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An analysis of formative assessment challenges facing English Language secondary school teachers in the Makoni District of Zimbabwe: A study of five schools

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Abstract

This study analysed formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers in the Makoni District of Zimbabwe. Data were sourced from 25 English Language teachers pooled from 5 secondary schools in the district. The study, which adopted the pragmatic paradigm and mixed methods approach, utilized questionnaires, follow-up interviews, documents and non-participant observation to collect data. Percentages and themes were used to report the results. The study established that teachers face major challenges such as teachers reflecting more about themselves instead of about learners (teacher-centered assessment) in their comments, inadequate, undetailed and unreflective feedback/comments, less time to assess appropriately because of large classes, shortage of teaching and learning resources etc. One of the major recommendations was the need for appropriate and adequate pre-service and in-service training programmes for teachers in order to equip them with effective formative assessment knowledge and skills in the classroom.

Keywords: Challenges, criterion-referenced assessment, formative assessment, norm-referenced assessment, summative assessment

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Introduction

The current study analysed formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers in the Makoni District of Zimbabwe. It is critical to analyse formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers because such an analysis might assist in realizing how these challenges could be reduced. Assessment is the single most powerful influence on learning and if not designed well, it can easily undermine pupil achievement (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 1999). Given this dimension and that formative assessment is key to the effective monitoring of teaching and learning in schools, it is of lofty significance that a study of this nature be undertaken. Such a study might improve assessment practices in schools in general and in English Language in particular. Hopefully this might improve pupil performance; resulting in the improvement of pass rates in schools given that many pupils fail English Language at Ordinary Level (Makoni District English, Language Panel, 2015).

Background and Literature Review

Newton (2010) sees formative assessment as a series of educational activities undertaken by and/or students which provide information to be used to modify the teaching/ learning process in which they are engaged. Assessment could therefore be viewed as a process by which evidence about student achievement is elicited, interpreted and used by teachers, students or other peers to make decisions about the next steps in instruction that are likely to be better than the decisions they would have taken in the absence of the evidence that was elicited. As already echoed, this shows that formative assessment has a very strong influence on both teaching and learning achievement and that if not designed well, it can undermine both teaching and learning. Thus, in general, assessment, which involves both measurement (e.g. 6/10) and evaluation (e.g. comments/ remarks) is intended to improve both teaching and learning.

While formative assessment is a global feature of education systems, practices tend to differ from country to country. In Zimbabwe, formative assessment is carried out at school or school cluster level where students write daily exercises, weekly and fortnightly tests, end of term tests, mid-year tests, end of year tests etc. In most cases, these tests are set and marked by either individual or groups of teachers. According to Richards (2010), formative assessment can be carried out at classroom level through teacher-made tests and exercises, demonstrations, self-assessments, pair assessments, homework, informal questioning and observation of classroom activities.

For Turner (2006), generally formative assessment in English Language aims to, among other things, maintain standards, motivate teachers and learners, measure specific abilities like reading age, classify students and discriminate between students of different abilities. The aim is

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also to determine how much is known about concepts in English Language, students' general understanding of the language itself etc. Given that concepts are embedded in language; it is critical that students understand the language used in order for them to understand the concepts. Once students do not understand the language used, they can hardly understand the content and/or concepts in that subject.

In conducting formative assessment, English Language teachers may either judge each student's achievement against a set of criteria (Criterion -referenced assessment) or against the achievement of others (norm-referenced assessment). While many schools in Zimbabwe focus on norm-referenced assessment which compares student achievement and therefore tends to demotivate and humiliate some students who often perform poorly, criterion-referenced assessment, which compares a student's performance against his/her own record, is, in the views of the present writers, more educationally sound. Students learn in order to acquire skills and knowledge and not to compete with others; though of course, competition, if kept at the appropriate level, can encourage students to work hard.

The Zimbabwean Assessment Policy from the Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (Director's Circular No.36 of 2006) outlines the types of assessments and the frequency with which they are supposed to be administered to learners. It also stipulates the teaching methods and sources to be used (e.g. drama, computers, internet, pictures, objects, literature from periodicals, magazines, newspapers, text books etc.). Under the Performance Lag Address Programme of 2012, teachers are also expected to provide different assessments to different types of students in order to bridge the gap between fast and slow learners.

