ELT Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy: Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

A critical understanding and implementation of assessment is an essential aspect of any language program. There has been growing interest in examining teachers' mastery and application of assessment literacy which addresses the knowledge and skills teachers need in order to use assessment effectively to evaluate and improve student learning. The present study was carried out with the aim of examining assessment-related perceptions and practices of Iranian ELT teachers. Eighteen male (4) and female (14) EFL instructors enjoying various educational status and levels of experience from different English language institutes in Iran participated in this study. They were divided into three groups based on their teaching experience (low, mid, high). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants on an individual basis. All the interviews were recorded by voice recorder and saved in audio files in MP3 format. Then, they were transcribed and analyzed through content analysis to discern recurring themes. Analysis of the responses revealed that teachers across the three groups were familiar with the basic concepts and terminologies in assessment. Another noteworthy finding is that teaching experience appears to make no significant difference in the way teachers perceive assessment. Moreover, although the participants in this study were assessment literate, this literacy was not reflected in their practices. The findings have implications for language testing profession and also provide suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Assessment, Language Assessment Literacy, Teachers' Perception of Assessment, Teachers' Assessment Practices.

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Introduction

Teaching and assessment are two interrelated concepts which affect one another greatly "forming a relationship in which the two inform and improve each other" (Malone, 2011). Assessment is undoubtedly one of the most significant and at the same time complicated tasks. Many educational systems are attempting to reengineer and upgrade their assessment and testing procedures to incorporate new approaches and techniques. Therefore, teachers' knowledge of assessment or assessment literacy has a great effect on the quality of education. That is why the notion of assessment literacy has inaugurated a new line of research in literature on assessment.

O'Malley and Valdez Pierce (1996, p. 3, as cited in Rea-Dickins, 2001) identify six purposes for assessment: 1. Screening and identification, 2. Placement, 3. Reclassification or exit, 4. Monitoring students' progress, 5. Program evaluation and 6. Accountability. Frey and Schmitt (2007) believe that formative assessment is effective since it attempts to adapt teaching and learning to meet learners' needs. In classrooms, teachers are assessors and consumers of the information provided through assessment. Classroom assessment offer teachers ways to gain feedback on the effectiveness of their teaching practices and techniques. Critical understanding of classroom assessment enables teachers to "improve the quality of education for all students by developing rigorous standards and aligning instruction and assessment" (Llosa, 2011, p. 367).

Mertler and Campbell (2005) in an effort to measure teachers' assessment literacy, developed an instrument, titled the Assessment Literacy Inventory (ALI). Kahl et al. (2013) confirmed the superficiality of long-held perceptions of many teacher education programs regarding the assessment knowledge and skills that should be taught to pre-service teachers. In response to the need to improve the quality of assessment literacy programs and meet the demands of teachers, they proposed a framework that defines the domain of assessment literacy, including knowledge, skills and competencies that should be embedded into any assessment course. Table 1 below shows the central assessment components that are required for anyone who attempts to become assessment literate.

Table 1

The Domain of Assessment Literacy for Teachers and School Administrators

Standards	Teachers must be able to create/select and effectively use classroom assessments for a variety of purposes.		Teachers and administrators must be able to select and effectively interpret and use results from external interim and summative assessments designed for a variety of purposes.
Category of Measures	**Formative**	**Classroom Summative**	**External Interim and Summative**
Types of Measures	▪ Formative assessment evidence gathering techniques	▪ Selected-response ▪ Constructed-response ▪ Performance tasks ▪ Portfolios	▪ District benchmark ▪ Diagnostic ▪ General achievement ▪ Adaptive ▪ State accountability

Quality of Measures	▪ Unpacking standards
	▪ Depth of knowledge
	▪ Quality of evidence regarding learning targets
		▪ Good and bad items/tasks
		▪ Reliability and validity
		  · Test length
		  · Domain representation (See "Alignment")
			▪ Match to purpose
			▪ Universal Design
			▪ Item quality in banks and tests
			▪ Item selection criteria
			▪ Alignment
			  · Categorical concurrence
			  · Depth of knowledge
			  · Range of knowledge
			  · Balance of representation
			▪ Technical characteristics (reliability, validity)

Results and Their Use	▪ Quality and use of feedback
	▪ Use of data to inform instruction
		▪ Scores vs. grades
		▪ Effective and detrimental grading practices
			▪ Reporting statistics
			  · Scaled scores
			  · Percentile ranks
			  · Performance levels
			▪ Subgroup/subtest results
			▪ "Growth" and longitudinal data
			▪ Comparability issues

Sikka et al. (2007) conducted a case study exploring practicing teachers' beliefs and uses of assessment. The results indicated a need for inclusion and use of different types of assessment in teacher training programs. Volante and Fazio (2007) examined the assessment literacy of 69 primary/junior teacher candidates in all four years of their concurrent program using survey. The findings of the study indicated that most candidates suggested summative purposes for assessment and only a minority expressed formative purposes. They favored observational techniques and personal communication.

