

EFL Teachers' Assessment Preferences and Prevalent Practices: The Case of Jordan

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ABSTRACT

Recently, there has been a great expansion in the role of assessment in language instruction and education at large. This study investigated EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers' perceptions and practices associated with learners' language progress assessment. A questionnaire was developed and provided to 107 teachers in Jordan. The study addressed five dimensions: reasons behind assessment, purposes, techniques, sources, and potential challenges. The findings of the study suggest that more enhancement is required for teachers' positive convictions associated with assessment process. Teachers continue using assessment for more "official" reasons with emphasis on "formal" rather than "alternative" assessment. Moreover, senior teachers and supervisors seem to play a minimal resource for EFL teachers, who still encounter some assessment-related challenges. These findings invite interventions towards better, more effective assessment of EFL students' progress.

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented widespread of the English language at an international level during an era characterized by globalization has triggered educators, and EFL researchers in particular, to look for more effective teaching approaches and assessment strategies. Thus, "the role of language assessment in particular has expanded in education and wider society" (Taylor, 2013, p. 405) bringing a heavier weight for teachers and their instructional practices inside the classroom. These practices are highly influenced by the beliefs they hold about the components of the educational process. Thus, this study aims at contributing to our knowledge about EFL teachers' beliefs and their actual practices associated with assessment. It focuses on actual assessment practices based on the premise that "assessment practices and purposes are mostly affected by teachers' beliefs and attitudes about assessment" (Han & Kaya, 2014, p. 77).

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Taylor (2013), Robert Lado's (1961) seminal *Language Testing* volume, was practically the knowledge-based compared to opinion-based *assessment literacy* concept. Lado aimed to target, in

addition to test makers, "a much wider range of key stakeholder constituencies including: existing teachers of foreign languages; prospective language teachers and, presumably, those in training; linguists and language specialists; teachers; and graduate students". Yet, scholars after more than half a century are still questioning "what constitutes the effective teaching and testing of languages continues to this day in a world that is still characterized by globalization and technological advances" (p. 404).

In addition to their knowledge of content, language, and competence in EFL instruction, EFL teachers need to be literate in assessment. Assessment literacy is essential as it "provides teachers with the knowledge and necessary tools to help them understand what they are assessing, how they need to assess it according to specific purposes, and what decisions they need to make in order to assess their learners effectively and maximize learning" (Djoub, 2017, p. 10). Assessment literacy, according to Coombe et al. (2009, cited in Djoub, 2017) can hardly be attained without the teacher's clear understanding of the meaning of effective assessment within the educational context, which may influence the assessment approach, and exposure to effective training, whether online or in the form of hands-on training workshops. Additionally, the abundance of

assessment resources and an embracement to educational change are very crucial.

Despite this, “misconception and fuzziness often surround what assessment is”, there is a thin line between what each of assessment and evaluation refers to (Drid, 2018, p. 293). Thus, whereas assessment concerns “information collection about a student to help in decision making about his/her progress and language development, evaluation is associated with the interpretation of assessment results in terms of the worthiness of performance in light of a well-established, specific standard” (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004).

Distinction has also recently been made between *assessment of learning* (AOL) and *assessment for learning* (AFL). Whereas the first is related to “reporting and decision-making purposes and thus making summative judgments of learning outcomes”, while the latter “integrates assessment into instruction as an ongoing process, where teachers use assessment information to make adjustments in their instructional endeavors and resources” (cf. Öz, 2014, p. 775). This means that teachers are required to go beyond the traditional role of assessing what students have achieved towards investing the assessment outcomes for improving their learning.

It seems improper to assume that more years of teaching experience will guarantee the development of the teacher’s assessment literacy. As Djoub (2017) has noted, “teaching experience alone has not allowed them to learn about how language assessment needs to be conducted more effectively, and they have therefore failed to develop their assessment literacy and share it with their learners” (p. 33).

In a recent study, Djoub (2017) administered a ten-question web-based survey to an international audience of EFL teachers with the purpose of investigating the effect of teacher’s assessment literacy on the assessment practices. Djoub concluded that the raining EFL teachers received was insufficient and their “beliefs and views concerning what assessment means for them in general and what constitutes sound assessment in particular reflect their lack of assessment literacy” (p. 22). Teachers were not aware of assessment contribution to student learning beyond measuring it, nor were they aware of the wide array of assessment techniques.

