

# The Reality of Continuous Assessment Strategies on Saudi Students' Performance at University Level

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Received: October 10, 2019 Accepted: November 23, 2019 Online Published: November 29, 2019

doi: 10.5539/elt.v12n12p132

URL: <https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v12n12p132>

## Abstract

This study was carried out to explore the assessment practice in Saudi universities with the major focus on Continuous Assessment Strategies. The study specifically aimed to find out the different assessment strategies and their contribution to students' learning and performance. It was conducted in Jubail University College and Al Mustaqbal University involving a sample of one hundred and fifty students and forty five teachers. Data was collected qualitatively and quantitatively using students' academic records and questionnaires. From the findings, it was observed that the use of continuous assessment helps students to understand difficult areas related to the EFL content. The study revealed that although there are various kinds of continuous assessment strategies, EFL teachers at both the universities generally employed take-home assignments, written tests and recap exercises to assess how the EFL students learn English language. Continuous assessment also provides more confidence to students and prepares them for final examinations. Therefore, it was recommended that the competent EFL teachers, who are trained and knowledgeable about evaluation strategies and procedures, should be motivated to share their expertise in order to improve the performance of Saudi EFL university students.

**Keywords:** assessment, continuous assessment strategies, students' learning and performance

## I. Introduction

### *1.1 Background of the Study*

The Continuous Assessment (CA) approach has been accepted as an alternative for the traditional assessment by many educational institutions worldwide including Saudi Arabia to assess the achievement of learners. The main reason behind this is that the traditional ways of assessment can only test a limited and specific type of information. Thus, continuous assessment is a modern method of educational assessment that aims to resolve the issues of mismatching between tests and classroom activities.

Continuous assessment proposes a procedure for measuring the performance of students to improve their level of achievement. As stated by Bolyard (2003) in order to assess students' knowledge and understanding, continuous assessment is implemented by teachers. It provides valuable information about the students' progress in terms of knowledge, and cognitive skills. Teachers administer assessments in several ways in order to gather information regarding their students' knowledge and level of understanding and performance. The data regarding the students' progress provides feedback on a regular basis. This data enables the teachers to improve the teaching and learning process. Moreover, they also learn about the categories of students: those who need remedial sessions and those who can proceed further to an advanced level. Through continuous assessment, teachers can measure the usefulness of their teaching strategies. In addition, continuous assessments serve as an indicator of the progress made at certain levels. As a result, the students are able to observe their levels of attainment and to visualize their progress (Airasian, 1991; Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017).

It is worth mentioning that the system of education in Saudi Arabia has improved considerably, and higher educational institutions have paid attention towards the implementation of continuous assessment strategies. As a matter of fact, Saudi Arabia is among one of those countries that have brought significant educational reforms for the improvement of students (Althaqafi, 2018). Recently, due to the significance of English language among the university students in Saudi Arabia, the assessment and examination methods are centered on the continuous assessment methods.

On the other hand, during the different phases of implementation of continuous assessment, educational institutions in Saudi Arabia confronted problems regarding its appropriate use. As a result, issues related to scoring of assessments and learning have become a topic of utmost importance for the educators. As stated by Alabdelwahab (2002), instead of encouraging the use of continuous assessment strategies, in reality, it resulted in unchanged assessment patterns by teachers and the use of traditional assessments. The lack of teacher training and knowledge regarding the basic principles of the new assessment scheme result in poor implementation of continuous assessment.

