

Iraqi EFL Teachers' Assessment Literacy: Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

In current educational approaches, the purpose and functions of assessment have extended, and teachers are expected to have good knowledge of the principles of modern assessment. In line with this fact, the present study investigated the assessment literacy levels of Iraqi English language teachers through Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory (CALI) based on the seven standards of teachers' assessment competence for educational assessment of students developed by the American Federation of Teachers, National Council on Measurement in Education and National Education Association (1990). The data were collected from 101 teachers working at secondary and preparatory schools of Suleymaniyah and Arbil governorates in the North of Iraq. The findings revealed that Iraqi English language teachers responded less than 15 correct responses out of 35 questions. According to the findings, teachers got the lowest score from standard seven (recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information). The highest score was from standard four (using assessment results when making educational decisions). Although 77% of teachers reported to have been adequately trained for assessment, the results revealed that they had low level of assessment literacy. Revisions in teacher preparation programs and preparation of professional training courses for in-service teachers are recommended.

Keywords: assessment, assessment literacy, Iraqi EFL teachers, teachers' assessment literacy

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Introduction

Teachers' assessment literacy is a crucial part of teachers' quality and professional requirements. As stated by Mertler (2003b), teachers' assessment literacy can enhance or limit the education process and student achievement. Scholars mentioned that the lacks in teachers' beliefs, knowledge and practice on assessment have negative consequences on student achievement and education (Brookhart, 2011; Chapuis & Stiggins, 2002; Plake, 1993; Rogier, 2014). Studies on this issue have made it clear that teachers' preparation programs are not well organized to address teachers' needs for classroom assessment (Mcmillan, 2005; Mertler, 2003b, 2004, 2009; Popham, 2009; Stiggins, 1988, 2002, 2007, 2008.).

Although there are studies on assessment literacy, Fulcher (2012) accentuates that research on this field is not well developed yet. When the related literature is examined we can say that assessment literacy has been studied and presented in three phases: (1) teachers' concept of assessment, (2) teachers' knowledge and skills and (3) teachers' classroom practice of assessment.

Teachers' concepts and value of assessment is the most significant factor in assessment interpretation and decision-making (Mcmillan, 2005). The misperceptions of assessment that restrict teachers' assessment literacy include the wrong view of assessment as non-related to teaching process (Brown, 2004; Shepard, 2000), the classical concept of scientific measurement (Shepard, 2000) and teachers' underestimation of the role of assessment. Another element in teachers' assessment literacy is their knowledge. Most teachers and principals engage in assessment performance without trusting their knowledge and ability (Stiggins, 2008).

Teachers' inappropriate beliefs and lack of knowledge lead to poor assessment practice. Teachers, who have no explicit views on students' performance, base their teaching methods and objectives on vague standards and lead to inadequate assessment practice (Stiggins, 1988). Research has shown that assessment practice lacks several important principles and procedures. Teachers collect a lot of evidence through classroom assessment without using them for instructional decisions (Valencia, 2002). Another problem is the evidences used only for reporting learning achievement. Most teachers do not use assessment to boost learning; they are likely to misinterpret assessment results (Rogier, 2014) and teachers only focus on constructed responses rather than critical thinking (Mcmillan, 2005). In most of the cases, teachers do not refer to authorities; there is no significant application of experts' recommendations and research findings in classroom practice (Mcmillan, 2005). There may also be a problem of translating knowledge and concept into practice by teachers for classroom assessment performance.

The problem in the field of assessment literacy may well be that there are many claims and recommendations asserted by scholars, but few are supported by empirical evidence. There is real need for expanding empirical research in teachers' assessment knowledge and its impact on learning achievement to support the principles and recommendations of scholars.

