



Exploration of Omani Cycle 1 English Teachers' Continuous Assessment Practices and Perceptions

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This article presents the findings from a qualitative exploratory study conducted in Oman that sought to uncover the factors leading to the identified gap between the SAH CA assessment standards and current grades 1 and 2 teachers' practices. The research investigated Omani grade 1 and 2 English teachers' practices and perceptions regarding the implementation of continuous assessment (CA) in teaching English as a foreign language.

Study Design: A constructivist grounded theory method investigation was conducted to examine the influence of teachers' beliefs, previous experience and contextual factors on their CA classroom practices and to discover the relationship between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices leading to the gap between CA standards and their practices. Three instruments were used namely classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and artifact analysis. Six teachers from Al Dhahirah were observed and three teachers out of the six were interviewed to seek an in-depth understanding of their beliefs. A three-stage coding process and the constant comparative method were used to analyze the data and triangulate beliefs and practices.

Results: Even though results demonstrated that teachers believed in the importance of CA and expressed positive beliefs towards CA, the analysis showed a gap between the teachers' actual practices and their stated beliefs regarding CA implementation in their practices. Moreover, findings highlighted the influence of the teachers' previous experience and impeding contextual factors on the teachers' CA practices.

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Recommendations: Therefore, it is recommended to involve teachers in consistent in-service training as well as CA discussion sessions to support CA practices directing the teachers' attention to the bright side of the assessment, its advantages, and its importance in the teaching learning process. Providing teachers with assistant teachers may help to alleviate overcrowded classes and heavy timetables. In addition, reducing the number of textbooks in the syllabus would provide more time for assessment in daily teaching.

Keywords: Continuous assessment; teachers' perceptions; practices; TESOL.

1. INTRODUCTION

Lately, the types and quality of assessment that teachers implement in their daily instructions is increasingly under scrutiny because the teachers' assessment practices can influence their students' achievement of course learning outcomes through promoting productive student learning processes [1]. According to Gashow [2], continuous assessment (CA) is fully integrated in the instructional process and practiced daily to inform instructors about the teaching and learning process. CA enables instructors to monitor their learners' progress and to evaluate their learners' performance. Additionally, CA is defined as "a vehicle for improving students' learning through remedial assistance" (Mulu, 2005, p. 3). In this vein, continuous assessment encompasses a summative and a formative dimension. The summative dimension referred to as *assessment of learning* is defined by Wiliam [3] as "evaluating the effectiveness of sequences of instructional activities when the sequence was completed as well as assessment as part of for learning" (p.3). The formative dimension defines "assessment as learning" whereas learning is an outcome of the assessment process, and "assessment for learning" whereby assessment inform the teachers and the students about their individual learning needs for a better personalization and adapattion of course delivery and instruction. Additionally, the latter definition encompasses personalized learning in view of "activating students as owners of their own learning" (p. 12) where teachers promote students' involvement in the learning process towards learner-led learning and autonomy.

In Oman, assessment practices in the previous educational system were associated with formal exams; particularly high stakes, promotion, and end-of-terms exams [4]. Al Toubi [5] attributed the poor achievement of Omani learners in English to the exam-based system, which influenced learners to learn the language for the sake of marks. Therefore, the Ministry of Education (MOE), introduced CA as a response

to the shortcomings of the previous assessment system. The MOE introduced CA as a part of its educational reform program in 2004/2005 and changed CA weighting in 2011/2012. The focus of CA is twofold. With CA, the ministry aims to improve the teaching and learning process as well as to measure students' learning [6]. The Omani school education has three fundamental levels. Cycle One (Grades 1 to 4) covers students aged 6 to 10. Cycle Two (Grades 5 to 10) covers students aged 11 to 16 while Post-Basic (Grades 11 and 12) covers students aged 17 to 18. In the new assessment system, in cycle 1, Grades 1 and 2 are solely assessed using CA. The Ministry of Education (MOE) provides guidelines on CA procedures for all grades in a document named Student Assessment Handbook (SAH). The SAH contains the learning outcomes and the percentage of marks allotted for each skill, tools for gathering assessment information, suggested timeframe to complete different stages of continuous assessment, informal records, formal records, and official format of record sheets know as Summary of Marks Awarded (SMA) and tabulation of corresponding letter-grades for awarded marks. Each skill is awarded marks according to a five-level-of-performance model which has been assigned a rating scale.

1.1 Gap between CA Guidelines and Practices in Grades 1 and 2

In CA, the primary aim is not awarding marks but helping students to learn with enhanced efficiency. CA implementation provides teachers and learners with opportunities to "harness assessment in the service of learning, using assessment data formatively to guide teaching and learning processes" (Green, 2018, p. 10) However, as a Senior English Teacher (SET), I noted during my supervisory visits that grade 1 and 2 teachers had different practices regarding the implementation of CA. I noticed teachers lacked focused attention regarding the formative assessment processes and applied summative purposes for marking techniques. Furthermore, I

found that some of the teachers used class tests for the purpose of assessing Grade 1 and 2 students which is not allowed according to the CA guidelines from the ministry. In cycle 1, according to the SAH, grades 1 and 2 are exclusively assessed using the CA system. Hence, there should be no class tests for grade 1 and 2.

1.2 Novelty of the Research

This research posits that the teachers' not following CA guidelines pertaining to the usage of different techniques to assess the learners' progress may change the formative purpose of implementing CA. Similarly, not using the national rating scales may result in grade variation at the end of the academic year since students of similar level and ability may be awarded different grades based on their teachers' assessment practices thus, impeding nationwide level benchmarking. As such, a need arose to uncover the underlying reasons that have led to such problems in the Omani context despite the government's efforts. The current study stems from the need to investigate the identified gap between the SAH CA assessment standards and current grades 1 and 2 teachers' practices. The novelty of this exploratory qualitative study resides in being the first research conducted in Oman delving specifically into the teachers' perceptions of CA with the aim of uncovering the sources of discrepancies between their CA beliefs and practices [7]. Teachers' beliefs and practices of CA were investigated along the contextual dimension, teachers' knowledge and career dimension, the learning dimension, and the instructional dimension [8]. To this aim, the objectives were threefold. The researchers sought, first to explore teachers' course delivery and assessment practices, second, to understand the factors shaping the teachers' beliefs of CA, and third, to unveil the relationship between the teachers' practices and perceptions of continuous assessment causing the gap between the teachers' CA practices and the CA SAH assessment guidelines.

