Review Paper

Reviewing modern and traditional methods of learning assessment: towards A dual-focused online oriented approach in Libya during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Libyan educational researchers aim at implementing effective approaches for learning assessment arguing for independent learners. However, traditional methods of learning and assessment still dominate most of the higher education institutions. The present research paper reviews traditional and modern assessment methods with an intention of modelling a method that helps Libyan teachers and educators to improve the learning assessment of the, arguably, suggested online learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the context requirements, the model therefore intends to crystalize traditional and modern methods of assessment. While it maintains the traditional view, which stresses the role of the teacher in the assessment process using summative assessment techniques, it aspires towards autonomous learning by including the learners as part of the assessment process. Accordingly, the paper focuses on the following points: Reviewing assessment approaches to allow educationalists from different fields and contexts to consider the pros and cons of their adopted assessment methods. Proposing a model of assessment that values the roles of teachers as well as learners in assessing learners' development in online learning.

Introduction

The present paper argues for the need to focus on learner autonomy in Libya during the COVID-19 pandemic by promoting online learning. According to Holec[1], learner autonomy is the ability of learners to take control of their own learning either independently or in collaboration with others. From this concept we can understand autonomy is not a natural inherent ability, rather a capacity to learn and act in a certain way in a specific situation, entailing the acquisition of a set of skills to suit any situation. Consequently, autonomy is attributed to the learner[2], meaning that learners are responsible for their own learning. In this paper, promoting learner autonomy means, not only on guiding Libyan learners to take control of their own learning, but also to guide them to assess their own learning and development as they engage in online learning, a new situation enforced by COVID-19. The paper begins by presenting the Libyan context, focusing on the teaching approaches and the development of technology in the Libyan educational system. The paper then proceeds towards reviewing traditional and modern assessment techniques in education. Finally, the paper concludes by proposing a model to implement in Libyan higher education for online learning beyond the current pandemic situation.

Learning Approaches in Libya

Over the last decades, several teaching methods and approaches have been developed in the areas of foreign language learning and teaching. Interactive learning has been widely accepted as an effective approach in the field. Compared to traditional methods, it has been found to be more effective, as learners tend to rely less on their teachers as the source of information[3], and rely more on their active engagement and interaction, leading towards agency and control in learning.

In Libya, steps have been taken to implement interactive learning for teaching English in schools (pre-university stage), however, research has shown that these steps were not effectively employed. Orafi and Borg[4] indicated that syllabuses of English language teaching based on the Communicative Approach to were introduced in Libya in 1999-2000. These syllabuses comprised two levels for elementary students aged 13 to 18 three levels for preparatory students, and three levels for secondary students. The syllabus brings together linguistic features such as vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar whilst focusing on developing the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing[5].

Following the academic year 2007-2008, the national education authority redesigned English for Libya textbooks[5]. The textbook focused on using English while learners acquire relevant vocabulary and grammar to enhance the development of content knowledge. Consequently, there was a shift towards meeting the specific needs of Libyan learners. The content of the English textbooks was presented in such a way as to draw upon topics of interest to the learners, ones which they will be familiar and relevant to their university study[5].

The textbook included activities that involve learners in using English, practically. Such activities include writing formal and informal letters, describing events, and using illustrations and images to tell stories[4,5]. The aim was to develop the communicative skill of Libyan learners, therefore, activities aimed at extending learners' grammatical understanding and vocabulary knowledge to develop their language skills of speaking, reading, listening and writing[5].

Nevertheless, research investigating Libyan teachers' use and application of the new communicative curriculum had come to shown that teacher-centred questions and answers and the correction of students' pronunciation replaced paired communicative activities[6-8]. In addition, most of the communication was not in English; instead, teachers used English/Arabic translations. The researchers concluded that the principles of the new curriculum were not in line with the teachers' teaching practice. Additionally, the researchers ascertained that teachers had positive attitudes towards communicative activities, but they did not apply them into their classroom practices since they believed these activities were beyond their students' linguistic ability[7].

