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Research Paper

EFL Teachers' Conceptions of Alternative Assessment Strategies

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Abstract

EFL teachers' conceptions of Alternative Assessment (AA) strategies in English language classrooms are of significance since they can affect the teachers' overall performance in the classroom. This study aimed to explore Iranian EFL teachers' conceptions of AA strategies. In so doing, a sequential mixed methods design was used. The participants of the study consisted of 30 (15 males and 15 females) Iranian EFL teachers with MA and Ph.D. degrees in English language teaching (ELT) who were selected through convenience sampling. To collect the required data, the Teachers' Perceptions of Alternative Assessment Questionnaire (Elharrar) was used as an open-ended questionnaire. Data analysis was conducted through qualitative thematic analysis and presenting the extracted themes in frequency and percentage formats. It was found that most of the teachers perceived the positive influences of AA. Additionally, it was revealed that the teachers attached some advantages to AA that help them provide a more quality teaching environment. The findings of this study may render implications for EFL teachers, teacher trainers, and administrators.

Keywords: *Alternative Assessment; Assessment Strategies; Traditional Assessment*

تصور معلمان زبان انگلیسی از استراتژی‌های ارزیابی جایگزین

تصور معلمان زبان انگلیسی از استراتژی‌های ارزیابی جایگزین (AA) در کلاس‌های درس زبان انگلیسی حائز اهمیت است زیرا می‌تواند بر عملکرد کلی معلمان در کلاس تأثیر بگذارد. این مطالعه با هدف بررسی برداشت معلمان زبان انگلیسی زبان ایرانی از راهبردهای AA انجام شد. برای انجام این کار، از طراحی روش‌های ترکیبی متوالی استفاده شد. شرکت کنندگان در این پژوهش ۳۰ نفر (۱۵ مرد و ۱۵ زن) معلم زبان انگلیسی با مدرک کارشناسی ارشد و دکتری بودند. مدرک تحصیلی آموزش زبان انگلیسی (ELT) که از طریق نمونه‌گیری در دسترس انتخاب شدند. برای جمع‌آوری داده‌های مورد نیاز، از پرسشنامه ادراکات معلمان از ارزشیابی جایگزین (الهرار، ۲۰۰۶) به عنوان یک پرسشنامه باز استفاده شد. تجزیه و تحلیل داده‌ها از طریق تحلیل موضوعی کیفی و ارائه مضامین استخراج شده در قالب‌های فراوانی و درصدی انجام شد. مشخص شد که اکثر معلمان تأثیرات مثبت AA را درک کردند. علاوه بر این، مشخص شد که معلمان مزایایی را به AA متصل کرده‌اند که به آنها کمک می‌کند محیط آموزشی با کیفیت تری ارائه دهند. یافته‌های این مطالعه ممکن است مفاهیمی را برای معلمان زبان انگلیسی، مربیان معلمان و مدیران ارزیابی ایجاد کند.

واژگان کلیدی: ارزیابی، ارزیابی جایگزین، ارزشیابی سنتی

Introduction

With the effect of the transition to a more learner-centered communication approach on the pedagogy of English as a Foreign / Second Language (EFL / ESL), the assessment of the EFL/ESL classroom in recent years has also experienced a shift from traditional assessment methods to the alternative assessment (AA) methods of student achievement (Diep et al., 2019). AA has been put forth with the claim that traditional assessment approaches are not often compatible with actual EFL/ESL experience since training methods are not congruent with assessment procedures (Monib et al., 2020). Therefore, alternative tests are suggested to complement the standard methods using numerous real, false, and blank objects as well as to capture the effects of learning and knowledge about learners' communication skills in their second language (Brindley, 2001).

