

## A Qualitative Study of Language Assessment Literacy of Iranian EFL Teachers with TEFL and Non-TEFL Background and Challenges in Their Students' Assessment

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### Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate language assessment literacy among EFL teachers in the Iranian context aiming at studying the implications of assessment literacy for TEFL teacher education reform. For this purpose, 20 EFL teachers in Iranian language institutes (Bayan, Azmoon, Zaban Sara, and Marefat institutes) were randomly picked for an extensive semi-structured examination. All the meetings were categorized and transcribed and after being analyzed, they were recorded on a Digital Voice Recorder (DVR). The results revealed that Iranian instructors were found well-acquainted with assessment literacy components. Likewise, it turned out that novice teachers with a TEFL background were more aware of assessment literacy and its significance in teacher education. However, in terms of other assessment components such as test administration, selecting the best assessment methods, and communicating assessment results experienced teachers with a TEFL background presented more to-the-point concepts compared to their counterparts in the non-TEFL group, indicating that the teachers with a TEFL background could perceive the aforementioned teacher assessment literacy components better than their non-TEFL counterpart. The findings imply that EFL language institute instructors' literacy in educational assessment particularly in especially in communicating assessment results to others and valid grading of the learners' assessment is found insufficient.

**Keywords:** Assessment Literacy, Components of Assessment Literacy, Novice and Experienced Teachers, TEFL/Non-TEFL Background

### INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an inseparable component of teaching and learning processes as it can affect both the quality of instruction presented by the teacher and the quality of learning on the students' side. While this is the case, a collection of research findings shows that teachers struggle to integrate assessment with instruction in alignment with contemporary assessment theories and principles (Amiri & Birjandi,

2015; Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Jalilzadeh et al. (2022) DeLuca, Klinger, & Practice, 2010; Lam, 2019; Scarino, 2013). That is, a world-wide switch toward applying unconventional assessments like performance-based and criterion-referenced assessments (Chen, 2013; Tao, 2014) on one hand, and teachers' strong preference to utilize traditional assessment methods such as objective tests on the other creates a tension, what McNamara (2003) called *paradigm war*.

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Teachers have tremendous effects on learners' learning and achievement. As Darling-Hammond (1999) argues, teachers have got the utmost importance in affecting learners. On the other hand, according to Eckhout, Mickelson, and Goodburn (2005), a principal element of the learning process, is classroom assessment, "good teaching is impossible in the absence of good assessment" (p. 3) because as Stiggins (1999) states "the quality of instruction in any classroom turns on the quality of the assessments used there" (p. 20). Similarly, DeLuca et al. (2010) stipulate that Assessment Literacy (AL) is critical to promoting student achievement, student learning, and teacher instruction. In addition, like J.-R. Wang, Kao, and Lin (2010) declare, even though the advantages of AL are known, it seems that many teachers lack the AL and are not familiar with proper assessment practices. To fill this gap in the literature, many researchers (e.g., Braden, Huai, White, & Elliott, 2005; Burry-Stock & Frazier, 2008; H. Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018; Khodabakhshzadeh, Kafi, & Hosseinnia, 2018; Craig A Mertler, 2009; Stiggins, 1991) have investigated the multiple aspects of teacher assessment literacy, considering how it works, what it implies, and how teacher training programs can promote Teacher Assessment Literacy (TAL).

EFL Teachers' assessment literacy has also been studied (Lam, 2019; Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Vitali, 1994). In addition, some standards have been proposed for such practices (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005; Pilcher, 2001). Some studies have also mentioned AL among EFL instructors' instructional strategies (Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Hajizadeh & Salahshour, 2014; Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi, & Rashidi, 2011). Meanwhile, research results have shown that teachers' AL activities do not necessarily represent their AL knowledge (Brookhart, 2011; Fard & Tabatabaei, 2018; Jannati, 2015; Lam, 2019; Mertler, 1999).

TAL is accounted as a major teacher qualification in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) domain (Ashraf & Zolfaghari, 2018; Bayat & Rezaei, 2015; Zamani & Ahangari, 2016). Deficiency in AL may create problems for the EFL teachers in their lesson planning

(Stobart, 2008) Likewise the teachers with less interest in assessment in their classes are likely to be a bit strict and create an atmosphere of competition rather than cooperation for their learners; something which surely leaves negative effects on the students' learning and second language development (Ellis, 2008). AL is claimed to be the key to effective teaching (Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Popham, 2014). Furthermore, AL is crucial in implementing productive and constructive language teaching and evaluation, particularly with the new approaches to testing like an assessment for learning (Stobart, 2008), assessment as learning (James, 2008), and dynamic assessment (Lantolf, 2008).