The continuous assessment approaches influence the quality of teaching in a positive manner only when the learning and assessment methods are employed effectively; moreover, they have a significant effect on the content that is taught and the manner in which it is taught. However, any mistaken belief of continuous assessment on the teachers' part could result in a wrong application thereby resulting in undesirable effects. Therefore, a continuous follow-up is required for the teaching learning process. The various aspects of the learning activities of students should be measured using a variety of (Iqbal, 2017). There are numerous publications on the impact of assessment on students' learning (Boud & Falchikov, 2007; Gibbs & Simpson, 2005; Shahbaz, Khan, Khan, & Mustafa, 2016; Stiggins, 2002; Topping, 1998; William, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004). On the other hand, the subject of how the co-occurrence of different types of assessment contributes to the improvement of student learning has received less attention, particularly research that focuses on different higher education institutions. Khan, Radzuan, Shahbaz, Ibrahim and Mustafa (2018) asserted that technology is playing its part in the development of language learning and various researchers are using technology in teaching and learning language (Khan, Radzuan, Alkhunaizan, Mustafa, & Khan, 2019; Khan, Radzuan, Shahbaz, & Ibrahim, 2018; Shahbaz & Khan, 2017); thus the role of continuous assessment is vital. There is a gap in the literature in relation to studies that compare the students from the English Language Department across different higher education institutions on the relationship between assessment and student learning. This collaborative study under investigation is conducted at undergraduate level at two main universities: University of Mustaqbal and Jubail University in Saudi Arabia .It aims to bridge this gap by examining the assessment practices that support student learning.

This study explores the current methods applied for continuous assessment of the English language students at both the universities. The research design was descriptive because of its appropriateness in terms of the effect of continuous assessment in developing the language skills of the English language students at Mustaqbal and Jubail University. Furthermore, the study employed quantitative approach for gathering data through a questionnaire administered for students and teachers. All data obtained from the questionnaire are interpreted and represented in the form of graphs. This study involved the random sampling of students and teachers from English Language Department in both the universities.

### *1.2 Statement of the Problem*

Continuous assessment approach can prove to be effective for education reform (Resnick & Resnick, 1992). An examination of the international literature has encouraged the use of continuous assessment. As a substitute of traditional assessment, researchers support the CA approach (Nitko, 1995). As a consequence, continuous assessment is implemented by many countries around the world including Saudi Arabia.

Throughout the phases of implementation of the continuous assessment approach, educational institutions faced issues regarding its efficient use. Though the goal of the CA approach was to encourage continuous assessment strategies, in reality the approach led to the use of unchanged assessment techniques, and traditional tests by the teachers (Alabdelwahab, 2002).

As stated by Tan (1992) the workload of the faculty members tends to increase because the process of continuous assessment is formative, systematic and comprehensive. Due to the fact that EFL faculty members are over-burdened with workload, they fail to use different kinds of continuous assessment strategies that depict the full range of information about their learners. Different teachers employ different strategies in order to monitor their students' academic progress. Although Iqbal (2017) states that continuous assessment can enhance student learning, research suggests that the implementation of continuous assessment approach is not an easy task. The attitudes of the faculty toward continuous assessment and lack of relevant knowledge and skill regarding the administration and construction of continuous assessment are concerns that do not allow the use of this approach to evaluate student learning (Gal & Ginsburg, 1994; Gipps, 2011; Shumway & Harden, 2003). This is a reflection that both the faculty and students are not aware of the significance of assessment approach in the teaching and learning process. Furthermore, the topic of the continuous assessment approach used by EFL teachers is not much researched in the Saudi context. Therefore, a study of this nature should be undertaken in

order to find out the effect of continuous assessment in assessing students' EFL learning.

### *1.3 Aims and Objectives of the Study*

This study is carried out based on the following objectives:

- To explore the strategies of continuous assessment for English language students at Saudi universities
- To highlight the effect of continuous assessment strategies in developing the language skills of English language university students in KSA
- To explore the views of the faculty regarding the academic performance of the students based on different continuous assessment strategies

### *1.4 Research Questions*

This study is designed to answer the following basic research questions:

- What are the appropriate continuous assessment strategies for English language students at Saudi universities?
- What is the effect of using continuous assessment strategies on developing the language skills of English language students?
- What are the teachers' views regarding the students' performance based on different continuous assessment strategies?

### *1.5 Significance of the Study*

This study will benefit the university teachers at both Mustaqbal University and Jubail University in the process of developing and designing of classroom assessment in the best interest of the students. Few studies, if any, have investigated Saudi classroom continuous assessment practices.

The findings of the study will be beneficial for the educationists to organize the assessment trainings based on new approaches of assessment so that the teacher can have the right perception and employ all those strategies in their classrooms to get better results. The results of the study will enable the teachers to analyze their own scheme of instruction and assessment.