In schools, English Language Heads of Departments derive their Departmental Policies from the Ministry's Policy. The Department Policy indicates that three language exercises should be given to students per week, one comprehension exercise per week, one composition exercise and one summary exercise fortnightly, one communication and register exercise per week, one library lesson every fortnight and a test monthly. A sum of 6 to 7 lessons (35-40 minutes) are supposed to be conducted a week.

It is perhaps for the above reason that Nenty (2014) argues that classroom assessment practices should be a means by which an education system should be evaluated and defined. Given what Zimbabwean secondary school English Language (L2) teachers are expected to fulfil according to policy, one cannot avoid imagining them facing a myriad of challenges in their efforts to assess students. Kotzi (2012) argues that while teachers are expected to understand and familiarize themselves with a variety of essential assessment concepts, principles, techniques, tools, strategies and procedures, relatively little emphasis continues to be placed on the challenges they encounter.

Disturbing is the fact that many pupils continue to fail English Language (L2) (Makoni District English Language Panel, 2015) and the real reasons for this are not clear. One wonders whether English Language teachers implement suggested procedures and work expectations correctly in the formative assessment of students work. The present writers therefore assumed that English Language (L2) teachers face challenges in their formative assessment of students' work; hence, the present study analysed formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) teachers in their attempts to use various assessment methods to assess and grade pupils' work and correctly interpret assessment results.

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It is against this backdrop that the present study set out to analyse formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers in five schools in the Makoni District of Zimbabwe.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of the study were to:

- (i) analyse formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers in Makoni District.
- (ii) establish how English Language formative assessment is done in Makoni District.
- (iii) identify factors that influence teachers' formative assessment practices in English Language.
- (iv) establish the extent to which English Language (L2) teachers face formative assessment challenges.
- (v) find out measures that can be put in place to reduce formative assessment challenges facing English Language (L2) secondary school teachers.

Research Questions

Main Research Question

- (i) What formative assessment challenges do English Language (L2) secondary school teachers in Makoni District face?

Sub-research questions

- (ii) How is formative assessment in English Language (L2) done in Makoni District secondary schools?
- (iii) What factors influence teachers' formative assessment practices in English Language (L2)?
- (iv) To what extent do English Language (L2) secondary school teachers face formative assessment challenges?
- (v) Which measures could be put in place to reduce formative assessment challenges in English Language(L2)?

Methodology

Research paradigm

The present study employed the pragmatic paradigm. The paradigm was chosen given that it maintains the idea of objective truth but concedes that the meaning of what participants say is critical. Thus, the paradigm allows the use of the mixed methods approach which is ideal for this study given that it permits the simultaneous use of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection.

Research Approach

As indicated above, the mixed methods approach was idea for this study as it allows the collection of data simultaneously using methods from both quantitative and qualitative approaches. For Johnson and Christensen (2012), this triangulation of quantitative and

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qualitative approaches does not only result in the collection of multiple kinds of data but also in comparing and validating data collected through different ways.

Research Design

The study used the survey research design. The design was appropriate because surveys have been found an effective tool in determining, examining and analyzing the opinions, preferences, attitudes and perceptions of people (Gaye, 2008). The current study aimed at analyzing the vies and opinions of English Language (L2) secondary school teachers regarding the formative assessment challenges they face in the Makoni District. The design was also used because surveys permit the triangulation of various data collection instruments as was the case in this study which triangulated semi-structured questionnaires, follow-up interviews, documents and non-participant observation.

Participants, Sample and Sampling.

