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An Exploration of EFL Teachers' Knowledge of and Attitudes towards Post-modern Approach to Language Assessment: A Qualitative Inquiry into Iranian EFL Teachers at Private Language Institutes

Mahmood Reza Moradian[1], Akram Ramezanzadeh[1], & Fatemeh Ghaffari Doust[2]

* Correspondence:
f.gh62@yahoo.com
1. Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Lorestan
2. Ministry of Education, Komijan, Markazi

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Abstract

Rested on postmodern thought patterns and their contributions to English language education in the guise of the alternative assessment paradigm, the present study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards postmodern approach to language assessment. The thematic analysis proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used for analyzing the data. Three core themes were extracted: low levels of assessment literacy among teachers, lack of alternative assessment tools, and the dominance of psychometric legacy. These themes were highly indicative of misalignment of participants' stated knowledge and attitudes with the postmodern approach to language assessment. The concept of the alternative assessment paradigm and its virtues in education were vague for participant teachers. Indeed, teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards classroom assessment generally appeared to diverge from the major tenets of postmodern approach and were more inclined to modernist approach. In other words, the pendulum of the Iranian education system has not swung from the modernist testing paradigm to postmodern assessment paradigm. It is hoped that the insights gained in the light of the discussions be a short step in the long way journey to attain successful modes of classroom assessment.

Keywords: Alignment, EFL teachers' attitudes, postmodern approach to language assessment

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1. Introduction

Education has undergone a massive change with the arrival of the postmodern era. The postmodern paradigm, by rejecting the modernist values and belief systems, has bestowed positive effects on education. Postmodern approach endows a critical perspective towards all dimensions of applied linguistics, and, in the meantime, language testing and assessment as a less-dealt-with but important sub-field within applied linguistics is not an exception. According to Fulcher (2013, p. 1), from a philosophical point of view, "in education and language testing we are concerned with questions of ontology (what we believe to be true), epistemology (how we discover what is true), and consequences of testing (the nature of ethical practice)". In fact, the postmodern approach to language assessment provides "alternatives or challenges to the current mainstream in language testing research both at the level of theory and at the level of practice" (McNamara, 2001, p. 329).

One manifestation of postmodern approach in this regard is deconstruction of the modernist standardized testing paradigm. Indeed, the process of postmodernization of education has revolutionized assessment. With the arrival of the postmodern era, we beheld a revolution in the assessment system; a paradigm clash occurred and the pendulum of educational assessment swung from testing to assessment. According to Gipps' (1994) this paradigm clash entails "a shift in practice from psychometrics to a broader model of educational assessment, from a testing culture to an assessment culture" (p. 1). Postmodernism-inspired assessment opens a new world for both teachers and learners, in the sense that "the underlying conceptions of learning, of evaluation, and of what counts as achievement are now radically different from those which underpin psychometrics" (p. 158). Evaluation in the modernist era is delimited to high-stake tests and final examinations and its focus is on the product of learning. Also, absolute measurement is made by attributing a single score to a learner; in this sense, modernism is the realm of numbers.

An aura of competition among learners in the classroom is a by-product of this psychometric approach. In contrast, assessment, as a postmodern pedagogic orientation, is more cyclic in nature and goes beyond testing and grading (Garfield, 1994). From a postmodern perspective, a single score cannot give a full picture of the range of skills that are important for learners. Therefore, "there should also be little emphasis on summative grading" (Gipps, 1994, p. 41). Besides, the use of tests was criticized because they were not all-encompassing indicative of learners' real knowledge and competence (Shohamy, 2001). Instead, alternative assessment tools including self-assessment, peer-assessment, and portfolios (among the most common of which) were substituted. Self-assessment provides "individual information to students about how well they have learned a particular topic and where they are having difficulty" (Garfield, 1994, p. 3).

