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Exploring Iranian ESP Teachers' Assessment Practices in Online Specialized English Courses

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Abstract

As an integral dimension of instruction, assessment determines whether or not the educational goals are being fulfilled. The present study was an attempt to investigate Iranian ESP instructors' common classroom assessment practices. To this end, based on convenience sampling, eight different ESP teachers teaching BA students from a variety of departments at Rasht Islamic Azad University, Iran were selected. An observation checklist containing 31 items was used as the only data-gathering instrument of this study. The results of the descriptive statistics revealed that some assessment practices including *using portfolio to assess student progress, assessing group class participation, conducting item analysis for teacher-made tests,* and *writing matching questions* were applied less frequently in the ESP classes. However, some assessment practices such as *incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades and recognizing unethical, illegal,* or *inappropriate uses of assessment information* were more likely to be used in the observed ESP classes. The instructors were also more likely to *incorporate classroom behavior in the calculation of grades, incorporate extra credit activities in the calculation of grades, recognize unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods, and inform students how grades are to be assigned*. It is concluded that ESP teachers utilize both traditional testing and alternative assessment for achieving a complementary process of assessment, and they call for an integration of them due to their importance in assessing both the process and product of learning. The results of this study may hopefully be beneficial for curriculum developers, materials developers, course and syllabus designers, teachers and teacher trainers, and the other stakeholders in the fields of language teaching and learning as well.

Keywords: classroom assessment practices, Iranian ESP teachers, online specialized English courses

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1. Introduction

Assessment has been a very hot topic in the field of education for many decades now. Shepard (2013) stated that nobody denies the integral role assessment plays in educational settings. Heaton (1975) asserts that assessment is a systematic process that entails identifying the extent to which learners have mastered and achieved the learning goals. Assessment has also been defined as a process of giving feedback which develops and expands learners' learning (Shepard, 2013). Likewise, similarly, Popham (2009) argues that assessment involves both learners and teachers in the continuous monitoring of learning and teaching process.

Being in the educational setting requires teachers to spend much of their time preparing for assessment; assessment becomes a large part of their daily life in order to gather information about learners and knowing which kind of assessment is more appropriate for learners. Therefore, it is necessary for teachers to be aware of assessment literacy (Atai, Babaii, & Taghipour Bazargani, 2017; Ghavidel & Valipour, 2021).

Assessing and grading students are important parts of teacher job so teachers should spend much time for assessment preparation. In addition, students need to show interest in gaining an acceptable understanding of assessment theories and methods. And it is well-documented that lack of students' assessment knowledge is a disadvantage for students' learning and motivation. This study focused on assessment as a key factor in improving the teaching and learning processes. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no study in the Iranian context, especially at Islamic Azad University, has sought the common assessment practices in the ESP online classes. To fill this gap and to have a better picture of the common assessment practices of teachers in an EFL context, this study explored the Iranian ESP teachers' assessment practices in online Specialized English courses and aimed to answer the following research question:

RQ: What are the common assessment practices of Iranian ESP teachers in online Specialized English courses?

2. Literature Review

Assessment has always been enjoying a central place in language teaching and learning as many important educational decisions are made based on assessment results. The value of assessment has been well-documented by many research studies on language assessment (Bailey, 1998; Koumachi, 2021; Lee & Butler, 2020; Mihanyar & Ashraf, 2020). Classroom assessment is a continual activity for teachers to improve the quality of instruction and motivate learners to learn (Fulcher, 2012).

Regarding the significant role of assessment, McNamara, Knoch, and Fan (2019) state that it affects what is taught and learned in the classroom and argue that there have been demands to abandon traditional assessment and use alternative assessment, instead. Traditional assessment is defined by Short and Burke (1991) as the outside force imposed on the curriculum and learners. There are also limitations in applying traditional assessment as they are likely to result in appropriate evaluations (Mastuno, 2009). Thus, in order to compensate for the shortcomings of traditional assessment, alternative assessment has attracted the attention of scholars (Chen, 2008; Lynch, 2001). Alternative assessment takes many forms such as performance assessment, portfolio assessment, students' self-assessment, peer-assessment (Huerta-Macias, 1995).

