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المستخلص: في الوقت الحالي يوجد العديد من الأساليب لتقييم أداء المؤسسات التعليمية حسب المخرجات والنتائج للطلاب والمعلمين والإداريين، وقد اتصف استخدام التقويم المستمر في النظام التعليمي السعودي كوسيلة لتسهيل ومتابعة التحصيل الدراسي للطلاب بناء على أساليب التدريس المطبقة في المؤسسات التعليمية، وهذه الدراسة تتناول من جديد التحديات المصاحبة لاستخدام التقويم المستمر في النظام التعليمي السعودي وهي ملخص دقيق لتطور التعليم في المملكة العربية السعودية، كما تناقش بالتفصيل مفهوم التقويم المستمر، وملخص الدراسة مبني على مناقشة الفرص المستقبلية للاستخدام الصحيح لأسلوب التقويم المستمر الناجح في النظام التعليمي للمملكة العربية السعودية، وفي الختام تم استنتاج أن هناك عدة أساسيات تعليمية تتعلق بالاستخدام الصحيح للتقويم المستمر يتوجب على المعلمين معرفتها وأخذها بعين الاعتبار أثناء استخدام التقويم المستمر خلال ممارستهم داخل فصولهم الدراسية مثل الفهم الكامل لإنجاز أهداف التقويم المستمر في المرحلة الأولى من عملية التدريس وتطوير الشكل والمحتوى للتقويم المستمر لإنجاز أهدافه بشكل أفضل وإعداد برامج التهيئة والتخطيط المناسبة لإجراءات وأنشطة التقويم المستمر في الفصول الدراسية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الاختبارات، التقويم المستمر، تقييم النظام التعليمي، تطوير المؤسسات التعليمية.

1. INTRODUCTION

The education in Saudi Arabia has gone through many changes in its history. In order to gain an in-depth insight about the utilization of continuous assessment methods in the Saudi context, it is essential to review the Saudi education system since its establishment in 1926 and up to the recent years. This is to track the development of the Saudi education system and its assessment utilization in accordance with the teaching practices. Therefore, different types of transformations that represent the progress procession of education are thoroughly presented and discussed. This paper discusses the Saudi education⁽¹⁾ system, continuous assessment utilization, challenges for utilizing continuous assessment, and opportunities arising from utilizing continuous assessment in Saudi education. Some suggestions for future development are presented at the end of this paper.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

2.1. State-of-the-Art Review of the Saudi Education System

The establishment of the Saudi education system has passed over two main stages known as Non-Classic stage and Classic stage. The Non-Classic stage consists of the teaching and learning activities being held at the mosques and houses. At that time, it was believed that such practices would empower students' learning of reading and writing along with the recitation of the Holy Quran. These activities were conducted in groups of people that were self-financed. These activities also were self-assessed by the same people who belong to governmental or non-governmental agencies. Then, a traditional type of education was presented at the primary schools "Katatteeb", mosques, gatherings of educated people throughout the country. The learning activities at that time followed the same basic idea of having students learning the reading and writing of the Holy Quran (Ministry of Education, 2001). However, such activities had not continued due to the political events that resulted in removing the Ottoman reign and the people's opposition and resistance for such type of education (Hugail, 1993). Based on these events, a group of teachers worked on modernizing the non-classic activities by imposing some new sciences and subjects in the curricula. Such type of education was available in some private schools in the eastern

(1) Author's comment regarding the use of *education* instead of *educational*:

As *educational* is a perfectly good adjective to describe what kind of system I am talking about, education and educational are generally interchangeable, but *education system* is much more common. In this particular context, I believe that it is possible to put two nouns back-to-back in a way that they complement each other. Also in this context, education is used as a noun modifier to show that the second noun (system in our case) is a part of or related to education, which also means that an education system is a system of education. Therefore, from a professional point of view, I used "education system" to refer to the system of the Saudi education not the system that is educational.

region and western region of Saudi Arabia (Al-Saloom, 1991). This was somehow referred to as a classic education started in the year 1925 that has become part of the country's overall system at that time. A number of trends were reported during this stage, these are:

a. Establishment and Formation stage

In 1946, the Education Council was established in cooperation with few associations that were established to promote embedding the classic system into the non-classic one. Based on this, the first educational system was established in the country to change the education status which was mainly relying on the primary schools "Katateeb" and the remaining incomplete schools of Hashemite and Turks (Al-Saloom, 1991). It illustrates the establishment of the identity of education entity and the designation of its features and policy.

b. Growth and Development stage

During this stage, there was a planning for opening new schools and institutes of various types and classes. Also, the allocation of budget for extending the teaching and learning practices in these schools was progressively increased (Ministry of Education, 2002). After a solid establishment of schools in most regions of the Kingdom, the Ministry of Education was established in 1975 (Al-Shamikh, 1982). One of the key aspects that has been resulted in this stage was the wide vocals of education throughout all regions. This was initiated by opening many schools, institutes, colleges and universities in most of the regions of Saudi Arabia which consist of general education, higher education, vocational education and vocational training. In 1991, after the issuance of the Basic System of Government, the government determined to review all activities and functions of other governmental departments and agencies. Therefore, directives were issued to all Ministries including the ministry of education to make changes that can be consistent with the abovementioned system (Ministry of Economy & Planning, Fifth Development Plan, 1990). As a result, the number of the schools which were established during the reign of King Abdulaziz reached 312 government primary schools, 14 private primary schools, 11 governmental secondary schools, 4 private secondary schools, one vocational school, 8 institutes for teachers' recruitment, one college of teachers and one college for Sharia studies (Abdullah, 1982).

