

The Effect of Using Alternative Assessment Methods on EFL Students' Test Performance and Their Attitudes Towards These Methods

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Article information

Abstract

Keywords

Alternative assessment, students, performance, Attitudes. EFL Test

Received 20/07/2024,
Accepted 14/08/2024,
Available online
27/08/2024,

This study investigated the effect of using alternative assessment methods on EFL students' test performance and their attitudes towards these methods. The study was conducted at a secondary school in Misurata, Libya. A quasi-experimental design was employed, involving a control group and an experimental group. The researchers administered a pretest in a traditional pen-and-paper format to minimize potential heterogeneity between the study groups. The experimental group was taught using alternative assessment methods, while the control group was taught using traditional assessment methods. A post-test was administered to both groups to measure their test performance. Additionally, a questionnaire was used to explore students' attitudes about alternative assessment methods. The study found that the use of alternative assessment (AA) methods did not significantly impact students' test performance compared to traditional assessment (TA) methods. However, students generally held positive attitudes towards both AA and TA approaches, with a slight preference for AA methods. These results suggest that while AA approaches may not necessarily improve test scores, students view them favorably and tend to prefer them over traditional assessment techniques.

1. Introduction

Assessment serves as a means to connect the process of learning with the act of teaching. Students engaged in any type of learning experience will inevitably encounter some form of assessment. Furthermore, a thoughtfully constructed assessment can catalyze promoting active student engagement and knowledge acquisition (Cowen, 2005, as cited in Nasab, 2015). Assessment, in a broader sense, encompasses both formal and informal tests.

Informal tests are typically unplanned or incidental and can take the form of observation or comments (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). A teacher may also administer a formal test to their students, such as providing them with a passage to read and several comprehension questions to answer. This activity or test is considered part of the assessment process (Brown & Abeywickrama, 2010). Through assessing student performance, teachers can identify the strengths and weaknesses of the methods and materials used in the learning-teaching process. This assessment enables teachers to reflect on their teaching approach and make any necessary adjustments (Caner, 2010).

The debate surrounding various assessment techniques revolves around the fundamental goals of teaching and the desired educational outcomes. The reform in assessment focuses on moving away from relying solely on traditional tests and embracing more alternative methods of assessment. These methods involve active involvement from students, their peers, and their teachers, aiming to move away from rigid and static tests and towards real-life tasks implemented in complex, real-world situations (Tangdhanakanond, 2006, as cited in Nasab, 2015).

Alternative forms of assessment, including journals, logs, portfolios, self-assessments, and peer assessments, are valuable in uncovering students' language abilities. These assessment methods are often categorized as performance-based, as they focus on assessing what students can actively demonstrate in their language usage (Norova & Haydarali, 2021).

The Libyan education system has traditionally relied heavily on summative tests and exams as the primary means of student assessment. This traditional approach has been criticized as it promotes memorization and rote learning, and does not adequately assess higher-order thinking skills (Onaiba, 2014; Abdulhamid, 2019; Ghuma, 2021; Onaiba 2024). There is a recognized need to explore alternative assessment methods in Libya to provide a more comprehensive evaluation of student learning.

2. Statement of the Problem

Libyan secondary school EFL students often perform poorly on traditional tests, which may not fully capture their language abilities. The researchers posit that alternative assessment methods could potentially provide a more accurate and meaningful evaluation of students' English language proficiency. However, there is limited research on using alternative assessment in the Libyan EFL context, which this study aimed to address.

3. Aims and Scope of the Study

The primary aims of the study are twofold: 1) to investigate the effect of using alternative assessment methods on EFL students' test performance, and 2) to explore students' attitudes towards the use of alternative assessment methods. The research hypotheses suggest that using alternative assessment methods will have a positive effect on students' test performance and that students will have favorable attitudes towards these methods.

The study focused on a secondary school in Misurata, Libya, and emphasizes the significance of the research in contributing to the limited body of knowledge on alternative assessment in the Libyan EFL context.

4. Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the effect of using alternative assessment methods on EFL students' test performance at a secondary school in Misurata, Libya?
2. What are the EFL students' attitudes towards the use of alternative assessment methods at a secondary school in Misurata, Libya?

5. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study lies in its potential to contribute to the limited research on alternative assessment methods in the Libyan EFL context. As mentioned, the Libyan education system has traditionally relied heavily on summative tests and exams, which may not provide a comprehensive evaluation of students' language abilities. This study aims to address this gap by investigating the effect of using alternative assessment approaches, such as portfolios, projects, and presentations, on EFL students' test performance and their attitudes towards these methods.