In Libyan universities, recent research has revealed that the English language curricula is prepared by the teachers themselves. Research has also shown that EFL University teachers combine aspects from different approaches: Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method and the Communicative Approach[9]. Elabbar[9] argues that university teachers developed a 'Libyan version' of the four methods in their teaching practices, i.e, Libyan university teachers sometimes adopt one of the four methods or they might utilize two of the methods as a preference over other methods, at other times a hybrid approach where all methods blend in. Although this approach seemed rather effective for Libyan classrooms when it came to face-to-face instruction, with digitized online learning and other modes of Technology-based learning, the more recent learner-centred approaches seem rather prevalent.

Technology and Libyan Higher Education

Implementing information communicative technology (ICT) has become an essential aspect for developing any education system. The Libyan higher education system is no exception, and as part of a developing country, its ICT is still in its early stages. In 2005, different parties, such as the country's major telecommunication enterprise, supported the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Vocational Training to manage a national policy for the implementation of ICT in education[10-12]. In a cooperation between the government and the private sector, initiatives aimed at developing the capacity of the country's infrastructure to achieve large-scale ICT enterprises in order to 'enable ICT access, provide ICT tools, and help develop ICT skills in all sectors of the community'[12]. The most important aim for the enterprise is the use of ICT and e-learning to improve the quality of education in Libya by selecting technology-enhanced educational techniques and developing methods for open and distance learning[10,12]. Unfortunately, traditional teaching approaches still dominate Libyan education.

While much of the emphasis in Libya still may be on traditional learning approaches which do not incorporate technology nor do they apply the more recent learner centred approaches which value the role of the students as active agents, Mohamed (2017)[13] investigated the interaction of ten Libyan university participants for reading short fiction collaboratively.Findings revealed effectiveness in the interaction among learners and the teacher leading to mutual meaning-making, and positive attitudes towards online learning. As, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no research done highlighting the implementation of online learning, nor has there been research on assessing it in Libyan higher education, this study, taking the current situation of the COVID-19 lockdown into account and its urgency for moving towards online and blended learning, aims at addressing part of this shortage in research by looking into how learners could possibly learn in an online environment while focusing on assessment (or self-assessment) at the same time, thus giving rise to interactive/collaborative learning initiatives in Libya, again.

Assessment in education

In the field of education, assessment of learning is important at all levels. It reflects the knowledge that learners possess and the extent to which learners meet the course or program outcomes. Assessment has also been used to certify learners' level of proficiency for placements and enrolment on future programs. Assessment methods have distinct advantages, disadvantages, and limitations. Having knowledge of these distinctions is crucial for teachers to select appropriate measurement methods for their learners. Such methods should provide evidence of learners' achievement while being compatible with the educational program's goals and assessment objectives. Yet, as Stiggins[14] maintains, despite the significance of assessment in the learning process, it has become a 'victim of gross neglect' over the last decade.

Traditional assessment

Traditionally, assessment in education has been predominantly accepted as being 'summative'. It is used to measure the amount of learners' success in meeting the assessment process. It

involves evaluating learning at the end of the learning unit to allow teachers to measure a student's learning. In other words, summative assessment involves a standardized testing system and generally utilizes a pen and paper or computer-based examination method. It employs questions which require short or limited answers including multiple choice questions, true/false and some short answer responses. It is significant to stress that such traditional assessment helps educationalists to determine the areas that learners have developed and those which they still struggle with[15].

Additionally, traditional summative assessment can help educators save time. A large number of learners can be tested at the same time. Traditional assessment techniques also examine the development of learners' understanding and the cognitive skills they acquired during the whole learning period. However, Spendlove[16] argues that such techniques can be significant as they tend to come by completing the learning process, but then again, they do not inform teachers about what they need to know about the learners' learning.

Accordingly, such learning system is not creative. It does not build critical thinking skills as it often does not tend to encourage deep learning and teaching. Spendlove[16] adds that such assessment has generally been accepted as 'transmissionist' in which learners have specific knowledge and teachers need to decide what's important andpass it on to their learners; learners then need to recall it. This does not inform teachers how they can improve their teaching practice, unfortunately. Also, traditional assessment methods lack authenticity and practicality. Students answer one by one questions without demonstrating critical and reasoning skills that enable them to apply their learning in their daily tasks.