Instructors consider teachers' assessment awareness as a part of their education programs (Mellati & Khademi, 2018; Tavassoli & Farhady, 2018) as it is assumed that EFL teachers need assessment literacy so that they could find the problems of their classes and moving toward betterment in their work through running modifications (Scarino, 2013). Likewise, AL also helps English teachers in communicating the theory, practice, and principles of language testing to test stakeholders, when testing is considered in a large scale (Popham, 2014). In particular, studies on TAL have been accomplished in second language literature since the 1990s (Stiggins, 1991). A plethora of studies have been conducted on AL as an outcome of Professional Development (PD) or teacher training programs (Atay, 2008; Firoozi, Razavipour, & Ahmadi, 2019; Looney, Cumming, van Der Kleij, & Harris, 2018; Walters, 2010; T.-H. Wang, Wang, & Huang, 2008), and some studies have also looked at assessment literacy as a notion related to students' achievement (Birjandi & Hadidi Tamjid, 2012; Braney, 2010). AL has also been measured by comparing the AL of different teachers such as novice and experienced teachers (Edwards, 2017; Craig A Mertler, 2009; Tajeddin, Alemi, & Yasaei, 2018). Moreover, Azadi (2018) investigated the conceptual factors of TAL among Iranian ESP instructors and Mohammadi (2020) compared AL knowledge of ESP instructors with TEFL and non-TEFL background.

Likewise, Jeong (2013) argues that definition of AL differs for language testers and non-language testers.

Another point which is worth mention is that in the Iranian educational system testing has been more absorbing than assessment (Arani, et al., 2012). Previous research has also shown that Iranian EFL teachers suffer from low levels of assessment literacy knowledge (Ashraf & Zolfaghari, 2018; Fard & Tabatabaei, 2018; H. Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018; Mellati & Khademi, 2018; Tavassoli & Farhady, 2018). Moreover, EFL teachers' perceptions of LAL is not presented in their classroom behavior (Jannati, 2015). Since a lot of teachers teaching English at language institutes do not enjoy a TEFL background (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009), the present study attempts to take this point into consideration and focuses on the English teachers with both TEFL and non-TEFL background. In addition, both experienced (with more than five years of teaching background) and novice EFL teachers have taken part as the study participants.

As context of classroom-based assessment is a significant point in LAL (Popham, 2014), the study aims at finding out the extent to which English teachers find the context of classroom-based assessment facilitating or inhibiting. Likewise, as connecting the theoretical knowledge to the practical issues is of high significance in the LAL (Inbar-Lourie, 2013), the study aims to touch upon the ability of English teachers in bridging the theory-practice gap in language assessment literacy. Perceptions of the novice and experienced English teachers with both a TEFL and a content background about the components of teacher assessment literacy is another prominent point the study intends to investigate. Hence, the following questions are posed in the present study.

1. How do experienced and novice English teachers with TEFL and non-TEFL background perceive teacher assessment literacy components?
2. What difficulties do English teachers experience in their students' assessment?
3. Which areas of language assessment

literacy should be focused on in an in-service training program for the Iranian English teachers of language institutes?

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The current study's participants were 20 novices and experienced English teachers with TEFL and non-TEFL backgrounds, including both genders, with university education (B.A. or M.A. degrees) teaching in different Iranian language institutes in Tehran province. They were arbitrarily picked to participate in an interview in terms of their AL knowledge, problems, and perceptions. Five teachers were the experienced ones who enjoyed a TEFL background and five others were the experienced ones with a non-TEFL background. Likewise, five novice teachers with a TEFL background and five others with a non-TEFL background took part in the study.

### Instrumentation

The two instruments employed in the process of data collection in the present study were the Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010) and in-depth teacher interviews: The modified version of the Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire which considered the cultural and local notions has been already used in the Iranian context (Baniali, 2018; Eezami, 2016). This questionnaire to a certain extent is in the control of setting out and stating the instructors' experience proportion. It consists of 12 items and five choices based on Likert scale. The Cronbach's alpha reliability index of the original version of the questionnaire is " $(\alpha=0.72)$ , which is a good reliability. The construct validity of the questionnaire has been confirmed through factor analysis" (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010, p. 3). The reliability indices for this scale in the modified version used in the Iranian EFL studies have been reported as  $\alpha=0.76$  (Eezami, 2016) and  $\alpha=0.71$  (Baniali, 2018). The base score is set as 12 and the highest setting for 60. Instructors receiving any point below 30 are categorized as novice teachers, however, the instructors succeeding in gaining any score ranging