Participants were all the 25 English Language teachers (male=12; female=13) found in the 5 secondary schools(2 Rural, 2 Resettlement Day Schools, 1 Urban) that were sampled through random purposive sampling from the 40 schools in Makoni District. It was necessary to involve different types of schools to ensure that all the types of schools in the area were represented. In fact, a study by Jobert (2011) found that assessment challenges were exacerbated by the location of the school; some schools, because of their location, are better resourced than others and this triggers assessment challenges for teachers. It was also necessary to involve both male and female teachers given that studies ((e.g. Turner, 2006; Delroy, 2009) have shown that people's attitudes, opinions and values are influenced by their gender.

The number of schools selected (5 out of 40) was considered representative given that literature (e.g. Brown & Brown, 2013) indicates that anything from 10% to 20% of a population is representative. Five schools out of 40 schools constitutes 12.5%; hence, the number of schools chosen is representative.

The number of English Language teachers in the 5 schools (n=25) was also considered representative given that literature (e.g. Van Dalen, 2000) recommends the involvement of all subjects if the population is relatively small as was the case in this study. Thus, all the 25 English Language teachers in the 5 schools were involved.

For Creswell (2007), careful sampling improves the validity of research results while a representative sample enhances the credibility of research results. This is why the researchers took the trouble to carefully sample in order to come up with a representative sample.

Instruments

A semi-structured questionnaire with closed and open-ended items, follow-up interviews, documents and non-participant observation were used to source data. As already pointed out, the use of the mixed methods approach gave the researchers a wide choice in instrumentation, hence, averting the pitfalls of one instrument. Trockim (2006) argues that the best hope for realizing objectivity in research is through triangulating across multiple fallible methods / perspectives.

The semi-structured questionnaire with closed and open-ended items generated both quantitative and qualitative data. For Trockim (2006), questionnaires, because of their anonymity, are

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suitable for collecting information on sensitive issues such as people's opinions, attitudes, views, feelings etc. Asking teachers about the challenges they face in the formative assessment of English Language may be a sensitive issue since some of these challenges may be emanating from Government or Ministry policies such as large teacher- pupil ratios etc. Teachers may not be free enough to say their real views even after being assured of anonymity and the confidentiality of the information collected.

As already pointed out, the questionnaire had both closed and open-ended items. Closed items were useful in generating frequencies of responses that were statistically treated and reported in percentages. On the other hand, the non- imposing open-ended items allowed the hearing of the teachers' opinions and beliefs about what they perceive to be formative assessment challenges in current assessment, as much as possible but of course within the confines and limits of the design. For Dillman, Smyth and Christian (2009), one needs question formats that effectively measure what one wants to measure.

Follow-up interviews, which were conducted after an initial analysis of the questionnaire responses, were used to probe into subtle issues raised and to have obscure and unexpected responses clarified. These interviews held with 10 teachers who participated in the study and were randomly selected, also helped to see the motivations of the teachers and their reasons for responding the way they did. This allowed for a deeper and more meaningful analysis of results.

The researchers analysed such documents such as students' exercise books and report books, scheme and as well as plan books, teacher-made tests, teacher record of marks books, English Language Departmental files, Ministry policies, ZIMSEC syllabus and reports etc. From the documents, the researchers were able to discern some formative assessment challenges such as reduced amount of written work due to large class sizes.

Non-participant observations of classes in sessions allowed the researchers to collect live data from live situations. These data were triangulated and compared with data from teachers on what they said they do. The researchers were able to see things that the teachers were either not free to talk about or were simply reluctant to do so, especially things that portrayed them negatively such as their poor and inadequate knowledge of assessment.

Validity and reliability of questionnaire

While appropriate instrumentation contributes to the validity of the results (Mushoriwa, 2013), the questionnaire for this study, developed by the researchers, was checked for validity and reliability through the inter-rater method. This involved giving the questionnaire to 4 experts in the area of Psychology, to first, check for suitability (validity) and second, to test it for reliability by rating it out of 10; then correlate the ratings to see the extent to which the raters agreed that the questionnaire was reliable.

All the raters agreed that the questionnaire was suitable (valid) and that it was also reliable given that an inter-rater reliability coefficient of 0.6 was yielded. The questionnaire was then test-run with 8 teachers who were not going to participate in the study to see if it worked as intended. After minor adjustments and modifications, the questionnaire was adopted for use with the study sample.

