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Outcome-Based Assessment and Saudi National Qualifications Framework: An Evaluation of English-Major's Summative Examinations

Abstract:

Aligning assessment practices with instructional and learning strategies trigger deep learning. However, research confirms that some language teaching contexts do not moderate a positive association between assessment methods and course learning outcomes (CLOs). This research attempted to examine the congruence between assessment task designs and CLOs of an English-major program in a Saudi public university and evaluate the authenticity of the tasks. To seek answers for the research questions, final examination marked papers of nine randomly selected courses were evaluated. The study used a documentary research method. The question papers underwent both quantitative and qualitative analysis. The results evinced inconsistencies in assessment task designing and marking styles across the courses. The tasks were invalid and unauthentic, and they did not match CLOs. Therefore, suggestions are presented that the assessment practices should be revisited to stop assessment tempering in the interest of observable and sustainable academic achievements.

Key Words:

Assessment Tasks, Authenticity, Critical Thinking, Learning Outcomes, Quality Assurance

Introduction

This article reports a documentary analysis of the validity of summative examination assessment tasks of nine English major courses of a Saudi pubic university. In order to make valid inferences from the assessment of students' learning outcomes, it is imperative that assessment instruments are valid and reliable. Valid and reliable assessment of students' learning outcomes is necessary for institutions, learners and society alike. It has been observed that most Saudi students get grades that are untrue of their actual academic achievements. One of the reasons behind this problem is a mismatch between CLOs and the assessment tasks. Therefore, this study evaluated the nature of end-of-course examinations given to English major students as a major part of the assessment. Thus, this study though very limited in scope carries immense significance to highlight assessment methods that obstruct the fulfillment of higher-order learning.

Literature Review

The Validity of Assessment Tasks

Valid assessment tools measure exactly what they are required to measure (Coombe and Evans, 2005) whereas invalid tests usually concede false inferences regarding students' achievement. Therefore, it is imperative for a language assessment task to show the actual achievement of learners otherwise the results are deceptive. Learners get commendable scores (certificates) without having achieved the intended learning outcomes (Green, 2007b). Therefore, Green (2007a) has given the model of overlap that asks for maximum overlap between exam specifications and the target academic and linguistic skills intended to be achieved (see Figure 1). The greater the overlap the greater is the achievement of learning outcomes.

Authenticity of Assessment Tasks

It has been argued that in order for assessment regime to contribute to the success of an educational system, its assessment tasks have to be authentic (Green, 2006; Messick, 1996, and Archbald and Newmann, 1988). Assessment literature emphatically suggests that real-life-like (authentic) the assessment has a positive impact on students' motivation and elicits better responses from students that finally lead to the achievement of higher-order learning. In such tests, students have the feeling of being more in real life than in testing conditions (Benedetti, 2006). Therefore, Paul (2008) argues that assessment should be in line with the skills required in the real world.

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Figure 1: A Model of Washback Direction (Green, 2007a)

Every educational program or course has certain learning outcomes that its learners are trained to achieve (Archbald and Newmann, 1988). To ensure the successful achievement of the learning outcomes, there is a need to examine the progress of learning. This aim can only be achieved by employing valid assessment tasks that are 'worthwhile, significant, and meaningful—in short, authentic' (Archbald and Newmann 1988, p.1). Such authentic assessment tasks require the production of new knowledge or applying concepts to novel situations rather than a mere reproduction of previously taught information (Muñoz and Álvarez, 2010). They have remarked that it is easy for teachers to decide if "students have a real understanding of the material presented and they are able to synthesize concepts" (2010, 44). However, the situation according to them can be different if the assessment tasks lack authenticity and have a strong similarity to teaching tasks. These causes make students memorize selected materials and resultantly teachers cannot determine the actual acquisition of the concepts and skills.