Furthermore, the findings of this study will also help the researchers analyze the reasons behind the low performance of English language students at Mustaqbal and Jubail University. The findings will certainly contribute by adding a deeper insight to the concept of continuous assessment strategies in the Saudi context as well as globally.

### *1.6 Delimitation of the Study*

The delimitation of this study is that it did not include a large number of universities in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Because it was not possible to examine all the universities in Saudi Arabia, the study focuses on only two institutions sampled from different parts of the country. Therefore, the research findings may not necessarily be a reflection of what is happening in other universities in KSA. Since this study does not include any other department, it focuses on the continuous assessment approach that is implemented to assess the performance of EFL students at Jubail and Mustaqbal University. The findings of this research, therefore are limited to the EFL teachers only even though the implementation of continuous assessment applies to other courses and populations that have the same characteristics.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Previous Studies*

Assessment is the key element in the educational process. The concern of this study is to explore the effect of continuous assessment on students' performance at university level. Numerous studies have mentioned that continuous assessment strategies being used by the teachers have effects on students' performance at university level. According to Gipps (2011) teachers have had to rely on continuous assessment in order to monitor their students' academic progress and performance. Continuous assessment needs a lot of hard work and devotion to your work, but unfortunately, most of the teachers avoid it just for the sake of self-convenience. Gal and Ginsburg (1994) indicated that the lack of personal integrity, self-discipline and unserious attitude to work tend to negate the existence of continuous assessment. Despite the benefits of continuous assessment, some teachers have refused to embrace it because of the extra work involved.

Continuous assessment promotes interaction between students and teachers. Such interaction greatly affects their

academic performances. As cited by Dochy, Segers, and Sluijsmans (1999) continuous assessment promotes dialogue among teachers and students to acquire knowledge in order to improve the teaching and learning process. With the help of continuous assessment, it becomes easy for teachers to find out what students in their classes know and are able to do. The main purpose of this study is therefore to make the educators realize that continuous assessment provides quality education. The continuous assessment procedure provides a progressive evaluation of student's performance in order to point out deficiencies which hinder their academic achievements. It helps the teacher to judge and assess the qualities and learning abilities of each student. According to Osokoya (2006) assessment is not merely testing, it is a process through which the quality of an individual work or performance is judged.

Individual and group assignments and tasks are also part of continuous assessment. They through positive impacts on academic performance of students lead them to become competitive participants in class activities. Onuka and Onabamiro (2010) asserted that regular individual assignments generate higher student learning and achievements because they form sources of feedback on the performance of the students and aid students to develop critical mind and good study habit. Mwebaza (2010) found that written tests, take-home assignments and recap exercises dominated teachers' continuous assessment strategies. Hence we can say that these strategies help the teachers to assess their students in a better way.

Continuous assessment makes the learning process interesting and engages both the students and teachers in continuous learning process. Inyang-Abia (2004) indicates that continuous assessments are the pivot on which the wheel of teaching and learning process rotates. According to Inyang-Abia (2004) the use of continuous assessment is the most significant aspect of influence for students' effective performance. Gibbs and Simpson (2005) indicated that the availability of continuous assessment in learning process has the potency for motivating and focusing learner's attention on the lesson being presented. For EFL teachers, continuous assessment is important to see progress of some skills. It helps teachers to make necessary observations and gather information about their students learning abilities. Christoforou and Yigit (2008) state that continuous assessment refers to collecting information and making observations about students periodically to find out what students know, understand, and can do.

There is also continuous assessment that refers to formative evaluation which provides an insight to educators to find out what their students have learned and help the teachers to evaluate their students in a systematic manner. Continuous assessment consists of specific tasks that are given to the students based on what has been taught to them. The teachers observe students doing these tasks and then make a judgment on how well they are doing. It is also a continuous practice and responsibility for teachers to assess their students in a systematic way. According to Yigzaw (2013) the practice of continuous assessment in our educational system signifies a greater responsibility for practicing teachers.

Continuous assessment enables the teachers to make decisions about the progress of their students. It provides them ample chances to reteach a topic and judge their weak and strong areas. The teachers often communicate with their students and inquire whether they are learning or not. According to Ghahari and Farokhnia (2017) continuous assessment does not mean testing often; rather it means communicating with the students often to find out whether they are truly learning or not.