Zhang and Burry-Stock (2003) investigated 297 teachers' assessment practices across varying teaching levels and content areas, as well as teachers' self-perceived assessment skills as a function of teaching experience and measurement training. The results of this study showed a rise in the use of objective tests in classroom assessment and an increased concern for assessment quality in line with increase in grade level. There was also variation in teachers' assessment practices across content areas. Sahinkarakas (2012) attempted to explore the role of teaching experience on teachers' perceptions of language assessment. To this end, she asked prospective language teachers and language teachers with different years of teaching experience to describe 'language assessment' using a metaphor. Then, she analyzed the metaphors and grouped them into themes. The results revealed four main themes: 1.

Assessment as a formative tool, 2. Assessment as a summative tool, 3. Assessment as something agitating, and 4. Assessment as a sign of self-efficacy. Mertler (2003) also explored and compared the role of classroom experience on assessment literacy of pre-service and in-service teachers. Both groups were surveyed by using the *Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory (CALI)* which was developed for this purpose. The findings of the study supported the positive impact of experience on assessment literacy and there were significant differences between the two groups, with the in-service teachers scoring higher than the pre-service teachers.

Mertler (1998) carried out a study to examine teachers' assessment practices in the state of Ohio and to see if they use traditional or alternative types of assessment in their classrooms. Data was collected through surveying 625 K-12 teachers from different grade levels and with different years of teaching experience. The results revealed significant differences in assessments practices of teachers at different school levels, with different years of experience, and different school locations. Moreover, teachers at elementary level reported more frequent application of alternative assessment techniques than middle and high school levels. The findings imply the need to address the actual needs of teachers at different grade level with respect to assessment techniques and knowledge. Shim (2009) investigated teachers' perceptions and practices regarding classroom-based English language assessment by using questionnaire and interviewing with some of the participants of the study. The findings of the study indicated that teachers were assessment literate and aware of the principles of assessment and testing, although they did not put a number of those principles into practice. Also, assessment emerged to be affected by some other factors that the teachers had no control over them such as overcrowded classrooms, heavy teaching loads, the central bureaucracy of the education system which controls primary education, and a shortage of funding for foreign language teaching. Muñoz et al. (2012) studied sixty-two Colombian teachers' beliefs about assessment and the results revealed a gap between perceptions and practices of the teachers which needed to be bridged through teacher training courses. Qassim (2008) examined the factors that affect teachers' assessment practices in public secondary schools in the state of Qatar through teachers' survey responses and focus group interviews. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the teachers believed that they were assessment literate and claimed to reflect their knowledge in their practices. Curriculum workload, teaching time and class size were reported as factors which negatively influenced the application of various assessment forms in the classroom. Based on teachers' responses, most of them had not received any kind of training with respect to assessment and they appreciated assessment-related training courses and workshops. Susuwele-Banda (2005) investigated teachers' perceptions and practices of classroom assessment in mathematics through questionnaire, observation and interview. Like other studies, this one indicated a gap between teachers' perceived and actual assessment practices in the classroom. It is worth noting that this study did not show any impact of teaching experience on teachers' assessment-related perceptions and practices.