Need to explore CA teachers' beliefs in relation to their practices.

Beliefs guide teachers' classroom practice as well as teachers' interpretation of their practices [9]. Individuals form their beliefs based on their personal experience and interpretation of events. Subsequently those beliefs are transformed into

attitudes and then into decisions that lead to actions [10]. Therefore, teachers' beliefs may influence the way teachers "perceive, design and implement" assessment in their classroom [11]. According to Al Sawafi [12], teachers' beliefs are assumptions guiding teachers' decision-making and teaching approaches. Teachers construct their beliefs about learners, subjects and the teaching and learning processes. Those beliefs impact teachers' practices when planning lessons, designing tasks and assessing learners' progress [13].

Many researchers explored the relationship between the teachers' beliefs and assessment practices. Ogan-Bekiroglu [14] investigated attitude and competence from the perspective of 46 Turkish teachers, who completed an educational assessment course, using a parallel mixed-method approach. Findings showed that despite the constructivist view that teachers held and their competence in educational assessment; teachers encountered challenges related to their assessment practices. Consequently, Ogan-Bekiroglu recommended taking into consideration the teachers' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes before introducing reforms in the educational and assessment systems. Lyon [15] conducted a case study exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs about educational assessment and their classroom assessment practices. Findings from classroom observations and reflective journals revealed that teachers who held constructivist and sociocultural views of learning tended to focus on alternative assessment strategies. However, Lyon stressed that contextual factors such as teaching load and other school responsibilities could cause inconsistency between the teachers' assessment perceptions and their practices. Lyon reported that teachers may have inadequate time to implement the assessment procedures that relate to their beliefs about assessment. Green [1] stressed that teachers, administrators, parents "tend to base their understanding of assessment on their past experiences. They conceive of it primarily as a tool for grading and ranking and find it difficult to adjust to thinking of it primarily as a means of driving learning" (p.14).

2. METHOD

A constructivist grounded theory method was adopted to investigate the Omani English language teachers' practices of CA to uncover the relationship between practices and teachers'

beliefs and perceptions of CA. The rationale for choosing a constructivist grounded theory approach is in relation to the active role of the researcher, whereby the researcher makes decisions about the research categories throughout the study [16].

2.1 Participants

Six Omani grade 1 and 2 English teachers from AL Dhahirah Governorate participated in this study over six months (See Table 1). In the observation stage, the purposive sampling resulted in the selection of six teachers identified based on their career profile and experience with various assessment systems. The purposive sampling selection yielded three EFL career profiles which could inform the researcher on the shaping of beliefs through qualifications, training, experience, and practice [17]. The first profile consisted of two teachers, who had been exposed to the previous assessment system that depended on awarding marks through summative classroom tests and to the current CA system, in which marks are awarded by converting the information gathered through formative assessment into marks on a rating scale. The second profile involved two teachers, who taught grade 1 and 2 students at the time of the study and had previously taught cycle 2 or post-Basic cycles that combined both summative assessment and CA assessment. The third profile consisted of two English teachers, who were solely involved in teaching cycle 1 students with the current formative CA system.

Three teachers, one from each profile were selected for interviews based on findings from the observation stage. Interviews were conducted to clarify the teachers' perceptions of CA in relation to their observed classroom practices about the use of CA techniques collected through observation and artifacts.

2.2 Data Collection

2.2.1 Observations

Data that concerned the implementation of the different assessment techniques of CA were collected through observations of classroom practices. Six teachers were involved at this stage. The observation protocol incorporated CA concepts from Al Sawafi [12] as well as the SAH's guidelines. The observation grid included timing and duration of the lesson, the number of students, and four CA categories namely lesson plans, feedback, the role of the teacher and CA techniques used. Duration, timing, and the number of students provided an understanding of the possibility for these factors to influence teachers' implementation of CA. In addition, a free space enabled the observer to note unanticipated events and facts that may occur in the classroom and influence the implementation of CA. Two round of observations ensured that richer data would be obtained, thus reflecting the teachers' actual classroom practices.

Table 1. Teachers' background information

Pseudonym	Experience	Qualification	Position	CA training
Grade 1 and 2 teachers exposed to both assessment systems				
Ammera	23 years	BA	Senior teacher	One day workshop
Amal	14 years	BA	Teacher	Workshop from senior teacher
Previously teaching in cycle 2, teaching Grade 1 and 2 at the time of the research,				
Dana	11 years	BA		Feedback from senior teacher
Layan	8 years	BA		Workshop from senior teacher
Amal	14 years	BA		Workshop from senior teacher
Grade 1 and 2 teachers exposed solely to CA system				
Shama	9 years	BA		Workshop from senior teacher
Sara	12 years	BA		Yearly workshop from senior teacher

2.2.2 Semi-structured interviews

To understand the teachers' beliefs and their relationship to assessment practices, semi-structured interviews were conducted with three teachers out of the six. Interviews enabled to recall the observed sequence and focused on eliciting clarification about different actions performed by the teachers [18] to delve into the inferences made about the teachers' perceptions of CA. Interviewing the teachers enabled to investigate in-depth the matching of the teachers' beliefs with their classroom practices. Through interviewing, a collection of assessment documents, such as teachers' lesson plans, CA markings registers and teachers' informal records were discussed. These documents provided an insight into the participants' beliefs. During the interviews, teachers contributed their thoughts and beliefs and explained their choice of assessment techniques and their decision-making in their assessment practices. As such, interviews provided in-depth information about the factors that influenced teachers' implementation of CA.