Through peer-assessment learners provide feedback to their peers and in this way collaborative learning in contrast with competition is promoted. Portfolios "celebrate the uniqueness of each student and provide tangible evidence of a students' work" (Brown, 2003, p. 257). In this way, postmodern approach to language assessment by triangulation of different sources of assessment strengthens the dependability and validity of decisions adopted based on assessment (Shohamy, 2001). The superiority and excellence of assessment over testing and examination is best portrayed by Gipps (1994) as "one can picture it as a form of survey (using postal questionnaire) as opposed to an in-depth study (using detailed interviews)" (p. 2). In fact, the focus of assessment in the postmodern era shifts from the product of learning to the process of learning (Ray, 2001). In other words, the contribution of postmodern approach to language assessment is that it upgrades the teaching and learning process. As Gipps (1994) asserts "we have to develop our assessment policy and practice in line with the educational assessment paradigm otherwise our attempts to raise educational standards and get the best out of our education system will be disappointed" (p. 161).

In the context of Iran, the wealth of available literature on the postmodern approach to language assessment is categorized into two parts: conceptual studies (Fahim & Pishghadam, 2009; Moradian, 2014) that have dealt with the philosophical stance in the Iranian EFL education system; and empirical studies (Afsahi & Heidari Tabrizi, 2017; Jalilzadeh & Dastgoshadeh, 2011; Sadeghi & Abolfazli Khonbi, 2014) that have dealt with some aspects of assessment approach. The present exploratory study builds a bridge between these two parts by converging philosophy and assessment. In fact, what makes this study unique is that no inquiry has dealt with philosophy and assessment in general, and assessment with regard to postmodern approach in particular. To the best of our knowledge, there is no empirical study that deals with postmodern approach to language assessment. Obviously, lack of philosophy behind assessment signifies ignoring the ontological, epistemological, and ethical issues in assessment, and such oblivious

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ignorance deals a deathblow to the hope of nurturing successful education. Therefore, philosophic thoughts are of paramount importance regarding language assessment.

This study specifically focuses on assessment in the English language education in Iran and the philosophy or philosophies behind it. Yet, to date, to the best of our knowledge, inadequate dealing with the language assessment and philosophy in Iran is a gap in the recent research topics that is worthy of dealing with. To help narrow this lacuna and in order to untie this knot as an important issue of immediate concern to the EFL context of Iran, this qualitative research, intends to see whether the teachers' knowledge and attitudes ("predispositions to assess - as favorable or unfavorable - various issues relating to the educational field" Andronache et al., 2014, p. 629) regarding assessment are aligned with the postmodern approach or not. In this line, the study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the EFL teachers' knowledge of post-modern approach to language assessment?
2. What are the EFL teachers' attitudes towards Post-modern approach to language assessment?
3. How do Iranian EFL teachers utilize their attitudes towards post-modern approach to language assessment in their classroom practices?
4. What are the possible alignments and misalignments of teachers' attitudes with the postmodern approach to language assessment?

2. Literature Review

In the following, some of the related research articles dealing with the postmodern approach to language assessment are reviewed. Fahim and Pishghadam (2009) conducted a conceptual study to in order to shed light on the concept of postmodernism and its implications in the ELT. The paper examines how postmodernism has brought a theoretical shift in the field and led to a major change in ELT practices. Abolishing method-based teaching, construction of post-method language pedagogy, and emergence of critical theories in applied linguistics are mentioned as the contributions of postmodernism in ELT profession. The paper concludes with the remark that, in practice, in developing countries like Iran the ELT still lives in the modernist era.

Afsahi and Heidari Tabrizi (2017) investigated the Iranian EFL teacher's assessment literacy and inclination towards the use of alternative assessment. The study's results showed that; first, there exists a notable positive correlation between the assessment literacy of EFL teachers and their utilization of alternative forms of assessment. In other words, if teachers possess a higher level of assessment literacy, it is more likely that they will employ alternative assessment methods. The second finding of the study demonstrated a correlation between the assessment literacy of Iranian teachers and their years of experience; that is, as teachers gain more experience, their level of assessment literacy tends to increase. Third, regarding assessment literacy, there was a notable distinction between teachers holding M.A. and Ph.D. degrees compared to those with B.A. and lower qualifications. Specifically, teachers with higher degrees exhibited a higher level of assessment literacy.