between 30-60 are labeled as the experienced ones. Teacher interviews were done by using a semi-structured interview (15-30 min). The items in the designed interview questions were reevaluated by two language and content specialists. Hence, the interview guide's content and construct validities were ratified by pundit discernment validity criteria (Creswell & Clark, 2017). To ensure the reliability of the interview the researchers, who played the role of interviewers, relied on the measures of minimizing biases and limits that were likely to impact her decision-making (Dornyei, 2007). In this respect, the researchers welcomed all the answers and views presented, did not push the interviewees toward their own beliefs and intentions, and instead provided them with a sense of speech freedom (Creswell & Clark, 2017). In a semi-structured interview, "the researcher uses a written list of questions as a guide, while still having the freedom to digress and probe for more information" (Mackey & Gass, 2016, p.173). The structure by which the interview is set to be performed is based on Dornyei's (2007) guidelines. During the interview, the issues concerning the teachers' sense of autonomy and preferred teaching styles were fully discussed.

### Data Collection Procedure

In the first step Novice and Experienced Teacher Questionnaire (Rodríguez & McKay, 2010) was administered to the participants.

Then, the questions designed for the interview were reevaluated on the base of language and the content by two experts in the field. were categorized and transcribed and after being analyzed, they were recorded on a Digital Voice Recorder (DVR). The qualitative data was collected, categorized, and analyzed for the purpose of the study through open, axial, and selective coding systems.

### RESULTS

To answer research questions, the researchers transcribed and analyzed the interviews with the 20 Iranian EFL teachers taking part in the interview sessions. Moreover, the results related to each question in the interview were then classified and presented.

**RQ1:** *How do experienced and novice English teachers with TEFL and non-TEFL background perceive teacher assessment literacy components?*

The content analysis through open coding showed that for each question there existed some themes. Likewise, axial coding revealed that for each theme, one could find some supporting notions. Hence, the themes and codes were extracted, and finally percentages and frequencies were used for an accurate and better interpretation of the obtained results. Table 1 below best shows the category of the main themes of the ideas, open coding (general related views) and axial coding (specific issues) based on the interview data.

**Table 1**  
*Themes and Codes Derived out of the Interviews*

Groups	Open Codes (Themes)	Axial Codes	Frequency	Percent
TEFL Experienced	Choosing appropriate assessment methods	I try to use appropriate assessment methods such as essay type items, oral group work.	4	%40
		I like to use standardized tests. But they are not available for the courses we teach. That is why instructors mainly use teacher-made tests or the work books other instructors have written	4	%40
		I try to test my students in line with the instructional objectives	4	%40
TEFL Novice		I try to use real life tasks, and creative performance tasks such as role playing.	5	%50
		I think in the crowded classes we have to make use of testing, not assessment.	5	%50
		In fact, we mainly use tests and sometimes we employ oral exams.	5	%50
		I ask the students to deliver mini-talks in the classroom and ask their peers to assess them.	5	%50
		I would like to use dynamic assessment in my class; however, I do not have enough time. On the other hand, the final exams are in the multiple-choice form and testing oriented	5	%50