Alternative assessment like self-, peer-, and portfolio assessment have received much attention during last decades (Ghazizadeh & Taghipour Bazargani, 2019). Assessment should not be used just only as an instrument during learning process, but also as a means of the active engagement of students in their learning process (Spiller, 2012; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). As another form of alternative assessment, portfolio assessment is defined as a systematic collection of learners' activities and learning process reflecting a student's progress, learning, and achievements in one or more school lessons. In recent years, portfolio assessment has been used for some purposes like as an assessment instrument and as a part of activities that improve students' language skills.

As an effective tool, self-assessment provides a tremendous opportunity for learners to actively engage in the process of learning since they can evaluate their own strengths and weaknesses, reflect on their developments, and set learning goals for themselves (Lynch, 2001; Paris & Ayres, 1994). Through self-assessment, students can become aware of goals and expectations, monitor their learning process, and evaluate their own state of understanding against goals and standards defined by the curriculum (Butler & Lee, 2010). Butler and Lee further argue that self-assessment helps learners understand the amount of effort needed to accomplish their goals, develop a variety of strategies, and employ them effectively.

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Peer-assessment is another common type of alternative assessment where learners give feedback on each other's work as an effective way to improve the quality of students' performance (McDowell & Mowl, 1996). According to William and Thompson (2008), summative assessment and formative assessment were first coined by Scriven (1967) and Bloom (1969). The former facilitates the measurement of the level of achievement of learning outcomes formally through tests, assignments, projects and presentations. It also allows the teacher to evaluate and to make important judgments either about learners' achievements at certain relevant points in the learning process (e.g. end of course, project, semester, unit, and year) or about the program in use, teaching and/or unit of study effectiveness (William & Thompson, 2008).

Formative assessment, on the other hand, is implemented in order to check students' ongoing progress, to give immediate and appropriate feedback and to improve the curriculum (William & Tompson, 2008). It usually occurs during day to day learning experiences and includes ongoing, informal observations throughout the term, course, semester or unit of study. Formative assessment also helps teachers to make decisions on modifying their programs or adapting their learning and teaching methods (Tuttle, 2009).

As a reaction to many forms of static testing, dynamic assessment has come into existence as a form of alternative assessment approach, focusing on the centrality of language as a means of communication in assessment process (Lantolf & Poehner, 2004; Sadighi, Jamasbi, & Ramezani, 2018). Dynamic assessment is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind where assessment and learning are intertwined. However, testing has usually been viewed as an isolated event taking place before learning (e.g., in placement tests), or during or after learning (e.g., certification or achievement tests). By contrast, dynamic assessment proposes to integrate and connect learning and assessment.

3. Methodology

As there was no cause and effect relationship and no treatment in this research, the present study can be considered as descriptive in nature. More specifically, to answer the only question of this study i.e., 'What are the common assessment practices of Iranian ESP teachers in online specialized English courses?' the researcher observed eight Specialized English classrooms chosen by convenience sampling.

Unfortunately, the time of data collection for the present study coincided with the spread of Corona virus all over the world, and it was not possible for the researchers to be present in the classes; therefore, by the researchers' request, teachers sent their links to join the classes as a guest. All the performances during the classes were observed and checked according to a 31-item checklist as the only data-gathering instrument of this study.

3.1 Participants

A convenience sample of eight different ESP teachers teaching BA students participated in this study. The ESP teachers were from a variety of departments including Law, Accounting, Business Management, Architecture, Industrial Engineering, Mining Engineering, Electrical Engineering, and Computer Engineering at Rasht Islamic Azad University, Iran. All the ESP teachers had PhD degree in their related subjects and their teaching experience generally ranged from 5 to 20 years. The particular course of interest was Specialized English courses at BA level.

3.2 Instruments

An observation checklist, as the only data-gathering instrument in this study, was adapted from Zhang, Burry, and Stock's checklist (1994). The reliability of the checklist was estimated through running Cronbach's Alpha to determine the inter-relatedness of the items within the observation checklist. This checklist containing 31 items addressed issues in classroom assessment of student learning in online specialized English courses.

