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USING TESTS TO REINFORCE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY WITH ARAB LEARNERS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Dr. MUSTAFA MASIHUDDIN SIDDIQUI

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Shaqra University, Dawadmi, KSA

Email: mustafamasihuddin@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Testing is regarded as a crucial tool throughout the academic sphere, for it helps the learners as well as the teachers in various ways. Most teachers use test for its primary motive of assessing students' knowledge and competence after teaching a set portion from the syllabus. It is beneficial for the learners as it tells them the topics which they have mastered and the topics which require more learning. Nevertheless, over the years, many experts have raised doubts on the efficiency of test and on its objective of inducing learning. Also, it has been noted that most students have a hostile perception of tests as they find them to be intimidating. The present paper propounds a technique through which the researcher has been able to encourage learning through tests and alleviate the exam stress in various colleges of Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: Reinforcing Learning, Tests, Feedback

1. Introduction

It is universally accepted that tests are a vital part of learning process as they help in elevating the efficiency of courses. Many educators depend on it to evaluate their students' performances and their own teaching. In general, tests can be defined as a process of assessing leaners' knowledge or skill in a particular subject. Over the years, test has been defined differently by different scholars, yet its meaning has revolved around the same signification. In 1983, Harrison stated in his book titled *A Language Testing Handbook* that tests are "a natural extension of classroom work, providing teacher and students with useful information that can serve each as a basis for improvement" (1). In 1990, Alan Davies suggested that "language testing is central to language teaching. It provides goals for language teaching, and it monitors, for both teachers and learners, success in reaching those goals (qtd. in Saraswathi 128). A similar perception is provided by Rhalmi who, in 2018, stated that "a test refers to a tool, technique or a method that is intended to measure students' knowledge or their ability to complete a particular task. In this sense, testing can be considered as a form of assessment."

Tests can be of various types depending upon the purpose they serve. In the book titled *English Language Teaching: Principles & Practice*, Saraswathi lists the four most common types: proficiency tests, achievement tests, aptitude tests, and diagnostic tests. While proficiency tests aim "to assess learner's ability to apply in actual situations what he has learnt," the achievement tests are "directly related to a known syllabus" and "attempt to examine a learner's achievement with specific reference to the objectives of a particular course." Aptitude tests help in predicting "future performance," and diagnostic tests "enables a

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teacher to diagnose a learner's strength and weakness" which assists in planning a "remedial programme" (129-28). Each of these tests can be conducted using numerous kinds of testing, such as direct testing, indirect testing, objective testing, subjective testing, discrete point testing, integrative testing, norm-referenced testing, and criterion-referenced testing. These have their own merits and are used on different occasions by the teachers.

For many centuries now, teachers have been using test as a tool for several purposes. According to Richard Frost, tests can give teachers "valuable information about where the students are in their learning and can affect what the teacher will cover next." Also, they are reflective as they inform the students "what they know and what they need to review." Moreover, tests provide students with a strong reason to "review material covered on the course." Besides, an important characteristic of testing is that it is "a learning opportunity" as the feedback helps the students in understanding something they failed to do during the test.

Until late-twentieth century, not enough emphasis was laid on the education sector in Saudi Arabia. As compared to the developed parts of the world, the education system in the kingdom is recent; therefore, there are many facets in it which are ineffectual and need refinement. One such area on which many teachers in higher education have not been able to capitalize is testing. In most cases, it turns out to be an intimidating experience for the learners, thereby resulting in nil or negligible learning from the process. The present paper sets forth a testing practice which reinforces learning and has proven to be effective in various colleges of Saudi Arabia.

2. Reinforcing Learning

A general pattern of tertiary-level teaching in the kingdom, as observed by the researcher, is fixed and includes basic steps. In the course of a semester, teachers usually impart lessons from the prescribed syllabus for around twelve to fourteen weeks with midterm tests generally conducted in the fifth and the tenth weeks. The scores achieved by the students in the midterm tests are announced in the following classes. Apart from these, many teachers also conduct revision classes in the week/s preceding the final tests. Although the revision classes deliver a significant opportunity to the learners to reinforce the lessons of the entire semester, they are rarely advantageous as many students prefer not to attend classes in the final weeks.