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Credibility of qualitative data

To ensure the credibility of the qualitative data, member checking (verifying information from the informants), prolonged engagement in the field (staying longer in research sites cross-checking information) and peer de-briefing (checking with peers and others to see if there is enough evidence supporting your assertions /claims /observations /findings etc.) were used. The triangulation of the different data collection instruments also ensured the trustworthiness of the results emerging from the qualitative data.

Results and discussion

The questionnaire with 25 items was the main data collection instrument and was designed to establish formative assessment challenges faced by English Language teachers, how formative assessment is carried out in schools, factors that influence teachers' formative assessment practices, the extent to which teachers face formative assessment challenges and measures that could be put in place to reduce formative assessment challenges. Thus, the questionnaire was designed to address both the research objectives and the research questions.

All the 25 questionnaire items used a 5-point Likert scale, requiring the participants to indicate whether they Agree (A), Strongly Agree (SA), Undecided (U), Disagree (D) or Strongly Disagree (SD) with given statements and to give reasons for their answers. For analysis purposes, A and SA were collapsed to indicate positive perception while D and SD were collapsed to mean negative perception. The neutral point (Undecided) was left out in order to make the results directional (Fishbein, 1975). Qualitative data from follow-up interviews, documents and non-participant observations were used to buttress / refute findings from the questionnaire.

As already pointed out, the data were mainly descriptively analysed with thematic interpretation as needed to clarify major observations. Only percentages endorsing are reported to simplify the reporting. It is also important to note that the researchers presented and immediately discussed the data in order to avoid the unnecessary repetition that often characterizes work where data presentation and discussion are separated.

Teachers were first asked if they face formative assessment challenges in English Language. An over-whelming majority (92%) indicated that they face numerous challenges when assessing English Language that ranged from how they do formative assessment to the teachers' skills and competence. A number of challenges such as large teacher-pupil ratios, inadequate time to assess meaningfully because of an examination-driven education system, congested timetables, resource constraints, poor knowledge and skills among some teachers, etc. were identified. In fact, 76% of the teachers felt that these many challenges resulted in malpractices such as under-assessing pupils and falsifying records. In line with how teachers do formative assessment, the majority of the teachers (52%) claimed that most teachers conduct learner-centred assessments on a regular basis. These learner-centred assessments enabled teachers to see the strengths and weaknesses of individual learners and in practice, this should enable them to apply remediation. Contrary to the above claim, lesson observations and observations from documents such as the scheme-cum plan showed that although teachers planned lessons that were learner-centred, in practice they deviated from this and adopted teacher-centred assessments mostly because of large class sizes and the acute shortage of

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resources. To the researchers, this is unfortunate because studies (e.g. Stanslas, 2008) have shown that learner-centred assessment is more effective than teacher-centred assessment because of its interactive nature, mediating the environment for pupils, yet, in teacher-centred assessment, assessment is seen as separate from teaching and occurs entirely through testing (Stanslas, 2008). One teacher (Teacher 8), supporting whole class testing, said:

There is simply no time and room for pupils to be assessed differently considering the large classes we teach, examinations and the resource-constrained situations that we face. A ripple effect of this is that we also have no time for remediation (Teacher 8).

The above sentiments indicate that teachers face formative assessment challenges as a function of such things as, among others, large classes, examination-driven education system and lack of adequate teaching and learning resources. According to Darling-Harmond (2008), there is research evidence to the effect that quality assessment is associated with small class size. In the studied schools, each school had an average of 63 pupils per class against the recommended ratio of 1:40. Msoro's (2011) study in Tyolo District of Malawi revealed that over-crowded classrooms made it very difficult for secondary school teachers to implement proper formative assessment strategies. Thus, in as much as teachers may have assessment skills, actual implementation becomes a challenge due to learner numbers in class. Teachers fail to assess learners on a one-to-one basis. In Zimbabwe, this is disturbing given the large pool of unemployed qualified teachers. In a follow-up interview, one teacher (Teacher 2) said:

Many teachers have the necessary knowledge and skills to carry out formative assessment properly, but our situations forbid. Our timetables are congested and we have very large classes; this poses serious challenges when it comes to the way we should assess learners (Teacher 2).