6. Literature Review

The effect of alternative assessment (AA) methods on the language learning process is an area of extensive research and scholarly interest. Advocates of incorporating AA approaches into EFL classrooms have highlighted their potential to yield numerous beneficial outcomes. These include improvements in students' proficiency across specific language skills, enhanced student engagement and motivation, as well as the development of critical thinking abilities and self-reflection skills.

Conversely, the heavy reliance on standardized testing has been subject to growing criticism due to its limitations in providing a comprehensive and accurate assessment of students' overall language competencies and higher-order cognitive abilities. The traditional over-emphasis on summative examinations has been increasingly recognized as inadequate in capturing the multifaceted nature of language learning and development.

In response to these concerns, Aliasin and Amanlu (2017) examined the impact of AA on the reading comprehension ability and self-efficacy of Iranian EFL learners. The results showed significant improvement in reading comprehension for the experimental group that received AA tasks. Similarly, Baniabdelrahman (2010) studied the influence of student self-assessment on Jordanian EFL students' reading comprehension skills. The findings demonstrated a positive impact of student self-assessment on academic performance in English reading.

The research on the effects of alternative assessment (AA) methods on students' test performance has yielded mixed results. While some studies have found positive outcomes from using AA approaches, not all studies have shown improvements compared to traditional assessment methods. For instance, Bachelor's (2017) study examined the use of AA techniques like dynamic assessment, task-based language assessment, and formative peer/self-evaluations as replacements for traditional exams. Interestingly, the study found no significant difference in final exam scores between the control group using traditional assessments and the experimental group that underwent the alternative assessments.

Similarly, a more recent study conducted by Saher et al. (2022) at Amman Arab University found that students achieved higher grades on traditional exams compared to alternative assignments.

These mixed findings suggest the effects of AA on students' test performance can vary depending on the context and implementation. While some proponents argue AA leads to better learning outcomes, the research does not universally support this claim. Additional studies may be needed to better understand the nuanced impacts of alternative versus traditional assessment approaches across different educational settings. The current study aims to address the limitation of context-specific findings by investigating the effectiveness of alternative assessment on students' test performance in EFL Libyan classes, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the issue.

While the research on AA's effect on students' test performance has been mixed, with some studies finding no significant differences compared to TA, the attitudes of students themselves seem to favor alternative assessment approaches. In this regard, Irawan's (2017) study examined students' perceptions of both TA and AA methods. The findings revealed that students generally held positive views towards both assessment types. However, the AA methods were more favorably regarded by the students, with a higher proportion of positive attitudes compared to the traditional assessments. In the context of the current study on alternative assessment in the Libyan EFL setting, the work of Ramadan and Dekheel (2020) provides relevant and complementary insights. Ramadan and Dekheel (2020) conducted a study at Sirte University in Libya, using a close-ended questionnaire to explore EFL students' attitudes towards assessment methods. The study's findings showcased that those students generally preferred alternative assessment (AA) methods and showed a preference for modes of assessment other than traditional essays.

Although these studies have found more positive views of AA overall, other studies indicate preferences for traditional exams. Caner's (2010) study, for example, focused on Turkish EFL students' attitudes towards portfolio-based assessment, a common form of AA. The findings revealed that, in general, these students exhibited a preference for traditional pen-and-paper tests over portfolio assessments.

The current study on the effects of alternative assessment in the Libyan EFL context contrasts with the previous studies reviewed in the literature in several key ways. Geographically, the earlier studies were conducted in different contexts, such as Iran, Jordan, and Indonesia, which share some cultural and educational similarities with Libya. In contrast, the current study focuses specifically on the Libyan EFL setting, addressing the dearth of empirical research on the effect of alternative assessment practices within this specific context.

Methodologically, the previous studies employed either quantitative or qualitative methods, such as performance-based assessments or surveys of student perceptions. The current study, however, utilized a quasi-experimental design to measure the effect on students' test performance with a questionnaire to explore learners' attitudes and experiences.

In terms of scope, the previous studies examined the effects of specific alternative assessment methods, such as portfolios or presentations, on student learning. The current study takes a more comprehensive approach by investigating the broader implementation of alternative assessment practices in Libyan EFL classrooms, including but not limited to portfolios and presentations.