Recently, scholars have called for a shift in language assessment from standardized testing to AA or authentic assessment (Zaim, 2020). As noted by Hancock (1994), AA is an ongoing process wherein “the student and the teacher judge the success of the student in language using non-conventional methods” (p. 2). It also refers to assessment tasks that are related to the real world (Barnard Bachelor, 2017; Moqbel, 2020). The purpose of AA is to examine various types of literacy skills in situations similar to real contexts in which such skills are used. Also called the performance evaluation, direct assessment, and authentic evaluation, AA examines what students can do instead of what they know (Worthen, 1993). Alternative perspectives regarding divergent opinions on assessment agree that real assessment relies on a collaborative partnership between the evaluator and the assessor (Barnard Bachelor, 2017; Ziafar, 2017). They describe assessment as the joint relationship of evaluators and students working together to improve the learning ability of students. Although no single concept exists, there is consensus on its key purpose, which is “to compile evidence of how learners’ approach, process, and execute real-life tasks in a given area” (Huerta-Macias, 1995, p.8). Likewise, Pierce and O'Malley (1992) describe AA as any method of discovering what an individual learns or can do to show development and inform education, and is not a standard or a traditional test. In particular, they note that alternative methods of evaluating students include variations in student needs, preferences, and styles of learning; and they are seeking to combine evaluation and learning. They also designate good results, stress positive characteristics, and offer formative and not summative evaluations.

Considering the role of AA in English classes, EFL teachers have the main responsibility to practice it in the classroom. Studies have proved that language assessment is a complex and difficult task (Atjonen, 2014; Dockrell & Marshall, 2015). Several instructive frameworks are trying to re-engineer and upgrade their assessment and testing strategies to fuse new methodologies and systems. This is why the notion of assessment literacy research is in its infancy in Iranian context. The concept of assessment literacy (Stiggins, 1991, 1994) refers to diverse abilities and knowledge that different groups of stakeholders need to address the new international assessment. Assessment literacy is “the possession of knowledge about the basic principles of sound assessment practice, including terminology, the development and use of assessment methodologies and techniques, familiarity with standards of quality in assessment, and familiarity with an alternative to traditional measurements of learning” (Paterno, 2001, n.d).

The importance of the use of AA in language classes has been the topic of several previous studies (e.g., Burkšaitienė & Teresevičienė, 2008; Charvade et al., 2012; Chirimbu, 2013; Jalilzadeh & Dastgoshadeh, 2011; Nezakatgoo, 2011; Price et al., 2012). However, AA is still an under-investigated research area in Iran. In this research paucity, to the best knowledge of the researchers, no study has explored Iranian EFL teachers’ conceptions of AA in language classes. Hence, this study aimed to investigate EFL teachers’ conceptions of AA strategies in language classrooms. In so doing, the following research question was formulated:

RQ. How do Iranian EFL teachers conceive the AA strategies in English classes?



Literature Review

Ercilia et al. (2016) investigated the effectiveness of AA on EFL achievement in high schools and showed that the integration of this type of assessment has different advantages and outcomes in the everyday learning process. Yildirim and Orsedemir (2013) investigated the performance of young students using the AA method as a complement to pen and paper tests. It was shown that the AA method could be used in combination with other assessment procedures including teacher reviewing the project results, portfolio, self-assessment and peer review. Musfirah (2014) implemented the AA of speaking skill. The results showed improved speaking performance of learners as a consequence of using the AA. Chang, Tseng and Lou (2012) probed different types of AA strategies to investigate the level of consistency and differences between them. They found a high consistency level between self- and teacher-assessment, but a low level of consistency between peer and self as well as teacher-assessment. Domínguez et al. (2016) did a similar study in terms of objectives and reported a high consistency level among different AA methods, including self, peer, and teacher-assessment. In Leach's study (2012), the effectiveness of different types of the AA on English achievement of EFL learners was compared and no statistically significant difference was reported between the impact of student self-assessment and teacher-assessment.

Methods

Design

Given that this study was an attempt to understand in detail the conceptions that EFL teachers hold about the AA strategies in EFL classrooms, it followed a sequential mixed methods design. According to Ary et al. (2018), this type of design is appropriate for uncovering the recurrent themes, patterns, and categories in a set of qualitative data.

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of 30 (15 males and 15 females) EFL teachers. In order to invite teachers and students to this research project, the researchers decided to progress with convenient sampling (Ary et al. 2010). The sample consisted of teachers who taught English in institutes, schools, or universities. Their age range was between 23-48. Their major was ELT. They had M.A. or Ph.D. in the field and had at least 3 years of teaching experience.