Jalilzadeh and Dastgoshadeh (2011) investigated the relationship between employing alternative assessment techniques and Iranian EFL learners' speaking ability. The results showed that "employing alternative assessment techniques, namely, self-assessment and peer-assessment leads to a significantly better performance on speaking tests" (p. 32). Sadeghi and Abolfazli Khonbi (2014) investigated the role of alternative assessment in academic achievement. The results of this research showed that continuous assessment, both in a general sense and through the various types of assessment (self, peer, and teacher), has an impact on the achievement of the group of EFL students participating in the study.

The bulk of the above-mentioned literature opens a new window to the repertoire of research agenda: scrutinizing the alignment of teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards post-modern approach to language assessment. In fact, no study was found that deals with assessment approach from a postmodern perspective. In line with widening the breadth and depth of the scientific richness of the above-mentioned researches, the present study in a broader enterprise investigated the alignment of teachers' knowledge and attitudes towards postmodern assessment approach to language assessment.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and context of the study

According to Merriam (2009), "sample selection in qualitative research is usually (but not always) nonrandom, purposeful, and small, as opposed to larger, more random sampling in quantitative research" (p. 16). The participants comprising this qualitative study consisted of twenty experienced English teachers, including ten males and ten females, who were selected based on purposeful sampling from different private language institutes in Khorramabad, Iran. The participants had a bachelor or master's degree in teaching English as a foreign language or in English literature. Experienced teachers are considered to have more than five years of teaching experience (Moradian & Ahmadi, 2015). Fulfilling ethical purposes, the teachers were made sure of the confidentiality of the obtained data and informed that the data would be only used for this research project. In fact, to protect confidentiality, participants' names were represented by acronyms for coding purposes; for example, T-A denoted Teacher A and similar designations were used for other participants.

3.2 Methods of Data Collection

To carry out this study, we used two data collection tools to gather information from participants. In order to explore and elicit the teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards classroom assessment, a structured interview was conducted. According to Merriam (2009), interviewing is often the primary data collection strategy in qualitative studies; direct quotations from people about their experiences, opinions, feelings, and knowledge can be obtained through interviews. Based on consulting the opinions of two experienced professors of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language), the interview questions were analyzed and revised to increase the instrument's validity. Besides, in order to double-check the validity of the instrument, the interview was piloted on a sample of five English teachers similar to that of the main study. In this way, the validity of the instrument was further assured.

Furthermore, as a way of triangulating the data, the interviewed teachers' performance in the classroom was observed to identify their assessment practices. Indeed, the purpose of this observation was to gain better insights into what actually happens in the classroom and how teachers utilize their claimed attitudes in their practice and classroom assessment. The identified assessment practices were evaluated via a checklist which was designed by the researchers and was based on the key concepts of postmodern approach to language assessment In so doing, initially, the literature on postmodern approach to language assessment (Fulcher, 2012; Garfield, 1994; Gipps, 1994; Inbar-Lourie, 2008; Leung, 2009; Lynch, 2001; McNamara, 2001; Shohamy, 2001) were closely examined to extract almost all key recurrent thought patterns highlighted and mentioned in the literature; in this way we can claim that the checklist has construct validity because it has been extracted from important resources available on the subject of the study. Again, to contribute to the validity of the instrument, the items of the checklist were consulted and revised with the help of two experienced professors of TEFL.

To ensure the trustworthiness of this qualitative research and enhance its rigor, some strategies were used. First, we used two data collection tools (triangulation) in order to confirm the emerging findings. Second, we tried to collect data from a sufficient number of participants; data were obtained from interviewing 20 teacher participants. Third, to ensure the inter-coder reliability of the coding procedure and the appropriation of the extracted themes, each researcher coded the data separately, and subsequently they discussed the findings and engaged in a conversation regarding the variations in coding. In this way, we ensured that there was agreement in coding the data.