2.2.3 Artifacts

Artifacts were useful in triangulating, the data collected from observations and interviews to generate a comprehensive picture about the teachers' perceptions of CA. Artifacts consisted of teachers' portfolios, lesson plans, marking registers, informal records, remedial plans and classroom assessment of activities and tasks. Informal records are part of the CA tools suggested in the SAH to follow students' progress. In their informal records, teachers identify students' areas of weakness and strength, make notes of their actions to improve their students' learning and their instructional methods. Teachers design their own informal record forms based on their decisions. Thus, exploring informal records provided insight into the teachers' CA beliefs. The analysis of these records informed about whether there was a focus on marks, on written feedback or both. According to Atai et al. [17], since "teacher role identities are actualized through a number of activities and conditions teachers use/create in their teaching practices, it is reasonable to explore the activities and conditions they identify as essential for fulfilling each role identity." (p. 99). In addition, since there is a certain amount of freedom in designing the assessment forms and tasks, examining artifacts enriched this study, penetrating in-depth into the teachers'

conceptions of their lessons, assessments, perceived results, and reflections.

2.3 Data Analysis

In accordance with the analytical procedures of grounded theory, inductive coding was used to analyze the data. According to Charmaz [19], coding refers to the process of "naming segments of data with a label that simultaneously categorizes, summarizes, and accounts for each piece of data" (p. 43). In grounded theory, the data collection and analytical processes are conducted concomitantly to ensure a constant comparative method of analysis. Thus, initial coding began from transcribing the data gathered through observation, interviews, and artifacts. In this research, three coding stages were undertaken.

2.3.1 Three coding stages

The first stage consisted of a close reading of the data for the purpose of categorizing each emerging fragment of data into initial codes based on the preliminary concepts that arose from the conceptual frameworks and the SAH items. Therefore, initial codes such as CA objectives, lesson planning, self-assessment, peer-assessment, timing of feedback, types of feedback, large classes, tests, quizzes, assessment tools and teachers' roles were identified. The second stage involved sorting initial codes, synthesizing, integrating, and organizing the data into categories. In this stage, the data was conceptualized. For example, codes for concepts such as the timing of feedback, the types of feedback and the characteristics of feedback were grouped under one theme entitled 'feedback', which was one of the categories under the teachers' practice category. The third stage, entitled theoretical coding, involved the constant comparative method of analysis and triangulation procedures. A comparison was made between data, codes, and categories within and across data sets and between multiple instruments to identify similarities and differences and consequently form a conceptual understanding. A comparison was carried out between the participants' statements within the same interview and throughout the interviews conducted with the other participants [19].

2.4 Quality Assurance

The triangulation process ensured trustworthiness. Three instruments were used to

collect data. Triangulation enabled the researcher to understand the problem and develop a viable working model [20]. Denzin [21] suggested that “by combining multiple observers, theories, methods, and data sources, researchers can hope to overcome the intrinsic bias that comes from single-method, observer, and single-theory studies” (p. 307). The credibility of the interpretations was enhanced by audio-recording the interviews, and the trustworthiness of the findings was asserted through consulting participants regarding the researcher’s interpretations of events. Therefore, the participants were actively associated with the data collection and analysis in a member reflection process. Hearing the participants’ perspectives on their beliefs, actions, intentions, and practice of CA generated multiple perspectives and interpretations of the data. Member reflections enhanced the participants’ voices in the study, limiting the researcher’s bias and thus ensuring the ensuing that the working model remained grounded in the data.

3. RESULTS

This section first presents the results from the 3-stage coding analysis triangulating findings from the teachers’ CA practices and beliefs which revealed salient congruent and incongruent patterns in the teachers’ CA practices and CA beliefs, as well emerging impeding factors responsible for the discrepancies between their CA assessment practices and MOE SAH CA

standards. Subsequently, answers to the research objectives are provided beginning with addressing findings related to teachers’ CA practices, then delving into the findings revealing the teachers’ beliefs of CA, and finally concluding with the emerging teachers’ challenges and impeding factors leading to the gap between their CA practices and CA national standards.

3.1 Results from the 3-Coding Stage Analysis

The analysis was conducted using the constant comparative method. Once categories were emerging from the initial coding, I read across all documents for two purposes: the first purpose was to analyze each teacher’s data to create a comprehensive picture of each teacher’s practices and perceptions, and to determine the congruence between them by triangulating the data gathered through observation and artifacts with the data gathered through interviews. The second purpose was to search for similarities, differences or connections between the participants’ actual practices and their beliefs about CA [12]. Fig. 1 shows the results of the focused coding, illustrating the categories and related themes. The focused coding stage yielded three categories: teachers’ practices, teachers’ beliefs and the challenges teachers faced while implementing CA. Three themes of CA challenges emerged from the data analysis: time, large classes, and heavy curriculum.

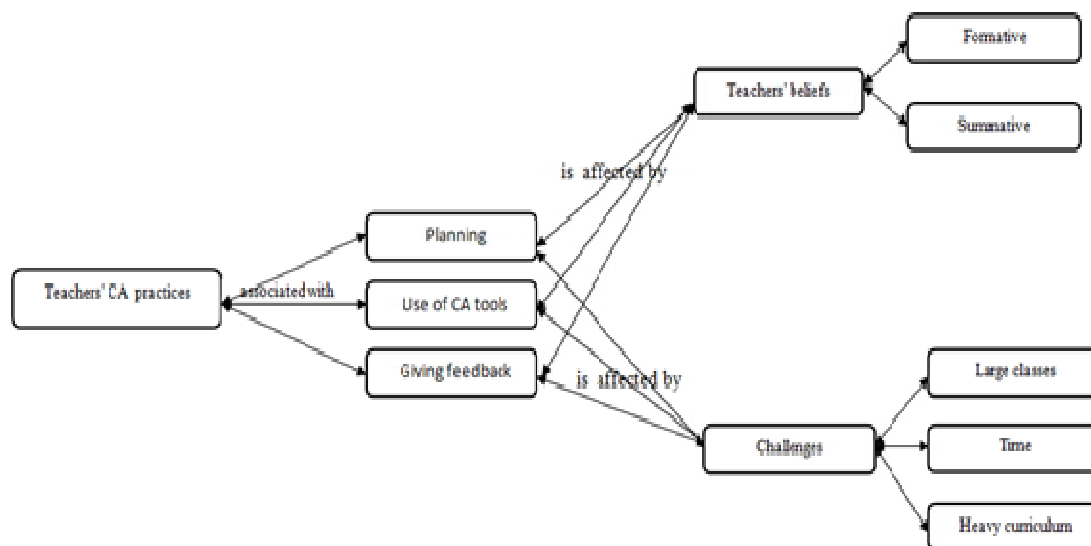


Fig. 1. Categories and themes derived from the focused coding stage

3.2 Teachers' Practices

As illustrated in Fig. 2, the first category concerned teachers' practices of CA, which was divided into three themes, based on the data gathered through interviews, observations, and artifacts: planning, the use of CA tools and records, and feedback. Fig. 2 illustrates the themes and sub-themes derived from the teachers' practice's category.

