Teachers’ Perception on Alternative Assessment

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Abstract

Assessment is important to provide us the picture of curricular goals attainment and quality of our instruction. Currently, in Brunei, government use large-scale assessment of academic achievement. This paper discusses teacher perceptions on using alternative assessment. A sample of 50 secondary teachers in Brunei was involved and their perceptions were collected using instrument developed by researcher. The result shows that teachers have positive perceptions on alternative assessment but they reported that the most significant impact of alternative assessments is the increase in paperwork and demands on their time.

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1. Introduction

Assessment is a part of teaching and learning process, aim to bring improvement for the assessor and the individual assessed. Therefore, assessment can be concluded as a method used to improve the quality of education because it can enhance life-long learning skills and elevate performance in various educational contexts. According to Belk and Calais (1998), assessment enables the teacher to gather information about the students’ progress, program goals and objectives as well as the extent to which methods of instruction deployed in the classroom are helping the students achieve these goals.

Huba and Freed (2000) define assessment as a process of gathering and discussing information from various sources in order to develop a deep understanding of what students know, understand and can do with their knowledge as a result of the educational experiences. Whereas, Grounlund (1998) defines assessment as methods used to determine the extent to which students are achieving the intended learning outcomes of instruction. Based on definitions given, assessment encompasses four steps which are; (a) measuring students’ achievement, (b) defining student performance, (c) summarizing what students can do, (d) inferring what students could do.

Nowadays, acquiring as many A’s as possible has been the main objective in education because this guarantees placement in prestigious universities and places of employment. Therefore, parents put on pressure to the teacher to produce excellent results. Due to the pressure, the teachers tend to teach to the test and gaining creative and critical thinking skills is no longer the main objective of instruction.
According to Olu Aina (2005), education should focus on students’ totality—cognitive, affective and psychomotor skills in order to produce students that are balanced physically, emotionally and intellectually. However, Rashid Mohamed, Abdul Ghani Abdullah and Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail (2006) state that assessment practices today emphasize too much on assessing content mastered by the students and give too little attention to the skills. Rashid Mohamed, Abdul Ghani Abdullah and Shaik Abdul Malik Mohamed Ismail (2006) stressed that, educators must not only assess content but also emphasize on knowledge and skills such as to create, reflect, solve problems, collect and use information.

According to assessment experts (Agrey, 2004; Kohn, 2000; Peterson and Neil, 1999; Sacks, 2000), standardized assessment (paper-and-pencil test) were used to assess students because it take relatively little time to develop and inexpensive to administer. Additionally, the assessment results are simple to report and understand. Finally, and very significantly, standardized assessments are promoted as objective measures of achievement. This means the results are not affected by the personal values or biases of the person who evaluated the assessment. However, the lack of using standardized assessment is that it tends to assess students’ cognitive aspect only.

Therefore, assessment in schools has always been a topic of contention especially with regards to whether the present system of assessment reflects the actual potential of students. Even though there have been calls to abolish, reform, revamp and add value to current assessment system, however, not much had been done because of many barriers shielding it. One of the ways to overcome the standardized assessment symptom is to conduct alternative assessment.

1.1 The Education System of Brunei Darussalam

Brunei Darussalam is situated on the north-west coast of the island of Borneo. It is bounded on the north by the South China Sea and on all sides by the Malaysia state of Sarawak. Brunei Darussalam’s people enjoy high standard of living and the education is free for all citizens from the primary level to the tertiary level. Education in Brunei Darussalam is heavily subsidized by substantial funding averaging at nine percent of the national budget per year.

The education philosophy in Brunei is based on the corresponding national philosophy of a Malay Islamic monarchy. In addition to classic reading, mathematics and science skills, students are taught a curriculum which incorporates the elements of naqli (study of the Koran) and aqli (reasoning). The two underlying Islamic elements are believed to produce citizens who are knowledgeable and skilled, as well as pious and loyal to the monarchy of Brunei. The Ministry of Education strives to provide the highest possible education to produce citizens who are committed and able to contribute to the future growth, prosperity and stability of Brunei Darussalam.