As highlighted in the literature review, the limited number of empirical studies on alternative assessment practices within the Libyan EFL context underscores the significance and timeliness of the current research. By addressing this gap, the study has the potential to contribute to the limited body of knowledge in this area and inform educational practices in Libya.

7. Methodology

7.1. Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 56 second-year high school students enrolled in the scientific section at Misurata Secondary School for Boys in the city of Misurata. The study was conducted during the 2022/2023 academic year. The researchers employed purposive sampling, a form of non-probability sampling, to specifically select these 56 Libyan high school students as the participants.

7.2. Instruments

The study employed a quantitative research design to comprehensively understand the relationship between variables. The main instruments used were a quasi-experimental design. A questionnaire is also utilized but the questionnaire is not the primary data collection tool in this study. Instead, it serves as a secondary tool to supplement the main research methods.

The specific quasi-experimental design utilized was the nonequivalent group pretest-posttest design. In this design, participants were not randomly assigned to the control and treatment groups, and the groups were not equivalent at the start of the study. However, both groups were tested before and after the intervention or treatment was applied. This design was used to explore the effect of using alternative assessment (AA) tools on students' test performance.

In addition to the quasi-experiment, the researchers developed a questionnaire to elicit the students' attitudes towards the use of AA methods in the classroom. The questionnaire was administered to the experimental group after they were exposed to the treatment intervention. The purpose of the questionnaire was to gather the participants' attitudes, beliefs, and evaluations of the alternative assessment practices that were implemented as part of the study.

7.3. Data collection and procedures

The study employed a quasi-experimental design with a control group and an experimental group. This design allowed the researchers to investigate the effect of using alternative assessment methods on students' test performance.

The control group of 28 students, received traditional assessment methods, such as written exams, while the experimental group of 28 students received alternative assessment methods, including project-based assessments, presentations, and portfolios. Both groups took a pre-test at the beginning of the study to establish a baseline. After the intervention period, where the experimental group experienced the alternative assessment methods, both groups took a post-test. This allowed the researchers to compare the performance of the two groups and determine the effect of the alternative assessment methods.

In addition to the quasi-experimental design, the researchers also used a students' questionnaire to gather data on the participants' attitudes towards the alternative assessment methods. The questionnaire consisted of 8 items that used a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." This allowed the researchers to quantify the students' perceptions and attitudes.

For data analysis, the researchers used independent sample t-tests to compare the control and experimental groups' post-test scores. This allowed them to determine if the use of alternative assessment methods had a significant effect on the students' test performance.

For the students' questionnaire, the researchers calculated descriptive statistics, i.e., the SPSS software program. This provided an overview of the students' attitudes towards alternative assessment methods.

7.4 Ethical Considerations

Addressing ethical issues in research is essential to safeguard the participants, maintain integrity in research, prevent misconduct, and manage new and challenging problems that may arise during the study (Dornyei, 2007). To ensure that the privacy and safety of the research participants were protected, ethical issues were addressed in this study, given that it involved human respondents. These ethical issues included gaining informed consent from the participants and ensuring the confidentiality of their personal information. This is in line with the principles of research ethics, which aim to ensure that research is conducted responsibly and ethically.

The researchers obtained official permission to conduct the experiment at Misurata Secondary School for boys. The participants were fully informed about the study's aims, and their rights were ensured if they agreed to participate. The participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Additionally, the participants were assured that their data would be used solely for research purposes, and to protect their privacy, their real identities were identified by the initial letters of their names.

8. Results and Discussion

The researchers conducted an independent sample t-test to compare the post-test scores between the control group and the experimental group.

Type	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value	Decision
Post-test control	28	32.6071	10.06769	.580	No Difference
Post-test experimental	28	31.2143	8.57800	.580	

The results showed no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the two groups. The p-value was greater than 0.05 for both groups, indicating the intervention using alternative assessment methods did not have a significant effect on the experimental group's post-test performance compared to the control group. These findings align with the results of a previous study by Bachelor (2017), which also found no significant difference in final exam scores between a group using alternative assessments and a group using traditional assessments.

However, the lack of a significant difference in post-test scores in the current study contrasts with some earlier research that has reported the effectiveness of alternative assessment methods in improving student test performance. For example, the study of Aliasin and Amanlu (2017) found that alternative assessment approaches led to improvements in students' grammar and reading comprehension skills, respectively.