3.2.1 Planning

Examining the lesson plans, I noticed that the teachers did not take CA into consideration when planning their lessons. No objectives or notes were written in the learning outcomes section about assessment. In the participants' preparation books, similar comments appeared in the column entitled assessment and evaluation (areas and tools): "individuals", "group work", "pair work" and "the entire class". The teachers' notes in the assessment column did not reflect their plan for assessing individual students and a group of students, but mainly reflected students' involvement in answering the different instructional tasks. Shama disclosed that she could not plan CA daily because "it takes me two weeks to assess a group of students because I have more than 30 students in each class, which is a big number. I just choose five students each time to assess reading skill. For spelling, it is continuous, because I have their notebooks, but for other skills, I assess only five to six students each time." Shama shared that when preparing her lessons, she planned to assess these

students. Shama further explained how she planned her students' assessment based on their levels.

« First, I choose the higher-level students in the first week. Then, for the next week, I choose the average and then the low-level students to give them more time to practice.»

In post-lesson discussion targeting to delve into the teachers' perspectives about the purpose of monitoring student work and observing certain individuals in CA, Shama explained that "To check their participation and involvement in the lesson, I have a list of students' names and I put a tick next to the students who participate. Then, I take the average of their participation. For example, if they have ten ticks out of 12, the average will be excellent. Ticks show me that those students participated in the class and had achieved the lesson objectives. So, I award them marks based on that."

The teachers' close observation of students' engagement while performing a task for the purpose of gathering CA information is one of the requirements of the SAH. However, there was no evidence to indicate that the teachers made use of such information, as the teachers neither planned to assess certain students nor did they take notes about students' progress. It seems that the teachers' purpose in monitoring the groups was more focused on checking whether the students had understood their instructions and were performing the task correctly.

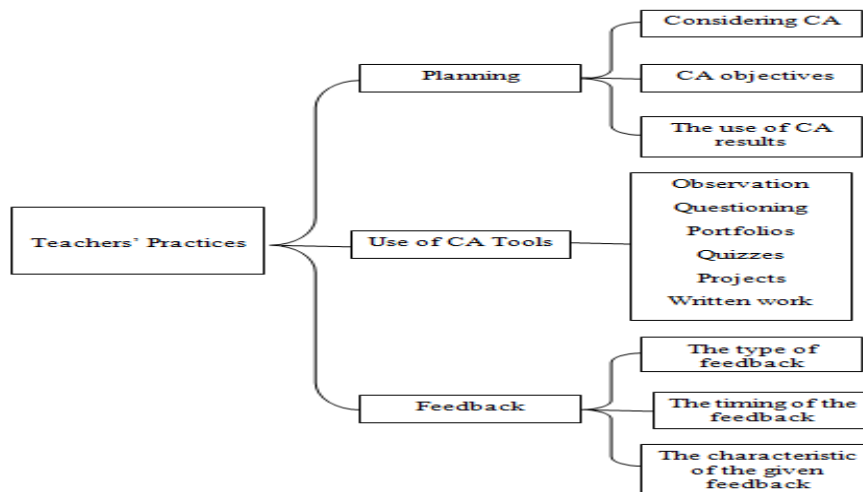


Fig. 2. Teachers' practices

3.2.2 Use of CA tools and records

The findings demonstrated that the teachers relied more on questioning, observation, tests and quizzes as tools to gather CA information and did not use portfolios, projects or written work, which is contradictory to the SAH guidelines. Puhl [22] stated that limiting CA to questioning, quizzes and exams is insufficient and that other tools should be considered to achieve the effective implementation of CA. Similarly, Freedman (1998) indicated that CA must include various assessment tools rather than solely relying on exams and tests. For instance, presentations, project work, interviews, observations, and oral questions can be used to improve the validity of the teachers' decisions [1].

However, despite their awareness of the different tools required in the guidelines, the teachers opted to use the tools that they believed to be most effective for their students. The teachers relied on tests and quizzes to award marks rather than continuously assessing their students using CA tools. The teachers' decisions were due to their beliefs and to their perception of what was feasible for them to do and what was not. For example, Amal stated that she "decided not to use the rating scales because she believed that they were above her students' level". Similarly, Layan confided that she "disregarded the rating scales and used her own assessment criteria, which she believed to be more suitable for herself and her students". Ajzen [23] examined the gap between teachers' attitudes and their behavior and reported that the reason behind teachers' lack of commitment in implementing new practices could be because teachers tend to

do what they believe is possible for them, which consequently shapes their classroom practice.

However, it is worth mentioning that the practices of teachers who had only experienced the CA system, Shama and Sara were different from those of the four other teachers. Those two teachers explained that they only used observation and questioning to assess their students. They emphasized that they did not use tests or quizzes to award CA marks. Their avoidance of tests might be because they did not experience the previous assessment system and had not taught grades with different CA weightings simultaneously. Therefore, their beliefs and practices emerged as shaped and anchored in their CA training and experience. This emphasizes the contribution of past experiences to the formation of their attitudes and beliefs about CA implementation. The teachers caught in between two systems perceived and practiced CA differently. The fact that CA was not included in the previous assessment system explains their disbelief and their reluctance to implement CA. On the other hand, the teachers assigned concomitantly to grade 1- 2 and to grade 3-4 were immersed into both systems. For these teachers, the different weighting systems in cycle 2 schools between grades 1 to 2 and grades 3 to 4 could be considered a confusing factor that may influence the teachers' beliefs about CA approaches, therefore shaping their CA classroom practices. Similarly, Chen [24] reported that the different weightings for CA implemented in two universities influenced the teachers' responses to change. Fig. 3 illustrates the factors that adversely affect teachers' use of CA tools and records.

