

## Iranian EFL Teacher's Assessment Literacy and Inclination towards the Use of Alternative Assessment

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### **Abstract**

Assessment literacy (AL), traditionally defined as a basic understanding of educational assessment and related skills to apply such knowledge to various measures of student achievement is increasingly being recognized as an integral part of teacher professionalism. Such growing interest in AL is due partly to the central role of assessment in student learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998), and to strong evidence that teachers are key agents in educational assessment. This paper is an attempt for investigation into Iranian EFL teacher's assessment literacy and inclination towards the use of alternative assessment. Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn; first, there is a significant positive relationship between EFL teachers' assessment literacy and the type of alternative forms of assessment they use, that is, if the teachers are more literate in assessment, it is more probable that they utilize alternative forms of assessment. Second, Iranian teachers' assessment literacy is significantly correlated with their years of experience. It was found that the more experienced the teachers, the more assessment literate they are. This could plausibly be justified by the premise that as the teachers gain more practice they become more familiar with the assessment approaches. Third, regarding assessment literacy, M.A. and Ph.D. teachers are significantly different from teachers with B.A. and lower degrees; i.e. the teachers with higher degrees had a higher level of assessment literacy.

**Keywords:** alternative assessment, assessment literacy

### **INTRODUCTION**

According to results of investigation of Jalilzadeh and Dastgoshadeh (2011), literacy assessment concept has not received much attention in Iran researcher world. Inbar-Lourie (2008) believes that the existence of language assessment courses shows that expertize in language assessment requires more competencies. Rogers (1991) holds the view that "accurate assessment of achievement is being more urgently called for at the district, state, and national levels" (p. 387).

It is of great importance for the ministry of education of countries to understand the assessment literacy of their teachers which includes selecting, modifying and implementing assessment and using it effectively in order to enhance learning. As it has been shown that an efficient assessment model can develop learning, it is critical for the ministry of education to identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses in regard to their assessment knowledge which enables them to develop professional programs to increase assessment literacy.

Therefore, this study tries to investigate the Iranian EFL teachers' assessment literacy and to find out whether they have sufficient knowledge of assessment, and if not, certain programs can be developed in order to improve this vital knowledge.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment refers to different ways of collecting information about learner's language (Brindley, 2001). In order to carry out an assessment, we can gather information about learners' progress and performance from different sources, such as test results, learners' portfolios and journals, interview, observation, peer assessment, and self-assessment. Assessment can have different objectives such as placing learners in the right class, evaluating learner's language proficiency, and measuring learners' achievement (Nation & Macalister, 2010). Likewise, Ur (2012) believes that assessment is carried out for different reasons such as evaluating learners' overall level, evaluating learners' progress, evaluating how well learners have learnt the course's material, and also evaluating learners' weaknesses and strength for diagnostic purposes.

Generally, as Bachman and Palmer (2010) mention, in a language assessment, we are interested in making an interpretation regarding some aspects of learner's language ability and "the primary use of any language assessment is to collect information for making decisions" (p. 22). The decisions that are made based on the collected information have consequences for learners, teachers, and the language program, in the educational context in which language assessment happens; therefore, we intend to make decisions that have beneficial consequences (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

There are two main types of assessment: formative assessment and summative assessment. Brown (2004) states that formative assessment means "evaluating students in the process of forming their competencies and skills with the goal of helping them to continue their growth process" (p. 6). Simply stated, learners' formative assessment means using assessment procedures to collect information about the learning process (Fulcher, 2010); such assessment provides information about learners' progress (Douglas, 2010) and its purpose is to improve learning (Ur, 2012).

The second type of assessment is summative assessment. Brown (2004) states that "summative assessment aims to measure or summarize, what a student has grasped, and typically occurs at the end of a course or unit of instruction" (p. 6). Simply stated, the role of summative assessment is to measure learners' achievement (Douglas, 2010; Fulcher, 2010; Ur, 2012) or proficiency (Fulcher, 2010).