In their survey-based study on 56 public primary school Turkish EFL teachers, Kirkgoz, Babanoglu, and Ağçam (2017) addressed the type of assessment and questions those teachers used. Results indicated high-use frequency of traditional paper-based tests, performance activities, and observation, and multiple-

choice questions were the common question type at a time when preferences favored communication-based over traditional assessment. A gap between actual preferences and actual practices can be clearly seen in these findings.

Han and Kaya (2014) surveyed 95 Turkish EFL teachers at primary and secondary schools with the purpose of exploring their assessment practices and habits, views, thoughts and feelings about assessment. They reported that less attention is paid to listening and writing, with speaking being viewed as the most challenging skill to assess. No differences were reported between EFL assessment practice associated with the teacher’s gender. However, there was a significant impact for class size. The impact of teacher assessment training was minimal with heavy reliance on the teacher’s personal assessment preferences. There was also no impact for the teaching hours or the number of quizzes on the teacher’s assessment preferences.

Also, within the Turkish context, Öz (2014) administered an online self-report to 120 EFL teachers. Findings showed heavy reliance on conventional --compared to formative-- assessment methods. The adoption of monitoring and scaffolding practices differed significantly across years of teaching experience, gender, and school type (public vs. private). Öz recommended that EFL teachers revisit their assessment practices and develop assessment-for-learning strategies and feedback procedures, which teachers can hardly accomplish without help and support.

Nezakatgoo (2011) used a quasi-experimental design study on 40 university students to determine the impact of portfolio-based writing assessment. Results revealed that portfolio-based assessment was more effective than traditional evaluation in terms of students’ writing improvement as well as in final-exam scores.

Chang (2008) administered a survey to 520 elementary school EFL teachers from Northern Taiwan. The majority praised portfolio assessment when it came to the practice of portfolio; the case was not the same when it came to practice, suggesting some discrepancy between teachers’ beliefs and practices. Moreover, whereas the overall findings suggested that teachers from different backgrounds with different levels of experience used multiple assessment together with traditional assessment, the most challenging circumstances against using alternative assessment were factors related to their work overload, time constraints, large class size, time-consuming activities, and concerns associated with the subjectivity enveloping multiple assessment.

More than two decades ago, Abbas (1994) conducted a study that addressed the criteria for EFL assessment in general and secondary school EFL exit exams in particular in Jordan. The results revealed that the process was not effective enough, nor were the criteria of effective language exams met, suggesting an educational reform in the area of language assessment.

Nonetheless, despite the overwhelming increase in the number of EFL learners, the impact of high-stake standardized testing, and the significance of instructional assessment, not much has been uncovered about EFL instructors' assessment and evaluation performance (Cheng, Rogers, & Hu, 2004). There is evidence supporting the idea that teacher education and language assessment research is quite limited, with an increasing awareness of the need for assessment literacy (Montee, Bach, Donovan, & Thompson, 2013). Moreover, previous research on EFL assessment tends to focus on a specific assessment strategy, which leaves a gap in the reader's mind associated with the comprehensive status quo of assessment practices. It also rarely links both beliefs and actual practices together.

Coombe, Troudi, and Al-Hamly (2012) cite research documenting that teachers typically spend no less than a third of their time in engagement with assessment and its related activities, yet without achieving the beneficial outcomes of effective assessment. It is urgent, accordingly, to explore the actual practices of EFL teachers and the beliefs they hold. Without doing so, tremendous efforts and much time can continue to be spent fruitlessly.

Especially during the last decade, the Ministry of Education in Jordan has attended to the importance of improving students' competence in English, resulting in new legislations that requires the introduction of English as a school subject starting from the first grade (5-6 forty-five-minute sessions a week) (Baniabdelrahman, 2010). Given these efforts, this study aims to thoroughly investigate EFL teachers' preferences and practices associated with EFL assessment in Jordanian schools and their association with some independent variables towards enhancing the level of awareness of the significance of assessment for learning and the variety of techniques teachers can use.