NON-TEFL Experienced	Developing Appropriate Assessment Methods	I try to test my students in line with the instructional objectives	3	%30	
		we mainly uses tests	3	%30	
		there is no difference between tests and tasks	4	%40	
NON-TEFL Novice		I use both oral and written quizzes as I think they are appropriate assessment methods	3	%30	
		we mainly uses tests	2	%20	
		I use both oral and written quizzes as I think they are appropriate assessment methods	3	%30	
TEFL Expe- rienced		learners should be able to translate ESP texts	4	%40	
		I try to develop tests which enjoy NON-TEFL validity	5	%50	
		I look at the student's past records and test scores to plan my own teaching and developing tests			
TEFL Novice		I develop tests based on the instructional manual of the ministry of education. So, I include different testing and performance tasks such as comparing, contrasting, identifying, specifying, and listing in my exams	4	%40	
		I develop appropriate assessment methods such as oral and written exams in line with instructional objectives	5	%50	
		I try to develop tests which enjoy NON-TEFL validity	5	%40	
NON-TEFL Experienced	I sometimes make tests, but I mainly use the tests in the books available	3	%30		
	I look at the student's past records and test scores to plan my own teaching and developing tests	3	%30		
	I develop tests based on the instructional manual of the ministry of education. So, I include different testing and performance tasks such as comparing, contrasting, identifying, specifying, and listing in my exams	3	%30		
NON-TEFL Novice	I never make tests. I use the tests in the books available	4	%40		
TEFL Experienced	Administering, Scoring, and Interpreting the Results of Assessments	I take exams every other session and score their performance by the help of the learners, themselves. We discuss the main points of the test in the same session	5	%50	
		I administer written tests every month or at the end of each lesson and score the students' papers on time. Meanwhile, I use oral exams every session	4	%40	
		I let the students check their problems with me and be fully informed of the nature of their scores	3	%30	
		I interpret the results of assessments in the class, especially if use the standardized tests issued by the ministry of education	4	%40	
		I ask the students to present their ideas about the difficulty level of the exam, test, or task they have taken	3	%30	
		TEFL Novice	I interpret the results of assessments in the class, especially if use the standardized tests issued by the ministry of education	4	%40
			I let the students check their problems with me and be fully informed of the nature of their scores	5	%50
			I ask the students to present their ideas about the difficulty level of the exam, test, or task they have taken	5	%50
		NON-TEFL Experienced	I take exams every other session and score their performance by the help of the learners, themselves. We discuss the main points of the test in the same session	3	%30
			I administer written tests every month or at the end of each lesson and score the students' papers on time. Meanwhile, I use oral exams every session	4	%40
			NON-TEFL Novice	I ask the students to present their ideas about the difficulty level of the exam, test, or task they have taken	3
		TEFL Experienced		I use the exam results to check for the prerequisite knowledge of my students before I start the new lesson	4
I consider the general understanding of the previous lesson by the students (I rely on a norm-referenced view) to plan for the future instruction	4			%40	
I make the learners familiar with the final exam samples which are standardized tests by the ministry of education	4		%40		
TEFL Novice	I use the exam results to check for the prerequisite knowledge of my students before I start the new lesson	5	%50		

		I usually decide up on the type of homework based on the previous performance of the learners	5	%50
NON-TEFL Experienced		I consider the general understanding of the previous lesson by the students (I rely on a norm-referenced view) to plan for the future instruction	4	%40
		I make the learners familiar with the final exam samples	3	%30
NON-TEFL Novice		Usually, I use the test results to pass fail the students in their ESP course	4	%40
	Developing valid grading procedures	I try to use a valid grading procedure and focus on different times with varying grades	3	%30
		I explain to the students exactly how the grade has been determined		
TEFL Experienced		I makes use of oral responses to questions asked in class of each student over the course as an assessment method showing a reliable student-performance	4	%40
		I give a lot of tests to motive the students study harder and gain the best result possible	5	%50
		I try to use a valid grading procedure and focus on different times with varying grades	5	%50
TEFL Novice		I makes use of oral responses to questions asked in class of each student over the course as an assessment method showing a reliable student-performance	4	%40
		I explain to the students exactly how the grade has been determined		
NON-TEFL Experienced		I give a lot of tests to motive the students study harder and gain the best result possible	3	%30
		I explain to the students exactly how the grade has been determined	4	%40
NON-TEFL Novice				
	Communicating Assessment Results	I talk with the students about their performance in the class as well as in the exams	5	%50
TEFL Experienced		I provide students with samples of their work	4	%40
		I record the assessment results of the learners in the class portfolio every session	5	%50
		I try to find the source of the weak learner's problems and use different methods to help him/her	4	%40
		I focus on the learners' scores in my own class and discuss the case of weak students with my colleagues	5	%50
TEFL Novice		I consider the results of both formal and informal assessment types while reporting the students' performance	5	%50
		I am really sensitive to the development of learners	4	%40
		I record the assessment results of the learners in the class portfolio every session	5	%50
NON-TEFL Experienced		I record the assessment results of the learners in the class portfolio every session	3	%30
		I am really sensitive to the development of learners	4	%40
NON-TEFL Novice				
	Recognizing Unethical or Illegal Practices	I will never let students see the other students' graded tests, so no violation of the students' right of privacy is allowed in my class	4	%40
TEFL Experienced		I always assess the learners based on the concepts covered in the lesson, though I may add a pinch of creativity to it	4	%40
		I recognize unethical and illegal practices in my assessment and do not differentiate between the learners while assessing them	5	%50
		I do not announce the scores in public unless they are high to encourage the learners	4	%40
TEFL Novice		I do not belittle the weak students in front of their classmates	5	%50
		I always assess the learners based on the concepts covered in the lesson, though I may add a pinch of creativity to it	4	%40
NON-TEFL Experienced		I will never let students see the other students' graded tests, so no violation of the students' right of privacy is allowed in my class	3	%30
		I recognize unethical and illegal practices in my assessment and do not differentiate between the learners while assessing them	4	%40
NON-TEFL Novice		I do not announce the scores in public unless they are high to encourage the learners	3	%30
		I do not belittle the weak students in front of their classmates	4	%40

Also, the results related to each item in the interview guide were presented as follows:

**Item One:** *How do you choose an appropriate assessment method?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I aim to apply appropriate assessment methods like essay-type items, oral group work, real-life tasks, and creative performance tasks such as role-playing (*Mainly mentioned by the teachers with a TEFL background*).

