Practice of Alternative Assessment at Tribhuvan University

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Abstract

Alternative assessment is a recent trend in the field of education. It helps the teachers and students to be more self reflective and responsible towards their tasks and activities. In this light, the present study aimed to explore the practice of alternative assessment system at Tribhuvan University. To accomplish the objective, the researcher adopted interpretivism as philosophical approach and narrative inquiry as research design. This research was based on the experience of university level teachers teaching at semester level. The total population of this study comprised all the teachers teaching at Tribhuvan University. However, the researcher selected only seven English language teachers from Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa using purposive sampling procedure. Similarly, the researcher made an interview guide, and interviewed with the sampled teachers using recording devices to obtain in-depth information. The results revealed that most of the teachers prefer to use traditional paper pencil test rather than using alternative assessment tools for student evaluation. They had their reluctance to use alternative assessment tools because of the time, resource and investment constraints. They were not properly updated and trained towards alternative assessment. However, they highlighted the importance of such tools for their students' evaluation. The present study can be useful to the teachers of university level for gaining insights of the alternative assessment tools for student evaluation.

Key words: *Paradigm shift, paper pencil test, alternative assessment tools, challenges in practice*

Introduction

Alternative assessment is a modern and indispensable approach to student evaluation in all levels of education. This system has been widely used in school level education. However, many universities in Nepal do not follow this system properly. In Tribhuvan University, majority of students do not attend the master's level classes regularly. They have very poor presentation and writing skills. They are also reluctant in completing assigned tasks and activities. Even if they complete them, they do not meet any requirements for being evaluated. In this reference, the present study aims to explore the practice of alternative assessment system at T.U. and examine the problems faced by teachers in implementing this system.

Assessment is an inevitable portion of instructional process. There are mainly two aims of assessing students: assessment for learning and assessment of learning. The former focuses on Continuous Assessment System (CAS) whereas the latter concentrates on certification or student promotion to the next level (Black et al., 2003). Alternative assessment is based on the assessment for learning which emerged as a reaction to traditional based assessment that are standardized, one-shot, speed-based and norm-referenced (Bailey, 1998). In such tests, projects were individualized and assessment procedures were decontextualized (Law & Eckes, 1995). Authentic assessment is a type of evaluation in which students are required to perform real-world tasks that demonstrate the application of basic knowledge and skills. A performance-based test is used to assess students' ability to apply skills and knowledge gained from a unit or units of study (Chun, 2010). The constructivist assessment approach is formative, with the goal of improving the quality of student learning rather than providing data for evaluating or grading pupils. It asserts that assessment is context-specific: what works well in one class may not work well in another.

Alternative assessment is compatible with constructivist philosophy, which considers learners to be active architects of knowledge (Estrin, 1993; Shepard, 2000). It is used to assess practical proficiency as opposed to abstract knowledge. It tends to shift away from the old paradigm of student passivity and toward student initiative, self-discipline, and choice. Alternative assessment is based on context and the growth of individual students. Assessment activities are an element of the classroom environment and continuing classroom practices that offer teachers with precise feedback so that they can quickly alter their teaching and effect learning (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993; Shepard, 2000). Alternative assessment assesses the students' higher order thinking, managerial and communication skills. Similarly, the leadership skills and other many soft skills can be measured through such types of assessment system which are almost impossible through paper pencil tests. Designing lessons and assessment in an alternative way ensures learners attain the outcomes of the courses and programs. Such tests emphasize the growth and performance of students. Furthermore, they are continuous forms of assessment because students get another opportunity to perform their ability in another situation if they fail to perform the given task at a particular time.