The school system consists of primary education (seven years), secondary education (five years) and higher education. The education system in Brunei Darussalam is centralised and examination oriented which emphasis on students passing the examination with excellent results. Students attending school in Brunei Darussalam are expected to sit for three public examinations, which are conducted by the Ministry of Education. The Primary Certificate of Education Examination (PCE) is taken at the end of primary school; the Brunei Junior Certificate of Education Examination (BJCE) is taken after three years at senior school; and the General Certificate of Education Examination (GCE 'O' Level) is taken at the end of five years at senior school.

1.2 Justification to do away with high stakes Standardized Assessments

Assessment experts (Agrey, 2004; Kohn, 2000; Sacks, 2000) claimed that standardized assessments are easy to develop, inexpensive to administer and results of standardized assessment are simple to report and understand. Besides that, standardized assessment also is an objective measure of achievement as the results are not affected by personal values or biases of the person who evaluated the assessment. As standardized assessment are seen as an objective measures of achievement, so it is regarded as a sound device that are valid and reliable indicators of students’ knowledge and skills. The standardized assessment results are also used to compare students’ performance in order to place them into groups or programs. However, time and again we have heard criticism levied against the standardized assessments. Many experts indicated that standardized assessment is abusive to students, parents and teachers (Kohn, 2000; Peterson & Neil, 1999). Examples of the criticisms of standardized assessment are as follows:
• Peterson and Neil (1999)
Many people tend to believe that standardized assessment will give them accurate indication of their children performance. However, they do not realize that most of the tests were intended to get the kids and schools to perform better, and if they don’t they will be penalized. Therefore, this approach seems to forgets that assessment must be used to improve student learning and not to fail students, not to wave fingers at bad teachers, not to make bold pronouncements that will be remembered at election time but to provide information to help the student learn better.

• Agrey (2004)
Current trend on high-stakes standardized assessments becomes a self-perpetuating loop when what is assessed becomes what is learn or valued, which then led to teaching to the test. The emphasis on tests has forced teachers to become managers of students’ performance rather than facilitators of knowledge and social values.

• Sacks (2000)
Stacks highlighted that standardized assessments generally do not have the ability to predict a student’s academic success. Some students might perform better than others in certain test but this cannot confirm their success later.

2. Assessment as a means not an end

Assessment of students’ performance and abilities accurately and reliably has always been a challenge. Traditional approaches of assessment such as paper and pencil tests although widely used do not accurately reflect the true potential of students. Moreover, paper and pencil test tend to produce students who are test-smart but poor problem solvers in real situations. Besides that, students also seem to lack in communication and other soft skills including social skills. Even though assessment are still widely used in grading and categorizing students based on their performances, there is a growing realization that assessment should be used to facilitate learning and skills development. Besides that, many educators are now looking at assessment as a way to motivate students to perform better and prepare students for self-directed and lifelong learning. The reason for these views is that assessments are beginning to take out the fun from learning. Students are learning just for the examinations.

However, when assessment is used to diagnose areas of weaknesses and then it is used to develop remedial instruction to facilitate mastery of content and skills. It acts as a motivator where it can prevent truancy, reduce the drop-out rate and overcome discipline problems. It is suggested that assessment be revamped and transformed to incorporate a more humanistic modality serving the following functions:

a) diagnostic
b) remedial/enhancement
c) motivation

2.1 Alternative Assessments
According to Gronlund (1998), alternative assessment refers to assessment methods that provide an alternative to the traditional paper-and-pencil tests. Puhl (1997) states that alternative assessments allow students to demonstrate their understanding and personal meaning of what they have learnt in class. Whereas, Suzieleez Syrene Abdul and Tajularipin Sulaiman (2006) states that alternative assessment techniques encourages higher-order creative and critical thinking where students has more control of his/her learning.

The rationales to have alternative assessment are:

a) Students do not learn in the same way, therefore they cannot be assessed only in a uniform manner (Brualdi, 1996)
b) Traditional assessment (paper-and-pencil tests) only examine students knowledge (Rudman, 1989)
c) Alternative assessment can emphasize on “real-life” skills such as problem-solving skills and decision-making skills to prepare students for the work force in the real world (Brualdi, 1996)
d) Alternative assessment allows teachers to monitor the effectiveness of their lessons on student understanding and to modify the mode of instruction whenever necessary (Wiggins, 1990)