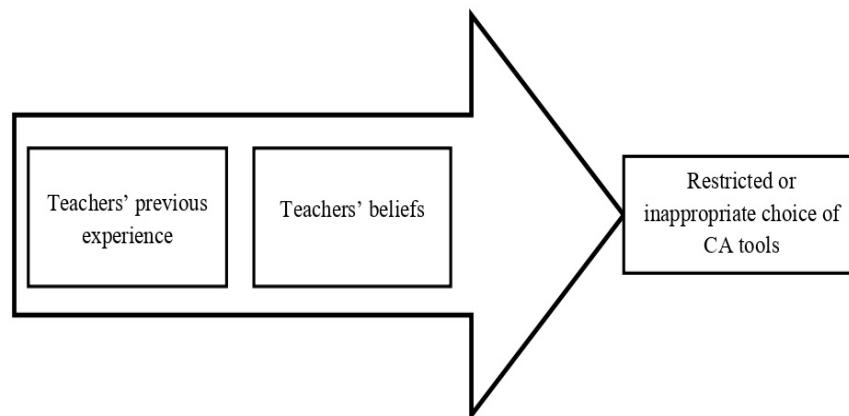


Fig. 3. CA impeding factors

3.2.3 Feedback

According to the guidelines, teachers are required to vary their feedback strategies based on their evaluation of the effectiveness of those strategies with the students. The guidelines recommend that teachers' feedback should be "inclusive", "selective", "knowledgeable", "clear", "specific", "interactive" and "supportive" [6]. The constant comparative method of analysis revealed that the teachers' awareness of the importance of providing feedback was congruent with their classroom practice and use of feedback. The findings highlighted that the teachers delivered feedback in ways that reflected their beliefs. The teachers adopted oral and immediate feedback because they believed that it was suitable and therefore useful for cycle 1 students' nature and level.

"I prefer to give immediate feedback because if I use delayed feedback, the wrong answer will stick in the students' minds, and I won't be able to change it. So, I think immediate feedback is more suitable for kids." Amal

Teachers gave feedback when students made mistakes or demonstrated their misunderstanding.

"I always give feedback because students have to know their mistakes. If they do not, they will make mistakes every day. They are in cycle one. They need to know the right and wrong answers." Shama

Teachers' feedback was in the form of providing the correct answer which is congruent with Chen and Liu [18] who reported the teachers' concerns related to accuracy and form awareness at the

early stages of language learning. Due to their beliefs, teachers ignored the characteristics of the feedback stated in the SAH guidelines. Thus, the teachers' feedback was not selective, inclusive, formative, or interactive. These findings are consistent with those of Gashaw [2], who found that although teachers used feedback in their classrooms, they did not provide students with enough and comprehensive feedback that could improve their learning autonomy.

3.3 Teachers' Beliefs

The second category was divided into two themes, based on the data gathered through interviews, observations, and artifacts: formative assessment and summative assessment, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

3.3.1 Formative assessment

Throughout the 12 lessons, the teachers used a variety of strategies, techniques, and materials to deliver the instruction and help students to achieve learning outcomes. They used a multi-sensory approach in which they targeted the auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learners. They used realia, technology, and games. Therefore, I asked the teachers whether they used the CA results to make decisions and to differentiate their instruction. The teachers' comments indicated their awareness of the guidelines' instructions in which teachers needed to adapt their lessons based on CA results. They stated that they changed their teaching strategies and techniques according to CA results, leading them to adapt their lessons to enable students to achieve the instructional outcomes.

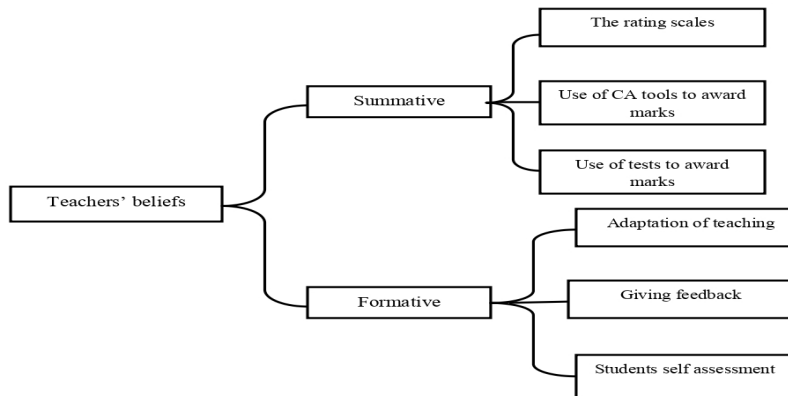


Fig. 4. Teacher's beliefs categories

"I will try to adapt my lesson. I will use appropriate activities for [the students'] abilities to give them a chance to achieve the objective. Sometimes it helps me to change my decision about the class or about how to assess the students" Amal.

However, through observation, I did not notice that the teachers changed the steps of their lessons to adapt to unexpected circumstances in the classroom. For example, delays in starting the lessons occurred in most observation sessions that I attended due to the schools' preparations for the National Day celebrations. The lesson duration was 30 minutes instead of 40 minutes. However, the teachers did not adapt their lesson plans accordingly, but taught their lessons as they had planned. Furthermore, analyzing the teachers' preparation book revealed no evidence of previous CA results having led to a change of strategies and techniques.

Subsequently, I investigated how the teachers used CA to identify low, average, and high achievers among their students, and how they used the information gathered to provide appropriate follow-up on the students' progress. In post-lesson discussions, all six of the teachers commented that they had not written remedial nor enrichment plans. None of the teachers mentioned preparing remedial plans for low achievers, nor did they consider doing so in future planning, except for one teacher, who shared her CA strategy in which she delayed assessing low achievers to give them more time to practice. Similarly, none of the teachers had considered options for outstanding students. Some of the teachers explained that they did not write remedial, or enrichment plans because they provided all students with supplementary activities in their notebooks. However, an analysis of the notebooks demonstrated that the teachers gave all students the same activities to practice the learned objectives without considering their levels. Regarding facilitation of students' learning, observations revealed that the teachers did not implement self-assessment to give the students a chance to reflect either on strategies or topics. However, the teachers used peer-assessment to support their students' learning.