Assessing learning can be said to involve more than just the evaluation of knowledge that learners possess at the end of a course. Assessment of lerning ought to be evidence-based where teachers make informed decisions about where the learners are in terms of their progress, where they need to go, and how to help them get there[17]. Theoretically, such assessment process is influenced to a high degree by sociocultural views of learning.

The Impact of Socio-Cultural Theory on Learning Assessment

In the mid-1980s, there was significant research towards social constructivist perspectives of learning. Social constructivism stresses the use of language in real life situations for learning. From this perspective, language is 'both the product and the process of learning' through socialization[18]. Such an epistemological view of learning has emphasized the active role of learners for their own learning and development[19-21]. Social constructivists, therefore focus on the social context for learners' construction of knowledge.

Vygotsky introduces the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to determine where beneficial instruction through mediation by

more knowledgeable peers should be positioned. It is defined as the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers[22].

The actual level of development represents learners' ability to achieve or solve problems independently[23]. The potential level of development, on the other hand, represents the assisted performance: it reflects the level of what learners can then perform independently[24]. Vygotsky believes that interaction with others and the socio-cultural environment contributes to learner's potential development. Newman, Griffin and Cole[25] also emphasize that cognitive changes occur when learners are involved in activities which are socially mediated and then become internalized.

From a socio cultural perspective, development of learning is then perceived in the evolving relationships between learners, participants (peers), tools (language and material), and the settings in which learners conduct their learning activities[26-29]. From this perspective, learning is not an internal process in which participants simply receive and construct knowledge in their minds but enact it as individuals of the real world participating in their particular community[29]. This understanding has important implications for learning assessment practices. Perceiving the learning process as a social practice constructed by individuals participating in the local context means teachers and learners are recognized as active assessment partners[30-33].

Accordingly, the outcomes of the learning process require a broader consideration than typically addressed in traditional assessment practices. Normally, traditional assessment focuses on the success of learners to display the knowledge they acquired-the construct. Sociocultural assessment of learning on the other hand emphasises students' ability to relate their knowledge to their personal lives and others in their social context[29]. Such view has significant implications for learning activities and assessment demanding active participation of learners.

Learners' Active Assessment

According to the earlier discussion, assessment at the end of a learning process is traditionally used and it is viewed as a distinct activity. To design a successful learning environment, teachers still need to consider assessment as an activity that is integral to learning. Assessment at the end of a learning course usually does not contribute to development. In other words, separating assessment from the learning process is inapt[16].

Distinct assessments often provide feedback on learning, inform instructional decision making, and hold learners' accountability, but as part of the learning process, assessments also need to

afford learners with opportunities to engage in assessment practices. Such practices have their functions within and outside the learning situation. In a reading class, for example, some activities generate questions that need clarification of information from a reading texts, which then requires dialogic exchanges for class discussion[34].

In addition, the feedback and suggestions students get from their peers and teachers provide resources for further learning and teaching. From a constructivist perspective, "building these complex social relationships around meaningful activities" becomes an activity in which all learners participate[29]. As Wenger[29] stresses that such activities view the classroom as a community in which learners are engaged in practices that impact learning beyond the 'boundaries of the classroom'. Thus, assessment becomes no longer a distinct activity, rather evidence of learning.

In this sense, assessment is an integral part of the learning process. Recent research has considerably focused on the use of assessment during the learning process[17,30,32,35-40]. Researchers argue that assessing the learning process involves teachers and learners. In other words, an assessment process can involve a teacher and a student, a student and another student, or amongst students themselves. Assessment activities thus involve both classroom tests and daily assessments. In this sense, assessment activities can have several dimensions including *events*, *tools*, *processes* and *decisions*[41].