This study aimed to answer the following major question:

1. What beliefs do EFL teachers in Jordan hold about assessment and what assessment practices do they report in terms of:

a. the motive behind assessment;

b. the reasons behind assessment;

c. source of assessment techniques;

d. the common types/forms of assessment; and

e. the challenges or difficulties associated with performing assessment.

METHOD

Participants

The sample of the study comprised a convenient sample of 107 EFL teachers, almost 65% of whom were female teachers. The majority (78%) were teaching at public schools. They were teaching basic (61%) aged 6-15 and secondary grades (39%) aged 16-17. The majority (60%) were BA holders whereas 22% were higher diploma holders and 18% held a Master's degree or PhD. 77% of the participants had 8-year and above of teaching experience.

Instrument of the study

The data for this study was collected using a questionnaire designed for its purpose in light of a review of the literature pertinent to EFL assessment. The questionnaire was validated through presenting it to a seven-member panel of three university professors (two in EFL and one in measurement and evaluation) and four practicing teachers. For reliability, the survey was piloted (test-retest) on 23 teachers who were later excluded from its participants, with an alpha coefficient of .84 for the entire instrument. The survey elicited general demographic information as well as specific information about teachers' perceptions and practices associated with the assessment they perform. In addition to demographics, the survey included questions about the motive behind assessment (2 items), the purpose behind assessment (12 items), source of assessment techniques (7 items), the common types/forms of assessment (17 items), and the challenges or difficulties associated with performing assessment (12 items). The questionnaire adopted a 5-point liker scale (strongly agree= 5, agree=4, undecided= 3, disagree =2, and strongly disagree=1).

Data collection

Data for the current study were collected mainly face-to-face. Still, however, a few participants preferred having it sent to them via e-mail.

Data analysis

After survey distribution and collection, questionnaires were checked for completion, and data from 107 questionnaires were fed into and analyzed

for results using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) 21.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Motives behind assessment

The first question on the survey aimed at eliciting teachers' views about the extent to which they believed assessment is important: A few (7%) reported *strong agreement*, almost two thirds (60%) reported their *agreement*, 23% expressed *disagreement*, whereas 2% reported their *strong disagreement*, and the others were undecided. As to whether EFL teachers performed assessment because they are convinced (rather than because they are required), only 7% reported *strong agreement* that they perform it because they are convinced, almost

one third (30%) reported *agreement* that they are convinced, 30% reported *disagreement*, and very few (2%) reported *strong disagreement* that they are convinced, and the others were undecided.

Reasons behind assessment

The second question with its corresponding items aimed at exploring the purpose behind assessment. As shown in Table 1, the strongest motives behind performing assessment relate to providing information to school administration and determining students' final grades. Nonetheless, lower levels of agreement were associated with grouping students for instruction purposes, making students work harder, or preparing students for standardized tests (e.g. TOEFL), they might need to take in the future.

Table 1: Purposes behind EFL assessment

Purpose behind Assessment	Mean	Std. Dev.
- provide information to my school administration	4.68	.66
- determine the final grades for my students	4.50	.84
- diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my own teaching	4.48	.75
- obtain information on my students' progress	4.47	.78
- motivate my students to learn	4.41	.73
- diagnose strengths and weaknesses in my students	4.39	.49
- provide feedback to students' progress through the course	4.36	.73
- plan my instruction	4.24	.78
- developed by myself	4.23	.98
- formally document growth in student learning	4.21	.99
- group my students for instruction purposes	3.87	1.01
- make my students work harder	2.86	1.50
- prepare my students for standardized tests they might need to take in the future (e.g. TOEFL)	2.81	1.41

Source of assessment techniques

The third concern for this study is to investigate the source of assessment EFL teachers use. As presented in Table 2, most of the assessment activities are self-

(or peer) prepared with reliance on the internet as well. Teachers reported less reliance on senior instructors and the least dependence was on EFL supervisors.

