

## *Original Paper*

# Continued Concerns with Language Assessment Practices in Saudi Arabian English Education

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### ***Abstract***

*Language assessment, viewed as a means to help instructors guide learners in effectively and successfully learning a language, plays an important role in the skills, competencies, and overall language-learning outcomes of second-language learners. This conceptual article reviews and synthesizes current language assessment practices and issues in English education in Saudi Arabia. It first highlights the overarching features of existing assessment methods practiced in English classrooms in Saudi Arabia, after which it discusses the factors underpinning those assessment practices and the detrimental effects of such practices on the development of Saudi learners of English as a foreign language. The article concludes by proposing a few pedagogical practices with the potential to change current language assessment practices in English classrooms in Saudi Arabia.*

### ***Keywords***

*Language assessment practices, Saudi English education, Saudi EFL teachers, EFL classrooms, detrimental effects of language assessment*

## **1. Introduction**

As an essential component of the curriculum for English as a foreign language (EFL), language testing can—depending on its execution—strengthen or weaken the process of teaching and learning EFL. For that reason, core knowledge of language assessment and the skills used therein are necessary for the process of language teaching and learning and for the mastery of a target language. The growing need for and importance of such knowledge and skills stem from the use of such assessment practices to gauge language learners' language attainment, current proficiency levels, performance, progress, and achievement, and to generally promote their learning of the language. In addition, language assessment has power and gatekeeping functions by virtue of enabling language instructors to identify their learners'

needs, document those learners' progress, and determine how the instructors themselves are performing as teachers. In that light, there is no doubt that language testing and language teaching are inextricably linked. In view of their reciprocal relationship, language testing is considered to be an integral part of teaching and learning and serves as a bridge between those two components of language education. Indeed, while Havnes (2013) has endorsed assessment as an essential prerequisite for learning, Eckhout et al. (2005) have argued that effective teaching also cannot be achieved without appropriate adequate assessment.

Given language assessment's strong impact on and crucial role in language teaching and learning, it is essential to continuously evaluate language assessment practices in national EFL curricula in order to ensure that classroom realities and other contextual factors do not hamper the proper implementation of assessment. Continuous, systematic evaluation of any endeavor of language assessment is integral to such curricula, particularly as a means to make projections for the future and obtain data to guide curriculum amendment.

A close examination of the current practices of classroom-based language assessment in English education in Saudi Arabia reveals inadequate implementation and the need for immediate action to transform the dominant traditional, even dogmatized, types of language assessment into innovative assessment practices. Thus, the primary aim of this article is to survey the distinctive features shaping language assessment practices in Saudi Arabian English education and thereby determine which elements contribute to the aforementioned inadequacy. The comprehensive profile detailed in this article encompasses all aspects of current English testing processes in Saudi classrooms, with the hope of painting an accurate picture that captures contemporary assessment approaches in the country and justifies continued concerns about contemporary language assessment practices in Saudi English education. Therefore, this article's critical analysis of those issues requires and is primarily concerned with the identification of real-world assessment practices in real-world EFL classrooms.

## **2. Overview of Salient Features of Current Assessment Practices in Saudi EFL Classrooms**

Saudi EFL teachers continue to execute inefficient evaluation methods or assessment measures and arrangements, such as testing rote memory, knowledge of factual information, and the application of strict rules, instead of testing critical thinking and higher-order comprehension skills using alternative assessment practices that elicit linguistic behaviors. The assessment is mostly carried out using a summative approach that permeated the traditional form of assessment. To monitor students' progress toward year-end learning outcomes (except for Grades 1 and 2 of elementary schools, where continuous assessment is the norm), Saudi teachers administer a final English exam that includes an oral test and a written test. The teachers prepare these tests according to specific schema and guidelines developed by the Ministry of Education (MoE). Therefore, as indicated by Almosa (2021), Saudi schools follow a unified system for assessment, which limits the roles they play in the developed language assessment.

The oral test, which assesses students' speaking and listening skills, counts for 10% of the final examination grade. With no official instructions on how to administer the oral test, Saudi EFL teachers tend to ask students two or three easy questions and instruct them to read one or two sentences aloud from the course's textbook. Accordingly, teachers do not assess students' performance extensively in aspects such as fluency, pronunciation, intelligibility, and use of lexis and grammar. However, because of the limited time allotted for examinations and the large numbers of students in each class, Saudi teachers have no other options.