Instrument

To collect the required data, the following instrument was used:

Teacher Assessment Practices and Perceptions Questionnaire

The Teacher Assessment Practices and Perceptions Questionnaire, developed by Elharrar (2006), measures the classroom evaluative practices and perceptions of teachers with particular emphasis on the theme of AA. It consists of 12 questions in the open-ended format. It has two parts: introduction (demographic information), and teachers' perceptions regarding AA. The reliability and validity of this questionnaire were checked and approved by previous researchers (Ahmad et al., 2020; Demir et al., 2019; Elharrar, 2006). Moreover, the questionnaire was expert-checked by a university professor of TEFL to ensure its validity for the purposes of the present study. Regarding reliability, the collected data were fed into SPSS, and a coefficient of $r = .88$ was obtained, which is acceptably high, according to Ary et al. (2010).

Data Collection Procedure

At the outset of the study, the sampling was conducted as explained above. To observe research ethics, the participants were informed of the purpose of the study. Additionally, they

were ensured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their personal information. Then, the google form of the Teacher Assessment Practices and Perceptions Questionnaire was prepared and sent to the participants via E-mail, WhatsApp and Telegram. Next, the collected data were exposed to appropriate data analysis procedures.

Data Analysis Procedure

The qualitative data extracted from the open-ended questionnaire were analyzed via thematic analysis. The recurrent themes were extracted and represented in frequency and percentage formats.

Results

Concerning the first question of the questionnaire which investigated the frequency of assessment use in the school to measure students' general academic progress, most of the teachers (19 teachers, 47.5%) stated that they assess their learners' language progress weekly because it is more convenient and it provides feedback both for learners and teachers to examine their learning and teaching. This weekly assessment look likes formative assessment.

On the second question which examined different types of evaluation for different reasons or purposes and teachers' perceptions regarding that, 11 EFL teachers (18.33%) mentioned that they assess learners for their final and midterm exams in both the alternative and the standard methods. Moreover, it was found that the second most frequent category was using alternative types of assessment (9, 15%). Finally, it was revealed that EFL teachers mentioned factors like placement (8, 13.33%) and formative assessment (8, 13.33%) as purposes of deployment of alternative methods.

Summative assessment (7, 11.6%), assessment based on the course content, the goals of the course, learners' learning styles (5, 8.33%), diagnostic (4, 6.66%), assessment depending on students' language proficiency (4, 6.66%), Dynamic assessment (2, 3.33%), and Portfolio assessment (2, 3.33%) were the other categories teacher indicated as practices of assessment. Many researchers have conducted studies on the various purposes of assessment (Barnes et al., 2017; Black, 2004; Hamp-Lyons, 2016; Khan, 2018; Liljedahl, 2010). As indicated by the teachers and studies, assessment has different purposes like placement, diagnosis, achievement, etc.

In question 3, on EFL teachers' conceptions regarding traditional assessment and AA, considering the definition of traditional assessment it was found that EFL teachers perceive it as something like multiple choice, short answer, true/false (5, 16.66%) which are out of context which focuses on form, traditional assessment deals with product of learning (3, 10%), it is summative and static in nature, it does not assess pragmatic information and focuses on students' memorization (3, 10%), and it refers to standard tests (3, 10%). Moreover, EFL teachers indicated that traditional assessment can be summative (2, 6.66%), involve some procedures which are static and do not examine abilities of the students in depth (2, 6.66%), old paper and pencil methods using multiple choice tests (2, 6.66%), is concerned with the theoretical knowledge ignoring different abilities and capacities of learners (2, 6.6%), focus on "what" and developing body of knowledge (2, 6.66%), and measure the final output of students after classes (2, 6.6%). Finally, the least frequent categories for definition of traditional assessment were reported to be those paper and pen exam without taking individual differences and real-life situations into account and without assessing pragmatics and illocutionary force (1, 3.33%), more atomistic (1, 3.33%), has a focus on lower-level cognitive abilities such as memorization and information recall (1, 3.33%), and assessments are being used frequently nowadays (1, 3.33%).