Observations and interview data revealed that where teachers do not use teacher-centred assessments, they use learner self-assessment, peer assessment and group assessments which are not time-consuming. Guskey (2004) also states that when teachers do not have time to assess learning properly, they generally resort to testing, a teacher-centred approach which is too often ineffective. In agreement with the above assessment approach, one teacher (Teacher 3) commented:

When assessing using what you have called teacher-centred assessment, all pupils move at the same pace and get the same assignment since the hectic schedule has no room for pupils to be assessed differently (Teacher 3).

Findings from the present study suggest that generally assessment in Makoni District is teacher-centered. The researchers noted that this was mostly so in resource-constrained schools such as those in Resettlement Areas. By extrapolation, it can be inferred that lack of resources creates

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assessment challenges for teachers since most end up shifting to the ineffective teacher- centered approach.

Results also showed that most teachers (80%) assess all the components of English Language skills (writing, reading, speaking, listening) but with more emphasis on writing. In interviews, many teachers said that they concentrated on writing because apart from the fact that syllabuses emphasis written work, it also provides evidence that the pupils actually did the work. Harris (2010) argues that most teachers in secondary schools assess reading sparingly assuming that by the time pupils reach secondary school, they would have mastered all the basic tenets of reading. For Harris, many teachers have become specialists in assessing Writing, while lacking in reading, speaking and listening, resulting in unbalanced assessment.

Assessment techniques often used by English Language teachers include such forms of assessment as tests, quizzes, exercises, demonstrations, discussions, writing and reading skills, portfolios, interviews etc. In follow-up interviews, some teachers expressed dislike for portfolios; arguing that they are taxing in terms of collecting different types of work and activities for pupils over a long period, yet there are serious time constraints. Other teachers preferred Interviews to portfolios. These teachers argued that interviews give the teacher the opportunity to hear the learner's line of thinking and arguments and therefore his / her level of understanding.

A serious formative assessment challenge noted in the study was that while teachers provide feedback to learners, they conceded that most of the feedback lacked enough detail to be useful. About 72% of the teachers felt that unless feedback was meaningful to learners, it is a waste of time.

A female teacher (Teacher 14) commended:

While we know the importance of providing detailed feedback to our learners, there is simply no time for it. Imagine marking over 60 exercise books which are needed the following day. Sometimes we simply insert a mark without any comments (Teacher 14)

Hattie (2009 p.9) says that when feedback is used effectively, it is the most powerful single moderator that enhances achievement. Gibbs and Simpson (2004) also argue that constructive feedback is the single most powerful influence on learning.

Quality formative assessment necessitates providing good feedback to students, using assessment data to improve instruction and using a variety of assessment methods (McMunn, 2011). This shows that the purpose of assessment is to provide constructive guidance and to accelerate and improve learner achievement. Ijefi and Utsere (2008), in their study initiated to investigate assessment for learning, observed with concern that most teachers wrote comments on their students' work that did not really help them identify what they had achieved and what the next step in their learning should be. This indicates that the quality of an assessment is as good as the communicative value of results.

About 88% of the teachers indicated that most teachers use norm-referenced assessment where they compare the performance of learners. As a result of using norm-referenced assessment, very little remediation was provided to deserving pupils. In follow-up interviews,

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many teachers felt that criterion-referenced assessment does not motivate learners enough. One teacher (Teacher 5) commented:

Learners need to know how others are performing so that they know where to place themselves. Even in real life, knowing what others are achieving in their lives is motivational (Teacher 5)

The above sentiments indicate that despite the fact that criterion -referenced assessment helps in the individuation of teaching and learning and therefore in assisting learners to proceed at their own pace of learning, such a high percentage of teachers (88%) are not in favour of it. By extension, many learners may not be acquiring the skills and knowledge needed so that they become creative and innovative and create jobs as stressed in the current Zimbabwean education system. The assessment challenge here is that the assessment practice preferred by most teachers (norm-referenced), which involves whole class teaching and is examination-driven, runs contrary to the current expectations of the Zimbabwean education system. Clearly what we see here is that adopting a wrong assessment practice may derail an education system's noble objectives.