Lukin et al. (2004) examined the effectiveness teacher training programs in assessment. The findings of the study indicated that the training programs had positively affected teachers' confidence, knowledge and skills of assessment. Language assessment courses (LACs) are held to help teachers

promote their assessment literacy. Jeong (2013) attempted to find out if there is any difference in the content and quality of LACs of different instructors_ language testers vs. non-language testers. To this end, an online instructor survey and in-depth follow-up phone interviews were used. The findings showed significant differences in the content of the courses in six topic areas: test specifications, test theory, basic statistics, classroom assessment, rubric development, and test accommodation. Also, the results indicated difference in the confidence of these two groups of instructors, with non-language testers being less confident than language testers. Malone (2013) conducted a study to elicit feedback on the content of a tutorial which was developed to promote foreign language instructors' knowledge of the basics of assessment. Forty-four US language instructors and thirty language testers participated in this project that were surveyed and interviewed on the content of the tutorial. The results revealed that what was considered as essential technical information regarding assessment by language testers was different from that of language educators. This study implies that experts' beliefs about the basics of assessment covered in the materials differs based on their perspective and needs. Therefore, this factor needs to be taken into account by materials developers in developing tutorials and training programs. O'Loughlin (2013) conducted a study to investigate assessment literacy needs of test score users and how their needs are being met. The data for this study, related to IELTS, was collected from fifty staff at two large Australian universities through an online survey and fifteen follow-up interviews with survey respondents. The results showed that the participants needed information about IELTS test in order to guide prospective international students and that information sessions and online tutorials were most favored ways of learning about IELTS test. Pill and Harding (2013) examined the language assessment literacy of non-practitioners by investigating the misconceptions about language testing in the discourse of 13 public hearing transcripts of Australian parliamentary inquiry into the registration processes and support for overseas trained doctors, focusing on the parts assessing their language proficiency. The findings indicated LAL problem among non-practitioners. This study challenges the language testing profession to expand its scope to bridge this gap. Scarino (2013) noted that "Developing the language assessment literacy of teachers in in-service teacher education necessitates a consideration and integration of not only the knowledge base required for language assessment, but also inter-related understandings of language, culture and learning" (p. 324). She also pointed to the need for test users and test developers to develop knowledge of different assessment processes in order to be able to interpret and evaluate their own assessment practices.

In response to the expanding growth and significance of assessment and testing, Taylor (2013) pointed to the importance of understanding the development and maturation of assessment literacy in order to uncover the principles underlying assessment practices. In fact, language testers and test developers need to be sensitive to different facets of assessment.

Though throughout literature on classroom assessment many studies have asserted the effectiveness of classroom assessment techniques in improving learning and quality of education, the results of Simpson-Beck's (2011) study did not support the aforementioned assertion.

The current study was conducted to investigate teachers' perceptions of assessment and its reflection in their practices in their classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The way teachers perceive assessment and their mastery of assessment literacy knowledge and competencies may influence the way they teach and assess their students. While several researchers have studied the effects of different types of assessment, review of related literature indicates a relative lack of work on LAL.

Assessment literacy is an integral component of teacher education programs. The present study is supposed to shed some light on LAL and contribute to teacher education programs by providing guidelines with regards to identification and evaluation of appropriate assessments for specific purposes, analysis of empirical data to improve one's own instructional and assessment practices, interpretation and application of assessment results in appropriate ways and integration of assessment and its outcomes into the overall pedagogic/decision-making process.

The present study was carried out with the aim of examining assessment-related perceptions and practices of ELT teachers to see how effectively they perceive and use assessment to promote student learning, analyze data, and make decisions from such data; that is, to be effective consumers and users of assessments. Therefore, to accomplish the purpose of this study, the following research questions were developed:

- How do high- and low-experienced ELT teachers perceive assessment and various assessment-related aspects of language programs?
- To what extent ELT teachers' language assessment literacy is reflected in their practices?

Method

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of eighteen male (4) and female (14) EFL instructors enjoying various educational status and levels of experience from different English language institutes in Iran, selected by convenience sampling. Their teaching experiences ranged from 1 to 14 years. Of these participants, 3 had Bachelor's degrees; 13 were reading for a Master's degree in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL); 2 were reading for a doctorate degree in TEFL. Participants were divided into three groups based on their teaching experience (low, mid, high). The following table shows the features of the participants of this study.

Table 2

Description of the classification of participants

Teaching experience (years)	1 -5 (low)	6 -10 (mid)	11 -15 (high)
Number of participants	9 (50%)	6 (33.3%)	3 (16.7%)

Instruments

For the purpose of this study, a semi-structured interview approach was used (Appendix A). To ensure that the interview questions were aligned with the research questions, the researcher conferred with her academic advisor. The focus of the questions was on eliciting teachers' perceptions and practices with respect to language assessment, taking the role of teaching experience into account.

Procedure

Before conducting the interviews, a brief explanation was given to the interviewees to refresh their memories. Then, semi-structured interviews were conducted with all the participants on an individual basis. All the interviews were recorded by voice recorder and saved in audio files in MP3 format. Then they were transcribed and analyzed through content analysis to discern recurring themes.