The role of classroom assessment

Classroom assessment can be regarded as one of the most challenging aspects of teachers' profession (Mertler, 2003a; 2009), and has a powerful impact on teaching and learning processes (Stiggins, 2012). Since teachers design, score and evaluate activities, classroom assessment needs

time and effort. Stiggins (1988, p. 364) emphasizes this issue stating “Teachers may spend as much as 20% or 30% of their professional time directly involved in assessment-related activities”. Literature supports the claim that despite the complexity and importance of classroom assessment, the current level of practice is not satisfactory (Davidheiser, 2013; Brown, 2004; Mertler, 2003b). Several factors influence the quality of classroom assessment including external tests, teachers' assessment literacy and classroom realities (Mcmillan, 2005; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003). The prominent power of external tests affects national teaching plans, learning objectives and assessment performance. These tests affect teachers' plans in a way that they almost ignore classroom assessment (Mcmillan, 2005; Stiggins, 2007).

Other obstacles can be the misconception of assessment among teachers, students and education community as a general, objective and accurate scientific measurement administered in certain times non-related to teaching. This classical view of assessment does not support students' motivation and confidence in learning (Shepard, 2000). Teachers' lack of knowledge is another obstacle in front of adequate practice of quality assessment in classroom education because teacher preparation courses and professional trainings are not preparing teachers well to challenge classroom assessment (Mcmillan, 2005; Rogier, 2014; Shepard, 2000; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003)

Additionally, there are some classroom realities and learning environments that affect classroom assessment practice negatively such as inappropriate behaviors of learners, heterogeneity of learners' abilities (Mcmillan, 2005), crowded classrooms and very limited classroom time especially in public schools.

In order to accomplish improvement in learning achievement and raise students' academic standards, necessary actions should be taken to promote the quality of classroom assessment. Training programs need to have courses that are more intensive on assessment literacy to prepare teachers well for the challenge of classroom assessment. The practice of assessment in classrooms should change to assessment for learning not of learning for obtaining learning goals (Mcmillan, 2005; Stiggins, 2002, 2008, 2012; Valencia, 2002). Any improvement in the quality of assessment for learning leads to students' greater achievement (Stiggins, 2012). The gap between external factors on classroom assessment and principles of assessment literacy need to be minimized.

The present study examines whether teachers are prepared to assess students' performance and tries to discover teachers' perceptions of their level of assessment literacy. In addition, this research tries to reveal teachers' views about the courses they received in their initial teacher education programs as teacher candidates. It also tries to find out the weak and strong aspects of teachers' knowledge about classroom assessment in relation to what kind of skills or ability they have or tend to develop.

This study tries to determine the assessment literacy levels of Iraqi teachers of English in Northern Iraq regional governorate. To this aim, the following research questions are to be investigated:

1. What are the assessment literacy levels of Iraqi English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers?
2. What are the weak and strong aspects of Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy when compared to the standards of teacher competence?

Research design

This study applied a quantitative method with a descriptive approach to define Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy levels in terms of the seven standards of teachers' assessment competence proposed by AFT, NCME and NEA (1990).

The researchers used Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory (CALI) designed by Mertler & Campbell (2005) to collect the data. The survey form was adapted from "Teacher Assessment Literacy Questionnaire" (Plake, Impara & Fager, 1993). The questionnaire consists of two parts: the first part has 35 items to investigate teachers' assessment literacy based on the seven Standards for Teacher Competence in the Educational Assessment of Students (AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990).

The second part consists of seven questions about participants' academic achievement, gender, age, classroom level they teach, and their views on the courses they received in initial teacher education.

The population of this research was EFL teachers in Northern Iraq, specifically from Sulaymaniyah and Arbil governorates. All the teachers are speakers of Kurdish as a first language. Some are not graduates of faculties of education and teaching departments; therefore, they have not been prepared for teaching and assessing students.

Teachers of both basic schools and preparatory schools in private and public education sectors are covered in data collection. The sampling method was convenience sampling. Although 150 questionnaires were distributed, 101 teachers completed the questionnaire.