The items in this checklist consisted of choosing appropriate assessment methods for instructional decisions, selecting textbook-provided test items for classroom assessment, administering announced quizzes, administering unannounced quizzes, evaluating oral questions from students, matching assessments with instruction, writing paper-pencil tests, writing multiple-choice questions, writing matching questions, writing true/false questions, writing fill-in-the-blank or short answer questions, writing essay questions, communicating performance assessment criteria to students in advance, recording assessment result on the rating scale/checklist while observing a student's performance, assessing individual class participation, assessing group class participation, using portfolios to assess student progress, following required procedures (time limit, no hints, no interpretation) when administering standardized tests, conducting item analysis (i.e., difficulty and discrimination indices) for teacher- made tests, informing students in advance how grades

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are to be assigned, incorporating extra credit activities in the calculation of grades, incorporating classroom behavior in the calculation of grades, incorporating improvement in the calculation of grades, incorporating effort in the calculation of grades, incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades, providing oral feedback to students, providing written feedback to students, communicating classroom assessment results to students, protecting students' confidentiality with regard to test scores, recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods, recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate uses of assessment information.

3.3 Procedures for Data Collection and Analysis

The data needed to conduct the present study was collected at Islamic Azad University, Rasht branch. The permit for conducting the research was obtained from the teachers of the classes. Non-participant Observation was conducted when the instructors were teaching. As mentioned before, the objective was to obtain information regarding the most common classroom assessment practices employed by the instructors at specialized English courses.

Observations were done during the online classes. The main focus of the observation was on the learners and teachers' interaction in the classroom setting. The researcher observed the instructors and learners in their natural teaching and learning environment. Each class was observed according to the checklist by the researcher. The descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, means, and standard deviations were run to the items of the checklist through the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS version 25).

4. Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for all the items of the assessment practices observation checklist. The items are listed in a descending order according to their means.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the ESP instructors' classroom assessment practices

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades	8	4.7500	.46291
Recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate uses of assessment information	8	4.2500	.70711
Incorporating classroom behavior in the calculation of grades	8	4.2500	1.03510
Incorporating extra credit activities in the calculation of grades	8	4.1250	.99103
Recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods	8	4.0000	.53452
Informing students in advance how grades are to be assigned	8	4.0000	.92582
Following required procedures (time limit, no hints, no interpretation) when administering standardized tests	8	3.6250	.51755
Writing paper-pencil tests	8	3.6250	.51755
Protecting students' confidentiality with regard to test scores	8	3.5000	.75593
Providing oral feedback to students	8	3.5000	.75593
Assessing individual class participation	8	3.5000	.75593
Writing multiple-choice questions	8	3.5000	.53452

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Evaluating oral questions from students	8	3.3750	1.0606
Administering announced quizzes	8	3.2500	1.0351
Writing fill-in-the-blank or short answer questions	8	3.1250	.99103
Providing written feedback to students	8	2.8750	1.1259
Communicating classroom assessment results to students	8	2.8750	.83452
Selecting textbook-provided test items for classroom assessment	8	2.8750	.83452
Matching assessments with instruction	8	2.8750	.99103
Incorporating effort in the calculation of grades	8	2.7500	.46291
Incorporating improvement in the calculation of grades	8	2.7500	.70711
Writing essay questions	8	2.7500	.46291
Communicating performance assessment criteria to students in advance	8	2.3750	.74402
Writing true/false questions	8	2.2500	.70711
Recording assessment result on the rating scale/checklist while observing a student's performance	8	2.0000	.53452
Choosing appropriate assessment methods for instructional decisions	8	2.0000	.92582
Writing matching questions	8	1.7500	1.1649
Conducting item analysis (i.e., difficulty and discrimination indices) for teacher-made tests	8	1.6250	.51755
Assessing group class participation	8	1.5000	.75593
Using portfolios to assess student progress	8	1.1250	.35355