Considering EFL teachers' perceptions of AA definition, it was found that AA deal with the process of learning (6, 20%), modern assessment techniques like dynamic assessment, formative assessment, portfolio assessment, cognitive diagnostic assessment (5, 16.66%), an authentic and holistic assessment taking different factors into consideration (4, 13.3%), a type of assessment which can be written or spoken and it may happen during the class time (4, 13.33%), places no boundaries to the imagination of teacher in writing the test item and/or student possible right answers (2, 6.66%), focuses on demonstrating meaningful application of what you've learned (2, 6.66%), portfolios (2, 6.66%), focuses on higher-level cognitive abilities such as concept learning, critical thinking, and problem solving (2, 6.66%), assessment for learning (1, 3.33%), helps learning. In case of DA, assessment is more like teaching than assessing (1, 3.33%), and focus on ensuring prof at real world tasks and *how* (1, 3.33%).

Concerning Question 4 which dealt with the reasons and ways teachers adapt their assessment methods and how they do it, the reasons for adapting method of evaluation based on students' diversity are revealed to be differences in student' level (10, 30.33%), students' needs and capabilities as well as the teaching context (6, 20%), classrooms inhomogeneity (4, 13.33%), one size does not fit all (3, 10%), ethnic diversity (2, 6.66%), and adapting classes to fully online format (1, 3.33%). Four teachers (13.33%) stated that they follow their own strategies for assessment.

With regard to Question 5 which investigated the ways teachers involve students in assessment process, the following categories were stated: Ask them to make sample questions for discussion and then I am honing them for final exam (9, 30%), take individual differences into consideration to help students assess themselves regularly (8, 26.66 %), requiring them to do class projects (4, 13.33%), ask them to do self or peer assessment (3, 10%), by asking questions each session and ask the others to pass their judgement (2, 6.66%), dynamic assessment (2, 6.66%), students are given choices on what to be involved in their final evaluation (1, 3.33%) and ask more competent students to carry out assessment for weaker students and assist them as well (1, 3.33%).

On Question 6 that measured teachers' reasons and justifications for changing or modifying their evaluation practices and what inspired them, the following reasons were extracted: Gaining knowledge about alternative and reflective assessment (12, 40%), needs analysis and individual differences (5, 16.66%), taking a variety of workshops (4, 13.33%), Covid 19 (4, 13.33%), the theoretical paradigms (3, 10%), and the results of classes (2, 6.66%).

Regarding Question 7 that explored teachers' perceptions regarding the advantages of practicing AA in their classroom, these advantages were uncovered: Realizing students' weakness and strength to help them become self-regulated and critical thinkers (9, 18%), assessing both the progress and achievement (9, 18%), increasing learning (6, 12%), tapping the potential of students (5, 10%), dynamic and process-oriented methods of assessment (4, 8%), receiving feedback (3, 6%), assessment for learning and improvement (3, 6%), feedback for teaching based on them (3, 6%), alternative assessments are less stressful methods of assessments than traditional methods (2, 4%), forcing them to study more (2, 4%), capturing a more holistic and all-embracing view of the abilities and competencies of students (2, 4%), focusing on aural skills (1, 2%), and involving learners (1, 2%).

Question 8 that examined the disadvantages of applying AA in a language classroom led to the identification of the following disadvantages: Practicality issues (14, 35%), Being a bit time consuming (12, 30%), subjective nature of AA strategies and the concept of fairness (5, 12.5%), limited resources (5, 12.5%), hindering the syllabus (3, 7.5%), and lack of confidence in students (1, 2.5%).

About Question 9 which explored the most satisfactory/ beneficial type of AA from EFL teachers' perspectives, the following types of AA were revealed: Self and peer assessments (11,



21.15%), formative assessment (9, 17.33%), interactionist dynamic assessment (8, 15.38%), assessing their progress frequently during the semester (6, 11.53%), tasked based assessment (3, 5.76%), multiple choice tests with numerable test items (3, 5.76%), reflective assessment (3, 5.76%), regular assessment (2, 3.48%), essay type (2, 3.48%), project and presentation of project assessment (2, 3.48%), portfolios (2, 3.48%), and a collaborative project (1, 1.92%).