Table 1 presents the progressive development in boys' education. It can be noticed that the number of schools has increased dramatically due to the increase in the number of students and teachers from 2005 to 2010. The same can be seen in Table 2 which represents the growth in girls' education that shows a progressive development every year. Such immersive development led the ministry to consider the utilization of several assessment methods for the aim of monitoring the teaching activities and their impact on students' learning of various subjects.

Table (1) The Growth of Boys Education during the 8th Development Plan

Year	Schools	Classrooms	Students	Teachers
2005/2006	14565	110819	2420073	200997

Year	Schools	Classrooms	Students	Teachers
2006/2007	14791	113325	2446302	207911
2007/2008	15066	119018	2510489	217613
2008/2009	15054	117458	2525014	212144
2009/2010	15198	118778	2536479	222575

Source: Ministry of Education (2010)

Table (2) The Growth of Girls Education during the 8th Development Plan

Year	Schools	Classrooms	Students	Teachers
2005/2006	16834	110178	2326506	235249
2006/2007	17494	112678	2369605	242274
2007/2008	18403	115601	2438007	250012
2008/2009	18051	116464	2437436	232500
2009/2010	18219	118438	2456559	249517

Source: Ministry of Education (2010).

c. Continuous Assessment Implementation stage

After the consolidation of different directions for assessing the teaching and learning practices of the Saudi education system, the utilization of continuous assessment came into place as a crucial part for developing the Saudi education system. The idea of implementing continuous assessment in the primary schools has appeared from the need of this stage for more focusing and concentration on learning, teaching and assessment. The objectives of the implementation of continuous assessment as a novel assessment innovation are as follows:

1. To take into consideration the characteristics of cognitive, emotional, social and psychological growth of this category of students (primary schools).
2. To academically provide primary schools teachers with the necessary tools to be qualified to deal with their classrooms as per correct scientific criteria of assessment.
3. To provide a learning and teaching environment that meets the needs of the student in accordance with his characteristics and needs.
4. To use teaching methods and strategies that would be appropriate with the nature of student's age such as recreational education or learning via educational games.
5. To use assessment methods and tools that provide the students with psychological security and keeps them away from tests anxiety (Ministry of Education, 1998).

The structure and aims of the said assessment innovation, i.e. continuous assessment, achieve the objective of focusing attention on the student in order to make them the center of the teaching and learning process. This objective requires financial and manpower resources to meet its needs. Also, this

matter requires a diagnostic assessment to help supporting programs explore the creativity of individuals (Harchy, 2009).

2.2. Continuous Assessment Utilization in Saudi Education System

The current movement to fully utilize continuous assessment in Saudi education system places emphasis on the corrective practices that are conducted inside or outside the classroom. This includes developing students' ability and skills to achieve the required learning objectives (Al-Saadawi, 2009). Some effective ways for utilizing continuous assessment in Saudi education sector are conducted by using short quizzes and daily notes and reports of the student's performance. It is believed that reporting students' performance in different learning tasks would help estimate the efficiency of teaching practices in terms of assignments, projects and homework. The learning goal behind the utilization of continuous assessment is to empower students' capabilities to learn the task by developing the teaching practices. On the other hand, one of the current practices in assessing teaching and learning practices in Saudi education involves gaining feedback from both teacher and learner. This is seen to help students be more motivated to study at the initial stage of their learning journey.

After all, it can be concluded that utilizing continuous assessment is mostly performed when teachers finish teaching part of the lesson or textbook unit. Based on students' responses and performance, teachers may decide either to continue teaching the following lessons or units upon verifying the success of students in achieving the educational objectives of this part, or to replicate more activities for learning.

3. DISCUSSION

The implementation of continuous assessment in the Saudi education system may face some potential challenges and difficulties. These challenges and other related issues from the analytical background of continuous assessment in the Saudi context may include:

- a. Lack of both teachers' and students' preparation programs and planning of continuous assessment procedures and activities.

It is a well-known fact that many educational institutions may plan for a certain utilization of assessment innovation in their educational system without considering certain aspects related to learners, classroom, equipment, etc. Such practices would result in a lack of knowledge about the suitability of learning programs being taught to the students. As such, proper preparation programs and planning of continuous assessment procedures and activities should consider the knowledge, cognition and skills that must be targeted and addressed. It also should take into consideration the students' prior and present experiences, competences and individual needs.