3.3 Procedure

We conducted a structured interview at the teachers' convenience in a direct face-to-face attempt to explore these teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards classroom assessment. The interviews commenced with participants exchanging greetings, and while there were pre-established interview topics, additional time was allocated for open discussions to address any unclear aspects for the teachers. More explanations were given by the interviewer where clarification was necessary. In order to avoid teachers' failing to completely state their views, the interview questions were asked in Persian.

Each interview nearly lasted 90 minutes. The interviewee's answers were tape-recorded during the interview. By implementing this approach, all the statements made by the participants are safeguarded for subsequent analysis

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(Merriam, 2009). The session was then transcribed completely by researchers and the transcripts were returned to the participants for additional input, providing them with an opportunity to review and verify their intended statements. The final transcriptions were translated into English by the researchers and were stored for later analysis. Typically, the most optimal database for analysis is obtained through verbatim transcription of recorded interviews (Merriam, 2009).

After that, the interviewed teachers' classes were observed. During the observations, we investigated the accommodation of teachers' assessment practices to the postmodern thought patterns in the context of the study. In better terms, the observations had a broad focus on the teachers' ability and skill in putting into practice the postmodern approach to language assessment. We employed non-participant narrative observation in this study; we watched the classroom environment and participants, without taking an active part in the situation under examination. The purpose of this observation was to see whether the assessment techniques that were used by our participants in the classroom were aligned with the postmodern thought patterns. Accordingly, the possible alignment or misalignment of these attitudes and assessment techniques with the postmodern thought patterns were determined.

3.4 Data Analysis

The method of analysis chosen for this study was a qualitative approach of thematic analysis. The data set related to interviews were analyzed using deductive thematic analysis. Generally, thematic analysis is the most widely used qualitative approach to analyzing interviews. The conceptual framework of the thematic analysis for these interviews was mainly built upon the theoretical positions of Braun and Clarke (2006). Indeed, thematic analysis offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analyzing qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2016). The reason of choosing this method was that "the rigorous thematic approach can produce an insightful analysis that answers particular research questions" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 97). Besides, thematic analysis "provides a flexible and useful research tool, which can potentially provide a rich and detailed, yet complex, account of data" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78).

The present study utilized the deductive or theoretical thematic analysis. In other words, the extracted principles associated with the postmodern approach to language assessment constructed the theoretical framework for analyzing the qualitative data of the current study. Indeed, the postmodern principles regarding English language assessment, which were extracted from the relevant literature, provided a framework for analyzing the collected data.

To analyze the interview data, the transcriptions were coded based on the research questions through which we were looking for the possible mis/alignments of teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards postmodern approach to language assessment. For the purpose of analyzing the collected data in this research, we followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, p. 80) six-step framework. This framework is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Phases of thematic analysis, adopted from Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 87)

Phase	Description of the process
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and rereading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.

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5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells; generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

4. Results

The thematic analysis of the interview data led to three core themes: (1) low levels of assessment literacy, (2) lack of alternative assessment tools, and (3) the dominance of psychometric legacy. A thematic map was induced after close examination of the data set from which the core themes and the related subthemes were stood out. This thematic map is presented as follows in Table 2. In the following, the meanings of these themes and the related subthemes have been expanded.

Table 2. The thematic map illustrating the key themes and their related subthemes

Key themes	Subthemes
1. Low levels of assessment literacy among teachers	Ignorance of the distinction between testing and assessment
	Insufficient knowledge of the distinction between formative assessment and summative assessment
2. Lack of alternative assessment tools	Negative attitude towards peer-assessment
	Unfamiliarity with self-assessment
	Absence of portfolio assessment
3. The dominance of psychometric legacy	Examination-oriented language teaching
	Grade-oriented language teaching
	Competition-centered language teaching