The results of the descriptive statistics revealed that some assessment practices were less often observed in the ESP classes. These included using portfolio to assess student progress (M = 1.12; SD = .35), assessing group class participation (M = 1.50; SD = .75), conducting item analysis for teacher-made tests (M = 1.62; SD = .51), and writing matching questions (M = 1.75; SD = 1.16). In addition, the instructors in the ESP classes did not choose appropriate assessment methods for instructional decisions (M = 2.00; SD = .92). Moreover, they were not willing to record assessment result on the rating scale/checklist while observing a student's performance decisions (M = 2.00; SD = .53), write true/false questions (M = 2.25; SD = .70), and Communicate performance assessment criteria to students in advance (M = 2.37; SD = .74). Figure 1 depicts the least frequently used assessment practices in the ESP classes.

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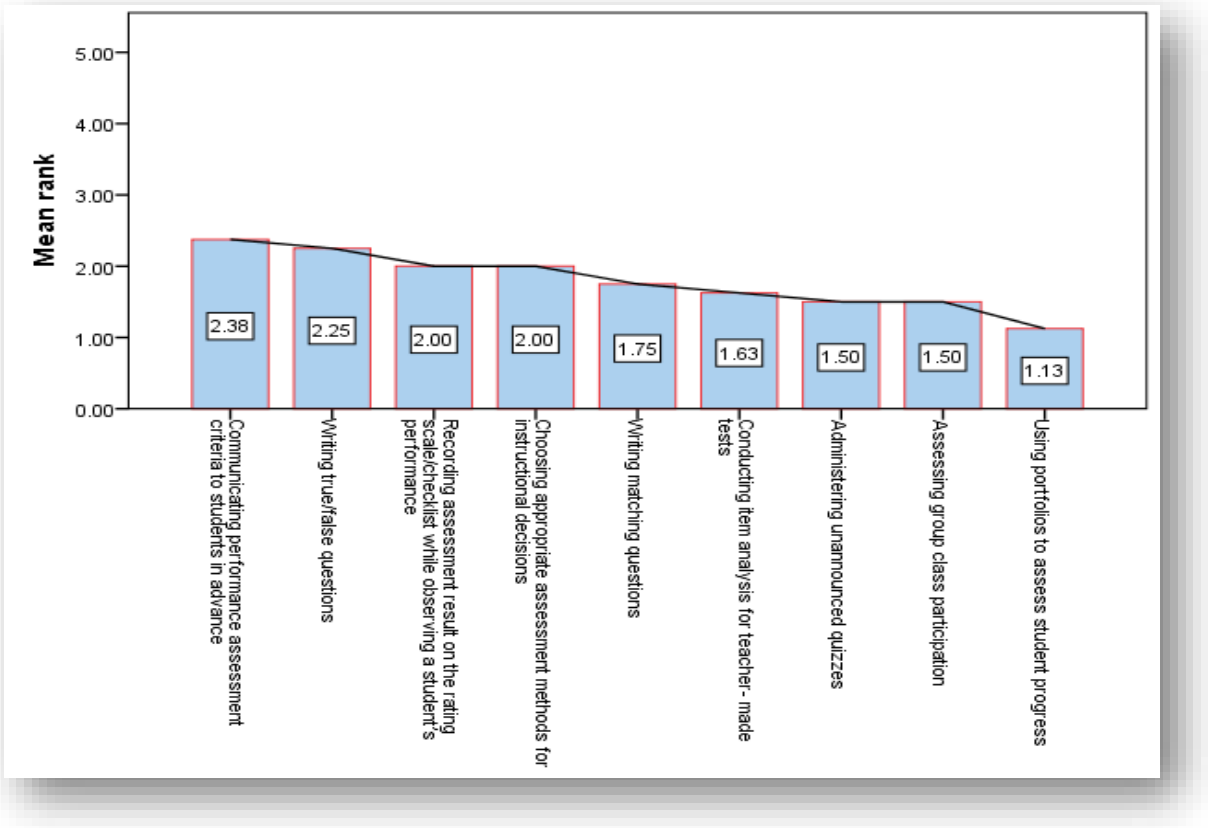


Figure 1. The least frequently used assessment practices in the ESP classes

In comparison, some assessment practices were often used in the observed ESP classes, such as incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades (M = 4.75; SD = .46) and recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate uses of assessment information (M = 4.25; SD = .70). The instructors were also more likely to incorporate classroom behavior in the calculation of grades (M = 4.25; SD = 1.03), Incorporate extra credit activities in the calculation of grades (M = 4.12; SD = .99), recognize unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods (M = 4.00; SD =.53), and inform students in advance how grades are to be assigned (M = 4; SD =.92). Figure 2 shows the most frequently used assessment methods in the ESP classes in descending order.