Previous Studies

A critical review of previous studies suggests that valid and authentic tests have mostly resulted in the achievement high-order learning (Muñoz and Álvarez, 2010; Benedetti, 2006; Saif, 2006; Ferman, 2004; Manjarrés, 2005; Stecher, Chun and Sheila, 2004; Cheng, 1997). For example, it has been noted that listening tests based on video are more reliable than their audio counterparts (Benedetti, 2006). The fusion of oral elements in end of school assessment had a beneficial impact on Matriculation students' oral proficiency compared to pen and paper examination (Ferman, 2004). The study of Saif (2006) revealed that a strong alignment between test specifications and course learning outcomes generates observable positive washback. This was confirmed by Stecher, et al. (2004) in their study of reforms introduced to the assessment regime of the writing component of examinations in Washington State where changes in assessment tools showed a considerable positive impact on learning processes. In addition, the studies of Manjarrés (2005) and Muñoz and Álvarez (2010) also confirm the argument that a strong correlation between course learning outcomes and test specifications has a beneficial effect on both teaching and learning.

It has to be born in mind that the alignment itself may not yield expected results. Therefore, it is mandatory to apprise students regarding how to access assessment tasks. This argument is supported by the findings of Cheng (1997). It was found in the study that despite the assessment tasks being aligned with course learning outcomes students' learning did not show the expected positive evidence. Therefore, teachers' role becomes critical along with decision-makers or supervisors.

Invalid and unauthentic assessment tasks, however, are surely a major cause of lower-order and superficial learning as confirmed by empirical evidence in different settings (see for example Scouller, 1998; El-Ebyary, 2009; Gijbles, Segers and Struyf 2008; and Gijbels and Dochy, 2006). The findings of these studies show that students focus only on lexical and grammatical accuracy because assessment task designs are contrary to learning outcomes. Some assessment tasks even only measure lower order language skills (Gijbles, et al., 2008). Consequently, learners do not tend to focus on improving higher-order cognitive skills (Gijbels and Dochy, 2006). One example of such assessment tasks are multiple choice questions that mostly cause surface level learning (Scouller, 1998). From the two categories of studies with positive and negative washback, we can infer that strong congruence between assessment instruments and the outcomes of a course is indispensable else the entire exercise of education can pale into insignificance.

Methodology

Context of the Study

National Qualifications Framework (NQF) operates under the Saudi ministry of education and with the help of the National Center for Academic Accreditation and Assessment (NCAAA) founded in 2004. NQF determines standards and procedures for quality assurance of higher education institutions in the country (NCAAA, 2017). Teachers implement those standards in universities. All departments with the help of relevant teachers prepare course specifications based on well-articulated and measurable CLOs that are divided into different domains namely knowledge, cognitive, communication and information technology, interpersonal skills, and psychomotor skills. The only tool available to teachers to check if the CLOs have been achieved is assessment. Administration of valid and reliable assessment instruments can inform teachers if the CLOs have been attained. The purpose of this research was

to examine the nature of assessment tasks given at the end of the semester and their role in the achievement of the CLOs. Final examination papers of English-major students in a Saudi public university were analyzed for validity, authenticity and consistency across courses. The findings were expected to show if the assessment practices were supportive or detrimental in achieving NQF quality assurance standards. The following three questions drove this research:

1. Do the teacher-made assessment tasks of the English-major program assess the concerned CLOs?
2. How authentic the assessment tasks are? And how valid the inferences drawn for the assessment task outcomes could be?
3. What is the degree of consistency in assessment task designing practices across courses?

### Research Instruments, Data Collection and Analysis

There are four different research methods available to researchers in social sciences, namely, questionnaires, interviews, observations and documentary analysis (Denscombe, 2007). Bearing in mind the nature of this research, documentary research method was employed. This study is based on a statistical analysis of the final examination question papers of the English major program. The assessment tasks were mapped against the intended CLOs. A purposive sample of nine courses from different curricular domains was randomly selected (see Appendix A).

The tasks were classified initially under the categories of selected-response questions (SRQs) and constructed-response questions (CRCs). Next, the assessment tasks were mapped against the corresponding CLOs. The action words used in each assessment task were cross-checked with the list of action verbs catalog provided by NCAA course specifications form. Space provided to students to write their answers for CRQs was also recorded. Microsoft Word Excel was used for determining frequencies and percentage of the assessment tasks. Both uniformities and discrepancies among courses were noted. To validate the findings, the results gathered at each stage were crosschecked and validated by a panel of senior colleagues—two associate professors of applied linguistics—for reliability purposes.