Brown (2004) introduces another categorization as well; he believes that assessment can be either informal or formal. Giving feedback to learners by teachers (e.g. comments on learners' performance and even response to learners' questions) is an instance of informal assessment. Actually, informal assessment is always used for formative purposes (Brown, 2004). On the other hand, the second kind of assessment in this categorization, i.e. formal assessment, is systematic and planned (Brown, 2004). While all tests can be placed under the category of formal assessment, formal assessment is not limited to testing; for instance, learners' journals and portfolios can be used as means of formal assessment (Brown, 2004).

Furthermore, Bachman and Palmer (2010) believe that there are two modes of language assessment: implicit assessment and explicit assessment. Implicit assessment is continuous, instantaneous, cyclical, and aimed at making formative decisions. In contrast, explicit assessment is clearly distinct from teaching and can be used for making both summative and formative decisions (Bachman & Palmer, 2010).

Harmer (2007) contrasts continuous assessment with exit tests. He believes that while an exit test is actually a final exam that determines the learner's grade, continuous assessment happens when a teacher assesses his/her learners at frequent intervals during a course or asks learners to keep a portfolio of all they have done from the very beginning of a course till the end. Harmer also believes that being an assessor is one of the roles that an EFL teacher should play.

According to Harmer (2007), EFL teachers assess their learners' performance and then give them feedback; for instance, an oral feedback in the class or a written grade at the end of the course. Therefore, the present study, by its focus on teachers' cognition of the ELT curriculum and its elements, was an attempt to shed light on the teachers' cognition of the language assessment.

Several studies have explored language assessment literacy and alternative modes of assessment (Brown and Hudson, 2012; Jalilzadeh and Dastgoshadeh, 2011; Koh, 2011; Mertler, 2003; Saito and Fujita, 2004; Volante and Fazio, 2007). However, no research was found to have been conducted on language assessment literacy and alternative modes of assessments simultaneously. The relationship between language assessment literacy and alternative modes of assessment has not been investigated to date.

## **METHODOLOGY**

A total of 200 Iranian EFL teachers from private language institutes and public high schools in three provinces of Northern Khorasan, Khuzestan and Tehran participated in this study. From among the 200 teachers who participated in the study, 80 teachers were teaching in high schools and 120 teachers were teaching in language institutes; 100 teachers were male and 100 teachers were female. Furthermore, 120 of the teachers held B.A. or lower degrees, while 80 teachers held M.A. or Ph.D. degrees. The subjects' ages ranged from 25 to 45. Out of 200 teachers, 40 teachers were randomly selected for interview from both private language institute and high school groups. The

sampling in the present study was convenience sampling in which the subjects were selected because of their convenient accessibility.

### **Instruments**

In order to examine the teachers' assessment literacy, Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory or CALI (Mertler, 2002) was administered. CALI was adapted from the *Teacher Assessment Literacy Questionnaire* (1993) by Plake and Impara (University of Nebraska-Lincoln, in cooperation with The National Council on Measurement in Education and the W.K. Kellogg Foundation). The CALI consists of 35 content-based items as well as 7 items on demographic information which are related to the extent teachers see themselves proficient in English, prepared for language teaching, and competent in language assessment. Furthermore, applying Cronbach's alpha consistency, the reliability rate of the questionnaire was found to be .81.

### **Design of the study**

This study applied a between-groups quasi-experimental design and included two treatment groups and two control groups to investigate into Iranian EFL teacher's assessment literacy and inclination towards the use of alternative assessment.

### **Procedures**

The data for the study were collected from private language institutes and public high schools in three provinces of Khorasan, Khoozestan, and Tehran. The participants were EFL teachers. To gather the data, the researcher used two instruments: an assessment literacy inventory and an interview as described earlier.

Regarding the questionnaire, the *Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory* was administered to the participants of the study. On average, it took them about an hour to complete the test.

### **Data Analysis**

The statistical analyses were carried out through SPSS version 20. In the first part, results of qualitative analysis is presented as follows:

Regarding the data obtained through the interview, after recording the interviews and transcribing them, the researcher used template organizing style method suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999) to prepare a template. The transcribed texts were coded using the predetermined template. The researcher quantified the coded data based on the learners' responses and applied frequency analyses to find out the percentages of responses to each question for both high school and language institute EFL teachers. The two groups' responses to each question were compared to find out the similarities and differences.