Table 2: Source of Assessment Activities

Source of Assessment Activities	Mean	Std. Dev.
- prepared by other instructors and myself	4.49	.74
- developed by myself	4.23	.98
- found on the Internet	4.22	.83
- obtained from published textbooks	3.05	1.74
- developed by myself and reviewed by my supervisor	3.02	1.48
- prepared by a selected group of senior instructors	2.92	1.54
- prepared by my supervisor	2.64	1.40

Common types/forms of assessment

Given the wide array of options teachers have at their disposal, the fourth major concern of this study addressed the techniques EFL teachers depend on in assessing their students' academic performance. The results, Table 3, indicate clearly that the traditional pencil and paper test technique topped the rank. In

addition, teachers reported frequent use of student-performed oral descriptions of events or objects, sentence-completion questions, editing a piece of writing, and in-class oral discussions, and oral reading/dictation. Nonetheless, long essay (more than one page), text summaries, student portfolios, and journals are the least frequently used.

Table 3: EFL assessment techniques and their use frequency by teachers

EFL assessment techniques and their use frequency by teachers	Mean	Std. Dev.
- teacher-made tests containing or asking students	4.47	.69
- provide an oral description of an event or object	4.31	.94
- sentence-completion items	4.29	.93
- editing a piece of writing	4.24	.83
- oral discussion in class	4.19	.80
- oral reading/dictation	4.15	.99
- oral interviews/questioning	3.96	1.14
- short essay (less than one page)	3.92	1.07
- oral presentations	3.86	1.14
- standardized speaking tests	3.17	1.55
- retell a story after listening to a passage	3.13	1.44
- standardized writing tests	3.12	1.43
- translation	3.06	1.52
- long essay (more than one page)	3.04	1.67
- student summaries of what is read/listened to	2.87	1.49
- student portfolio	2.55	1.36
- student journal	2.53	1.62

Challenges or difficulties associated with performing assessment

Finally, the fifth target of the current study is to shed light on the challenges EFL teachers encounter in assessment. The results (Table 4) indicate that grading students' work, analyzing their results, and developing a rubric for grading students' answers or performance

are the most challenging areas of assessment. The least challenging areas include providing students with adequate feedback, identifying the best type of question format (open-ended, multiple-choice, etc.), and designing questions based on content. Assigning clear objectives of student assessment and making decisions on student's success and failure were the least struggle of EFL teachers.

Table 4: Areas of Challenge in EFL Assessment

Areas of Challenge in EFL Assessment	Mean	Std. Dev.
- grading students' work	4.30	.97
- analyzing students' results	4.04	1.51
- developing a rubric for grading students' answers or performance	4.01	1.12
- drawing a chart of test-characteristics	3.80	1.17
- discussing results with supervisors and school administration	3.32	1.32
- discussing results with parents	3.24	1.50
- administering the test	3.07	1.00
- providing students with adequate feedback	2.75	1.34
- identifying the best type of question format (open-ended, multiple-choice, etc.)	2.72	1.54
- drawing questions based on content	2.67	1.21
- assigning clear objectives of student assessment	2.49	1.51
- making decisions on students' success and failure	2.37	1.25

EFL teachers' views about the reason behind assessment indicate that no less than two thirds are convinced with the beneficial role assessment plays in teaching, a finding that mirrors the assumption about the time teachers spend on assessment as a part of their teaching (cf. Troudi & Al-Hamly, 2012). The percentage of those who expressed strong disagreement (3.7%) is low but still they need to be convinced with the advantages of assessment. In addition, no less than one third of the teachers reported strong agreement that practicing assessment is a result of regulations requiring them to do so. There is no contradiction --it seems-- between being convinced and having regulations mandating assessment. One possible interpretation, however, could be that the only reason behind conducting assessment is the regulations, and in this case it will be wise to consider improving teachers' conception pertinent to the significance of assessment for learning.

Teachers' responses about the motives behind assessment suggest an influence for the frequently reported reasons, namely providing information to school administration and determining students' final grades. The belief that assessment leads to more students' work seems unconvincing for teachers, and their students' need for sitting international standardized tests does not seem to be an urgent need. Possibly teachers are occupied with the latter idea since neither the secondary stage exit exam (*tawjihi* as called in Jordan) nor university admission requires a score on such standardized tests. In countries where university admission requires a score on international standardized tests (e.g., TOEFL or IELTS), EFL teachers would probably assign more weight for preparing students for such tests. This stated, it seems a weakness in the educational system of Jordan at the school level that students' grading on their secondary school exam is limited to achievement tests that do not necessarily measure proficiency (cf. Sasaki, 2008).