Data analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted to explore teachers' assessment levels according to the seven standards of teachers' assessment literacy. Each subscale was investigated individually to determine the weak and strong aspects of teachers' assessment literacy. Means and standard deviations for each standard and the whole instrument were examined. All the statistical analyses were carried out by using SPSS to find answers for the research questions.

Findings

Perceptions of Qualification for Assessment

Table 1 gives information about the frequency analysis of the question of whether teachers have received a stand-alone course on classroom assessment as part of their undergraduate program.

Table 1 *Descriptive Statistics for Stand-alone Course on Classroom Assessment*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	yes	43	42.6	42.6
	no	58	57.4	57.4
	Total	101	100.0	100.0

Table 1 shows that 42.6% of the teachers (n= 43) took a stand-alone course on classroom assessment; on the other hand, 57.4% of participants (n= 58) did not take a stand-alone course on classroom assessment.

Table 2 presents description of the frequency levels of teachers' perceptions about undergraduate preparation program.

Table 2 *Perceptions of Undergraduate Preparation for Classroom Teaching*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	very unprepared	6	5.9	6.4
	somewhat unprepared	11	10.9	11.7
	somewhat prepared	47	46.5	50.0
	very prepared	30	29.7	31.9
	Total	94	93.1	100.0
Missing	System	7	6.9	
Total		101	100.0	

In Table 2, it is seen that only 16.8% of teachers (n= 17) think that the undergraduate preparation program did not prepare them for classroom teaching, while 76.2% of teachers (n= 77) think that undergraduate preparation program prepared them to be a good teacher in general.

Table 3 illustrates teachers' perceptions of undergraduate preparation program for students' assessment in the classroom.

Table 3 *Perceptions of Undergraduate Preparation for Classroom Assessment*

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Valid	very unprepared for assessing student performance	8	7.9	8.2
	somewhat unprepared for assessing student performance	15	14.9	15.5
	somewhat prepared for assessing student performance	42	41.6	43.3
	very prepared for assessing	32	31.7	33.0
Total		97	96.0	100.0
Missing	System	4	4.0	
Total		101	100.0	

Frequency analysis presented in Table 3 demonstrates that 7.9 % of teachers (n= 8) report being very unprepared, while 14.9% of them (n= 15) answered to be somewhat unprepared. On the other hand, 41.6% of teachers (n= 42) reported being somewhat prepared and 31.7% of teachers (n= 33) believe that they are very prepared for assessing students' performance. The descriptive frequency statistics show that 73.3% of English teachers (n= 74) feel prepared for assessing student performance.

Analysis of teachers' assessment literacy

Research question 1: What is the assessment literacy level of Iraqi teachers of English as a foreign language measured by Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory?

Descriptive analysis was conducted to investigate Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy levels. Table 4 shows the descriptive statistics of their assessment literacy levels.

Table 4 *Descriptive Statistics of Teachers Assessment Literacy Levels*

	<i>N</i>	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Total correct answer	101	5.00	28.00	14.3465	4.45968

As seen in Table 4, the average scores of teachers ($N=101$) was less than satisfactory. Teachers answered less than 15 questions correctly ($M=14.34$, $SD= 4.45$) out of 35 questions. The minimum correct response was five and the maximum correct response was 28. The statistics showed that Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy level in the current study was found to be less than all the previous studies around the world (Perry, 2013; Plake, Impara & Fager, 1993; Mertler, 2003b; Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2013).

Research question 2 What are the weak and strong aspects of Iraqi English language teachers' assessment literacy according to the standards of teacher competence?