Teachers pay more attention to completing the syllabus. They focus only on traditional ways of assessing the performance of students. Stiggins (2002) indicates that current continuous assessment system involves class tests, class exercises and homework and no attention is given to project work, which is the most important learning medium that allows pupils to take active part in their own learning. According to Nsibandé and Modiba (2012) factors challenging the implementation of CA are: large class size, shortage of funds to fulfill necessary resources and lack of adequate training of teachers. Thus, this study will try to prove that continuous assessment has a great effect on students at university level. It can enhance their learning and other related skills. It will emphasize on how the use of continuous assessment can contribute to the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Research Design*

The design of the study was descriptive which employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods to collect data from Jubail University and Al Mustaqbal University. According to Koul (1996), descriptive study method of research design can allow gathering comprehensive information concerning the existing phenomenon with the intent of employing data to justify current conditions and practices. A cross sectional survey design was adopted to carry out the study. McMillan (1996) indicated that a cross-sectional survey is a descriptive research

in which “information is collected from one or more samples or populations at one time” (p. 182). Since the study aimed to describe the current situation regarding continuous assessment strategies at Jubail University and Mustaqbal University, this research design was considered as the most appropriate one.

The researchers used the survey research design which enabled them to gather information in a short time and to study the various continuous assessment strategies that were employed by English teachers at both universities. The researchers developed it and took related literature into consideration.

3.2 Sample Selection

The target population included forty-five EFL teachers; the majority had a Masters degree in their field, and one hundred and fifty Freshman, Sophomore and Senior students aged between 18-24 years from Al Mustaqbal University and Jubail University, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The census method was reasonable in the sense that there was the need to gather data from a small population of EFL teachers and students.

3.3 Data Collection Methods

Two structured questionnaires were developed and used to collect data from the faculty members and students from both universities. A total of 150 students’ questionnaires were distributed to students and 45 teachers’ questionnaires were sent to teachers. The purpose of the questionnaires was to confirm the improvement in the performance of those students who were being assessed. In addition, the use of questionnaires facilitated the process of data collection within a limited time.

3.4 Setting

A joint research collaboration was agreed upon between Jubail University and Mustaqbal University in the beginning of the second term of the academic year 2018/2019. The current study on continuous assessment strategies was one of the research topics included in this collaboration. The study was carried out by conducting the survey that was sent to both students and faculty members from both the institutions.

3.4 Data Analysis

All the collected data from the questionnaires was recorded into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets; the use of Microsoft Excel enabled the researchers to generate descriptive statistics, and create bar graphs using simple percentage method. The explanation of the descriptive survey enabled the researchers to provide appropriate inferences regarding the value of continuous assessment strategies on the performance of Saudi EFL college students.

4. Results and Discussion

This section of the paper deals with the presentation, and analysis of the findings of the study. The results are organized and discussed in accordance with the various questions that guided the study.