Findings

Based on the analysis of the tasks, two categories were formulated, i.e., SROs and CROs (see Table 1&2). The data analysis yielded very straight forward results. More than two-thirds of the tasks were SRQs. The CROs were given mainly in literature exams. All linguistics and skill courses except Morphology were SRQs. Moreover, three-fourth of the total marks were allotted to the SRQs.

Table 1. Marks distribution for SROs
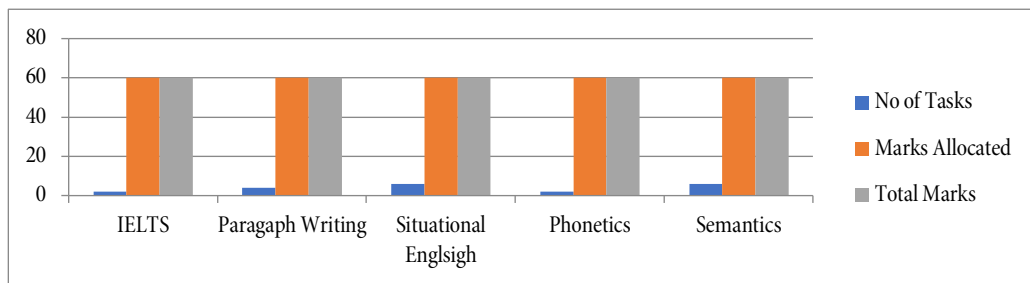
Table 2. Marks distribution for CROs

□	Course Name	SRQs		CRQs		Total Marks
		No of Tasks	Marks	No of Tasks	Marks	
1	Morphology	6	54	2	06	60
2	Modern English Drama	0	00	4	60	60
3	Nineteenth Century Novel	3	30	1	30	60
4	Modern Poetry	1	21	3	39	60

Table 3 indicates that the space given for CRQs was very limited. Two-line places may not be enough for a CRQ no matter how brief an answer is. This is what was noted in the Morphology exam where task 1 and 2 being CRQs and the space provided to answer each question was two lines. In the Modern English Drama exam, all questions were CRQs each carrying 15 points with a varied amount of space provided for answers as shown in Table 2. Similar inconsistency with a standard deviation of 7.4 was noted

in the question sheets of the Novel and Poetry exams giving students mixed signals about what exactly their answers should look like.

**Table 3.** Space is given to Students to be used for CROs

	Course	No of tasks	Marks	Space provided (number of lines)
1	Morphology	1	3	2
		2	3	2
		1	15	5
2	Modern English Drama	2	15	23
		3	15	21
		4	15	5
3	Nineteenth Century Novel	1	30 (4 topics)	4
		1	13	9
4	Modern Poetry	2	13	10
		3	13	8
	Average No of lines per question	13	10.38	8.9
	St. Deviation			7.4

Table 4 has the most significant results of the research. No obvious match was noticed between task designs and the intended course-learning outcomes. Most of the outcomes were not assessed at all. Surprisingly four of the courses i.e., Poetry, Drama IELTS, and Paragraph Writing assessed none of the learning outcomes. Assessment tasks of other courses such as Phonetics and Semantics measured just one of the formulated outcomes. The only exam that measured most outcomes was Modern Poetry.

Table 4. The overlap between task designs and CLOs

Course Name	No of Tasks	No of CLOs	No of CLOs covered	No of CLOs not covered
Situational English	6	6	2	4
IELTS	2	4	0	4
Paragraph Writing	5	5	0	5
Phonetics	2	5	1	4
Semantics	6	4	1	3
Morphology	6	5	2	3
Modern English Drama	4	2	0	2
Nineteenth Century Novel	3	2	0	2
Modern Poetry	10	10	6	4
			12 (28%)	25 (68%)