## RESULTS

Research question 1: Which type of alternative assessment is used more frequently by Iranian Institute EFL teachers?

Descriptive statistics were calculated for Iranian Institute teachers' use of alternative forms of assessments. Table 1 shows the results of descriptive statistics.

**Table 1.** Frequency of language Institute teachers' use of alternative forms of assessment

		Frequency	Percent
Valid	Portfolios	10	25.71
	Journals	5	8.57
	Conferences and interviews	4	5.71
	Observations	15	40
	Self - and peer assessments	8	20
	Total	42	100

As indicated in Table 1, only 42 teachers (out of 80 language institute teachers) used alternative forms of assessment. Portfolios were used by ten teachers, journals by 5 teachers, conferences and interviews only by 4 teachers, observations by 15 teachers and finally self- and peer assessments by 8 teachers. The Observation was the most frequently used alternative form of assessment employed by language institute teachers, and "conference and interview" was the least frequently used alternative form of assessment.

Research question 2: Is there any significant relationship between EFL teachers' years of experience and their assessment literacy level?

In order to answer the question, a Pearson Correlation Coefficient was run, the results of which are summarized in Tables 2 and 3.

**Table 2.** Descriptive statistics for EFL teachers' assessment literacy and years of experience

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Assessment Literacy	13.81	4.606	200
Years of Experience	6.65	4.649	200

Based on Table 2, the overall mean score for assessment literacy of the 200 EFL teachers was 13.81, and the mean of their years of experience was observed to be 6.65.

**Table 3.** The relationship between EFL teachers' assessment literacy and years of experience

		Years of Experience
Assessment Literacy	Pearson Correlation	.625**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	188

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As is evident from Table 3, there is a statistically significant positive correlation between assessment literacy and years of experience. That is to say the higher the years of experience the more literate the teachers will be.

Research question 3: Is there any significant difference between teachers holding MA and Ph.D. with teachers holding BA and lower degrees regarding their assessment literacy?

In order to answer the last research question, an Independent Samples t-test was utilized (Tables 4 and 5).

**Table 4.** Descriptive statistics for teachers holding MA and Ph.D. with teachers holding BA and lower degrees

	Degree	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Assessment Literacy	BA and lower	120	11.87	3.65	.34
	MA and higher	80	16.76	4.34	.50

As is evident from Table 4, there were 120 teachers holding B.A. or lower degrees whose mean and standard deviation were 11.87 and 3.65, respectively. On the other hand, the mean and standard deviation for the 80 teachers with degrees of M.A. or Ph.D. were 16.76 and 4.37, in order.

**Table 5.** Independents Samples t-test between teachers holding MA and Ph.D. with teachers holding BA and lower degrees

		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2- tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower		Upper
Assessment Literacy	Equal variances assumed	1.36	.245	-8.28	184	.000	-4.89	.590	-6.05	-3.72
	Equal variances not assumed			-7.99	137.26	.000	-4.89	.612	-6.10	-3.68

As obvious in Table 5,  $t_{184} = -8.28$  ( $p < .05$ ), a significant difference existed between the two groups, namely, those holding MA and Ph.D. with those holding BA and lower degrees; that is teachers holding MA and Ph.D. ( $M=16.76$ ,  $SD =4.34$ ) had higher level of assessment literacy than teachers holding BA and lower degrees ( $M=11.87$ ,  $SD =3.65$ ).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions can be drawn; first, there is a significant positive relationship between EFL teachers' assessment literacy and the type of alternative forms of assessment they use, that is, if the teachers are more literate in assessment, it is more probable that they utilize alternative forms of assessment.

Second, Iranian teachers' assessment literacy is significantly correlated with their years of experience. It was found that the more experienced the teachers, the more assessment literate they are. This could plausibly be justified by the premise that as the teachers gain more practice they become more familiar with the assessment approaches. Third, regarding assessment literacy, M.A. and Ph.D. teachers are significantly different from teachers with B.A. and lower degrees; i.e. the teachers with higher degrees had a higher level of assessment literacy.

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