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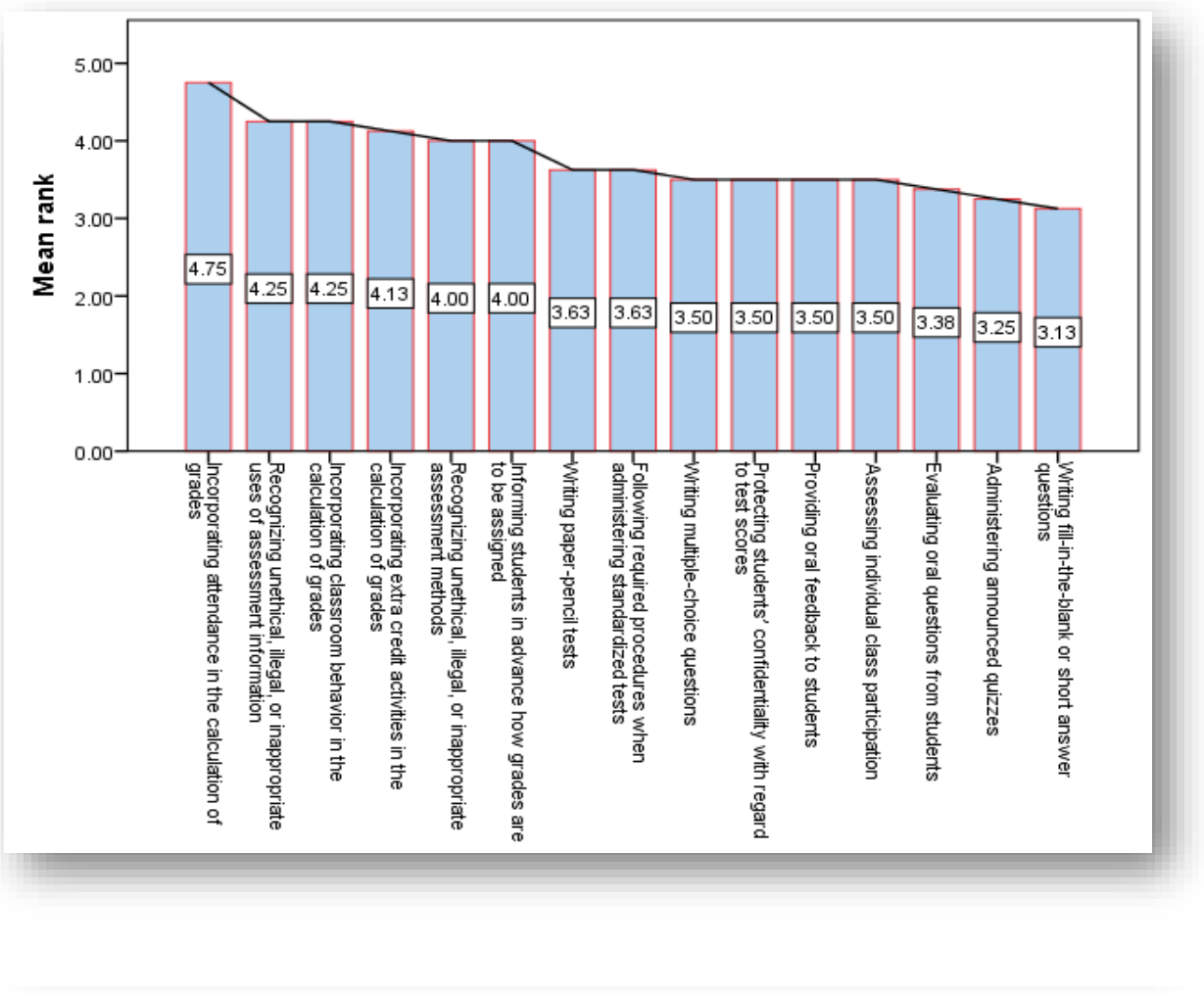