The results pertinent to the in assessment EFL teachers' source of knowledge use clearly indicate over-reliance on themselves and other peers in addition to the internet. Teachers reported less reliance on supervisors, whether in the preparation or consultation in assessment matters. Senior instructors seem to play a very limited role in helping towards effective assessment. Even though the majority of the participants in this study can be labeled as "experienced" teachers, which can help in interpreting this result, consultation with senior instructors and supervisors can be of great help. One more possible interpretation for these results lies in the fact that Jordan adopts a centralized system of education, whereby the textbooks used are adopted country-wide

with specific details provided in the teacher's book guiding teachers on techniques for handling assessment issues. It seems that, after all, teachers need a more supportive role from supervisors and senior teachers.

In response to the fourth question addressing the type of assessment techniques used, the results suggest that teachers lean more toward using traditional, rather than alternative assessment. As has become commonly known, "oral exams, true-false, multiple-choice, matching, completion, short-answer, and extended short-answer test items" belong to traditional assessment whereas "essay items, research papers, portfolios, models, and structured and unstructured performance assessments" belong to alternative assessments (Alkharusi, 2008: 250). Notably, the use of traditional pencil and paper test technique, student-performed oral descriptions of events or objects, sentence-completion questions, editing a piece of writing, and in-class oral discussions, and oral reading/dictation was the most frequent. This, however, came at the expense of alternative-assessment-related techniques such as long essay (more than one page), text summaries, student portfolios and journals. This finding coincides with Djoub's (2017) finding that 80% of her study sample used regular pen and paper tests at a time when almost two thirds used portfolios and almost only one third used journal writing, and a very low percentage used role play (p. 17). Teachers, accordingly, need more explanations about and encouragement to adopt alternative assessment techniques that give clearer evidence on students' advancement in performance rather than being limited to achievement. More emphasis is required on strategies that are consistent with the communicative aspect of language instruction. This finding aligns with what scholars (e.g., Troudi & Al-Hamly, 2012) confirm, namely that much work can be done on assessment with little beneficial outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The current study aimed at investigating EFL teachers' perceptions and practices associated with the assessment of learner's language progress. It addressed five dimensions: reasons behind assessment, purposes, techniques, sources, and potential challenges. The findings of the study suggest that more enhancements are required for teachers' positive convictions associated with the assessment process. Teachers seem to continue using assessment for more "official" reasons with an emphasis on "formal" rather than alternative assessment.

Moreover, senior teachers and supervisors seem to play a very minimal resource for EFL teachers, and

there are still some challenges teachers encounter, which invites interventions towards better, more effective assessment of EFL students' progress. For example, grading students' work, analyzing their results, and developing a rubric for grading students' answers or performance continue to be sources of challenge for EFL teachers.

Teachers seem to be still obsessed with formal, rather than informal, assessment. This is interpreted within their challenge in dealing with "student's journal or portfolio of material, as a formal assessment of the attainment of certain course objectives, but it is problematic to call those two procedures "tests" (Brown, 2004:6). Tests, formal tests, it seems, are what counts as true testing for assessment from the views of this study's participants. This also confirms Brown's (2004) suggestion that designing assessment rubrics that are communicative and performance-based remains to be a challenge for EFL teachers.

In-service teacher training into assessment literacy is encouraged in order to enhance EFL teachers' multi-dimensional awareness on the use of multiple assessment techniques such as observations, checklists, questionnaires to develop teachers' ability to carry out effective assessment. Such training can help in enhancing teachers' understanding of what sound assessment is and how it should be administered.

Finally, it should be noted that this paper is not without limitations. Studies addressing particular (lower basic, upper basic, or secondary) school levels would be very helpful. The type of school to which an EFL teacher belongs might play a role in shaping both beliefs and/or practices. The sample size remains an issue, too. There seems to be a clear need for studies on the same topic involving larger samples for wider generalizability.

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