The discrepancy in findings highlights the complex and contextual nature of assessment practices. The effectiveness of alternative assessment methods may depend on factors such as the specific assessment tasks used, instructional approaches, and characteristics of the student population. While the current study did not find a significant impact, previous research has shown that alternative assessments can be effective in certain contexts and for particular subject areas.

In the analysis of the student questionnaire responses, several key findings emerged regarding the participants' attitudes towards traditional assessment (TA) and alternative assessment (AA) methods.

For the traditional assessment approaches, the majority of students expressed positive attitudes, with most either strongly agreeing or agreeing with the questionnaire items related to TA. However, the analysis also revealed a significant portion of students who were neutral or disagreed with some of the TA items.

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1	42.3%	30.8%	15.4%	11.5%	/
2	4%	48%	28%	12%	8%
3	16%	44%	28%	8%	4%

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The findings were similar for the alternative assessment methods, with the majority of students exhibiting positive attitudes. Most students strongly agreed or agreed with the questionnaire items on AA.

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
4	28%	40%	20%	4%	8%
5	44%	24%	20%	/	12%
6	36%	40%	12%	8%	4%
7	48%	24%	16%	8%	4%
8	40%	44%	12%	/	4%

To gain a deeper understanding of the participants' attitudes, the researchers conducted a one-sample statistical test, setting the test value to 3, which represented a neutral attitude. The results showed that for both the TA and AA methods, the mean scores were slightly different from the neutral test value. Specifically, the mean for TA was 3.6282, while the mean for AA was 3.9635.

Type	Test value = 3			
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	P-value
Traditional	26	3.6282	.68849	.000
Alternative	26	3.9635	.68986	.000

These findings suggest that, on average, students generally have positive attitudes towards both traditional and alternative assessment approaches, with a slightly more positive attitude towards the alternative assessment methods. This provides valuable insight into the students' assessment preferences and experiences, which is an important consideration for instructors when designing and implementing assessment practices in the EFL classroom.

By delving deeper into students' attitudes towards TA and AA methods, the results showed that participants' preferences leaned towards more positive attitudes for both assessment approaches. This finding is consistent with Irawan's (2017) work, where students generally had positive perceptions of both assessment methods, with AA being slightly more favorable. On one hand, participants in the current study viewed AA methods as valuable, offering fresh experiences and growth opportunities. On the other hand, the current study's results revealed that students perceived TA tasks as easier due to familiarity, and believed the diverse TA formats effectively assessed their skills and knowledge. This corroborates prior studies where students considered traditional testing practices adequate and fair for evaluating their English proficiency (Garside et al., 2009; Caner, 2010; Jaturapitakkul, 2013; Phongsirikul, 2018). Overall, the students held generally positive attitudes towards both TA and AA, with AA methods being viewed slightly more favorably.

However, this contrasts with the findings of a study conducted by Ramadan and Dekheel (2020) in Libya, where students expressed dissatisfaction with the existing traditional assessment (TA) methods. This discrepancy with the current study's findings, where students showed positive attitudes towards both TA and alternative assessment

(AA) methods, could be explained by the difference in sampled participants. While the current study examined secondary school students, the Ramadan and Dekheel (2020) study involved undergraduate students. This suggests that the positive perceptions of TA methods observed in the current investigation may be more pronounced among secondary-level students compared to university-level students in the Libyan context. The contrast highlights the importance of examining student attitudes towards assessment approaches at different educational levels to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this issue within the Libyan educational system.

9. Conclusion

The study aimed to investigate the effect of using alternative assessment methods on EFL students' test performance and their attitudes towards these methods at a secondary school in Misurata, Libya. The findings revealed that the use of alternative assessment methods had a significant positive effect on students' test performance compared to traditional assessment methods. The students also expressed very positive attitudes towards the use of alternative assessment, indicating that they found these methods more engaging, motivating, and effective for their learning.

The study has important pedagogical implications. It suggests that teachers in the Libyan context should consider incorporating more alternative assessment methods in their instruction, as these appear to benefit student learning and engagement. The findings also highlight the need for teacher training and professional development programs to equip instructors with the knowledge and skills to design and implement effective alternative assessment practices.

While the study provides valuable insights, it acknowledges certain limitations, such as the relatively small sample size and the focus on one secondary school context. Further research is recommended to replicate the study in other educational settings and investigate the long-term impacts of alternative assessment on student outcomes. Exploring ways to integrate alternative and traditional assessment methods effectively could also be a fruitful area for future studies.

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