3.3.2 Summative assessment

To assure fair, consistent, and professional judgments in assessment, the MOE provides

teachers with a rating scale, a measurement instrument with "a set of marks with regular intervals between them" [6] to assess overall achievement and task performance based on the learning outcomes. As previously stated, assessment in grades 1 and 2 is based solely on CA. The summative purpose of CA is the basis for awarding grade 1 and 2 students with marks and grades. Although teachers showed their awareness of the SAH guidelines and of the rating scales, they clearly stated that they did not use the rating scales to assess their students.

Teachers claimed that the scales were inappropriate and above their students' levels. In addition, teachers resorted to using tests, which according to their beliefs, enabled them to assess every student, particularly those who did not participate in class discussion and activities. These comments demonstrated that teachers depended on tests to identify her students' levels of achievement instead of using CA tools to gather information. Although teachers are required by the MOE to use tools such as portfolios, projects, written work and classroom interactions, teachers relied on using tests to assess their students' levels.

Moreover, Amal, Dana, Layan, and Ameera reported that they combined marks that had been awarded for tests and quizzes with marks awarded for students' participation when assessing their students.

"I actually have a sheet on which I take notes on students' work regarding their participation, tests and quizzes. Then, I award marks by taking the average of tests, quizzes, and participation." Layan

The teachers demonstrated their awareness of the importance of using both summative and formative assessment. Layan explained that she always faced problems at the end of the year because she had a large amount of information about her students, whether in written form or from her observations. However, she stated that she could not use the information to award students with the marks that they deserved. In the subsequent interviews, I asked the teachers about their preferred type of assessment.

« I like both formative and summative because formative gives a clear idea about students' levels during the class. You can notice them, how they can answer questions, how they speak, how they listen and write the correct answers

and whether they able to read or not. You can notice all these things during the class. Summative is also a good idea to check the shy and lazy students' levels." Amal

However, all teachers perceived that using tests allowed them to assess all students, and so they used tests as a summative tool to award students with marks, thus neglecting the rating scales.

"I use summative assessment to motivate students to study more and quizzes are suitable for their level." Layan

Their reliance on tests as concrete evidence of students' progress to show stakeholders might be one of the reasons behind the teachers' insistence on using tests to award marks. Parents were more easily convinced when presented with test results, a challenge to the implementation of formative assessment reported in Green [1].

Teachers' previous experience can be a reason behind their attitudes towards implementing CA properly. Al Sawafi [12] reported that the more "experienced teachers showed less commitment to CA implementation" and CA reform (p.213). Two teachers admitted not using tests or quizzes to award marks. Both teachers, Shama and Sara were from the same participant profile which had only experienced assessing students using CA. Conversely, one of the teachers perceived formative assessment to be more accurate than summative assessment, due to the long-term assessment process. They advocated formative assessment; however, their practices did not demonstrate a systematic, accurate implementation of CA in the classrooms.

The second reason for the teachers' differences in following the SAH guidelines might be related to their lack of training. Teachers must be supported to be able to cope within any new system. Al Sawafi [12] stated that teachers need to be "equipped with the knowledge, skills, and competencies that help them to deal with the new strategies and procedures of the system" (p. 208). None of the teachers had received training in the use of CA, except for one teacher, a senior teacher who had joined a one-day assessment training workshop. As a senior teacher, she had to cascade the training workshops to other teachers in her schools. Similarly, all the teachers confirmed that that their senior teachers had provided them with comments and

workshops on the use of assessment. Training teachers to use CA would be very useful, as it would enable the teachers to successfully implement CA in their classrooms. Al Sawafi indicated that "the training of teachers regarding the implementation of innovation should start at the pre-implementation stage and continue during the actual implementation process of the innovation" (p. 208). Green [1] suggested integrating assessment "into teacher training programs so that teachers have better models for practice than those they experienced" (p. 15). The six Omani teachers would have benefited from being trained on note taking procedures, managing their instructions, finding opportunities for both formative and summative assessment and using the rating scales to award students with marks. Depending only on SETs to deliver training on such core elements of the teachers' work seems illogical, as SETs may have different beliefs, attitudes, and understandings about the training that they received, which could affect the way that the information is cascaded. Therefore, the trickling down of information results in inadequate training, and this strategy thus defeats the purpose of the implementation of CA in cycle 1 schools. The Assessment Reform Group (2008), as cited in Al Sawafi [12], attributed teachers' low level of commitment in implementing CA in their classrooms to 'the failure of the cascade program to reach the end users and to consider the contextual factors surrounding the actual practice' (p. 210).

3.4 CA Challenges and Impeding Factors

As illustrated in Figure 1, the third category that emerged from the data analysis was the challenges that may hinder the implementation of CA. The CA challenges were divided into three themes: large classes, time, and heavy curriculum. Observations determined that although the teachers believed in the importance of CA and demonstrated their awareness of the SAH guidelines provided by the MOE, the teachers' practices reflected the impracticality of implementing CA in assessing grade 1 and 2 students, perhaps related to their teaching contexts. While conducting observations, I noticed that there were between 30 to 33 students per class, except for one class which had 25 students. All the participating teachers considered the large number of students in mixed ability classes to be an obstacle that prevented them from continuously gathering information. This concurs with Gashaw [2], who indicated that large class size is a major factor

that can affect the implementation of CA. In the present study, inadequate time allocation was the second challenge that the teachers faced when implementing CA. Teachers reported that they did not have enough time to assess their students because of the large number of students. CA requires teachers to take notes on students' progress, consider opportunities for formative and summative assessment, and care for poorly performing and outstanding students by adapting their instruction. However, schools' circumstances differ. The participating teachers' statements concurred about the nearly impossible challenge of continuously assessing many students according to the SAH guidelines in the allocated time. This is congruent with Gashaw [2], who reported that the shortage of time was one of the problems that teachers and students might face when carrying out CA in the classroom.

The third challenge reported was the heavy curriculum. At the time of this study, the curriculum included three textbooks, the Class Book, and the Skills Book, each of which

comprised six units, in addition to a Jolly Phonics booklet. The teachers needed to assess their students' achievement of the learning outcomes for the three textbooks as well as to teach all textbooks units within the allocated time. Therefore, the teachers focused their attention on teaching the curriculum, helping their students to achieve the learning outcomes. Consequently, the teachers devoted less attention to the CA process. As a result, the teachers perceived that tests and quizzes could enable them to timely and fairly assess all students while providing assessment reports to all stakeholders which is congruent with Douglas [8].