On the other hand, it is observed that the students learn and perform better simply by the inclusion of certain reinforcements in the aforementioned steps. For instance, conducting sample tests in the class before the midterm tests helps in making the testing experience less frightening for the learners. Besides, a follow-up discussion and feedback after both—sample tests and midterm tests assist learners in recognizing their mistakes and understanding the recurring errors. Furthermore, connecting midterm tests with the final test ensures fortification of learning. Figure 1 outlines the basic pedagogical structure which is followed by most teachers in Saudi Arabia and the one which includes the four steps of reinforcements:

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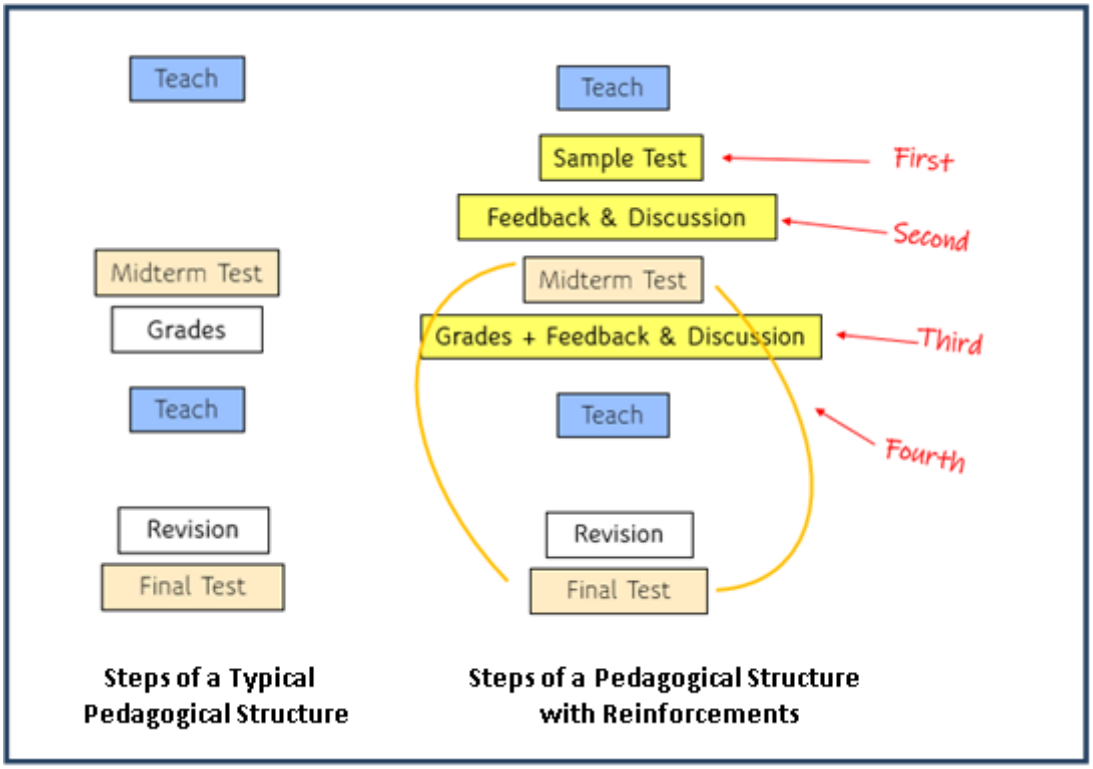

Figure 1: Basic Pedagogy versus Pedagogy with the Four Reinforcements

To validate their effectiveness, these steps were included in the researcher's pedagogy and a comparative study was conducted. The methodology of the study has been put forward below followed by the results and discussion.

3. Methodology

3.1 Setting and Participants

A case study was conducted across eight semesters in three different colleges of Saudi Arabia. These were Dammam College of Technology situated in the Eastern Province, Tanomah College of Technology located in the Southern Province, and Shaqra University in the Riyadh Province. The testing along with the reinforcements was conducted formally at the colleges in the allocated periods and classrooms. Saudi students of English, who either belonged to diploma or bachelor's course were the subjects of this study.

3.2 Method

The results of this study were obtained from the comparative analysis of the semester grades of the students. In this study, the learners in Dammam College of Technology were taught and tested without the reinforcing steps in one semester and with them in the other. Later, the grades thus obtained were tabulated and represented in a line chart in MS Excel for the comparison. To further corroborate the validity of the technique, a similar study was conducted in Shaqra University. Besides, an observation was made in students' learning behaviour in all the three colleges.

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4. Results and Discussion

The inclusion of the reinforcements derived positive results as students benefitted distinctively from each of the added steps. A brief account of the four reinforcements in the testing practice is given below followed by the results of the comparative analysis.

4.1 Reinforcement 1- Sample Tests

Practice tests or mock tests have proven to be highly favourable for the learners. There are numerous studies which prove the merits of conducting practice tests before the actual tests. For instance, Walsh believes that practice tests "can help ease test anxiety" and increase "the mental stamina." A similar effect was observed when the researcher conducted a mock test in his period which preceded the midterm test. The researcher called this test as *sample test* as its format was identical to the format of the actual test but the questions were dissimilar. This proved to be highly fruitful due to a phenomenon known as Transfer-Appropriate Processing which, according to Regina Waddell, "suggests that memories are easier to retrieve when the retrieval process is similar to how they were encoded during an initial learning activity."