My scrutiny of a number of the English tests administered to students at the intermediate and secondary levels revealed an unpleasant result. According to the official schema developed by the MoE, a written test must include questions that address (a) composition, (b) reading comprehension, (c) dialogue, (d) grammar, (e) information, and (f) vocabulary.

- The composition questions require students to write essays about chosen topics. Lists of guided words that students can use in their writing often accompany these questions. Teachers draw the topics and their vocabulary lists directly from intermediate and secondary English textbooks.
- The reading comprehension questions follow the same procedure. Rather than testing students on new texts similar to those studied in class, Saudi teachers test the students' comprehension of previously studied passages in the students' textbooks. The questions are not high level, do not test inference skills, do not cover wide aspects of the information presented in the reading passage, and often do not require a genuine understanding of the passage, as they contain response cues.
- For the dialogue questions, Saudi teachers test their students on incomplete dialogue taken from the students' textbooks and ask their students to complete the dialogue.
- The grammar, information, and vocabulary questions are all fill-in-the-blank, true-or-false, short-answer, multiple-choice, and other selected-response formats. For these questions, Saudi teachers select material from grammar, information, and vocabulary exercises in the students' textbooks.

Because of this overall test design, the administered exams mainly test students' mastery of previously taught concepts (Albedaiwi, 2014). In other words, as Al-Mohanna (2010) argued, Saudi EFL final exams do not measure genuine communicative use of English. In fact, the tests' scope is restricted to two skills: reading and writing (with no provision for listening and speaking); moreover, the items intended to test reading and writing merely assess students' ability to memorize, rather than their ability to read and write. Overall, Al-Mohanna (2010) found that Saudi EFL exams test only very basic knowledge of English, do not assess skill development, and do not provide rich descriptive and diagnostic information on students' performance.

### 3. Factors Informing Current Practices of Assessment in Saudi EFL Classrooms

Five factors inform the poor quality of the EFL tests administered in Saudi schools and explain the reasons for and the resulting consequences of these improper appraisal apparatuses. First, Saudi English teachers, as the agents of and most prominent figures in language assessment, often have scant training in the general construction and development of language tests or language classroom-based assessments or in the appraisal, specifically, of EFL students. Graduates of university English departments are only required to take one class in language testing; this class mainly focuses on theoretical issues that are central to language testing, at the expense of addressing practical considerations or, more precisely, providing hands-on opportunities to develop actual English tests that reflect both formative and summative assessments throughout the semester or year. As a result, most Saudi EFL teachers are unequipped to manage assessment methods and techniques effectively inside the language classroom (Rauf & McCallum, 2020; Almosa & Alzahrani, 2022); to develop tests that accurately measure students' language proficiency; to interpret and explain the results of the administered tests; or, consequently, to make correct decisions based on the obtained results.

Additionally, teachers are typically unfamiliar with issues such as the validity and reliability of their classroom assessment practices and, in particular, balancing these issues with practicality; neither are many knowledgeable about basic statistics and item development. In fact, teachers seem to acquire most of their knowledge of testing and assessment through on-the-job experience, instead of through preservice education (Al-Seghayer, 2021). Accordingly, Saudi EFL teachers are unaware of the different aspects associated with assessment and feel ill-prepared to undertake assessment-related activities, including preparing diagnostic, progress, and achievement tests. Moreover, they are unable to track or document learning over time to provide students with a strong sense of where they are, where they are going, and how to get there. These instructors do not integrate their instruction and evaluation as a single area of an encompassing web of continual classroom planning. In sum, Saudi EFL teachers are neither knowledgeable of measurement or language assessment, skillful in test and item construction, understanding of the issues involved in language tests and the consequences of test use, nor well trained in language assessment (Al-Seghayer, 2017).

Al-Saadat and Al-Braik (2004) investigated this lack of training in language test construction in Saudi university EFL programs. In this study, 60 Saudi English teachers from both intermediate and secondary schools responded to a 63-item questionnaire. The results indicated that 67.6% of the participants had minimal training in constructing language tests. Similarly, Alsamaani (2014) surveyed 50 Saudi English teachers from 12 intermediate public schools in the Qassim region. The participants completed a task-based self-critique of classroom assessment knowledge and skills, thinking-aloud protocol, and assessment training needs. Empirical data from Alsamaani (2014) illustrated participants' minimal training in constructing language tests. Accordingly, both Al-Saadat and Alsamaani argued that more than half of newly employed Saudi English teachers are unqualified to design and evaluate EFL tests. Umer et al. (2018) asserted that developing sound classroom language assessment standards, in line with

modern language assessment techniques, requires Saudi EFL teachers to build up their language evaluation competencies and skills.