4.1 Low Levels of Assessment Literacy among Teachers

The participants' remarks during interviews showed that they possessed low levels of the professional knowledge regarding language assessment literacy. This low level of assessment literacy among teachers is represented in the two subthemes: ignorance of the distinction between testing and assessment, and insufficient knowledge of the distinction between formative assessment and summative assessment. In other terms, we put these two subthemes under the core theme of low levels of assessment literacy among teachers. For each subtheme we provide a number of excerpts which are chosen from the data set. In this way, the meaning of the above-mentioned core theme would be illuminated. Unfortunately, a large number of the participants of this study were negligent of the difference between testing and assessment. They considered testing and assessment as similar concepts. They maintained that:

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T- C: I think they are more similar to each other than being different from each other. I think the difference is not considerable. Testing and assessment have the same meaning for me.
There were a number of participants who perceived testing as different from assessment, but their knowledge of this area was limited; actually, they were unaware of the breadth and depth of testing and assessment.

T- D: Testing and assessment are different from each other. I cannot explain the exact difference between them. I just know that assessment is complicated and doing assessment needs expertise and skills but I don't have the necessary skills because I haven't received education for that. We are more accustomed to testing and examinations.
Unfortunately, some of the participants of this study did not have knowledge about the difference between formative assessment and summative assessment and some of them declared that they have forgotten all about the difference. They remarked that:

T- E: They are familiar but I cannot remember their difference.
T- F: I can't remember anything about them.

4.2 Lack of Alternative Assessment Tools

The participants of this study remarked that ELT in private language institutes is deprived of alternative assessment tools. This lack of alternative assessment tools is represented in three subthemes: negative attitudes towards peer-assessment, unfamiliarity with self-assessment, and absence of portfolio assessment. In other words, we put these three subthemes under the core theme of lack of alternative assessment tools. For each subtheme we provide a number of excerpts which are chosen from the data set. In this way, the meaning of the above-mentioned core theme would be illuminated.

Most of the subjects partaking in this study were unfamiliar with the importance of peer-assessment and its function in the classroom. Some of them believed that the only agent of assessment is the teacher; that is, the teacher is always the subject of assessment and the learners are objects of assessment. This is in drastic contradiction with the above-mentioned postmodern thought patterns regarding peer-assessment.

T- F: I think assessment done by the teacher is better than assessment done by a peer because learners take teacher-assessment more seriously than peer-assessment. I don't like the classroom time to be wasted by such things. To tell you the truth, I cannot trust learners. It is possible that during peer-assessment some mistakes remain uncorrected and even unnoticed. Anyway, the teacher knows more than learners.

Moreover, interviews with the participants revealed the fact that self-assessment is excluded from the education system. There are some reasons for this exclusion: first, some teachers were totally unfamiliar with the concept of self-assessment. As the following examples from the data show this:

T- M: Self-assessment? As a teacher, I'm not familiar with this concept. So I cannot encourage my learners to do it.

Second, some of the interviewees made mention of the fact that they do not have enough knowledge and are not skillful enough for implementing self-assessment in the classroom. As one of the participants hinted at this issue:
T- D: Encouraging learners to carry out self-assessment may be a good idea, but like peer-assessment it needs expertise. The role of the teacher is too important here. The teacher should be able to guide learners in this line. I have not had a specific plan for employing self-assessment in my classes.
Interviews with the participants showed that most of participants had no familiarity with portfolio assessment. As they asserted:.

T-I: I'm unfamiliar with the concept of portfolio-assessment and the way it should be implemented in the classroom.
Those who were familiar with it stated that they don't use it, because it is too time consuming and the work load of teachers robs the opportunity for employing portfolio assessment in the classroom. The following quotation from a participant shows this.

T- O: I haven't used portfolio assessment. I believe that it is a favorable suggestion, however it is not practical for us. It is time consuming. Sometimes, one teacher has simultaneously ten classes in a single semester. How on earth that teacher can keep portfolios for all of the learners in these ten classes?

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4.3 The Dominance of Psychometric Legacy

Modernist evaluation adopts a psychometric approach which is delimited to final examinations, tests, and grades. The teachers' remarks during interviews showed that ELT in private language institutes is enmeshed in the imperatives of the psychometric paradigm. This dominance of psychometric legacy is represented in three subthemes: (1) examination-oriented language teaching, (2) grade-oriented language teaching, and (3) competition-centered language teaching. In other terms, we put these three subthemes under the core theme of the dominance of psychometric legacy. For each subtheme, we provide a number of excerpts which are selected from the data set. In this way, the meaning of the previously mentioned core theme would be illuminated.