2. I think in the crowded classes we have to make use of testing, not assessment. In fact, we mainly use tests, and sometimes we employ oral exams (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

3. I like to use standardized tests. But they are not available for the levels we teach. That is why teachers mainly use teacher-made tests or the workbooks other teachers have written (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers with a TEFL background*).

4. I use both oral and written quizzes as I think they are appropriate assessment methods (*Mainly mentioned by the teachers with a non-TEFL background*).

5. I ask the students to deliver mini-talks in the classroom and ask their peers to assess them (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

6. I would like to use dynamic assessment in my class, however, I do not have enough time. On the other hand, the final exams are in the multiple-choice form and testing oriented (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

7. I try to test my students in line with the instructional objectives (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

**Item Two:** *Do you usually develop tests, design tasks, and design interviews to assess your students? Explain the process to me, please.*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I develop appropriate assessment methods such as oral and written exams in line with

instructional objectives (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

2. I try to develop tests that enjoy content validity (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced and novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

3. I never make tests. I use the tests available in the books (*Mainly mentioned by the teachers with a non-TEFL background*).

4. I look at the student's past records and test scores to plan my own teaching and developing tests (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

5. I develop tests based on the instructional manual of the ministry of education. So, I include different testing and performance tasks such as comparing, contrasting, identifying, specifying, and listing in my exams (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

**Item Three:** *How do you implement scores, and read the assessments' results?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I take exams every other session and score their performance with the help of the learners, themselves. We discuss the main points of the test in the same session (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

2. I administer written tests every month or at the end of each lesson and score the students' papers on time. Meanwhile, I use oral exams every session (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

3. I interpret the results of assessments in the class, especially when using the standardized tests issued by the ministry of education (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced and novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

4. I let the students check their problems with me and be fully informed about the nature of their scores (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers and the novice ones with a TEFL background*).

5. I ask the students to present their ideas about the difficulty level of the exam, test, or task they have taken (*mentioned by almost all the interviewees*).

**Item Four:** *Do you ever use assessment results to make decisions? How?*

The main points of the opinions presented by 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I use the exam results to check for the prerequisite knowledge of my students before I start the new lesson (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers and the novice ones with a TEFL background*).

2. I usually decide upon the type of homework based on the previous performance of the learners (*Mainly mentioned by novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

3. I consider the general understanding of the previous lesson by the students (I rely on a norm-referenced view) to plan for the future instruction (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

4. I make the learners familiar with the final exam samples which are standardized tests by ministry of education (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

**Item Five:** *How do you develop valid grading procedures?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I try to use a valid grading procedure and focus on different times with varying grades (*Mainly mentioned by novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

2. I explain to the students exactly how the grades have been determined (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

3. I make use of oral responses given to asked questions in class by each student over the course as an assessment method showing a reliable student-performance (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers and the novice ones with a TEFL background*).

4. I talk with the students' parents about their children's performance in the class as well as in the exams and classroom assessments and provide them with samples of the student's work (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

5. I give a lot of tests to motivate the students study harder and gain the best possible results (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

**Item Six:** *How do you communicate assessment results?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I try to find the source of the weak learner's problems and use different methods to help him (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

2. I record the assessment results of the learners in the class portfolio every session (*Mentioned by almost all the teachers*).

3. I focus on the learners' scores in my own class and discuss the case of weak students with the school counselor (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with and without a TEFL background*).

4. I am really sensitive to the development of learners (*mentioned by almost all the teachers*).

5. I consider the results of both formal and informal assessment types while reporting the students' performance (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with a TEFL background*).

**Item Seven:** *Do you ever recognize unethical or illegal practices? How?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. I recognize unethical and illegal practices in my assessment and do not differentiate between the learners while assessing them (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers with or without a TEFL background*).

2. I do not announce the scores in public unless they are high to encourage the learners (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers*).

3. I do not belittle the weak students in front of their classmates (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers*).

4. I will never let students see the other students' graded tests, so no violation of the students' right of privacy is allowed in my class (*Mainly mentioned by the experienced teachers*).

5. I always assess the learners based on the concepts covered in the lesson, though I may add a pinch of creativity to it (*Mainly mentioned by the novice and experienced teachers with a TEFL background*).