Alternative assessment requires from both teacher and students reflective attitudes conducive towards more challenging, varied tasks to assess performance of the target knowledge. There is a clear-cut rationale of introducing alternative assessment in the field of education. In the beginning, English language teachers were encouraged to employ communicative approaches however, students were assessed through traditional paper pencil tests (Puppin, 2007). Traditional tests used to take more teaching time and were not fair as they do not account for individual differences. Due to learners' varied intelligence, interests and goals, they cannot be assessed in the uniform way. Another reason for introducing alternative assessment is that traditional paper pencil tests examined only students' knowledge about particular subject area, however, they did not examine many soft skills such as creative, communicative and collaborative skills of the learners. Alternative assessment can focus on real life skills such as problem-solving skills and decision making skills. Further, such tests can support and enhance learning, provide certification for progress or further transfer, present a form of quality assurance. Through traditional testing system, students had no idea for the causes of their failure.

The teacher maintains a continuous perspective on how students approach, monitor, and process reading and writing. Students evaluate and reflect on themselves through the use of projects such as portfolios and reading logs. Students who engage in self-reflection and assessment become more engaged and responsible for their learning, and the interaction between teachers and students becomes more collaborative (Shepard, 2000). On the other hand, traditional assessments are one shot standard exams constructed in multiple choice format. They focus on a right answer, non-interactive performance, decontextualized test items. They are summative in nature and foster extrinsic motivation. In short, the distinction between traditional assessment and alternative assessment can summarized on the following table.

Traditional Assessment	Alternative Assessment
One-shot tests	Continuous, longitudinal assessment
Indirect tests	Direct tests
Non-authentic tests	Authentic assessment
Individual projects	Group projects
No feedback provided to learners	Feedback provided to learners
Timed exams	Untimed exams
Decontextualized test tasks	Contextualized test tasks
Norm-referenced score interpretation	Criterion-referenced score interpretation
Standardized tests	Classroom based tests

Source: Bailey (1998, p. 207)

Portfolios, journals and diaries, writing folders, teacher observations, peer and teacher-student conferences, audio-visual recordings, checklists, and self-assessments are examples of alternative assessments in ESL/EFL classrooms (Rahmaal-Mahooq & Denman, 2018). Using

genuine assessment tools like as portfolios, autonomous projects, and journals, learners can communicate their knowledge in the materials in their own unique ways (Brualdi, 1996; Knight & Mantz, 2003). In general, we can discuss the following tools and techniques of alternative assessment system.

Portfolio is a collection of learners' work in which they are assessed in terms of their performance, ability, progress and learning process. It is an ongoing process which learners produce tangible evidence of their learning. Portfolio materials may include: Essays and compositions in draft and final forms; Reports and project concept; Poetry and imaginative prose; Artwork, photographs, and newspaper or magazine clippings; Presentations and demos recorded on audio and/or video; Personal journals, diaries, and other writings; Test, test scores, and other written homework exercises; Notes from lectures; Comments, ratings, and checklists for self and peer assessments.

Interview helps to assess spoken achievement of learners when engaging in interaction between educators and learners. Interview assesses the students' oral productions, identify their needs before designing a course, discover their learning styles, and preferences. So, care should be given to design the questions to elicit students' right response. Some students who cannot do well writing they can do better in oral production.

Project work is a move, beyond the immediate educational context from the classroom into real life and student pro-activity (Freeman & Lewis, 2005). Project-based assessment is a tool which enables us to assess learner's higher order thinking skills. Such works aim to develop students' various soft skills such as communicative, collaborative, leadership, critical thinking and higher order thinking skills.

A performance assessment measures a learner's capacity to apply his or her knowledge and abilities in real-life situations. Such assessments focus on complex learning, engage higher order thinking and problem solving skills, stimulate a wide range of active reactions, involve demanding activities that require many replies, and require a large amount of time and effort from a community of students (Reeves, 2000).

Journal keeping is similar to diary writing. It helps the students to practice and develop their own writing. It helps to generate the ideas and explore their relationship in writing project. Journal writing works best when we write regularly, perfectly at the same time each day so that, it becomes a habit. So, a journal records the students' feelings, thoughts, emotions, assessments, ideas, and progress toward goals. It is typically written with little regard for structure, form, or correctness. Students can express their thought when they are judged later by the teacher.