Skill-based courses offered at the beginning of the program to empower students for handling content-based courses. However, as shown in Figure 1 none of the assessment instruments measured the CLOs except situational English. The situational English assessment instrument could not be considered completely valid as it assessed only two of the six outcomes.
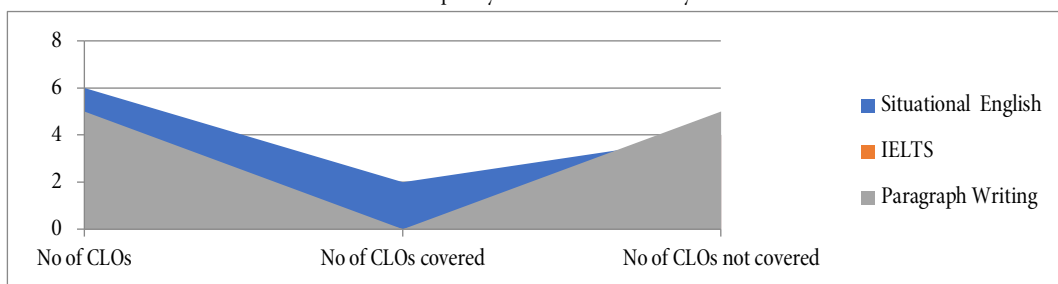
Figure 2: Skill Courses Assessment Tasks Mapped Against the CLOs

Table 5 indicates how instructors with masters and doctorate qualifications prepared assessment tasks. Three of the nine courses were taught by master degree holders and the rest by Ph.D. degree holders. However, their approach to assessment task formation

was identical. Interestingly assessment tasks of Ph.D. teaching faculty qualifications covered four percent of the learning outcomes whereas those of MA holders covered forty percent of the intended learning outcomes. Nonetheless, this statistically big variation is actually insignificant because most of those tasks were SRQs that normally do not ascertain the achievement of higher-order learning.

Table 5. Assessment tasks overlap with course-learning outcomes among instructors

	Course Name	Instructor Qualification	Number of Tasks	Total No. of CLOs	Number of CLOs covered	Number of CLOs not covered
1	Modern English Drama	PhD	4	2	0	2
2	IELTS	PhD	2	4	0	4
3	Paragraph Writing	PhD	5	5	0	5
4	Phonetics	PhD	2	5	1	4
5	Semantics	PhD	6	4	1	3
6	Morphology	PhD	6	5	2	3
	Percentage of CLOs covered		25	25(100%)	4(16%)	21 (84%)
7	Situational English	MA	6	6	2	4
8	Nineteenth Century Novel	MA	3	2	0	2
9	Modern Poetry	MA	10	9	5	5
	Percentage of CLOs covered		19	17 (100%)	7(41%)	9 (59%)

Figure 2 provides a comprehensive illustration of outcomes coverage by the three domains i.e., skill courses, linguistics, and literature. Skill courses, linguistics and literature covered the learning outcomes thirteen, twenty-nine and thirty-nine percent respectively. Though the measurement varies distinctly from one domain to another the literature assessment tasks appear to be somewhat more valid than the other two domains. In conclusion, two-third of the outcomes of each domain was noted unmeasured which reflects grave validity concerns in the assessment regime.

Discussion

The study focused on three areas i.e., validity and authenticity of the assessment tasks and the level of consistency across different courses. The first research question sought to examine if the tasks assessed the intended learning outcomes. The findings indicated that three-fourth (68%) of the outcomes were not measured that referred to validity issues in the assessment regime across the whole program. Interestingly four of the courses (see Appendix A) did not assess any of the intended learning outcomes. The most interesting dimension of this point is the skill
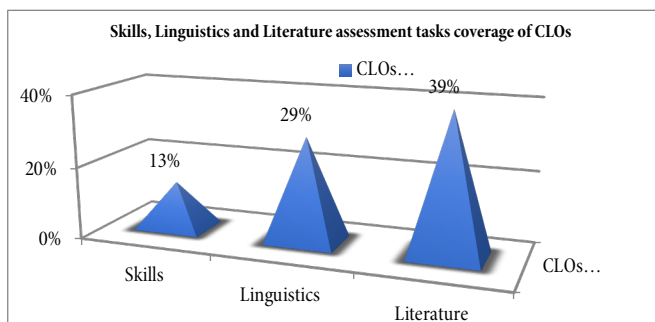
Figure 3: Coverage of CLOs by all assessment tasks of all domains