The second factor informing the poor quality of the EFL tests administered in Saudi schools is that a substantial number of currently employed English teachers are graduates of colleges of languages and translation or colleges of arts, which specialize in translation or English literature, in which language testing is not a required course, and in which the program of study marginalizes observation and all related language-teaching practices. Consequently, graduates start their professional careers without the training necessary for developing adequate language tests that would inform their EFL curricula and pedagogies. Language testing courses are not offered to graduates of languages and translation or colleges of arts programs despite the fact that language testing is a field of study that entails a deep understanding of the fundamental theories and principles of assessment in teaching English, as well as familiarity with basic concepts of assessment, approaches, functions, and types of assessment instruments used in English language instruction, as Olwi (2020) argued.

Third, as was noted in the overview, the MoE imposes a schema that teachers must follow when designing written English tests, which limits their choice of test tasks. Ali et al. (2019) pointed out that Saudi EFL teachers do not engage in the process of language assessment. In concert with this observation is Al-Seghayer's (2017) conclusion regarding centralized assessment development and other related issues:

EFL teachers should be at the heart of the national English curriculum policy planning and be regarded as curriculum makers rather than mere implementers. Saudi English teachers are not empty vessels. They have their own experiences, beliefs, and values and their practical knowledge is different from theoretical and pedagogical knowledge. Accordingly, these teachers are generators of practical knowledge, making them key agents for changing, improving, and advancing the English curriculum. As such, teachers should be given the responsibility for thinking about what suits their students best, and they should play a central role in all aspects of the planning and implementation of the national English curriculum. (p. 13)

Fourth, the fear of being questioned by school administrators and supervisors about students' poor test results and low proficiency levels may motivate some Saudi EFL teachers to construct exams their students can pass with ease. For such teachers, the number of students who officially pass the exam becomes a bigger concern than ensuring that students are skilled in the use of the English language. However, the results of these adapted tests reflect neither the students' end-of-semester achievement nor their real language ability. Consequently, teaching to and learning to prepare for exams have become the "guiding principle" of Saudi EFL instruction, and students' open pursuit of passing scores is a social reality. The students' learning attitudes thus influence classroom assessment practices. Saudi EFL teachers because of such reality instead of "teaching," are teaching "to the exam," that is, with a high score in mind rather than language proficiency. In this regard, Obeid (2017) and Umer et al. (2018) noted that due to the perceived undesirable consequences of failure among many students, teachers are under strong pressure to prepare student-friendly assessment tasks.

The fifth factor is the popularity of discrete point tests and summative testing of students' learning. Teachers focus on summative assessment and do not have enough knowledge or skill to implement alternative assessments. Teachers are more concerned about students' performance on exams rather than these students' performance effectively communicating in real-life situations. As a result, Saudi EFL teachers devote a considerable proportion of their lesson time to teaching to the test by tailoring their instructional content for examinations, thereby depriving students of opportunities to learn other valuable English language-related knowledge and skills.

#### **4. The Downside of Current Assessment Methods in Saudi EFL Classrooms**

The existing evaluation development practices of Saudi EFL contexts—specifically, inadequately developing and incorporating assessment procedures and techniques into EFL lessons—have led to educational negligence and its various negative consequences. Specifically, Saudi teachers are not using assessments effectively to assess students' learning and progress, support and improve learning efficaciously, or facilitate better learning outcomes. Instead, the ineffective practices teachers do use create a long-term dilemma for teaching EFL in Saudi schools, in general, and for teaching listening and speaking skills, in particular. For instance, Saudi students undervalue these skills because of the small fraction of points allotted to them on final exams compared to those allotted to other language skills, which comprise up to 25% of the final examination marks, and because speaking and listening skills are not assessed with a written test. Hence, the significance of the English oral test has been drastically reduced, and its prominence has faded.

Likewise, because students know in advance that the final exam will ask them to write an essay on one of the topics covered or discussed in class, they simply memorize the topics discussed in class, along with those topics' specific word lists, and regurgitate this content on the exam. Thus, rather than testing students' skills in authentically communicating in English, these exams test students' memory of language rules and related knowledge. Furthermore, this type of decontextualized rote learning does not guarantee students' understanding or develop their critical thinking or higher-order comprehension skills. Overall, constructing English tests in this manner fails to reveal students' genuine ability to use lexical and structural items in real-life situations.