Concepts are placed in boxes and circles, and they are linked to other concepts using arrows that indicate the direction of the association. Learners can use concept maps to reflect thoughtfully. They can be used as a meta-learning approach to assist learners in learning. It can

also assist learners in organizing and comprehending new material more clearly. Learners use concept maps to relate their new knowledge to their prior knowledge.

Computers are being used in teaching and testing language which has made teaching and testing easier than before. In terms of language learning, students can develop different language skills with the help of computers. Computer shows spelling mistakes as well as grammatical mistakes of the learners. In the same way it also gives instructions and corrects grammatically incorrect sentences for developing writing skill, there are different writing formats like bio-data, application, letter writing etc. In this regard, Yusop (2018) states that technology-based assessment is the use of technology in teaching and learning to assess learners' performance and progress. This sort of assessment is designed to encourage learners to participate and collaborate in online and off-campus learning.

These aforementioned tools and techniques of alternative assessment are useful to assess students' skills on particular issues or topics. Alternative assessment tools are used to determine what students can and cannot do, in contrast to what they do or do not know. They encourage students to learn to apply knowledge rather than to memorize material. There are the various features of alternative assessment (Linn et al., 1991, Linn & Baker, 1996). For example, students involve in setting goals and criteria for assessment. They perform a task, creating on artefact product. Higher order thinking and problem solving skills are employed. Such tests help in measuring meaningful abilities. These tests are applied in real-world context.

Tribhuvan University is the oldest and largest university of Nepal founded in 1959. In the beginning, it adopted the semester system until the 1970s. However, it could not last long. Many problems occurred in teaching, learning, and examination in this system. Then after, it enforced an annual system where students had to engage the whole year as a single academic session. TU reintroduced the semester system at the central departments of the university campus in 2014. After that, it adopted this system at all the campuses in Kathmandu Valley in 2017 for master's degree programs. From the academic session 2018, TU extended this system at the postgraduate level to all its constituents and affiliated campuses across the country. The semester system has expected to help students achieve better learning attainment as the academic session changes rapidly, and they receive immediate support from the internal and external examination system.

The semester systemaims at focusing on a continuous assessment system for regular monitoring of students' progress and setting a comprehensive and in-depth learning environment to build the capacity of learners by developing required knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Moreover, it encompasses individual and group presentations, case studies, and other critical reading tasks, which simplify the conventional one-way lecture technique. It provides a chance for students to learn more through the presentations, mid-term examinations, group discussions, submission of assignments, etc. on a regular basis (Abro, 2014).

TU Semester System Operational Guideline (2014)

- The in-semester (internal) evaluation shall have a total weight of 40 percent in each course. Students have to obtain 50 percent to pass in the internal exam. Without passing internal exam students will not be qualified to appear in the semester exam.
- Total weight of internal exam is divided into internal assessment, project work, class attendance etc. upon the recommendation of Subject Committees and approval by the Faculty Board.
- In case a student remains absent in internal examination due to serious illness s/he will be given one-time opportunity to appear in the exam if he/she is able to produce an authorized medical certificate. The internal exam notice will be published by the concerned department or campus.
- In case the percentage of marks obtained in internal exam exceeds the semester examination by more than 20 percent, the marks obtained in the internal exam will be reduced to 80 percent.

The courses in the semester system aim to have both internal and external assessment systems. Scoring is based on GPA. Students are internally evaluated with 40% marks and externally evaluated with 60% marks. Internal marks are assigned on the basis of their attendance, classroom participation, and first, second, and third assignments. There is a provision for 80% student attendance, and their presentation is a must in the semester system. Different tasks, such as project work, book reviews, article writing, unit tests, and quizzes, are provided in the first and second assignments. Usually, an internal examination is administered in the third assignment. On the other hand, external exams are conducted by the concerned dean offices of TU.