In addition to informing learners of the knowledge gaps, the sample tests helped them in familiarizing with the pattern and the question language of the midterm test. This reduced students' silly mistakes on midterm tests as compared to the semester in which the reinforcements were excluded. Also, they helped in encouraging peer teaching as they were conducted by pairing a more knowledgeable student with a less knowledgeable one. In sample tests, students were allocated only three quarters of the time which they were given in midterm tests. This perfected the timing of the students, causing no student to fail in completing their midterm test in time.

4.2 Reinforcement 2 - Feedback and Discussion (Sample Tests)

This step is considered to be indispensable as it multiplies the benefits of practice testing. In her article, Waddell claims that "there are several individual studies that show that practice testing plus feedback is more beneficial than practice testing alone." Therefore, the sample tests were always followed up by a brief discussion and feedback on learners' performances on sample tests. To spare learners' embarrassment of mistakes, the sample test papers were never collected; rather, a collective discussion was made on the board. This step proved to be vital as students clarified all their doubts before appearing for the midterm test. Additionally, in this session, the researcher supplied the correct answers or model answers to the learners with appropriate explanation, causing a reinforcement of the target item. This served the learners favourably as the learners not only understood the instructions clearly, but they also perceived the kind of answers which were expected from them in the midterm tests through this feedback.

4.3 Reinforcement 3 – Feedback and Discussion (Midterm Tests)

As mentioned earlier, many teachers in Saudi universities reveal test scores of students in their period which succeeds the midterm tests. Although this is a significant step, the absence of a suitable feedback and discussion regarding the midterm tests causes a loss of a reinforcement opportunity. It is believed that, over the span of an academic course, the learners use the maximum amount of their brains when they take formal tests. This is because, during testing, the learners aim to answer correctly to attain better scores. In order to capitalize on these efforts of the learners, the researcher always discussed and provided a detailed feedback to the learners while revealing their test performances. This stimulated learning as students found out what their mistakes were and the correct answers to the questions they could not answer. The participation of the learners in this session was found by the researcher to be highly active and dedicated.

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4.4 Reinforcement 4 – Connecting Midterm Tests with Final Tests

The final step which the researcher included in his testing practice was connecting midterm tests with the final tests which were conducted in the final weeks of the semester. As midterm tests are formative form of testing, they encompass only a part of the syllabus. Contrastively, the final tests are summative in nature; hence, they test learners' knowledge of the entire syllabus. In order to test students' learning from the previous steps, the researcher incorporated some questions from the midterm test in the final tests verbatim or with slight changes. This proved to be a momentous step as it aided in the long-term retention of the target areas and inculcated the lessons firmly.

4.5 Analysis

On comparing the performances when students were subjected to the aforementioned reinforcements with those when the researcher taught and tested in a typical way, some noteworthy differences were observed.

The first comparison is of the grades of Dammam College of Technology learners in the semesters of 2017. As can be seen in Table 1, only 13 out of 202 students attained A+ when no reinforcing techniques were implemented; whereas, 21 out of 189 students achieved A+ with the reinforced learning. A similar trend is shown by students who attained A and B+. On the contrary, a reverse drift can be seen in lower grades as a smaller number of students achieved C+, C, D+ and D in the semester with reinforcements than in the semester without them. A striking observation is regarding the number of students who failed the course. When the semester was completed with fewer steps, five students failed; while, only one student failed in the semester with added steps. Similar results were obtained when the reinforcements were implemented in the Tanomah College of Techonology.

Table 1: 2017 Study Results

Grades	Without Reinforcements	With Reinforcements
A+	13	21
A	17	29
B+	31	49
B	42	43
C+	47	25
C	19	11
D+	19	8
D	9	2
F	5	1
Total	202	189

Figure 2 compares the grades attained by the number of Dammam College of Technology students (in percentage) in the two situations:

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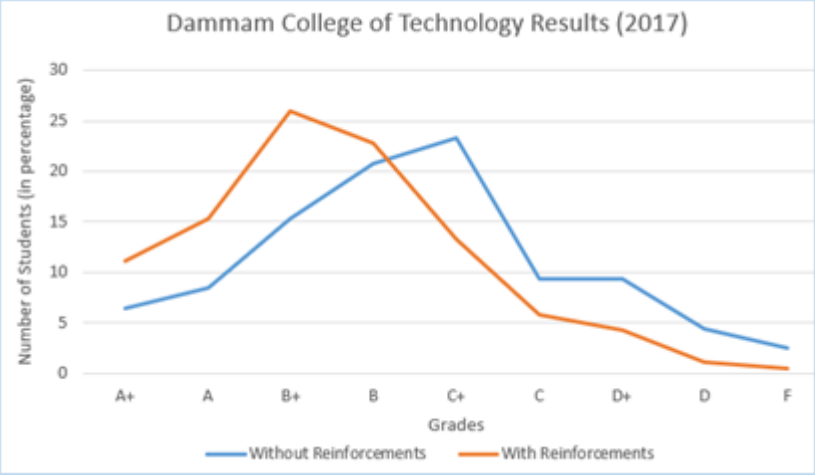

Figure 2: 2017 Study Results

Table 2: 2019-20 Study Results

Grades	Without Reinforcements	With Reinforcements
A+	5	13
A	9	19
B+	15	20
B	25	15
C+	24	13
C	11	13
D+	12	9
D	9	5
F	6	1
Total	116	108

A validation of the reinforcement method was made by comparatively analysing the performances of students of Shaqra University in the session 2019-20. The results listed in Table 2 are evident of the constructive outcomes of the four steps, which assisted more than 29 percent of students in attaining A+ and A. Contrastively, only around 12 percent of students received A+ and A without them. The difference in the number of students who failed the course in both the semesters also signify the virtues of the reinforcements. Around 5 percent of students failed the course without them, but only one failed the course when they were tested with complementing reinforcements. A comparison of Shaqra University students' performances in the two circumstances is shown in Figure 3:

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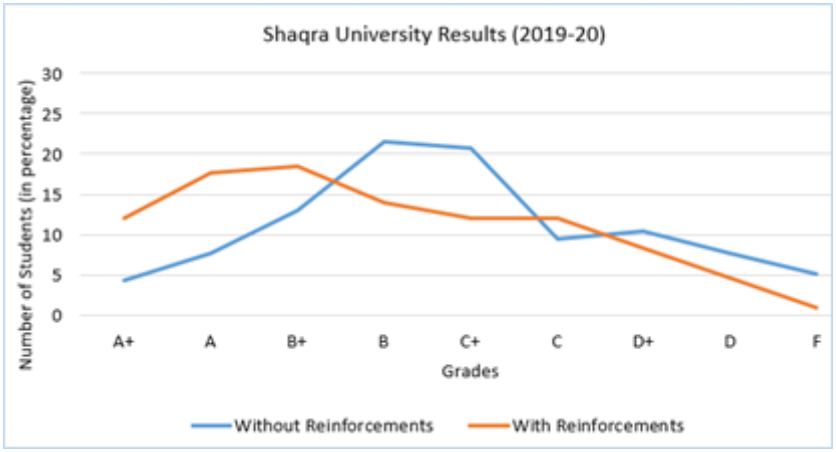

Figure 3: 2019-20 Study Results

5. Limitations and Suggestions

While using the reinforcement strategy, the researcher encountered some limitations, which have been discussed in this section along with some suggestions. Firstly, preparing sample tests increases the workload of teachers as they have to design every test twice. This becomes demanding for the teachers who teach multiple subjects as the midterm tests of all courses are conducted mostly in the same week. Secondly, using the periods surrounding the midterm test for mock tests and discussion can consume substantial time, thereby leaving only limited time for the teachers to cover the prescribed syllabus. Thirdly, students might rely heavily on sample tests and the follow-up discussions to score well on their tests. This can cause loss of students' attentiveness in regular classes.

The researcher believes that a proper planning by the teachers can help in combating these issues. If teachers utilize only a part of their periods in conducting sample tests and discussing them and midterm tests, sufficient time will be available to cover the syllabus. Moreover, the designing of sample tests need not be done every semester. As the motive of the sample tests is only to help learners face and perform better in midterm tests, they can be repeated in every semester without making any changes. Finally, if sample tests are conducted without informing the students in advance, the learners will not take the regular lessons for granted as they will rely on them for their midterm tests and not on the sample tests.

6. Conclusion

The present study aims to prove that testing can be utilized as a learning opportunity for the learners, which has been pointed out by John Kleeman, "Taking a test doesn't just measure how much you know, it helps reinforce the learning and make it more likely that you can retrieve the same information later." Kleeman's claim that testing can "be more beneficial to learning than spending the same amount of time studying" is evident by the results discussed in this study. The researcher believes that the introduction of the four steps of reinforcement can help in making testing a more positive, productive, and welcoming experience in Saudi universities and colleges.

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