The dominance of an “exam-oriented” culture in Saudi EFL education also drives teachers to do their utmost to prepare students for the final exams; thus, teachers concentrate primarily on areas and information the tests will cover. As a result, both teachers and students pay more attention to exam preparation than to actual learning (Al-Hamdan, 2014), even though the exam results do not genuinely reflect the students' end-of-semester achievement or their real language ability. At the same time, the students' learning attitudes, that is, their focus on high scores as the ultimate practical goal of learning EFL, reinforce these classroom assessment practices. Consequently, teaching and learning for exam performance (or “teaching to the test”) has become the guiding principle of Saudi EFL instruction with less time devoted to activities that will not be part of the test. This narrow focus on passing exams

ultimately means that the academic content in Saudi EFL classrooms is lacking. The techniques of testing only rote memory, knowledge of factual information, and ability to apply strict grammatical rules—instead of testing critical thinking or higher-order comprehension skills, using alternative assessment practices, and eliciting linguistic behaviors—can assess only a limited number of cognitive skills and functions associated with memory and students' ability to recall decontextualized information.

In other words, reliance on rote learning leads to memorization rather than understanding. Therefore, EFL courses' academic content is lacking when teaching and learning are narrowly focused on passing exams rather than on developing deep understanding. Moreover, it is believed that traditional testing techniques relying on the reproduction of memorized information fail to truly reflect actual student performance. Such techniques are not effective ways of testing expanding learning concepts, which require students to exhibit thinking skills at higher levels than they did previously. Umer et al. (2018) investigated Saudi EFL teachers' construction of assessment tasks and found that most of the Saudi EFL teachers who participated in the study assessed their students' memorization or remembrance of factual knowledge, based upon the amount of factual recall that the students could demonstrate. In addition, teachers tend to tailor their examination questions in accordance with learners' expectations.

There is another adverse consequence of the current ineffective language assessment practices in Saudi EFL classrooms. Most items on these English language exams constructed by Saudi EFL teachers are discrete point items, which provide little language input and require minimum responses, forcing students to choose from among a finite set of options and to write short responses to a few questions. These exams also include content items requiring only linguistic knowledge, in particular, knowledge of certain forms and structures and a narrow range of language uses. Tests conducted in Saudi EFL classrooms show that this kind of language assessment focuses mainly on testing static knowledge of the English language than on testing dynamic communicative competence. Moreover, another detrimental form of the prevailing approach to language assessment is that in tests of productive skills, emphasis is given to the formation of correct grammatical sentences; in tests of receptive skills, emphasis is placed on getting specific details correct rather than understanding the intention of the speaker or writer. Consequently, the scope of testing reading comprehension is very narrow, often involving only decoding and literal understanding, without regard for a wide range of writing and reading purposes and students' possible responses to reading.

## **5. Proposed Forms of Language Assessment and Pedagogical Practices**

Current assessment practices in Saudi EFL classrooms, primarily pencil-and-paper summative language achievement tests, must undergo various changes. In general, teachers and the MoE should adopt the following range of techniques to implement appropriate language assessment approaches, change the current practice of EFL assessment, and boost the pedagogical potential of assessment:

- 1) Align final exams with curriculum objectives, student learning outcomes, and recommended best practices and make assessment practices more transparent in relation to students'

proficiency levels and the teaching process, especially practices that emphasize the recommended communicative teaching approach.