The results of the interview with the 20 EFL teachers taking part in the study revealed that TEFL teachers understood components of as-



assessment literacy more accurately than the non-TEFL teachers. In fact, the interview results revealed that novice teachers with a TEFL background were more aware of assessment literacy and its significance in teacher education. Moreover, they were more updated in terms of developing test types, technical assessment knowledge, test validation, ethical issues, and decision making based on assessment results. However, in terms of other assessment components such as test administration, selecting the best assessment methods, and communicating assessment results experienced teachers with a TEFL background presented more to-the-point concepts compared to their counterparts in the non-TEFL group, indicating that the teachers with a TEFL background could perceive the aforementioned teacher assessment literacy components better than their non-TEFL counterpart.

**RQ2:** *What difficulties do English teachers experience in their students' assessment?*

To answer this question, the researchers focused on eliciting the information from the data collected through the teachers' answers to the ninth question of the interview as well as classroom observations. Item nine of the interview was as follows:

*What difficulties do you think English teachers experience in their students' assessments?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 instructors interviewed are presented by content analysis accounting on open and axial coding. Table 2 below best shows the category of the main themes of the ideas, open coding (generally related views), and axial coding (specific issues) based on the interview data derived from the ninth research question.

**Table 2**  
*Difficulties ESP Content Instructors Experience in their Students' Assessment*

Themes	Open Codes	Axial Codes	Frequency	Percent
Learners' Background	General English	Learners are weak in reading comprehension	13	%65
		Most of the learners are not able to present themselves in spoken language.	14	%70
		Most of the learners are not able to present themselves in writing.	15	%75
		Most of the learners are not interested in listening activities.	18	%90
	Experiences	Leaners are not familiar with some of the specialized contexts	16	%80
		Weak learners cannot follow the information presented in the class	18	%90
		Students with a good back ground in English do not take the course seriously	17	%85
		The classes in which instructors have to teach are not filled with homogeneous learners.	15	%75
Instructors' Issues	Logistic Concerns	Non-homogeneous classes create problems not only while teaching, but also in assessing the learners.	16	%80
		Shortage of time allocated to ESP	15	%75
	Assessment Knowledge	Authorities have high expectations regarding assessment of the students.	17	%85
		The number of ESP instructors without a TEFL background is high in this university.	15	%75
		Some instructors teaching ESP lack a good general English knowledge.	15	%75

Based on the Table 2, the main points of the opinions presented by the 20 instructors interviewed were as follows:

1. The problem of EFL classes at school dates back to Konkur (University Entrance Exam) and its backwash effect.

2. Families are not aware of the EFL teachers' problems such as the shortage of time allocated to English at schools and have high expectations regarding the assessment of their kids.

3. The number of EFL teachers without a TEFL background is high in this province and that is why students do not improve well.

4. In case assessment is considered to examine the performance of the students concerning their L2 speaking and writing abilities, teachers will find it highly difficult as most of the learners are not able to present themselves in these two skills. Nor are they interested in listening activities. However, testing the reading, vocabulary, and grammar of the LANGUAGE INSTITUTE students is fairly plausible.

5. The classes in which teachers have to teach are not filled with homogeneous learners. This creates problems not only while teaching but also in assessing the learners.

In addition, the result of interviews showed that the most recurrent assessment challenges for the EFL teachers taking part in the study were related to (1) *building relationships with students*. Mainly students prefer reading tests to the tests of other skills, (2) *dealing with issues ensued from social status and identity of the students and their previous experiences*; students from richer families have had the overseas experience and are in some cases quite familiar with the target language community cultural facts, while the teacher teaching them lacks such an experience. This, in some cases, creates a barrier for the teacher in assessing the learner's L2 development, and (3) *supervisors (school principals and inspectors)*, who unfortunately are not, in most of the cases, familiar with teaching English problems and in accordance with their traditional perspectives would blame the teacher for student's lack of achievement or low grades.

*RQ3: Which areas of language assessment literacy should be focused on in an in-service training program for the Iranian English teachers of language institutes?*

The eighth item of the interview guide which sought for appropriate answers to this question was as follows:

*Have you taken part in any in-service training courses considering assessment issues recently? Do you feel it is needed? Which areas are more important to you?*

The main points of the opinions presented by the 20 teachers interviewed were:

1. Yes, but it is difficult to use them in the class. We do not have enough time (*Mainly mentioned by the teachers without a TEFL background*).

2. No, but I think I need to take some courses in this regard (*Mainly mentioned by the novice teachers without a TEFL background*).

3. Yes, and I have really learned new things which are useful (*Mainly mentioned by the teachers with a TEFL background*).