Some of the alternative assessment techniques are (Knight & Mantz, 2003):
a) Fieldwork, lab work: A type of authentic assessment where teachers should decide to sample to avoid overwhelming volume to be checked.
b) Posters: An efficient way of seeing how students understand complex content and relationships of components. This task is best done in groups because students can learn by perusing each other’s posters.
c) Presentations: This activity encourages students to become better at oral communication. They can be authentic and also invite peer assessment, which is a way of giving teachers supplementary evidence for grading.
d) Article review: This sort of task encourages critical, analytical and evaluative thinking.
e) Concept maps: Students identify the main points in an argument, view, claim, concept or system. They will then group like points with like in a way that shows the relationship between them. This technique is an efficient way of portraying how students understand conceptual relationship.
f) Role-play: Students take on part of certain characters in specific situation. This task can be a good way of identifying students’ understanding of different perspectives.
g) Projects: Authentic and complex tasks. Students may have to use several concepts and skills to complete the task
h) Portfolio: Allow students to establish their own claims to achievement, using what they see as the best evidence to hand.

However, before the alternative assessment is integrated to the school system, teacher perceptions on alternative assessment should be collected and analyzed. This is because; teacher is an important agent of change in education. If the teacher accept or have positive perceptions on alternative assessment, they will surely support the assessment and make sure the alternative assessment succeeded in reality.

2.2 Concept Mapping

According to Novak & Gowin (1984), concept map is a diagram that represents organized knowledge where it comprised of concepts or ideas and the relationship between them. Concepts are enclosed in boxes or circles and linked to another concept/ concepts by lines or arrows. Arrows are being used to denote the direction of the relationship while the lines are used to show the flow of relationship from top to down or sideways starting with the main concept. The main feature in the concept map is that the concepts are arranged in hierarchies.

Concept map also can be used as an alternative assessment tool. Ruiz-Primo and Shavelson (1996) proposed the framework of concept map as an assessment tool having three main components: (i) the task requiring students to provide evidence on his or her knowledge in a domain, (ii) the format for student’s response, and (iii) the scoring system for evaluating accurately and consistently student’s concept map. The three assessment components in concept map influence one another and the goal or construct of the assessment. Figure 1 shows the interaction among the three assessment components and the construct.

3. Limitations

Due to constraints in time and finance, this study only involved 50 secondary teachers in Brunei which is only a small proportion of teacher population in Brunei. The teachers were selected randomly. However, researcher make sure that all of the respondent chosen to be involve in this research are committed and willing to give full cooperation during the research.

4. Methodology

This research aims to discuss teacher perceptions on using alternative assessment. This research is a survey design research which use questionnaire in order to collect data. The questionnaires were distributed to 50 secondary teachers in Brunei. Respondents are required to state their opinion based on 5 scales; HDA= Highly Disagreed, DA= Disagree, A= Agree and, HA= Highly Agree. The reliability of the questionnaire is 0.72. Examples of item used in the questionnaire are as follows (Table 1):
5. Results

Data collected from the questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistic (frequency and percentage). From this research, most of the respondents agree that alternative assessment can promote active learning and self confidence among students (95%) and 80% of the respondents states that alternative assessment is suitable to cultivate critical and creative thinking skills. 85% of the respondents state that alternative assessment does not interrupt their job (to teach).

6. Discussion and recommendation

Alternative assessment is the best method to enhance students’ potential. Besides, alternative assessment also provides information on achievement of particular levels of skills, understanding and knowledge as oppose to achievement of certain marks or scores provided by traditional paper-and-pencil test. However, before alternative assessment is integrated in Brunei education system, many aspects should be change. Especially on teachers perceptions’ and knowledge regarding the concept of alternative assessment and ways to conduct the assessment.

Based on this research, researcher can conclude that Brunei teachers have positive perceptions on alternative assessment. Because alternative assessment can help them to cultivate their students’ critical and creative thinking skills. However, the respondents’ claim that, alternative assessment increase their work. Therefore, before the alternative assessment is integrated to all schools in Brunei, many aspects must review. Firstly, teacher should be
informed about the concept of alternative assessment through in-house training and short-courses. Secondly, teachers should be informed about the interrelationship of pedagogy, assessment and curriculum. However, any change in implementation of alternatives assessment in the Brunei education system should be done gradually to allow the teachers and students adapt to the “new” teaching and learning environment.

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