Figure 2. The most frequently used assessment practices in the ESP classes

As seen in Figure 2, there were 15 items that had a high usage frequency, means of which were higher than 3.00. Incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades was the item that the instructors most frequently used. It showed that most of the instructors preferred incorporating student attendance in assigning grades and used it as a common assessment practice. In addition, the instructors mostly recognized unethical, illegal, or inappropriate uses of assessment information. Incorporating classroom behavior in the calculation of grades had also a high frequency.

According to Figure 2, incorporating extra credit activities in the calculation of grades, recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods, and informing students in advance how grades are to be assigned were among the most frequently applied assessment methods. In addition, following required procedures when administering standardized tests, writing paper-pencil tests, protecting students' confidentiality with regard to test scores, and providing oral feedback to students were actively noted by the instructors. Furthermore, the results of the analyses also presented evidence for the ESP instructors' consideration on non-achievement-based grading such as assessing individual class participation. Besides, writing multiple-choice questions was stated as highly used questions types that were used more often than other types of questions such as matching items or true/false items. Evaluating oral questions from students, administering announced quizzes, and writing fill-in-the-blank or short answer questions were used on numerous occasions in the classroom assessment process.

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Finally, the results of the statistical analyses as presented in Figure 2 also revealed that some classroom assessment practices had moderate frequency. Assessment practices such as providing written feedback to students, communicating classroom assessment results to students, selecting textbook-provided test items for classroom assessment, matching assessments with instruction, incorporating effort in the calculation of grades, incorporating improvement in the calculation of grades, and writing essay questions were the items that had low moderate frequencies. These practices were sometimes used as ESP classroom assessment practices.

5. Discussion

The findings of the present study showed that some assessment practices were applied less frequently in the ESP classes including using portfolio to assess student progress, assessing group class participation, conducting item analysis for teacher-made tests, and writing matching questions. However, some assessment practices were more likely to be used in the observed ESP classes, such as incorporating attendance in the calculation of grades and recognizing unethical, illegal, or inappropriate uses of assessment information. The instructors were also more likely to incorporate classroom behavior in the calculation of grades, incorporate extra credit activities in the calculation of grades, recognize unethical, illegal, or inappropriate assessment methods, and inform students how grades are to be assigned. It is also showed that due to a number of concerns expressed in the literature on assessment, practices of teachers' support should be given to teachers to improve the quality of teaching and assessment for learning, and teachers need comprehensive and well-planned professional development in classroom assessment.

Moreover, the findings from this study lend support many of the concerns expressed in the literature on the assessment literacy of teachers (Bailey, 1998; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017) and complements a large body of literature that advocates support for teachers to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Gholizadeh & Taghipour Bazargani, 2022; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020; Tajeddin, Khatib, & Mahdavi, 2022). Similar findings were also reported on teachers' low assessment literacy knowledge (Tajeddin et al., 2022; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). The over dependence on summative assessment approaches makes it virtually impossible for teachers to adapt teaching and learning to assessment in the classroom. Teachers were more concerned with summative assessment. Questioning techniques, feedback without grades, peer assessment and formative use of summative test to improve learning were not given attention by teachers in the classroom.

The results are also in line with the findings of Ismael (2017), who found that the assessment practices of the participants encompassed various alternative assessment (AA) methods; however, these participants required more experience in terms of implementing criteria with more frequency in a longer time. In addition, he argued that the participants' knowledge of AA needed to be increased. Participants believed that AAs are beneficial but they could not use the full potential of them.