course assessment tasks. It is mandatory for such course examinations to assess the target skills. However, as the findings showed, apart from situational English none of the skill courses assessed any of the learning outcomes provided in the approved course specifications. As noted in the literature review, for assessment tasks to be instrumental in assurance of quality learning they have to be an explicit alignment with the course learning outcomes because assessment is not separate from teaching and learning processes; they are intimate and linked together (Frankland, 2007; Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2001). Learners are stakeholders in assessment practices (Saville and Hawkey, 2004). Their perception of a test shapes their learning styles. Assessment tasks not covering course learning outcomes will concede superficial learning (El-Ebyary, 2009; Gijbles, Segers and Struyf, 2008; Gijbels and Dochy, 2006; Scouller, 1998). On the other hand, empirical evidence indicates modifying test specifications influence teaching and learning (Saif, 2006; Ferman, 2004). Therefore, based on the findings of previous research it is safely posited that the assessment task designing in the context of this study needs alignment with course learning outcomes to develop higher-order learning.

The second research question required an evaluation of the authenticity of the assessment tasks and the anticipated validity of the inferences drawn from students' actual performance on the given tasks. The authenticity factor requires assessment tasks to resemble real-life-like performance (Green, 2006; Messick, 1996, and Archbald and Newmann, 1988). The findings showed that none of the assessment tasks were truly authentic in nature. The learning outcomes of courses such as Situational English, IELTS

and Paragraph Writing should be assessed through tasks that can reflect students' achievement of the skills instead of using SRQs tests which only show students' knowledge. Thus higher-order cognitive, as well as interpersonal skills, remain untested. Therefore, any inferences drawn from students' results on such a test cannot be reliable. Similarly, the CRQs do not make learners think critically, analyze, synthesis and evaluate information. The CRQs given in examinations seemed to require the reproduction of limited and memorized information.

Regarding the last research question, it was noted that almost three-fourth of the assessment tasks were SRQs. Five of the courses did not have any CRQs. In addition, the findings revealed vivid inconsistency in marks allocation and the space provided to be used by students for answering CRQs. For example, as shown in Tables 3 and 4, marks were allocated for two-line answers whereas five-line answers carried 15 marks. It should be made clear at this point that the students seemed to have an implicit but very strong message that they should use the allotted space only, i.e., no need for using extra space. Last but not the least data analysis revealed that most of the CRQs were short answers memorized by students with great resemblance to answers across whole classes. However, at the same time, it was found that all instructors-cum-examiners had an identical approach to assessment task designing. Almost all of them design SRQs and short answer questions. This may be due to an undeclared departmental policy towards assessment task designing or the teachers' shared belief of assessment culture in the given context. This is evident from the dominance of SRQs in most of the tasks. It cannot be a mere coincidence that instructors with Ph.D. degrees as well MA qualifications design almost similar tasks. Previous research has also shown that teachers' assessment task designing practices are often dictated by different stakeholders such as students, parents and community (Cheng, 1997). Therefore, further investigation may reveal the reasons for this undesirable assessment approach.

Teachers' perception plays a critical role in their approach to teaching. Cheng (2002) has remarked that teachers' perceptions concerning teaching emerge from various areas such as their personal learning and teaching experiences along with the kind of education system they have been students of. Their beliefs, values and objectives with regard to the syllabus and teaching methods are influenced by their perceptions experiences. Such perceptions also affect their concept of the curriculum they teach and their specific roles within it. Finally, perceptions influence their decision making and actions. The most significant factor forming teachers' approach to teaching and learning is their familiarity with syllabus, skills and content assessed in a test (Alderson and Wall, 1993). The greater the knowhow, the more is the influence on pedagogic practices. Therefore, desirable alignment between teachers' perceptions and the intended learning outcomes is indispensable and if not assessment literate already, they need to have adequate assessment literacy.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This research was based on the analysis of only nine courses (total number of courses was 36) of an English-major program. Its findings, therefore, may not be generalizable unless the assessment tasks of the whole program are evaluated. However, in the context of assessment tasks mapping with CLOs, this study has cast serious doubts on the validity of assessment tasks that can guarantee quality assurance required by NQF standards. The assessment tasks evaluated were completely invalid. They did not measure what they were supposed to measure. Evidence from previous research indicates that assessment tasks that are authentic and actually measure target CLOs have greater prospects of inculcating higher-order learning whereas assessment instruments with SRQs result in surface-level learning. Therefore, it can be safely stated that the English major summative examination is very far from promoting higher-order learning. Further research into the alignment between CLOs and assessment tasks of English major programs from another Saudi university will show the extent this problem contributes to the low quality of students' learning nationwide. Experimental studies, in particular, may show how assessment tasks having greater congruence with CLOs can ascertain quality assurance required by NCAA/NQF. Future research may seek teachers (assessment task designers) input to determine the factors contributing to their current assessment practices and literacy.