Nearly, all of the participants had a positive attitude towards final examinations. They all expressed that they value final exams due to the important function that they have in the education system. The participant teachers believed that, to be meaningful, education must culminate in examination and exams are the best tools that show how much learners have learned.

T-E: I believe that final exams are necessary. I think education should lead to evaluation and the best form of evaluation is final exams. In other words, education without examinations is nonsense. First, we should teach, and after that we should measure how much learners have learned and this is done by final exams.

Another reason of valuating exams in teachers' opinion was that exams are norms which determine which student is qualified to go to a higher level.

T-T: Final examinations are used for decision making about pass or fail of points. I care for them because without them a weak learner can go an upper level without mastering the previous level. This leads to a heterogeneous class regarding language proficiency. Such a classroom drives the teacher crazy because the teacher doesn't know how to teach these learners.

Also, there were a few teachers who mentioned they value exams because the education system, the institute's plan, the parents, and the learners value them. It can be inferred from their utterances that the exam culture has deeply penetrated into our education system and even if a teacher personally does not value exams, s/he must do so because other stakeholders in education highly value exams. The following statements has been chosen from the data set:

T- F: We live in a society where people just think by their eyes. The common belief held by teachers, learners, and parents is that the best and the most comprehensive form of evaluation is done in the form of final exams. I care for final exams because others care for them. The most repeated question that parents have asked me till now is 'when is my child's final exam?' Also, the most important concern of learners is final exams. We cannot say that final exams are bad and we cannot run away from them because there are some lazy students who never bother themselves to open their books unless they have an exam. It seems that our education has been summarized in 'final exams'.

Nearly, all of the participants had a positive attitude towards grades. They believed that grades are a good yardstick for determining how much a learner has learned. In this way, proficient learners are separated from non-proficient ones. They considered grades as an illustrator that shows a learners' level of language proficiency. The following statement shows this:

T-E: Grades are important because as I mentioned before, grades assigned to learners are a kind of feedback for them. Grades are measures that show how much a learner has learnt. Grades are a good measure for learners, for their parents, and for teachers to show the result of education.

Some of them expressed that because of the importance of exams, grades are important per se; each exam leads to a grade.

T- B: As I mentioned, final examinations are of prime importance in our education system and because of the importance of final examinations, grades are important too. Final exams lead to grades. Grades show students' achievement. Both teachers and learners should value grades.

By the way, some of the participants complained that without the pressure of grades lazy learners won't bother themselves even to open their books!

T- F: We have some learners who study just when they have an exam. All the fingers are not the same. The grades that are gained from the final exams are the essential urge for these lazy students to study. Necessarily evaluation

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leads to grades. We have to define a grade that shows and indicates the passing or failure of learners in the exams. If they fail, they should come back and study that course again.

Almost, all of the participants disagreed with eliminating grades. Their justification for this perspective was that if grades are eliminated, all of the aforementioned advantages for grades will be lost. For example, they mentioned that without grades, they cannot determine how much a learner has been successful in learning English. The following statement has been chosen from the data set:

T- M: I totally disagree. Grades are our measure of success in the education system. Grades are numbers and numbers are based on mathematics and mathematics is based on logic. So grades are rational in my opinion. Whenever I talk with my colleagues about finding a substitution for grades, we can't reach a conclusion. I think there is no substitution for grades.

The analysis and interpretation of interviews showed that nearly all of participants in this study considered competition among learners in the classroom as a positive element. They justified their perspective by mentioning some reasons such as:

T-M: I think one of the essential reasons for presence of learners in the classroom is creating an atmosphere of competition among them. Otherwise, they can stay at home and study by themselves. Competition motivates learners to work hard and study more. It is a good idea.