Method

The researcher adopted interpretivism as philosophical approach and narrative inquiry as research design to accomplish this research. Narrative inquiry is a valuable investigative technique in qualitative research. Narrative inquiry is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. It is a way of understanding experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006). It is a collaboration between the researcher and participants over period of time, in a palace or series of places and in a social interaction with environment. Narrative knowledge is created and constructed through the stories of lived experience. It offers the valuable insights into the complexity of human lives, cultures, and behaviour. Here, the present research is based on the lived experiences of university level teachers teaching at semester programs of Bachelor and Master's level education. It is mainly based on primary sources of data. The total population of this study consisted of university EFL teachers in Nepal. However, due to the constraints of time and efforts, the researcher selected only seven university level teachers from Tribhuvan Multiple Campus, Palpa using purposive sampling procedure. Firstly, he built a rapport with the selected participants and then the researcher made an interview guideline, and took the

interview with the sampled teachers using recording devices to obtain in-depth information. After that, the collected data were analyzed thematically under different headings. After exploring the results of the study, the researcher interpreted them by comparing their features with those of previous research works. Toassure participants' confidentiality and anonymity, all identifying information from the transcripts has been removed, and the participants have been referred according to identification codes. The code T (teachers) used in the results and discussion section helps to identify the source of quotations.

Results and Discussion

The present research aimed at exploring teachers' opinions on the practice of alternative assessment. To accomplish the objectives, the researcher gathered their data through interview technique and then results were organized under following themes. Finally, the results were interpreted using different logic.

Teachers' Strategies for Student Evaluation

The word strategy comes from the ancient Greek word *strategia* which means steps or actions. Strategies are methods or plans used to accomplish a goal. They are specific actions, behaviors, steps or techniques teachers useto improve students' progress in internal and external examination. Teachers tend to use various strategies such as paper-pencil test, question - answer, choral reading, presentations, summarizing, discussion, think pair share, journal reflection, project works, etc. for student evaluation. In this regard, T2 stated, *I tend to employ various strategies for student evaluation such as paper-pencil tests, quizzes, student presentation, discussion and summary. Sometimes, I allow my students to do choral reading, writing reports, article and book reviews, interviews and role plays*. However, T5 had a different experience of student evaluation. *He further said, I do not administer other tests except paper pencil tests, student presentation and writing assignments. I think they are the best strategies for student evaluation.* Although there are many alternative tests in higher education, many university teachers like to administer paper pencil tests as they are easy to administer and score. There are various methods of assessment in higher education, such as oral tests, paper-pencil tests, practical tests, project work, group work, and other non-testing devices, but the paper pencil test appears to be the most widely applied tool (Acharya, 2022). Whatever the tests we administer, they should be valid, reliable and practical. A test is valid if it measures what is supposed to measure (Hughes, 2003). On the other hand, whoever or how many times it is administered if the result is the same, these tests are said to be reliable. Similarly, a test should have scorability and administer ability.

Teachers' Practice of Alternative Assessment

Alternative evaluation considers each student's progress as well as the setting of the classroom. It provides details about each student's specific strengths and weaknesses. Additionally, it gives teachers detailed feedback so they can modify their instruction and influence student development. The old paradigm of passive student behavior may be reversed

and replaced by student initiative, self-discipline, and choice through alternative evaluation. Despite such considerable significance, many teachers do not practise alternative assessment in the classroom as they think that it is convenient to use traditional method, i.e. paper pencil tool rather than alternative assessments tests. Students can be easily assessed through traditional tests. However, it is lengthy and difficult process to assess the students through alternative assessment. In this regard, T3 said, *I am not using sufficient alternative assessment tools for student evaluation even in semester system as there is a pressure for course completion in one hand and it is difficult to change their assessment habit at university level on the other.* So, many teachers do not change their assessment technique while evaluating their students. They believe that the conventional methods of assessment are more valid, dependable, and objective. This is particularly true for multiple choice tests and other standard tests (Law & Eckes, 1995). However, some teachers use alternative assessment approach in the classroom. Project works, journal writing, book reviews, dialogue, and student presentation are practised as alternative assessment tools (Shrestha, 2013).