4. The in-service training courses for the EFL instructors are expected to be thoughtful on the technical aspects of assessment and testing they are in urgent need of, especially when they have a non-TEFL background (*Mentioned by almost all the teachers*).

5. In-service training is necessary for EFL teachers to help them get familiar with assessment ethics, test development, test administration, grading. Also EFL teachers, especially the ones without a TEFL background need learn modern ways of assessment, dynamic assessment, peer assessment and self-assessment. Therefore, they should attend in-service training courses in this regard (*Mentioned by almost all the teachers*).

6. Assessment workshops where task development and performance testing are taught are of urgent need for EFL teachers (*Mentioned by almost all the teachers*).

The results also revealed that all EFL teachers, especially novice teachers without a TEFL background and the experienced ones were in urgent need of in-service training courses in L2 assessment concepts. It can be concluded that in-service training is required for EFL teachers, especially in the areas such as performance testing, assessment ethics, test and task development, test administration, qualitative evaluation, and grading.

## DISCUSSION

The results of the interview with the 20 EFL teachers taking part in the study first disclosed that EFL teachers were relatively acquainted with both of the components of the assessment, selecting suitable assessment methods and applying assessment findings to educational policies and decisions. However, the outputs assert a shortcoming in other parts of the AL. Also, it was indicated that TEFL teachers understood components of assessment literacy more accurately than the non-TEFL teachers, and novice teachers with a TEFL background were more aware of assessment literacy and its significance in teacher education. The findings are in conformity with former studies like Alemi, Miri, and Mozafarnezhad (2019), Azadi (2018), Barootchi and Keshavarz (2002), Elshawa, Heng, Abdullah, and Rashid (2016), Kremmel & Harding (2020), Melter (2004), Mohamed et al. (2017), and Plake and Impara (1993). The findings of the present study are in line with the study done by Mertler (2004) that focuses on pre-service versus in-service teachers' assessment literacy in parallel to the current study. Accordingly, based on the study's output both groups of in-service and pre-service instructors did quite well in *selecting suitable and proper assessment methods* and *applying the results to the practical field of decision making that is set to play more effective sequentially*, they didn't enjoy an acceptable record of valid grading procedures and their performance was relatively low. Hence the study's output, in a sense reinforces the Plake and Impara (1993) and Plake, Impara, and Fager (1993) studies findings. They administered a questionnaire set their sight on the assessment literacy of in-service teachers. They figured out that the highest performance was on *selecting a proper assessment method* and the lowest mean was recorded in *communicating assessment results*.

These results confirm what Volante and Fazio (2007) did in assessing the teacher candidates' assessment literacy and examining the assessment literacy of primary/junior teacher candidates in all four years of their concurrent program. They showed that the proportion of

self-awareness stayed quite low for the candidates across each of the four years of this program. Most of them came up with the idea of summative purposes for assessment, however, only a few of them agreed on formative purposes. Observational techniques and personal communication were among their top picks. At the same time, these findings are correlated with the study Janatifar and Marandi (2018) conducted on the [lack of] awareness of the Iranian EFL teachers of the basic components of the LAL.

One conceivable cause for these findings could be linked to the testing and assessment training programs in which the participants took part. Apparently, these programs have failed to properly prepare them and instruct them in the basic principles of assessment literacy. Indeed, It makes sense to claim that despite the significance of assessment literacy for EFL teachers in providing accession to second language education enterprises, It's sad to note that, Iranian EFL instructors are busy struggling with testing issues rather than assessment concepts (Barootchi & Keshavarz, 2002).

The discoveries may be examined from this viewpoint that EFL instructors are able to conduct their classes according to the principles of LAL except if they are prepared based on LAL theories. As a consequence, pre-service and in-service programs on assessment are to win popularity and significance it is because of these pieces of training that instructors are inspired to develop themselves in the assessment method field so that they can put them into practice in their career. Furthermore, the distinction between the EFL instructors with a TEFL record and experience and the ones with a non-TEFL foundation may be ascribed to the nature of the major and instructive courses they have received through their studying at the university.

The present study can also take support from Volante and Fazio's (2007) study which explored teacher candidates' assessment literacy and examined the assessment literacy of primary/junior teacher candidates in all four years of their concurrent program. The results revealed that levels of self- efficacy remained

relatively low for teacher candidates across each of the four years of this program. Most candidates suggested summative purposes for assessment and only a minority expressed formative purposes. They favored observational techniques and personal communication. In case some of the teachers taking part in the study are considered low experienced, the result of the present study matches the results of previous studies (Mertler, 2003; Mertler & Campbell, 2005; Volante & Fazio, 2007).