5. Discussion

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that the teachers in private language institutes had low levels of assessment literacy. Stiggins (1991, 1997) declares that "the term 'assessment literacy' refers to the range of skills and knowledge that stakeholders need in order to deal with the new world of assessment" (cited in Fulcher, 2012, p. 115). In fact, "becoming assessment literate requires the attainment of 'a toolbox' of competencies, some practical and some theoretical, on why, when and how to go about constructing a variety of assessment procedures (Boyles, 2005; Hoyt, 2005; cited in Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p. 389). In sum, language assessment literacy for teachers has three dimensions: understanding "the 'what' of language testing and assessment, performing the 'how', and appreciation of the background and reasoning behind the actions taken, that is, the 'why'" (Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p. 390).

Knowledge of the distinction between formative assessment and summative assessment is an inseparable part of assessment literacy. This has been asserted by Inbar-Lourie (2008, p. 390) who mentions that "discussion of language assessment literacy needs to be considered with reference to current assessment developments, in particular the support for assessment *for* learning." From a postmodern perspective, by emphasis on formative assessment or assessment for learning, learning and assessment are viewed as intertwined (Black & William, 1998; cited in Inbar-Lourie, 2008). Postmodern assessment holds that "rather than being an activity separate from instruction, assessment is now being viewed as an integral part of teaching and learning, not just the culmination of instruction" (Garfield, 1994, p. 1). This is what distinguishes formative assessment from summative assessment; formative assessment occurs throughout the instructional period and is primarily utilized to provide feedback for the teaching and learning process; summative assessment occurs towards the conclusion of a term or course and serves the purpose of evaluating the extent of students' learning and the effectiveness of the course (Gipps, 1994). The participants of this study had insufficient knowledge of the difference between formative assessment and summative assessment. Also, the participants were ignorant of the distinction between testing approach and assessment approach. While, from a postmodern perspective, testing and assessment are two different worlds and teachers "need to gain understanding of the competing and often contradictory forces at play between the testing and assessment cultures" (Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p. 388).

The thematic analysis of the interview data leads to the explanation that ELT in private language institutes lacks alternative assessment tools. Most of the teachers had negative attitudes towards peer-assessment and were unfamiliar with its importance and function in the classroom. It is not only teachers who give feedback to the students; peers too are encouraged to give feedback to each other which is labeled as 'peer-assessment' (Gipps, 1994). Postmodernists celebrate and give paramount importance to social learning and team work. Postmodern assessment encourages students to recognize the value of incorporating cooperative group activities in the learning process (Garfield, 1994). Adopting a collaborative learning approach enables learners to work side by side. The assistance and guidance provided by teachers or through collaborative efforts with more proficient peers is called scaffolded assessment which helps learners to perform at the higher level and to gain mastery (Gipps, 1994).

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Also, the participant teachers were unfamiliar with self-assessment. Through self-assessment, learners are encouraged "to monitor and reflect on their own work/performance (with the positive and constructive help of teachers) so that they become self-monitoring learners in the metacognitive mode" (Gipps, 1994, p. 159). Postmodern assessment points out that involving learners in self-assessment is an essential and initial step in the assessment procedure, and it is imperative that significant assignments undergo self-evaluation before submission, hence promoting autonomous learning (Garfield, 1994). Accordingly, self-assessment helps "students determine their overall strengths and weaknesses in learning the course material" (Garfield, 1994, p. 3).

Besides, portfolio assessment was excluded from the education system of private language institutes. Quantitative absolute measurement of learners' competence only by assigning a number in the name of a grade to learners is not enough; what is requisite and superior is a detailed description of learners' performance. The alternative assessment that meets such a condition is called 'portfolio assessment.' Brown and Hudson (1998) define portfolio assessment as a deliberate gathering of various aspects of a student's work which effectively portrays their accomplishments, aptitudes, endeavors, competencies, and contributions within a specific course.