Assessment *events* include organizing oral presentations or listening activities to support learners. When assessment events are used with the right frequency, teachers will know the extent of the success of instruction, the areas requiring further instruction, and the learner(s)' needs for additional support. Yet, a consideration of how frequently assessment activities can be used in the classroom must be taken into account by teachers[40].

Assessment *tools*, on the other hand are essential to providing evidence of students' learning. In the learning classroom, assessing learners' ability to interact and communicate can be evaluated using performance tasks, such as preparing oral presentations or writing reports. The tool that teachers use for assessment must fit with the type of learning it suggests. Taylor and Nolen[41] stress: Assessment tools and processes have tremendous power in the lives of students – both in the ways that students come to judge their own abilities and in the ways that they represent what is important to know and be able to do.

The assessment tools mentioned above are used to support learners' development. Such tools support learners with key concepts about significant areas to learn and develop, criteria for beneficial practices, and the alignment of learning assessment with instructional methods applied. Teachers therefore ought to consider the assessment tools they use. They need to recognize which methods can help their learners to achieve the learning aims. Cheng and Fox[40] point out that using language components with receptive and productive language skills as combined tools (e.g., grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) can all enhance the reliability of teachers' assessment process.

The other assessment dimension is assessment *processes*. These refer to the way teachers carry out assessment activities. As teachers employ assessment techniques, they need to decide on the way of providing feedback for their learners' and the amount of feedback required to proceed to the next stage of learning. Assessment processes are also used to support learners' views of the significant role of teachers in their education. In other words, teachers (as facilitators of learning) need to provide appropriate feedback that helps learners focus on the requirements of the task and consequently understand it better.

The last dimension is assessment *decisions*. Decisions of teachers' assessment are used to support learning because grades should accurately reflect the knowledge that learners have acquired. In other words, teachers make decisions about their students' learning according to the results from the assessment[42-44]. For Cheng and Fox[40], teacher's decisions range from lower level learning decisions, which can include plans for follow-up classes, to higher decisions, which can have essential and life-long consequences for the learners, such as deciding what level a student should be placed in next. Accordingly, using tests for assessment represents one assessment tool that teachers can use for the ongoing requirements.

The above discussed dimensions of assessment include the following two practices. First, assessment for learning, identified as 'formative assessment, which refers to the process of seeking an evidence for use by students and their teachers to decide where students are in their learning, where they need to go and how to get there. Second, assessment of learning, (i.e. summative assessment), which refers to assessments that follow the learning. Such assessment intends to determine whether learning has occurred, normally used to assess students' current learning status, i.e., at a specific time. Teachers need to be engaged with the two assessment practices, formative and summative, to best support students' learning.

Black and Wiliam[45] explain the aims of formative assessment by saying: Practice in a classroom is formative to the extent that evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted, and used by teachers, learners, or their peers, to make decisions about the next steps in instruction.

Cizek[46] alternatively defines formative assessment as: The collaborative processes engaged in by educators and students for the purpose of understanding the students' learning and conceptual organization, identification of strengths, diagnosis of weaknesses, areas of improvement, and as a source of information teachers can use in instructional planning and students can use in deepening their understanding and improving their achievement.

According to the earlier discussion, tools that can be used in the assessment process can be summarized in the Figure-1.

A Dual-Focused Online Learning Approach in Libya during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The above discussed literature significantly informs the current situation of the impact of COVID-19 on learning and teaching in Libyan higher education. As educators propose using online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be apparent that for better learning and assessment of the learners, assessment of the new implemented online learning technique in Libyan universities needs to include more than the traditional summative testing procedures. Assessment needs to involve continuous monitoring and mediation of teachers as well as learners in the mutual learning and assessment process. Over time, the learners can develop (with the right support) an awareness of their progression towards independent learning, which need to be investigated in further studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of Libyan learners' self-assessment.