- 2) Make sure the assessment measures also employ alternative assessment practices or a variety of assessment batteries used to detect students' growth and performance that are consistent with in-class and real-life tasks and that measure what students can in fact do with the language.
- 3) Adopt a competency-based system of evaluations and tests that focuses on communicative behaviors. The evaluation system should draw heavily from an array of alternative assessment techniques that accurately assess higher-order concepts and that are part and parcel of the teaching process. Such techniques include quizzes, debates, speeches, descriptive tasks or narration, interviews, exhibits, presentations, portfolios, learning logs, role-play activities, conferences, group projects, written reports, demonstrations, text retelling, dialogue journals, self-evaluation, peer evaluation, anecdotal records, constructed-response tests, reciprocal-teaching homework, oral production inventories, multiple-intelligence assessment menus, storytelling, information gap activities, posters, and other authentic testing rubrics that cover production and comprehension skills. Such assessments should take place within meaningful activities and authentic contexts that reflect real-world language use and allow students to demonstrate their learning in relation to practical tasks and/or situations. Moreover, performance-based evaluations should examine students' functional competence by way of analytical and interactive exercises.
- 4) Assess students by observing their engagement in classroom activities, by measuring how well their work meets specific criteria, and by giving them a variety of kinds of tests. The proposed assessment procedures should be performed over the long term instead of at a single point in time and should be treated as artifacts of learning accomplished through individual and group projects.
- 5) Ensure that tests generate positive feedback and inform teacher intervention. Assessment procedures should also be based on the interrelation of various aspects of language, including grammar, vocabulary, culture, and the four major language skills (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), among others, to capture students' total range of skills and abilities and take stock of every aspect of their language production.
- 6) Conduct English proficiency tests at the end of each grade year and use diagnostic indicators to assist students who do not perform well on the tests.
- 7) Make current assessment practices more criteria-based in order to test grammar, vocabulary, reading, and communicative skills. Adapted assessment measures should consider six principles: (a) validity (i.e., assess what students know and understand and how they perform in EFL classrooms), (b) explicitness (i.e., assessment criteria should be explicit), (c) comprehensiveness (i.e., students should be assessed in a range of contexts), (d) fairness, (e) alignment with teaching, and (f) practicality (i.e., the ease with which a test can be administered and scored).

- 8) Incorporate components in the employed assessment techniques that assess the discursive and pragmatic competencies of Saudi EFL learners as well as their intercultural competencies.
- 9) Communicate assessment results with students by giving descriptive feedback, which enables students to identify their strengths and weaknesses.
- 10) Assess non-language constructs that are part of communicative competence, including confidence, illocutionary abilities, voice projection, and physical performance.
- 11) Create a task and performance-based assessments that require students to perform a task using skills learned in class to perform real-world tasks in the target language. Such assessments may include interviews, oral reports, role play, describing, explaining, retelling, summarizing, paraphrasing, categorizing, comparing, and contrasting. Tasks can range from a simple constructed response (i.e., a short answer) to a more complex one.
- 12) Develop integrated language tests, as opposed to discrete tests that measure language skills individually. Integrated tests rely on authentic practices and merge language skills; they are also implemented during instruction and not as stand-alone language tests.
- 13) Implement a portfolio assessment that involves recording learners' progress over time and in a variety of modes to show the depth, breadth, and development of their language abilities.
- 14) Shift evaluation practices from strict traditional testing procedures to less formal, less quantitative ones.
- 15) Deemphasis assessment *of* learning in favor of assessment *for* learning. Whereas the former is administered at the end of a unit or grading period and evaluates a language learner's achievement relative to the class's, the latter assesses a language learner's learning of a skill or lesson throughout the learning and teaching process.
- 16) Instead of a psychometric summative assessment, apply a more formative approach, one that emphasizes giving feedback to improve performance and boosts language learners' progressive and potential development.

Implementing these wide-ranging proposals for quality in-classroom assessment techniques can meet the urgent call from current EFL professionals to emphasize inquiry, the application of knowledge, the stimulation of curiosity, the use of English in social and educational pursuits, procedures that require problem-solving, and complex thinking and language skills in EFL education. The proposed forms of language assessment and pedagogical practices can also foster comprehension and creativity and promote language activities such as negotiation, collaboration, and cooperation instead of memorization. In time, implementing these practices can allow the realization of the goal of developing students' English-language competency, which entails an ability to use the language effectively in three modes of communication: interpretive (e.g., listening, reading, and viewing), interpersonal (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, and writing to others), and performative (e.g., speaking and writing in different types of performance).

## 6. Conclusion

This conceptual article provides a comprehensive, inclusive, aggregative picture of language-testing practices in EFL classrooms in Saudi Arabia. In doing so, it elucidates the reality of the major features of language-based assessments currently employed in Saudi Arabian English education. The article also illustrates that current practices in language assessment do not reflect cutting-edge or modern approaches to assessment, due to several factors, and need improvement in many areas. In response, more work is needed to develop language tests that can contribute to realizing the purpose of learning and instruction and help build Saudi EFL teachers' capacity in language assessment. To that end, this article's in-depth analysis can serve as a starting point for initiating change and promoting the adoption of more effective and efficient methods of assessment, ultimately improving teaching practices in the Saudi EFL context.

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