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Appendix A

Domain	No	Semester	Course	No of tasks	Nature Of tasks		Task No	Instructions	Marks	Space provided
								No of items and allocated Marks		
Skills	1	One	Situational English	6	SRQs	6	T/1	Choose the right word from the box	Not mentioned	10 blanks
							T/2	Choose the correct answer	✓	16 items
					CRQs	0	T/3	Put the following conversation in the right order	✓	4 exchanges
							T/4	Matcher the columns	✓	6 items
							T/5	Put the words in correct order	✓	8 items
							T/6	Make the sentences negative	✓	6 sentences
	2	Eight	IELTS	2	SRQs	2	T/1	True/False	30	15 items
					CRQs	0	T/2	Choose the right word from the box	30	20 blanks
	3	One	Paragraph Writing Group A	4	SRQs	4	T/1	True/False	30	20 blanks
							T/2	Answer the following short questions.	5	2 questions
					CRQs	0	T/3	Rewrite the following indirect quotations and punctuate them correctly.	9	3 items
							T/4	Read the following paragraph and answer the questions.	16	4 questions
			Group B	4	SRQs	2	T/1	Explain the principles and process of writing first draft	15	15 lines
							T/2	Circle topics and underline main ideas in sentences	15	10 sentences
					CRQs	0	T/3	Explain the function of end-of-paragraph-signals, give 5 examples in sentences	10	10 lines
							T/4	Write a 15 sentences paragraph on the following topic.	20	2 0 lines
Linguistics	4	One	Phonetics	2	SRQs	2	T/1	Choose the correct answer	52	26 blanks
					CQRs	0	T/2	Transcribe the following sentences	8	8 sentences
	5	Eight	Semantics	6	SRQs	6	T/1	True/False	30	16 statements
							T/2	Choose the best answer (a,b,c)	10	6 blanks
							T/3	Mark 'YES' or 'NO'	5	5 statements
							T/4	Choose the best answer (a,b,c)	5	5 items
					CRQs	0	T/5	Choose the right answer (a,b)	6	3 items
							T/6	Draw Venn diagram for the following sentences	4	4 sentences
	6	eight	Morphology	8	SRQs	6	T/1	True/False	21	14 statements
							T/2	Define 2 out of 6 terms	3	One line each
							T/3	Complete the following sentences	4	9 blanks

							T/4	Complete the following sentences	14	7 blanks
					CRQs	0	T/5	Match columns	8	8 sets
							T/6	Labelling affixes as personal, negative and prepositional	4	2 sets
							T/7	Explain the difference between 'spelling' and 'insertion'.	3	2 lines
							T/8	Differentiate between 'acronym' and 'initialisms'.	3	2 lines
Literature	7	seven	Modern English Drama	4	SRQs	0	T/1	When and where is the play *Death of a Salesman* set?	15	5 lines
							T/2	What is the American Dream? How is the this dream represented in the Arthur Miller's play?	15	23 lines
					CRQs	4	T/3	Comment on the following quotation.	15	21 lines
							T/4	What does the concept of the "Angry Young men" represent in Look Back in Anger?	15	5 lines
	8	six	Nineteenth Century Novel	3	SRQs	2	T/1	Fill in the blanks by choosing the best answer.	15	15 blanks
							T/2	Identify the speaker of the following quotations	15	2 quotes
					CRQs	1	T/3	Comment on any three of the following topics (out of six topics).	30	4 lines each
	9	seven	Modern Poetry	4	SRQs	1	T/1	Discuss Langston Hughes' "I, too, Sing America'.	13	9 lines
							T/2	William Carlos Williams was one of the principal poets of the Imagist Movement. How far do you agree?	13	10 lines
					CRQs	3	T/3	Comment on the following stanza.	13	8 lines
							T/4	a. Mark the following statements as true or false.	12	12 Statements
								b. Supply the missing parts in the following sentences.	9	9 blanks