Results and Discussion

In the following sections of this paper, teachers' perceptions and practices are analyzed and discussed separately to examine if the teaching experience plays any significant role in their conceptions of assessment.

Perceptions

All the participants in the current study confirmed the integral role of assessment in any language program and they provided a number of characteristics attributed to a good and sound assessment. These characteristics will shed light on how teachers with different teaching experience perceive assessment, defining the *what* and *why* of assessment from their perspectives. Table 3 lists the fundamental features of a good assessment from the viewpoint of the respondents and their frequency in the three groups under study.

Table 3

Characteristics of a good assessment

Characteristics	Low-experienced	Mid-experienced	High-experienced
Motivating	1	*	**1**
Fair	1	*	**2**
Authentic	*	1	*
Valid	3	`1	*
Reliable	3	1	*
Unbiased/objective	1	1	*
Based on the objectives of the course	3	3	**2**
Assessing achievement	6	2	**3**
Diagnostic	1	2	*

The results in Table 3 indicates that the most frequently mentioned features of a good assessment by the teachers are that assessment should evaluate and assess learners' achievement in order to examine whether they have learned the materials covered throughout the course and that assessment should reflect the objectives of the course. Moreover, the features listed in the above table implies that teachers with different teaching experience (low, mid, high) have an overall knowledge of the fundamental issues in assessment and testing.

All the language teachers asserted that students should be informed of what they will be assessed on since this awareness will have positive impact on their performance. However, this awareness-raising should be implicit and general rather than explicit and specific. In addition, they considered it as students' rights to be aware of the assessment rubrics to avoid puzzlement and improve their performance.

In contrast to the ministry of education and most of the language institutes which heavily rely on students' scores as the representative of their knowledge, the majority of the respondents asserted that scores are not a sufficient indicator of students' actual performance and knowledge unless both formative and summative assessments are taken into consideration to represent the learners' potential. However, 7 out of 18 teachers asserted that they get satisfied with the assessment results when their students get good marks. Others claimed that they are satisfied when they observe progress and improvement in their students' education at the end of the course or program in comparison to the outset. In fact, satisfaction is felt when there is a match between the expectations of teachers, learners and the program. An English instructor enjoying more than 6 years of teaching experience believed that "satisfaction is felt when assessment leads to students' motivation, when assessment leads to teachers' real feedback of their current knowledge and level of the students and also when it does not demotivate students".

All the teachers except one confirmed the washback effect of assessment on the way students study and do assignments. They believed that assessment motivates students' better preparation and further learning by identifying their strengths and weaknesses, so that the students focus on the parts that require further attention. The teacher who had a different view separated his responsibility and practices from that of the learners', considering no relationship between the two.

Validity and fairness are considered as two significant features of assessment that require attention on the part of teachers and administrators. All the teachers, regardless of their teaching experience, expressed uncertainty with respect to the fairness and validity of their assessment practices, although they attempted to consider these two features.

Practices

Effective assessment practices act as facilitator in the process of language teaching and learning. The participants in the current study showed recognition of two types of assessment: summative and formative. They asserted that they implement both types of assessment in their classes while putting more emphasis on formative and ongoing assessment. Depending on the age and proficiency level the students, and the objectives of the course, they used different kinds of assessment. Some of the assessment practices they used were pair-work, group-work, role-play, storytelling, asking questions, and asking students to

write about a topic related to the purpose of the course. They claimed that they typically focus on all four primary skills of language learning namely speaking, writing, listening, and reading, based on the purpose of the course in order to help learners develop communicative competence. Grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation were among the language components that the teachers across the three groups reported to consider and work on in their classrooms.

Change in the conception of teaching and learning brought about an interest in self- and peer-assessment in which learners are asked to critically reflect upon their own performance and that of others. Through this process, students learn to take responsibility for their own learning, provide relevant feedback, become autonomous and more importantly, they get motivated. 2 out of 9 low-experienced and 2 out of 6 mid-experienced teachers in this study reported that they do not make use of self- and peer-assessment in their classes. They expressed their viewpoints by mentioning some of the restrictions that they had in employing such assessment like: time limit, large class size, age factor, unreliability and reluctance of some students to judge and be judged. These were reported as factors which negatively influence the application of various assessment forms in the classroom. Other teachers found these kinds of assessment practices fruitful in offering the students an opportunity to learn about the concepts and components of assessment. They claimed that before employing such assessments, they prepare their students by giving them some directions to manage self- and peer-assessment effectively. According to one English language instructor "it's a good approach to consult our students about assessment because our view is different from students' view, and we can get awareness by consulting them".