4.1 Data Presentation and Interpretation

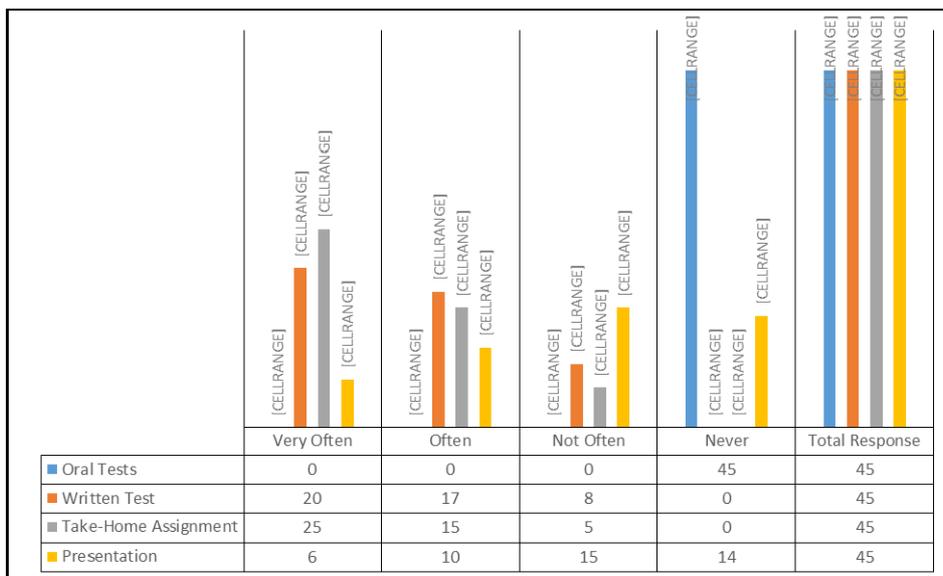


Figure 1. The number of times different continuous assessment strategies were used by EFL teachers at Mustaqbal University and Jubail University

The results in Figure 1 clearly display that take-home assignments were the most frequently employed continuous assessment strategy in EFL classes at both Jubail and Mustaqbal University. This is followed by written test. The fact emerged from the study that the over-all percentage of *very often* and *often* for take-home assignment (88.9%) is more than the written test (82.3%). Furthermore, it was found that teachers hardly use presentations and they do not use oral tests.

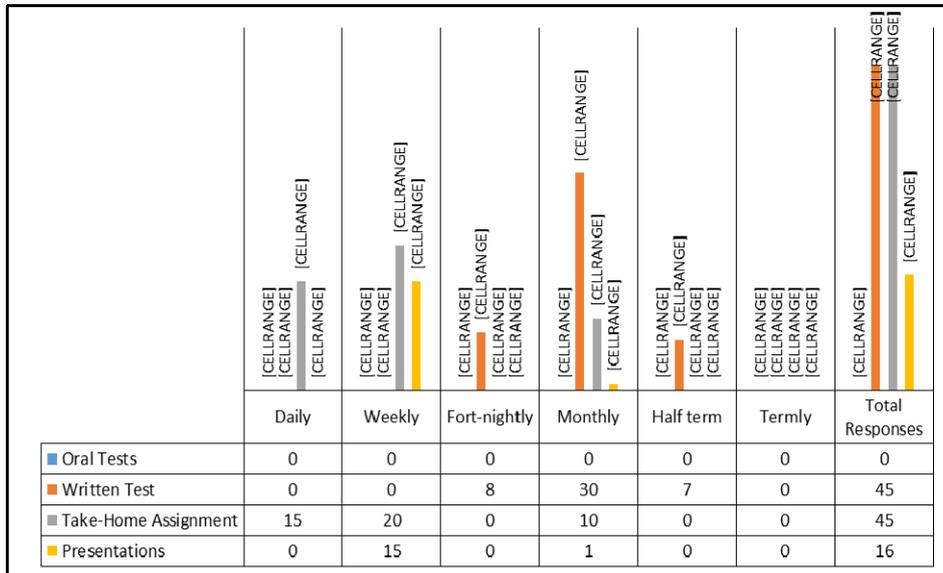


Figure 2. Teachers' feedback on the frequency of use of different continuous assessment strategies at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

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he results as indicated in Figure 2 show that 66.7% of the EFL teachers used written tests every month throughout the semester, 22.2% of the respondents employed take-home assignment monthly whereas 6.3% used it on monthly basis. On fort-night basis, the table shows that only written test (17.8%) was used. Take-home assignments were commonly employed weekly followed by presentations. On a daily basis, only take-home assignments were used by the EFL faculty at Mustaqbal and Jubail University.