- b. Lack of applying continuous assessment during the daily learning process.

The lack of applying continuous assessment during the daily learning process is seen to reduce its effectiveness that should neither manage nor change the process of teaching and learning. This means that the assessment process must be performed at the appropriate venues during the learning process in which some essential aspects such as students' preparedness and nature of outcomes to be assessed must be contemplated. Sometimes the assessment process is done at the end of a subject or unit; while some other times it is done at the beginning of the learning process. Therefore, the learning activities should be properly utilized when conducting the assessment process. Moreover, the improvement of continuous assessment process inside the classroom relies partly on knowing the learning objectives of the present practices.

- c. Lack of monitoring and recording the progress scores achieved by students.

The monitoring process is very significant for assisting the teachers in designating the students' needs, providing feedback on their progress in general, writing the assessment reports for their parents and rectifying the effectiveness of the program and teaching methodology. The monitoring process should be implemented and the teachers should only monitor the useful issues under assessment.

- d. Lack of providing the students, parents and some teachers with feedback in the form of reports.

Although the utilizing continuous assessment may rely on the feedback while students progressing in a task, reporting the feedback in accordance with the activity is a major issue that forms the communication between the school and parents of students. In this regard, some recommendations have been highlighted by Piechnik, Yang, Czosnyka, Smielewski, Fletcher, Jones & Pickard (1999) to overcome such lack:

- 1- Students should receive verbal and written notes on their work the matter could help them in knowing what they have done and what they can do thereafter. Such feedback can be done immediately as part of the daily learning process and most probably it is done verbally; or upon the end of each unit, subject or exercise, and most probably done in written form.
- 2- Parents should be provided with report (verbal or written) that includes clear statements about the student's progress and achievement.
- 3- Teachers should be provided with demographic background about the students' progress in previous learning sessions. It is considered essential to maintain continuity and improvement on the students learning process.
- 4- Finally, school's managers should be provided with the information about the progress of all students in achieving the required criteria.

4. CONCLUSION

During the utilization of continuous assessment in Saudi education as a form of assessment innovation, both challenges and opportunities emerged as a result of this kind of assessment innovation. Based on the aforementioned challenges that may be faced in schools during the utilization of continuous assessment, some opportunities can be drawn from such utilization. For instance, providing a continuous feedback about students' learning and teachers' practices in classroom can impact the way for processing subject-matter knowledge. Also, continuous assessment can offer a particular view about the nature of evidence and principles of fairness needed for sustaining students' performance. The recent continuous assessment practiced by Saudi schools is intended to help both teachers and students to develop alternatives to standardized tests that are being addressed from different assumptions. For example, continuous assessment simplifies the way for unifying the classroom needs with the consideration of the fit between teaching practices and students' performance. Thus, it is believed that assessment in the Saudi context must be looked at as an official event that must be uniformly administered in order to conduct more intensive individualized assessments. Meanwhile, considering teachers' teaching background as a key factor for conducting the continuous assessment would help shape the belief of carrying out a certain activity in a classroom following specific instructional goal. Most significantly, the way for conducting this type of assessment place additional demands by teachers for having the assessment as an "objective". This is because teachers most of the times are more concern about the subjectivity involved in making more holistic evaluations of students. As such, they may find themselves more comfortable with formula-based methods, such as counting miscues, because these techniques were more "impartial." Lastly, preparation programs and planning of continuous assessment procedures and activities are considered as very essential components of effective continuous assessment utilization.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

Reviewing the challenges and opportunities that may results from continuous assessment utilization led the researcher to suggest a number of issues important for extending continuous assessment in the Saudi context. This includes modulating the form and content in order to clearly characterise the thinking and problem solving skills necessary when engaging in activities. On the other hand, further considerations must be given to the current manner of using continuous assessment in classrooms in which teachers may consider the effects of external motivational elements. Such assumption is driven from the fact that when an assessment is implemented, teachers tend to depend on the classroom assessment process in association with the continuous flow of information about student progress in the activity with less emphasis on students' learning. Thus, at the initial stage of teaching, teachers need to fully understand the achievement targets that they expect students to attain. In addition, teachers may also need to correlate students' performance with the utilization of certain teaching strategy.

Such correlation would help configure the assessment process to further advance students to achieve their goals. Some previous studies reported that students usually pose a different way for processing and understanding information from the beginning of the learning activity. Moreover, involving other sorts of interaction-centred materials can empower the teaching experience in order to help transform students' expectations in the form of exercises. Classroom assessment for building students' confidence requires a deep consideration of institutional policy for bringing teaching strategies into practice for lifelong learning. Other suggestions for continuous assessment development can include engaging students in regular self-assessment which would allow them to effectively share and discuss with their teacher and relatives about their achievement. As a conclusion, the current education system in Saudi Arabia can benefit from developing the continuous assessment by conducting proper preparation programs and planning of continuous assessment procedures and activities in the classroom that will help keeping both teachers and students confident about their ability to complete the teaching and learning tasks.

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