One of the most effective tools in designing assessment and tests that provides a link between teaching and testing is a table of specifications. A table of specifications helps teachers to organize and plan assessment based on the objectives of the course, and materials and topics covered during the course, specifying the items to be included in the test. Therefore, it increases the validity of teachers' assessment practices by reducing the mismatch between the content of the course and that of the test (Fives & DiDonato-Barnes, 2013). 6 out of 18 teachers in the current study asserted that they design their own table of specifications and the results are highly satisfactory. 3 participants who were teaching at schools said that the ministry of education provides them with table of specifications. The rest of the participants did not use any kind of table of specifications.

Assessment results can be quite informative for teachers and learners. The important point in using assessment result is that teachers should reflect upon them critically and interpret them carefully. 10 out of 18 teachers used assessment results just to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the students and provide them with feedback while other teachers, besides using the results to inform learners about their performance, found the assessment results helpful in highlighting problems, if any, in instructional delivery strategy and the materials covered in class, and also planning to improve the situation. One teacher asserted that "I use assessment results in order to find out the weaknesses and positive points of our teaching program, teaching methodology, content, learners' competencies and the congruence of all these factors".

Teachers need to have sufficient knowledge of the basic concepts, orinciples, theories, and practices in assessment (assessment literacy) to ensure the quality of their assessment. They can become assessment literate through a number of ways. Reading books, articles, online resources and consulting with colleagues were the most frequently reported ways of increasing knowledge about assessment by the participants of this study. In addition, the majority of them welcomed workshops and tutorials on assessment and were complaining that there are very few workshops.

Conclusions and Implications

The researcher in the current study investigated assessment-related perceptions and practices of ELT teachers as "the agents of the assessment process" (Rea-Dickens, 2004, p. 251) to shed light on the issue of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) which is gaining interest among researchers in the field of language assessment and testing. According to Rea-Dickens (2004), teachers play a significant role in the washback effect of assessment and the findings of this study support that.

Analysis of the responses provided by the ELT teachers in this study reveals that teachers across the three groups based on teaching experience are familiar with the basic concepts and terminologies in assessment and know the *why* and *what* of assessment to some extent. Another noteworthy finding is that teaching experience appears to make no significant difference in the way teachers perceive assessment. This may be due to the fact the majority of the participants were reading for a Master's degree in TEFL and had some courses on language testing. Moreover, although the participants in this study were assessment literate and aware of the principles of assessment and testing, this literacy was not reflected in their practices. For instance, they attributed the features reliability, validity, fairness and authenticity to good assessment but they did not put their knowledge of such features into practice.

Taylor (2009) noted that "training for assessment literacy entails an appropriate balance of technical know-how, practical skills, theoretical knowledge, and understanding of principles, but all firmly contextualized within a sound understanding of the role and function of assessment within education and society" (p. 27). Taking the findings of the present study into account, it can be said that this study has pedagogical implication for language testing profession to take action by expanding its scope to integrate perception and practice with respect to assessment.

Future research can be conducted with a corpus larger than the present study in order to increase the reliability of the research. Also, interviews can be accompanied by class observation to gather richer data and increase the generalizability of the findings.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Semi-structured interview questions

    a) Do we need assessment in a language program?

    b) What are the characteristics of good assessment?

    c) When do you assess your students?

    d) How do you assess your students?

    e) Which skills and language components do you typically assess?

    f) Do you engage students in peer- and self-assessment? If yes, how?

    g) To what extent do you consult your students about assessment?

    h) Should students be informed of what they will be assessed on?

    i) Should students be informed of the assessment rubric?

    j) Do you think students' scores represent what they have learned?

    k) When are you satisfied with assessment results?

    l) How do you make use of assessment results?

    m) Do you use a table of specifications to plan assessment?

    n) Does assessment impact the way students study and do assignments?

    o) To what extent are you convinced that your assessment is valid/fair?

    p) Do you support the idea that instructors need to have some sort of background knowledge about classroom assessment?

    q) How do you increase your knowledge about assessment? Do you read books, attend workshops, …?