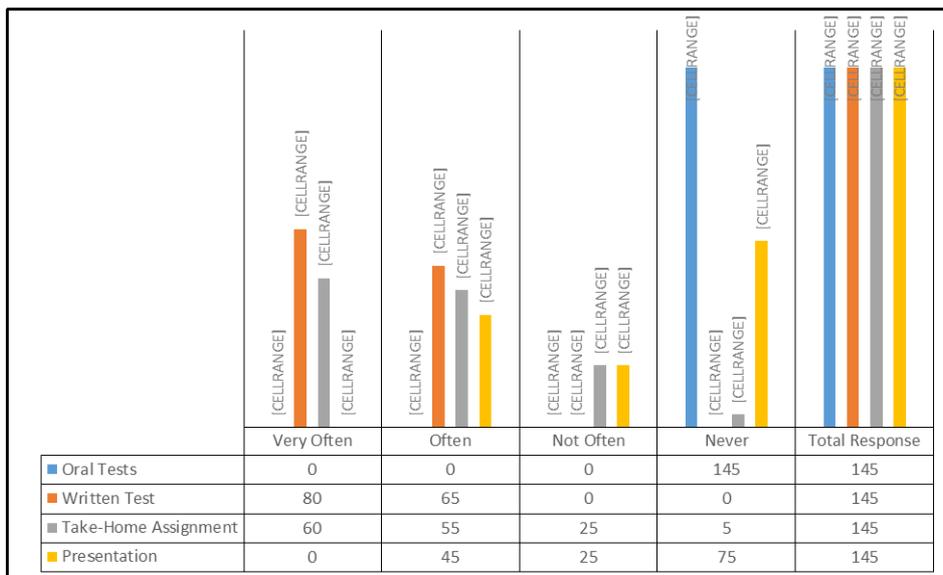


Figure 3. Students' feedback on the number of times different continuous assessment strategies were used by their EFL teachers at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

The results in Figure 3 clearly show that the Saudi EFL students at both the universities were frequently assigned tests (55.2%) and take-home assignments (41.4%) respectively. The use of presentations was less frequent. Oral tests were not used according to the responses of the students. This response is in agreement with the feedback provided by the EFL faculty at both the universities.

It must be noted that since five questionnaires were not properly filled in by the students, only one hundred and forty-five questionnaires were accepted as data for the research study.

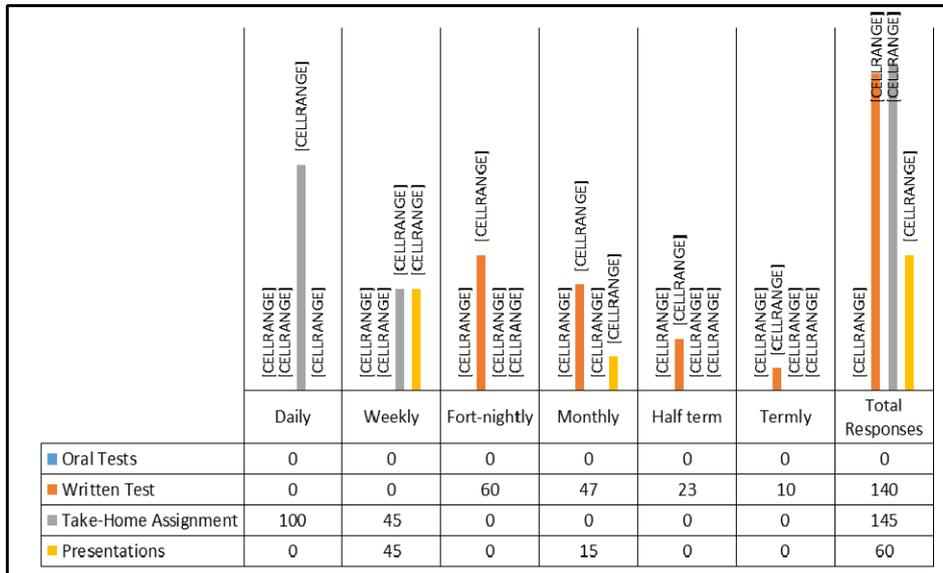


Figure 4. Students' feedback on the frequency of use of different continuous assessment strategies by EFL teachers at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

The results in Figure 4 suggest that written test is being used by EFL faculty after every two weeks with a percentage of 42.9, on a monthly basis with a percentage of 33.6, on a midterm basis with a percentage of 16.4 and termly with 7.1%. Furthermore, the table also displays that take-home assignment is being used on a daily basis by teachers with a percentage of 69 and on a weekly basis with a percentage of 31. Presentation is being used every week (75%) and monthly (25%) respectively. As indicated in the table, oral test was never used at all.