Traditional assessments are indirect and inauthentic (Shohamy, 2017). Shohamy further adds that traditional assessment is mostly one-shot, speed-based, and norm-referenced. These tests measure learners' performance at a particular moment, and that's why Bailey, Law, and Eckes (1995) view traditional testing as single-occasion tests. Nevertheless, test scores do not reflect learners' real progress, and, consequently, they cannot help teachers identify what difficulties the students may experience during the test. The current reform agenda in educational assessment advocates that a good assessment is the same as a quality instructional activity. Teachers' ideas about assessment were unconnected from the notions of instruction and so deeply belief that this shift was not possible.

Another goal of assessment reform involves placing high value on teachers' decision-making ability with respect to assessment of student ability. Empowering teachers to become responsible assessor calls upon their knowledge of subject matter, pedagogy, psychology of children learning and communicate that knowledge to all stakeholders. If staff development efforts want to empower teachers to be competent in all these roles, then professional development programmers must help teachers become reflective about their practices and beliefs, including the confrontation of potentially conflicting beliefs. Staff professional development must address the conflicting belief of teachers between the role of assessment and the role of instruction.

Teachers' personal experiences in the classroom are likely to conflict with those that provided the basis for assessment reform. For reform to be successful, dissonance must be identified and confronted, only this way can one expect change to occur. Assessment literate teachers must be able to design and administer more than summative end-of-unit tests and exams if they are to realize improvements in schools. The previously noted models suggest that teachers view assessment as pedagogy so that it is integrated into their best instructional strategies. Essentially, teachers need

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to shift their paradigm to understand how assessment can drive instruction and positively impact student learning and performance.

6. Conclusion

Based on the results of the present study, it is concluded that classroom assessment practice is immensely important because of its emphasis on validity and ethicality. Classroom assessment practices are ongoing processes that involve teachers and students in making judgements on students' progress, through the application of non-conventional strategies. Traditional assessment merely samples "tiny snippets of student behavior", but alternative assessments look at the bigger picture of students' performance. Secondly, some conclusions relate to the necessity of classroom assessment practice, which covers the knowledge of its concepts, requirements, criteria, features, and benefits as mentioned in the literature.

Knowledge about these aspects of classroom assessment practice requires a deeper knowledge of the underpinning theories of classroom assessment practice, especially the two most important aspects of those theories, which are interrelated with the characteristics and benefits of alternative assessment. Adequate knowledge of the underpinning theories of any practice is necessary because "those engaged in the 'practice' of education must already possess some 'theory' of education which structures their activities and guides their decisions" (Carr & Kemmis, 2003, p. 56).

Focusing on students' strengths, it is concluded that significant feature of alternative assessment, needs to be developed. Regarding the benefits of alternative assessment for students' learning, the participants were observed that alternative assessment improves students' learning, and they believed in these benefits. Nevertheless, their ability to take advantage of the alternative assessment benefits requires improvement, especially with regard to integrating it into teaching and learning more broadly in a longer class time. This is in order to enable teachers to identify continually students' strengths to focus on, and diagnose and address their weaknesses. Nonetheless, it is concluded that subject teachers had the right to perform a variety of alternative assessment since they were observed that the more ways students have to display their knowledge and performance, the more accurate assessment might be for making assessment decisions, rather than depending on a few exams on certain days alone.

It is also concluded that ESP teachers utilize both traditional testing and alternative assessment for achieving a complementary process of assessment, and they called for an integration of them due to their importance in assessing both the process and product of learning. Regarding the benefits of alternative assessment methods in allowing students to be critical, reflective, and problem-solving thinkers, as well as assessors and autonomous learners, the participants had several opinions. For instance, they believed that teachers are not the only assessors, as students can be assessors and alternative assessment might help them to be confident, critical thinkers, and autonomous learners.

Finally, it is concluded that the use of alternative assessment in the departments requires development in terms of their benefits for teaching and learning, and their effectiveness in showing students' knowledge and performance accurately, validly, and ethically. In addition, applying classroom assessment practices seems to be impractical due to the current existing challenges. Therefore, performing alternative assessment in different departments can only partially fulfil the essential goals of alternative assessment that stem from their underpinning theories. These goals relate to focusing on the social aspect of learning, student-centered learning, empowering students, students' active roles, and increasing the accuracy, validity, and ethicality of assessment.

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