The thematic analysis of the interview data revealed that ELT at private language institutes is dominated by psychometric legacy. This entanglement in the imperatives of psychometric paradigm includes examination-oriented language teaching, grade-oriented language teaching, and competition-centered language teaching. Nearly, all of the participants believed that education must culminate in examinations. In the modernist evaluation, routine classroom tests and examinations, at the end of a semester, were considered as the hurdle that students needed to overcome to show they were ready for the next stage (Hargreaves, Earl, & Schmidt, 2002). In the postmodern epoch, the modernist notion that "evaluation must be confined to summative, end-of-term or end-of-unit tests alone" (Brown, 2002, p. 17) vanishes; instead, there is an increasing emphasis on "ongoing assessment of students' performance as a course progresses, or what has commonly been called formative evaluation" (Brown, 2002, p. 17). This shows that tests and paper-pencil examinations are not all-encompassing indicative of learners' real knowledge and competence.

Also, the teachers had mental reliance on grades and considered grades as the yardstick for determining how much a learner has learned. A postmodern system of alternative assessment devalues grades. In educational assessment, "we move away from the notion of a score, a single statistic, and look at other forms of describing achievement including 'thick' description of achievement and profiles of performance, what Wolf, Bixby, Glenn, and Gardner (1991, p. 62) call differentiated portraits of student performance " (cited in Gipps, 1994, p. 160). Postmodern assessment holds the view that student evaluation is provided in the form of a profile rather than a numerical score (Birenbaum, 1996; Wolf et al., 1991; cited in Inbar-Lourie, 2008, p. 387). Grades do not qualify as feedback unless they provide information that can be used to help students close the gap between their actual performance and desired performance (Gipps, 1994). As a result, "there should also be little emphasis on summative grading" (Gipps, 1994, p. 41).

Besides, the teachers had positive attitudes towards encouraging competition among learners with this justification that competition motivates learners to work hard. They were ignorant of the fact that when competition is dominant among learners, the spirit of collaborative and cooperative learning would be lost in the classroom. With assigning grades to learners, each learner's performance is compared and weighed with that of other learners; subsequently, an aura of competition between learners will emerge which is not always useful. The destructive effect of competition is explained by Gipps (1994, p. 41) in this way: competition "discourages students from helping each other with their academic work", also, it has the negative potential to harm peer relationships, and tends to discriminate high-performing groups against low-performing groups, and tends to promote the belief among learners that their success or failure is determined by their ability, rather than their effort, which can be particularly detrimental for low-achieving learners. Postmodern assessment disdains competition in the classroom and promotes cooperation and collaboration instead. As Gipps (1994) mentions, cooperative learning can be employed in groups to alleviate pressure on individuals and address the varying strengths and weaknesses of learners.

The results of the interviews are highly indicative of the misalignment of Iranian EFL teachers' attitudes towards classroom assessment with the postmodern thought patterns in the context of private language institutes. The study's outcomes demonstrated that almost all of the teachers hold similar attitudes that mostly contradict the postmodern approach to language assessment. It must be acknowledged that because this study is qualitative in nature, these findings are based on a limited sample of twenty teachers from different private language institutes in Khorramabad context, and cannot be generalized to the larger population of teachers and private language institutes in other contexts.

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6. Conclusion

The themes derived from the data set revealed that teachers' attitudes were hardly aligned with postmodern approach. Actually, teachers' attitudes and classroom assessment techniques were inclined to modernist approach and diverged from postmodern approach. In this study, the participant teachers demonstrated a very poor understanding of classroom assessment inspired by postmodern approach. In truth, this study revealed that the shift from the testing paradigm to assessment paradigm has not occurred yet in private language institutes. These findings vividly show the prevalence of a modernist-centered education in Iran. While the education system in some countries is based on postmodern approach, the Iranian education system is replete with imported modernist thought patterns.

Two important contributions are presented in this study; theoretically, it offers fresh content obtained through empirical analysis that pertains to the concept of postmodern approach to language assessment. Practically, because the study's findings uncovered the misalignments of EFL teachers' knowledge of and attitudes towards postmodern approach to language assessment in the context of private language institutes, these results are informative for teachers to upgrade the expertise and skills that they need to possess in their profession and for teacher educators to educate prospective teachers in this line.

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