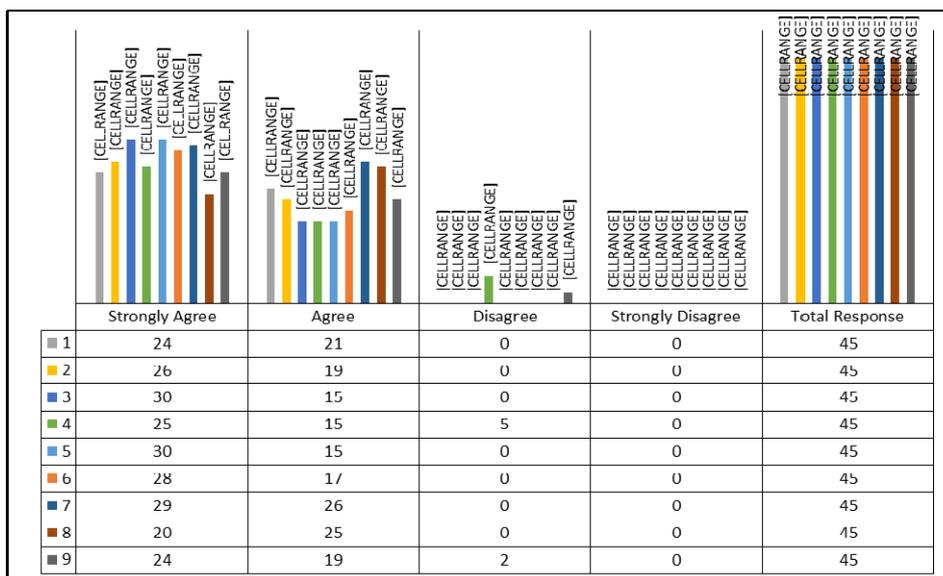


Figure 5. Teachers' feedback on the effect of continuous assessment strategies on students' performance at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

The results in Figure 5 based on the questionnaire (See Appendix 1) show that continuous assessment strategies affect the performance of the students in a positive manner. 58.3% of the EFL teachers strongly agreed with the submission, 40% of the faculty at both the universities agreed with the submission whereas only 1.7% disagreed with the submission.

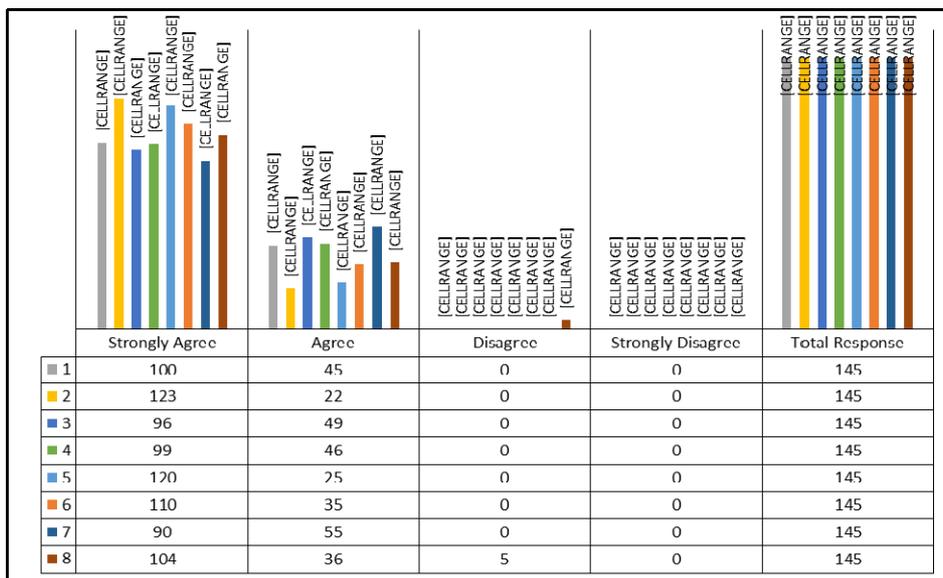


Figure 6. Students' feedback on the effect of continuous assessment strategies on their academic performance at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