In terms of difficulties English teachers of language institutes experience in their students' assessment, the backwash effect of the University Entrance Exam (UEE) is highlighted. Assessment gets harder because of the unfamiliarity of families with the assessment issues intensified with their high expectations. The results of classroom observations have also showed that building relationship with students, dealing with issues ensued from social status and identity of the students and their previous experiences, and coping with traditional perspective of school principals and inspectors toward assessment are among the most frequent assessment challenges for the EFL teachers taking part in the study.

To sum up, the results of this study indicated that both teachers with TEFL background and Non-TEFL background, novice or experienced, have moderate to low level of assessment literacy. The present study findings are similar to the previous research investigating in-service teachers' assessment literacy focusing on the assessment literacy of in-service teachers (Alkharusi, Kazem, & Al-Musawai, 2011; Mertler, 2003; Mertler & Campbell, 2005; Plake, 1993; Vitali, 1994). In line with the learners' performance evaluation and in accordance with theoretical perspectives toward teacher education (Inbar-Lourie & Levi, 2020), all kinds of assessments are composed of two major elements: making decisions about the expected standards of performance and making judgments about the quality of the performance in relation to these standards. In classrooms where assessment for learning is practiced, students are encouraged to be more active in their learning and associated assessment (Chen, 2013). The findings of the present

study, hence, can be used by assessment theoreticians in the further development of their AL views. In fact, the ultimate purpose of assessment could be "creating self-regulated learners who can leave school able and confident to continue learning throughout their lives" (Bozorgian, 2014, p. 2).

## CONCLUSIONS

According to the reformed assessment policies in the Iranian ELT context (Firoozi et al., 2019), only teachers with a TEFL background are allowed to teach in the language institutes. Regulations of ministry of education has also confirmed the same notion (H. Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018). Nevertheless, a good number of Iranian language institutes do not enjoy trained teachers in TEFL and familiar with AL principles (Ashraf & Zolfaghari, 2018; Mellati & Khademi, 2018). As AL literacy plays a significant role in the teachers' reflective teaching (Ashraf & Zolfaghari, 2018) and effective training (Ellis, 2008), employing EFL teachers with a TEFL background instead of the ones without a TEFL background is suggested. Also, as the present study findings showed, the novice teachers who have recently graduated from universities enjoy more assessment knowledge than their experienced counterparts (Mohammadi, 2020). They are also more sensitive to such notions (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2018). The reason might lie in the teacher burn out issues with the experienced teachers (Fathi & Derakhshan, 2019; Sadeghi & Khezrlou, 2014) and interest of newly TEFL graduates in using their achievement in the L2 classroom. After all, interview results revealed that all EFL teachers taking part in the study, especially novice teachers without a TEFL background and the experienced ones were in urgent need of in-service training courses in L2 assessment concepts. This is in line with Lam's (2019) suggestion on language assessment training for ESL teachers in Hong Kong and its effect on the L2 learners' development.

In general, it was found that the Iranian EFL teachers taking part in the study, irrespective of their experience and background, were not well familiar with standards of teacher

competencies presented by Plake and Impara (1993). Nor were they well familiar with the standards of assessment literacy (Mertler, 2003) or AL studies presented by other researchers (McTighe & O'Connor, 2005; Pilcher, 2001) and this gets more troublesome when considering that almost half of these teachers who have a background of teaching EFL at the language institute level enjoy a TEFL background and surely they have passed courses in language testing and assessment in their undergraduate and graduate levels. Specifically, it is important that they understand assessment is an integral component of instruction and goals for student learning (McMillan, 2000; Pilcher, 2001). Teachers have indicated that they are more concerned with the day-to-day issues related to the application of assessment processes and less with fundamental measurement principles (Rogers, 1991).

In parallel with the discoveries and outputs of the study, a few suggestions are proposed. As the discoveries clearly illustrated, Iranian EFL instructors are facing a critical lack of language assessment literacy, therefore a pressing evaluation of the existing provisions of teacher preparation programs is required. Based on the findings, in order to boost the theoretical and practical assessment instructions to different assessment domains, these programs should go through a change and reformation process. Also, based on the findings of the study there exist a very trivial difference in terms of assessment literacy among the EFL teachers and non-EFL teachers who never enjoyed pre-service and in-service assessment training. It is of the utmost importance for public and private schools to assess the kind of pre-service and in-service training that the institution is providing. Moreover, the findings suggest that TEFL instructor preparation programs in Iran bolster focused on proficient advancement programs that are based on teachers' assessment needs. The findings are pointing out that testing and assessment materials designers incorporate practical guides in evaluation material so that the EFL instructors with no further problems figure out to spot how to shift the theory into practice.

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