A significant number of teachers (74%) reported in interviews that English Language is a very difficult subject to assess because it has numerous technical aspects(e.g. grammar, punctuation, spelling, various forms of compositions etc.) to be assessed. One teacher (Teacher 5) noted:

The fact that we have to assess many aspects in this subject is a real challenge. It may not be easy to get a teacher who is good at all these aspects and so assessment suffers (Teacher 5).

Interview data also showed another formative assessment challenge that teachers encounter. Some teachers pointed out that most secondary school assessment practices are tailored towards the Zimbabwe Schools' Examination Council(ZIMSEC) summative examinations; forcing teachers to align their teaching and assessment with ZIMSEC. This tends to force teachers to abandon proper assessment practices, adopting practices such as drill and testing. Popham (2001) made similar observations when he stated that teachers tend to drill their students on test items likely to appear in the high stakes examinations and this narrows formative assessment coverage. For Yeh (2005), if Examination Boards continue to influence formative assessment practices, there will be serious narrowing of the curriculum by excluding subject matter not tested.

About 60% of the teachers revealed that while they felt well trained generally, they were not adequately trained for formative assessment. One teacher (Teacher 9) commented:

Emphasis was on content, not on assessment; hence, my knowledge in this area is scanty. Given that formative assessment occurs frequently, one can imagine the damage done by teachers of my caliber. Once you lack knowledge in something, you stop not only liking it but also practicing it (Teacher 9)

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Follow-up interviews showed that indeed there were some teachers who were not well grounded in assessment. Literature (e.g. Knapp,2009; Ellis, 2009) generally indicates that the quality of assessment by teachers is determined by the quality of training they receive. In Zimbabwe, while the Zimbabwe Council for Higher Education (ZIMCHE) commended the quality of teacher training programmes (ZIMCHE, 2012), perhaps more could still be done in terms of colleges assisting student teachers to develop effective assessment methods and to learn to properly score, analyse and interpret assessment results. Interview data indicated that many teachers lack requisite competence to analyse assessment data using statistics.

For Zindi (2001), courses on assessment are often statistical or mathematical in nature, yet many of our students lack interest in Statistics because of their poor mathematical background. This may suggest that many teachers are not well grounded in the area of assessment as a function of not having adequate knowledge of Statistics and indeed, this is a serious challenge. Perhaps this is why Rajmal (2009) says that lack of correct interpretation and appropriate use of the range of assessment data are a real challenge among English Language teachers.

Conclusion

The study's findings indicate that most English Language teachers face a number of assessment challenges that might possibly contribute to the poor performance of many learners in the subject. Among the challenges identified include lack of proper knowledge and skills in assessing learners due to inadequate training, high teacher-pupil ratio, inadequate resources and adopting inappropriate assessment practices that tend to focus narrowly. Given that assessment is central to effective teaching and learning, the adoption of effective assessment methods is most likely not only to reduce assessment challenges in English Language but also to increase pass rates in the subject.

Recommendations

Among the major recommendations are that: First, given that many teachers face assessment challenges due to poor knowledge of assessment as a function of inadequate or poor training in the area of assessment, the Government of Zimbabwe, through its Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Technology Development, should mount workshops, seminars and in-service courses to ensure that teachers acquire pre-requisite assessment knowledge and skills.

Second, there is need for the Government, through the Ministry, to maintain appropriate teacher- pupil ratio (1:40) as per policy. More teachers are needed in our schools; the Government should tap into the pool of unemployed but qualified teachers.

Third, there is need for the mobilization of resources by different sectors in society such as the Government through the Ministry, Churches, Non-Governmental Organisations, Communities etc.

Fourth, since ZIMSEC influences assessment practices in schools, making much of the assessment exam-oriented, there is need for the Ministry, to re-examine the stress given to examinations in the light of the current shift to an education focusing on creativity and innovation.

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