Teachers' Rationale of Using Alternative Assessment

Alternative assessment came as a reaction to traditional paper pencil method. It is also widely accepted that students whole potentialities cannot be assessed through traditional assessment tools. It can not assess to those students who have other abilities rather than only linguistic ones. This assessment aims to enhance higher order skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, creativity, collegiality, and so forth. It focuses students' unique strengths, interest and learning styles. It develops extensive levels of cognitive skills in students and presents multiple forms of expression- presentation, portfolio, debates and performance. It provides feedback to the students by identifying the area of difficulties and helps them to teach on the basis of their personal interest. Students develop their deeper understanding of concepts and practical implications. It can consider multiple dimension of students performance. It also focuses on a wide range of skills and activities. In this regard, *almost all participants highlighted the importance of alternative assessment. They claimed that it aimed to assess both core and soft skills of the participants*. Soft skills include management skills, collaborative skills, leadership skills, communication skills, of the candidates. According to Shrestha (2013), alternative assessment is a continuous process of educating and assessing students' English language learning abilities in a non-threatening setting that enables teachers to understand, pay attention to, value, and recognize each student's true potentials.

Problems of Implementing Alternative Assessment

Teachers have the problems of applying alternative assessment system in the classroom as they think that traditional assessment technique is easier than modern ones. They are not well trained towards modern trends in students' evaluation. They are not familiar with the alternative assessment tools. Most of teachers have no information or formal training and

experience about new and alternative assessment and evaluation methods and techniques (Sozbilir & Neacsu, 2014). Such alternative methods of assessment will not be considered to be part of mainstream of language assessment until they can be shown to be both valid and reliable (Hamayan, 1995). Further, teachers and students question the reliability and validity of alternative assessment tools. These tools are not taken as standard tools in comparison to traditional paper pencil test. Another problem is that it is more expensive and takes more time, resources and investments. They may lead to misunderstanding and unfairness. These tests are subjective and bias in nature. Teachers also have difficulty to score such tests. In this regard, T4 claimed, *there are several problems of applying such test tools in the classroom as they are not as valid and reliable in comparison to traditional paper pencil test.* It means that this assessment system has big questions about reliability and validity. So many reforms are needed in the assessment system to make it reliable and valid (Acharya, 2022). Moreover, there are other problems of employing alternative assessment: school/college culture, time management, flexible curriculum and involving families (Shrestha, 2013).

Conclusion

Various strategies such as question-answer, choral reading, presentations, summary, discussions, think pair and share, journal keeping, and project works are used in bachelor and master's level semester programs of T.U. however, paper pencil test is the most practised in annual programs of university education. It was found that the most of the teachers are reluctant to use alternative assessment tools as they are not familiar with those tools in one hand, and they do not have sufficient time and resources on the other. Alternative assessment tools aims to enhance higher order skills, critical thinking, problem-solving, and creativity of the students. They were developed to measure the applied skills and practice of students rather than measuring only theoretical knowledge. However, some teachers and students raise the question of reliability and validity of alternative assessment. Alternative assessment is valuable for parents, students, and teachers alike. Students are given numerous platforms to demonstrate their abilities and work on the areas that need improvement in order to improve their learning, while teachers engage in self-assessment in order to raise their teaching standards.

Student assessment is an integral part of teaching learning process of the formal education. The teachers can apply any alternative assessment strategies and techniques that are suitable for their courses. The present study can be further useful to the teachers of university level for gaining insights of the alternative assessment tools for student evaluation. This is a small scale study which may not be generalized in the all the situation so that an intensive study can be done selecting a large number of participants and multiple tools.

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