4. DISCUSSION

Results revealed that there was a gap between teachers' actual CA classroom practices and their beliefs. Their classroom practices were shaped by their beliefs and other contextual factors; Fig. 5 illustrates the relationship between teachers' practices and their stated beliefs.

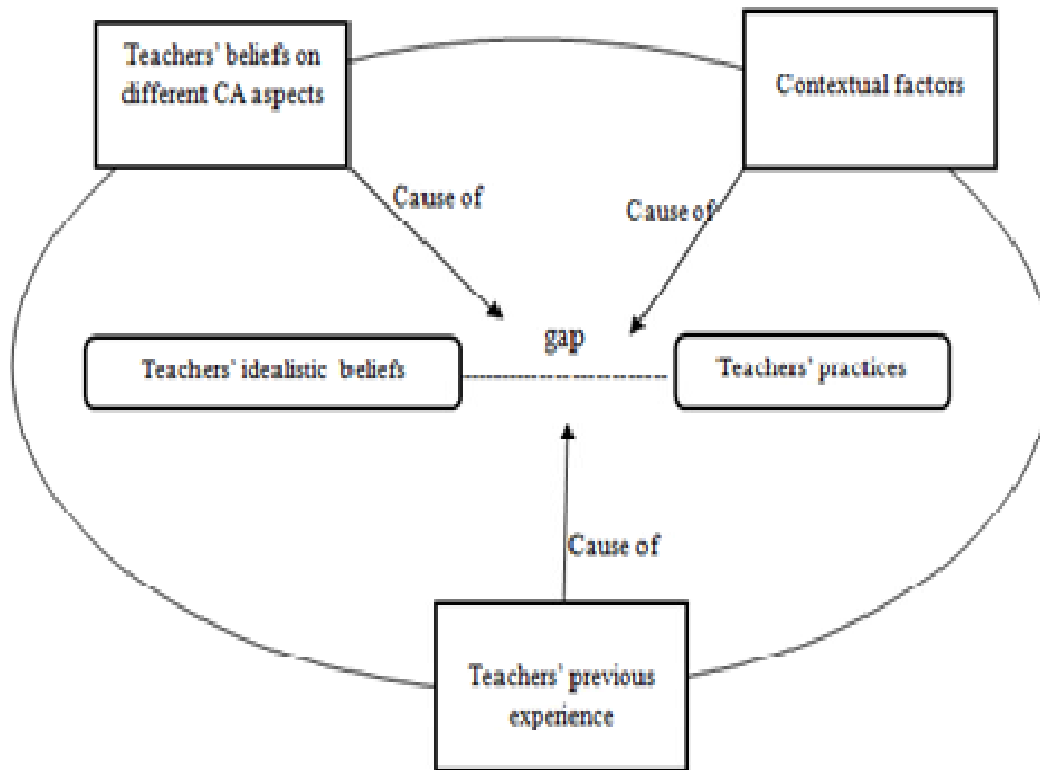


Fig. 5. Factors that caused the gap between teachers' practices and beliefs

4.1 Teachers' Implementation of CA in Their Classrooms

The analysis of the lesson plans showed that none of the participating teachers considered CA opportunities for assessing their student's progress in their lesson planning. No CA objectives were written in the lesson plans. The lesson plans focused on achieving the instructional learning outcomes in terms of course delivery rather than on assessing students' progress. The teachers used various techniques to achieve the instructional outcomes. However, the teachers used similar assessment tools to gather CA information, which were questioning, tests, quizzes, and observations. Although the teachers used classroom questioning and observation as tools to gather information, they did not maintain informal records of their students' progress, nor did they document their students' strengths and weaknesses. Therefore, there was a lack of transparency regarding how the teachers used the information gathered to award the final CA marks. Furthermore, the teachers did not perform systematic continuous gathering of information for the purpose of CA. In addition, the analysis of artefacts concurred with observations and interviews regarding task and project-based learning tools. None of the six teachers used portfolios, projects, or written work, which are recommended tools for gathering information. Most of the participants used tests and quizzes to award students with marks, which is against the SAH guidelines. Moreover, the guidelines state that to award marks, teachers are required to compare students' general level of achievement throughout the academic year with a rating scale provided by the MOE. However, the teachers neglected to use the rating scale as a basis for awarding marks.

About feedback, the use of immediate oral feedback was dominant among the participants. Generally, the feedback was given as correction of mistakes. Corrective feedback drew the learners' attention to grammar and pronunciation rules. Teachers gave corrective feedback to individuals, groups, and the entire class, depending on the learning situation in which the students were involved. The teachers avoided using written feedback, and their feedback was mostly limited to tick and grade-only information. All teachers used peer-assessment as a source of feedback. However, the teachers neglected to implement self-assessment among their students.

4.2 Teachers' Perceptions of CA in Their Classrooms

It is evident from the findings that most participating teachers believed in the effectiveness of CA. They stated that the use of CA was beneficial in giving teachers a clear idea about their students' strengths and weaknesses, enabling learners to identify areas of weakness through the feedback that they receive, and enabling teachers to differentiate instructions based on CA results. The participating teachers seemed to be aware of the CA principles and guidelines and the formative and summative purposes of CA. Moreover, the teachers were aware of the rating scales to award marks for CA summative purposes. However, the teachers believed that awarding students with marks based on the rating scales was unsuitable, and instead believed the use of tests and quizzes to be more accurate and logical. Teachers seem to have different beliefs regarding the implementation of CA. Pajares [25] described this state as having a tension between teachers' core beliefs and peripheral beliefs. Phipps and Borg defined core beliefs and peripheral beliefs as "Core beliefs are stable and exert a more powerful influence on behavior than peripheral beliefs" [12]. Phipps and Borg found that the teachers' core beliefs derived from well-established and stable experience; "whereas the beliefs which have not been firmly established in experience remain unimplemented ideals" (p.198). Therefore, the core beliefs are dominant and affect the other beliefs.