Question 10 investigated the education reform and its impact on teachers' perception regarding students' assessment. The impact of educational reform on assessment practices was found to be very effective in terms of AA. The participated teachers stated that they should proceed the policy of the school they work for (8, 26.6%), they mostly use alternative, peer and reflective assessment and don't believe in final exam (6, 20%), assessment has been changed during years from traditional assessment to alternative and formative assessment types (6, 20%), they can feel a paradigm shift from testing to assessment especially at university, assessment procedures need more improvement (3, 10%), they I try to assess learners in an authentic way (3, 10%), they don't care much about students' final test scores now as they evaluate them over the duration of the semester (2, 6.66%), by emergence of CLT in teaching, the new methods of assessments such as DA has also become prominent (1, 3.33%), and humanizing assessment (1, 3.33%).

Question 11 assessed the amount of training each teacher took for AA practice in classroom and the following themes were identified: They didn't receive any kinds of training options (15, 50%), they mostly gained their understanding of the strategies through reading books and published articles (7, 23%), they have experienced peer and teacher assessment as well as portfolio assessment in their classes (4, 13.33%), and workshops (4, 13.33%).

Question 12 assessed the best assessment training types to familiarize teachers with AA and led to the following themes: Reading the related papers (12, 35%), taking part in teacher training workshops (11, 32%), doing peer observation followed by discussion (7, 20%), Teacher reflection (3, 9%) study groups (1, 3%), reading related papers (35%) and teacher training workshop (32%).

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated EFL teachers' conceptions of AA strategies. It was found that most of the teachers perceived the positive influences of AA. It may be rooted in the fact that traditional assessment is more strictly-laid than AA. In contrary, AA provides a more flexible tool for teachers to gain a better understanding of students' competencies (Atjonen, 2014; Dockrell & Marshall, 2015; Monib et al., 2020). This finding seems to be tied to the teachers' reflectivity as well. That is, as teachers reflect on their professional assessment practices, they opt for techniques that are more responsive to their professional needs and facilitate capturing students' proficiency in greater depth. This finding means that as teachers reflect on their assessment practices, they seek alternatives that best fit their purposes; and it seems that AA provides such affordances better than traditional assessment.

Additionally, it was revealed that the teachers attached some advantages to AA that help them provide a more quality teaching environment. Issues such as more learner engagement, being more effective in providing effective instruction, better analysis of students' needs, enhancing peer assessment, and helping teachers upgrading their knowledge by participating in professional workshops and reading scholarly documents were among the most frequent AA-related benefits. These findings are in line with the results of the studies by Chang (2019) and Seban (2009). These findings indicate that firstly, the teachers have been able to extend their reflectivity potential to the context of assessment, which has enabled them to take a critical look at their practices in particular and professionalism in general. Second, the teachers need more training in

AA (through different channels including taking part in workshops and reading related papers) as they find this technique helpful in their practices. Consistent with this finding, according to Tsui (2018), teacher training workshops have significant effects on their teaching and assessment methods. Hence, taking these into consideration, EFL teachers can get acquainted with alternative assessment strategies and use them. Similar to this study, previous studies have shown identical findings that reading related papers can increase teachers' knowledge on assessment (Popova et al., 2018). This finding provides implications for teacher educators to run professional development courses in order to enhance teachers' assessment literacy. Such courses could positively contribute to teachers' professional cognitions as they are more likely to experience a more positive institutional setting, particularly in relation to assessment.

According to the findings, it can be concluded that EFL teachers can benefit from AA strategies as a complement to traditional paper and pencil tests in an attempt to capture the communication skills of learners. Moreover, it is concluded that EFL teachers can take advantage of a variety of channels including relevant papers, workshops, etc. in upgrading their knowledge of AA strategies. Last but not least, the findings lead to the conclusion that the advantages of AA are so strong that making efforts to cope with its challenges and complexities is worth trying. Future research can explore the teachers' AA-related practices to provide a better means of how teachers practice AA in their instructional practices. Moreover, research in other contexts is required to obtain a better understanding of teachers' multicultural understandings of AA. These issues could be addressed in future studies so that the field comes to a better understanding of teachers' cognitions about assessment

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