Descriptive data was collected through Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory in order to explore the strong and weak points of teachers' assessment literacy. Details about strong and weak points of teachers' assessment literacy are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 *Statistical analysis of teachers' scores for each standard*

	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>
Standard 1- Choosing appropriate methods of assessment	2.2475	1.12611
Standard 2- Developing appropriate methods of assessment	2.3465	1.12637
Standard 3- Administering, scoring and interpreting assessment results	2.3366	1.07030
Standard 4- Using assessment results for decision making	2.4059	1.12408

Standard 5- Developing valid grading practice	1.8317	1.15818
Standard 6-Communicating assessment results	1.6931	.99742
Standard 7- Recognizing unethical or illegal assessment practice	1.4851	1.01601
Total correct answer	14.3465	4.45968

Maximum possible score for each standard is five. The results showed that teachers' highest score was on standard four: "*Using assessment results for decision-making*" ($M= 2.41$, $SD= 1.12$), then the second highest score was on standard two: "*Developing appropriate methods of assessment*" ($M= 2.34$, $SD= 1.13$). The lowest score was found in standard seven: "*Recognizing unethical or illegal assessment practice*" ($M= 1.48$, $SD= 1.01$). The second lowest standard was standard six: "*Communicating assessment results*" ($M= 1.69$, $SD= .99$).

Discussion

Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy level

The findings of the current research showed that Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy level was much less than satisfactory. Teachers responded less than 15 items correctly out of 35 items. However, teachers' correct response ranged from 17 to 24 in the previous studies (Campbell, Murphy & Holt, 2002; Davidheiser, 2013; Mertler, 2003b; Perry, 2013; Plake, 1993; Plake et al.1993; Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2013). A study conducted by Campbell et al. (2002) in the United States showed that pre-service teachers' correct response was 21 and in-service teachers' was 23. Another study conducted by Plake (1993) revealed that teachers' overall correct response was 23. In another study, Plake et al. (1993) found teachers' correct response as 22.

Mertler (2003b) carried out a study with both pre-service and in-service teachers to determine their assessment literacy level; as can be expected, pre-service teachers' score was less than in-service teachers'. A study was conducted by Davidheiser (2013) with Drexel University participants indicated that assessment literacy level was found higher than all the previous studies. Further, in a study conducted by Perry (2013), teachers' assessment literacy was found to be above average. Despite contextual differences, all the above-mentioned research showed that teachers' assessment literacy score was higher than the findings of the current study.

On the other hand, in a study conducted by Yamtim and Wongwanich (2013) in Taiwan, primary teachers' assessment literacy level was found to be 17.11. In the comparison with the findings the other studies on teachers' assessment literacy, we can conclude that Iraqi EFL teachers have the poorest level of assessment literacy so far. This low score in assessment literacy may result from poor teacher education programs, lack of in-service training courses for teacher development, limited resources in assessment, and the dominant role of national testing on the teaching/ learning process.

Strong and weak aspects of Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy

The weakest aspect of teachers' assessment literacy in this research was found in standard seven, which is "*teachers should be skilled in recognizing unethical, illegal, and otherwise*

inappropriate assessment methods and uses of assessment information". The results showed that teachers' highest score was on standard four, "teachers should be skilled in using assessment results when making decisions about individual students, planning teaching, developing curriculum and school improvement" (AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990).

The findings revealed that the strong aspect of teachers' assessment in the current research is similar to the study by Perry (2013) in which teachers' highest score was also in standard four. The weak points of teachers' assessment literacy were also similar to Perry's study in standard seven. The second weakest aspects of teachers assessment literacy found in this study is slightly different from the study by Plake et al. (1993) in which teachers' weakest point was in standard six. The strong aspect of this research was found to be different from the study that was done by Plake et al. (1993) in which the highest point of score was in standard three: "Administering, scoring and interpreting assessment results". Mertler (2003b) found strong points of performance in standard three and lowest score was in standard five, which was different from the current study. Yamtim and Wongwanich (2013) found different strong and weak points of assessment literacy as well; the weakest point was in standard five and the strongest aspect was on standard one.

The strongest and the weakest aspects of teachers' assessment literacy show moderate variety across the related literature. The various results may be due to the difference in courses related to assessment in teacher education programs, curriculum differences and education policy. Another reason may come from the fact that teachers learn from colleagues (Stiggins, 1988) and revise their own samples; as a result, the strong and weak points may be shared among them in similar contexts.