4.3 Relationships Between Practices and Perceptions of Continuous Assessment

Findings showed evidence of a gap between teachers' actual classroom practices and their perceptions about CA implementation. Although the teachers were aware of this situation and believed in the importance of CA in planning, of giving feedback and of using various tools to assure the accuracy of CA results, their actual practices did not match their beliefs. The teachers reported various factors that impeded their implementation of CA, such as large classes, inadequate time, and heavy curriculum, which consequently affected their practices.

Al Sawafi [12] in his study highlighted a range of contextual factors that might inhibit CA implementation such as large classes, overload of teaching, large number of slow learners in the

classrooms, overload of other school activities and inadequate facilities and materials. In addition, Andrews (2003) and Fullan (1985) reported some contextual factors that might influence teacher' beliefs and practices such as syllabus, textbooks, assessment system, pressure from peers, technical and administrative leaders [12]. Furthermore, beliefs affected some teachers' practices about certain issues of CA. For example, some teachers believed that tests were important as summative assessment tools and that marks awarded based on tests should be included in the assessment of grade 1 and 2 students. As a result, those teachers used tests to assess students and award marks. They felt that the use of rating scales to award students with marks was neither fair nor logical. Thus, they used their own judgmental criteria to award marks. Their beliefs and attitudes might have been influenced by their previous teaching experiences, in which both formative and summative assessment were combined. One of those teachers had experienced the previous assessment system and the other teacher had previously taught cycle 2, in which formative assessment and summative tests were combined. These teachers' previous experiences could have influenced their later assessment practices. This is consistent with findings from Al Sawafi [12], Basturkmen [26] and Dowrich [27] which showed that more experienced teachers are often more resistant to change in comparison to less experienced teachers.

5. CONCLUSION

Overall, the teachers perceived that good CA practice plays a vital role in improving teaching and learning. This clearly emerged from the investigation of their CA practices and their CA beliefs. With this belief, the teachers strive to practice CA according to SAH standards in their lessons. However, the findings highlighted the gap between the teachers' actual classroom assessment practices and their beliefs about CA. Although the teachers believed in the importance of considering CA in planning, of providing feedback and of using different CA tools, they demonstrated a low level of commitment in practices. The teachers did not conduct systematic gathering of information for the purpose of CA, nor did they consider opportunities for assessment in their lesson planning, nor did they use a variety of CA tools to assess students' progress. These findings pointed out that the reason behind teachers' insufficient commitment of the assessment

criteria is due to their belief of the unfeasibility to teach and gather information about their learners at the same time.

Another important finding revealed that teachers' previous experience had an influence on their classroom practices and their beliefs about CA implementation. Teachers who had formerly taught in cycle 2 schools in which the weighting of CA is only 40% or had experienced the previous assessment system demonstrated limited CA in practice tended to use class tests to assess their student's performance instead of CA tools. This finding supports the claim about the influence of the teachers' previous experience on their beliefs and their actual practices found in the literature. Hargreaves [12] stated that more experienced teachers face "difficulties accommodating change" (p. 213). In addition, the study found that there were other contextual factors that might have affected teachers' classroom practices, such as inadequate training, large classes, a shortage of time and a heavy curriculum. It is worth noting that the findings of this study are consistent with the findings of previous ones conducted in the Omani context by Al Sawafi [12] and Al Kindy [28]. Al Sawafi reported a gap between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices due to their peripheral beliefs and contextual factors such as extensive experience and cultural challenges.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, I recommend the following to improve the implementation of CA in the Omani context. First, teachers should be involved in consistent in-service training, in which teachers are provided with the necessary information to enable them to successfully implement CA in their classrooms and effectively connect teaching, learning and CA. This study findings revealed that most of the teachers have not received CA training. Therefore, the designers of the teacher training programs should organize training workshops and courses that target not only the senior teachers but also all English teachers in the schools. Second, I recommend organizing discussion sessions in which teachers are encouraged to discuss any barriers to implement CA successfully. Levin in her study [12] found that "discussions based around cases is valuable as they can lead to clearer, more elaborated understandings about the issues in the case studies and they provide a means for recognizing the need to change or articulate one's thinking (p.228)." Therefore,

during training teachers can be encouraged to examine their own practice and reflect upon the obstacles they may face. This may enable the teachers to think critically and find solutions to improve their own assessment practices. In addition, MOE can manage some contextual factors that can enable teachers to effectively implement CA. For example, MOE can reduce the number of students in the classroom and reorganize the busy timetable to support teachers in effectively implementing CA in their classrooms.

Third, stakeholders can support teachers about CA implementation by spreading positive ideas about assessment to change the teachers' attitudes towards CA. This can be done through different ways such as providing teachers with the necessary support that enable them to easily assess the learners and by continuously directing the teachers' attention to the bright side of the assessment, its advantages and its importance in the teaching learning process. Providing teachers with assistant teachers, who collaborate with the class teachers and take responsibilities of different jobs may help to alleviate the problem of overcrowding in the classes and timetables. In addition, it is preferable to reduce the amount of the teaching material that is used to comply with the syllabus that teachers are required to teach each semester. This will provide more time for assessment and enable teachers to include assessment in their daily teaching.

FUTURE RESEARCH

As this study only reflects the sample population from Al Dhahirah Governorate, I suggest the exploration of teachers' practices and beliefs about CA with a wider scope, involving teachers from other governorates. Exploring Omani teachers' practices and beliefs about CA in all the country's governorates would present a clear image of how successful the implementation of the CA system is in Omani schools. Consequently, it would provide stakeholders with the chance to reformulate the assessment system and its presentation to the teachers. In addition, since this study followed a qualitative research approach, the use of a mixed method approach in further research would provide more insights into teachers' beliefs and practices regarding CA.

CONSENT

The participants' rights were protected through informed consent and through safeguarding their

anonymity. The research received the Ministry of Education's permission to be conducted in the Al Dhahirah Governorate. Consent forms were sent to the participating school administrations. Grade 1 and 2 English teachers were individually informed about the rationale of this study. An information and consent form were distributed to each participant and their headmistresses. The consent form informed participants of their rights and sought their consent to all aspects of the research, such as agreeing to be observed, interviewed, and audio recorded. The purposive sample therefore consisted of the teachers who were willing to participate in all the data collection procedures.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

All ethical considerations were taken to protect participants from harm.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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