As indicated earlier, the present paper seeks to put forth a model for virtual assessment that serves the Libyan context during COVID-19. The suggested model aims towards the promotion of learner autonomy, therefore integrates formative assessment with summative assessment in that emphasizing the role of the teacher as well as valuing the learners' role in the assessment process. For Crooks[47], assessment is 'any process that provides information about the thinking, achievement or progress of students'. So, the model stresses learners' self-assessment to enable them to take responsibility for their learning, thus becoming active agents in the learning and assessment process. As McConnell[48] puts it:

… if learners are actively involved in decisions about how to learn, what to learn and why they are learning, and are also actively involved in decisions about criteria for assessment and the process of judging their own and other's work, then their relationship to their studies will be qualitatively different to those learners who are treated as recipients of teaching and who are the object of others', unilateral, assessment.

The diagram below shows the cyclic assessment process of the model, involving both teachers and learners. The diagram focuses on developing learners' autonomy, which requires the active participation of the learners and their control over their own learning. This way learners are involved in the assessment process. That is learners are required to assess their needs for better learning as well as assessing their own learning development. Teachers on the other hand are required to assess learners' understanding. Engaging learners' and teachers' assessments will create a more balanced approach where both interact to create a more constructivist environment that values both as agents in the learning-teaching process, thus aiming towards learners' "autonomous learning".
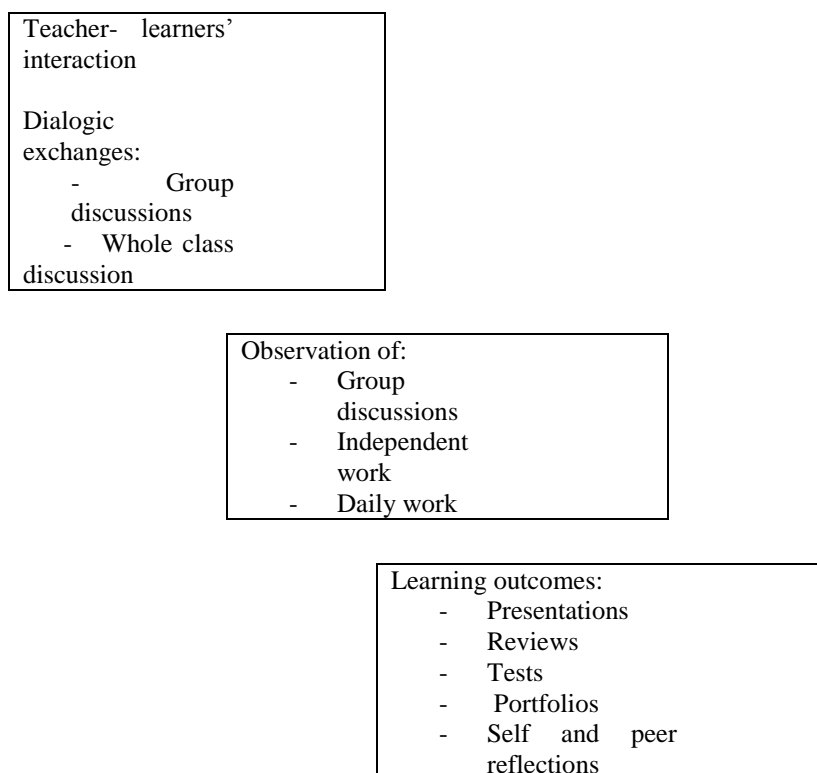
Teacher- learners' interaction

Dialogic exchanges:
- Group discussions
- Whole class discussion

Observation of:
- Group discussions
- Independent work
- Daily work

Learning outcomes:
- Presentations
- Reviews
- Tests
- Portfolios
- Self and peer reflections