Iraqi EFL teachers' conception on assessment

The findings of the present study showed that more than 57% of participants reported that they had not received a stand-alone course on assessment during their undergraduate education. Improvement in learning is inevitably connected to teachers' assessment literacy (Arter, 2001). In the context of this study, teachers have not received any in-service training course on assessment, at least for the last 10 years. Although teachers' quality is one of the most crucial factors of learning achievement (Lee & Wiliam, 2005), there have rarely been courses for in-service teachers' quality improvement in Iraqi context.

This poor level of assessment literacy may result from the misconception of assessment practice and role. Teachers got the lowest score on average in comparison to all studies done about assessment literacy so far; yet more than 73% of teachers believed that their undergraduate program had prepared them for classroom assessment. Teachers' claim of being prepared can be regarded as false statement because the contradiction between their claim and assessment literacy scores may be due to teachers' misunderstanding of classroom assessment. Similar to previous studies, most of the teachers who performed much better reported that they had not been prepared well for assessment (Mertler, 2009; Stiggins, 2002, 2007). The results showed that teachers in the context of the present study are unaware of the principles of assessment literacy. Therefore, as mentioned by Mertler (2004) teacher education programs should be seen as the foundation of core teaching skills including assessment literacy and assessment skills which are of great importance in actual teaching practice.

Despite the limitations of this study, in which the data collection was a single stage survey and only teachers of English participated in the data collection process, there is enough evidence in hand to claim that teachers assessment literacy is much less than satisfactory. Teachers need in-service training courses for professional development. Teachers are not aware of the principles of assessment literacy and even they are not aware of their need to improve. Teachers need to be trained about unethical and illegal practice of classroom assessment more than other aspects.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to determine Iraqi EFL teachers' assessment literacy level. Population and sampling were restricted to Northern part of Iraq, specifically in Sulaymaniyah and Arbil governorates. The findings provide empirical evidence in hand supported by 101 survey samples to claim that Iraqi EFL teachers' level of assessment literacy is too low according to Standards for Teacher Competence in the Educational Assessment of Students (AFT, NCME, & NEA, 1990). The results indicated that Iraqi EFL teachers perform the weakest level of knowledge as compared to all the previous research in this field (Campbell et al., 2002; Davidheiser, 2013; Mertler, 2003b; Perry, 2013; Plake, 1993; Plake et al. 1993; Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2013). Teachers' weakest perception was found in "*recognizing unethical or illegal assessment practice*" but they performed somehow better "*in using assessment results for decision-making*". Although most of Iraqi EFL teachers reported as being prepared, the findings proved the opposite. They underestimate or misunderstand the role of assessment and their own potential need for improvement.

It is clearly proved that Iraqi EFL teachers are not prepared well to assess students' performance adequately and determine the true level of achievement. Teachers need improvement in assessment through reform in teacher education programs and training courses in Iraq.

Suggestions

Based on our findings, revision and improvement in teacher education programs in Northern Iraq is definitely needed as suggested in many studies for other contexts (Brookhart, 2001; Chapuis & Stiggins, 2002; Mcmillan, 2005; Popham, 2011; Zhang & Burry-Stock, 2003). Education reform should not only focus on changing course books and pedagogy. Curriculum reforms need to cover assessment concept, principle and procedures alongside with other aspects. The important role of assessment in education should receive enough consideration by the schooling system.

There is also an urgent need of appropriate in-service training courses for teachers' professional development. The training courses need to address all the principles and procedures of sound assessment. There should be a standard for teachers' quality and a clear policy for recruitment to raise the standards of teaching and learning.

One suggestion for further studies could be about the methodological considerations. This study employed a survey research method, which gives general information on teachers' perceptions, however, inclusion of classroom observation and assessment interpretation in further studies may bring in-debt understanding of the assessment perceptions and practices of teachers.

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