The results in Figure 6 based on the questionnaire (See Appendix 1) suggests that most of the Saudi EFL students believed that continuous assessment approach affected their overall academic performance in a positive manner. The figure above displays that 72.6% of the students at both the universities strongly agreed that continuous assessment strategies affect their performance positively, 27% of the respondents agreed with the same idea whereas only 0.4% disagreed. Continuous assessment enables the students to review in an effective manner. Furthermore, the CA strategies enables them to be more confident; thus preparing them for the final assessment. Many students also mentioned that due to the prompt response they received from their teachers on CA, they could recognize their mistakes and problem areas. As a result, the CA approach resulted in improved performance. It was evident from the results that CA strategies attract the attention of the EFL students and motivate them to focus more because they expect to be evaluated every now and then.

#### 4.2 Discussion of Research Findings

The following conclusions emerged on the relationship between different continuous assessment strategies and students' academic performance.

Based on the data from Figure 1 to 6, it was observed that students' feedback regarding the CA approach was in accordance with their EFL teachers. Due to CA strategies, the students were well acquainted with the skills and knowledge of question and answer techniques. The regular use of CA approach enabled the students to focus more on their studies, so they dedicated most of their time in revision. Students also stated that due to the use of continuous assessment strategies, their examination fears and anxiety decreased to a great extent. This also resulted in a greater level of communication with the teachers. From the data, it can be stated that different types of continuous assessment strategies were being used in Jubail and Mustaqbal College that included written tests, take-home assignments and presentations. The EFL faculty and the Saudi EFL students at both the universities were of the opinion that continuous assessment strategies had a significant impact on the academic performance of the students.

### 5. Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey conducted at both Jubail and Mustaqbal University, it was concluded that continuous assessment approach had a significant impact on the academic performance of Saudi EFL students. The findings reveal that different types of continuous assessment strategies were employed by the EFL teachers

that included written test, take-home assignment and presentations. Due to the fact that CA approach enables the faculty to notice their own problem areas related to teaching as well as those of their students, it leads to improved performance. A balanced and regular implementation of different continuous assessment strategies results in the attainment of learning outcomes. Furthermore, CA approach improves the confidence level of the students resulting in their enhanced performance.

### 5.1 Recommendations

- As revealed from the survey results, continuous assessment approach is effective for the EFL students at Mustaqbal and Jubail University; therefore, it is recommended that EFL faculty members at both Jubail and Mustaqbal University should be provided training and guidance on the effective use of continuous assessments.
- In order to achieve the learning outcomes and enhance the academic performance of Saudi EFL college students, the EFL teachers at both Jubail and Mustaqbal University should use tests, assignments, presentations and other collaborative tasks which are more useful in terms of daily use.
- In order to implement the continuous assessment approach on a regular basis, the teaching load of EFL faculty at Jubail and Mustaqbal University should be balanced.
- In order to enhance the academic performance of EFL students at both Jubail and Mustaqbal University, the EFL faculty should provide students with fruitful feedback.

### Acknowledgements

The researchers are grateful to Mustaqbal University and Jubail University College, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, for the fulfillment of this research study due to their scientific collaboration.

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## Appendix A

Table 1. Teachers' questionnaire on the effect of continuous assessment strategies on students' performance at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

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Statements
1. CA builds the mindset of the student.
2. CA improves teaching and learning process resulting in better performance.
3. CA helps to recognize the weak students and to suggest remedial measures.
6. Students who do well in CA generally perform well in final examinations.
7. Due to CA, students generally pay more attention in class.
8. Due to CA, students become more confident and ready for the final exam.

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\* CA Continuous Assessment

Table 2. Students' questionnaire on the effect of continuous assessment strategies on their performance at Mustaqbal and Jubail University

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Statements
1. CA allows me to review material from time to time.
2. CA prepares me for the final exam.
3. The immediate feedback of the teacher during CA improves the learning process.
4. CA improves my level of understanding.
5. CA enables me to learn answering strategies and question approach methods related to the final exam.
6. CA enables me to take better notes
7. Due to CA assessment, I pay more attention in class.
8. CA assessment enables me to interact with the teachers particularly while doing corrections.
As an EFL student, how does continuous assessment contribute to your performance in final?

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