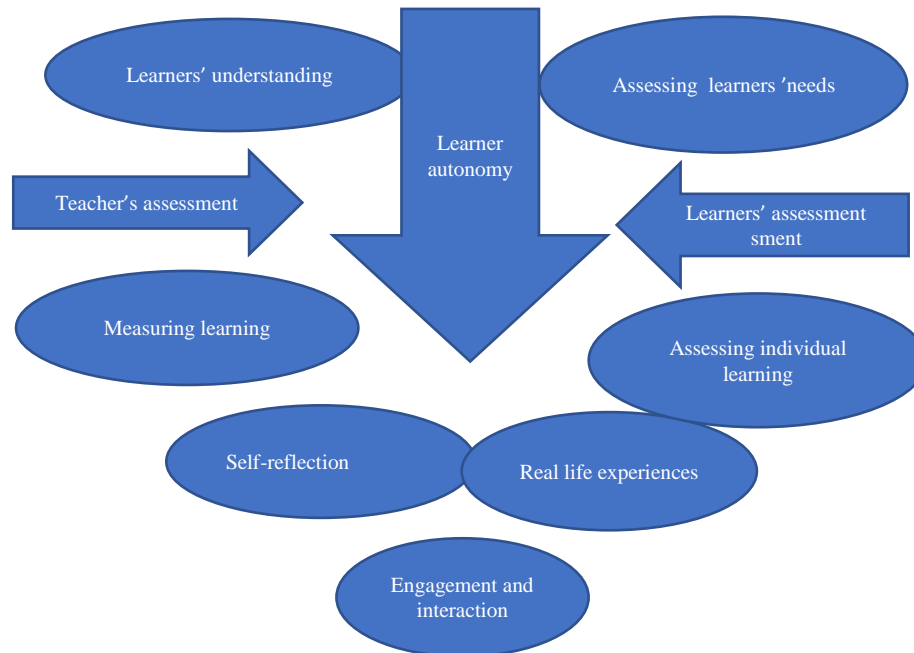**Figure-1:** Tools and procedures used for learning assessment[40].

Figure-2: A dual-focused online oriented approach in Libya during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adopting such approach for assessment provides educators with a chance to trace the learners' views, problems, and progress throughout the virtual learning process. By implementing online learning and assessment, educators in Libya may well be directing education towardslearner-centred approaches that aim at creative constructive learning situations, and which value "learner autonomy". Simply put, learners in Libyan higher education become involved in the continuous process of assessing their learning, which can lead to effective learning and development.

Conclusion

While research has highlighted the important role of the learner in the learning-teaching process, the definition of learner-centred learning falls from short if the learner is not included in the evaluation of his/her own learning achievements. With the limitations acknowledged by earlier research on the impact of the more teacher-centred (traditional) assessment methods, the present paper argues against such imposed traditional assessment in Libyan higher education. It, therefore, moves the focus from generalizable outcomes to process. In other words, the assessment process of learning is described here as a shared task that involves the teacher as well as learners in a reciprocal relationship in which both learn from each other and develop and mature at the same time. It aims at improving learning rather than assessing performance. As a result, assessment activities are considered as an integral part of the learning process encompassing all assessment practices. This is surely the kind of learning culture needed to ensure that we target the learning needs and achieve the learning aims by fulfilling curriculum standards.

This should have a mitigating effect on the decreased physical interaction during the COVID-19 pandemic, which has ultimately had a rather negative effect on the sort of output learners are expected to endure in, what can only be said to be, a purely teacher-centred environment. By taking the learning to virtual spaces, both learners and teachers in Libya ought to learn the opportunities, as well as boundaries, that come along with assessing the kind of learning taking place. An aspect which need not be taken for granted is the level of engagement and control given to the learners. If we are to create learning spaces which do in fact value the active role of the learner, then we will need to opt out of total control given to teachers and leverage students with opportunities to practice autonomy as best as they can. As any learning situation needs significant ways of measurement, assessment methods become the framework for ensuring learning standards.

Recommendations: This paper argued for the need for students to self-assess their learning and called for co-construction in the assessment process by following procedures which make the learning more meaningful, practical, and authentic. Such considerations of assessment will however require better understanding of the assessment process proposed by the model, which demands further exploration of the interrelations presented in the procedure of assessment, including learners, teachers, assessment tasks and learning. Furthermore, as this proposal has been presented in times of crises, it would be worthwhile to formulate learning goals which take into account, not only learning itself, but curricula content and practical ideas for creating such autonomy driven, learner-oriented learning situation both online and offline.

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