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Examining Iraqi EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of Learning-Oriented Assessment

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Abstract

Learning-oriented assessment constitutes an approach that integrates language assessment into the learning process to expedite learners' noticing of their weaknesses and maximize their learning opportunities. The present study scrutinized Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA. In light of this objective, the researchers used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to conduct the study. Accordingly, they selected 103 male and 114 female teachers in 37 public high schools in Baghdad (Iraq) as the participants. Moreover, they administered Aloswat's (2022) learning-oriented assessment questionnaire to these participants to obtain quantitative data on their proclivity in adhering to the principles of this assessment approach. Finally, they selected a small number of the above-mentioned teachers based on the data saturation criterion. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, they gathered qualitative data on their perceptions of learning-oriented assessment. The researchers used independent-sample t-test and thematic analysis to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data. The results indicated that female teachers adhered more strictly to the principles of learning-oriented assessment than male teachers. In addition, female teachers had more favorable perceptions of this assessment approach compared to their male counterparts. The results may provide teacher educators and syllabus designers with guidelines on implementing LOA in EFL courses.

Keywords: Iraqi female EFL teachers, Iraqi male EFL teachers, language assessment, learning-oriented assessment

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1. Introduction

A scrutiny of the recent empirical studies (e.g., Ahmadnejad & Aghajanzadeh Kiasi, 2024; Ghavidel & Valipour, 2021; Moradian et al., 2023; Movahedi & Aghajanzadeh Kiasi, 2021; Safarzadeh & Taghipour Bazargani, 2023; Sheikhy Behdani & Foroutan, 2024) indicates that *assessment* has been a recurrent line of research in language instruction. Murillo and Hidalgo (2020) defined language assessment as the formative procedure that examines learners' second language ability in order to empower them to scrutinize their language acquisition path, specify their strengths and weaknesses, and evaluate their learning efficacy in light of pre-specified criteria.

The comparison between Murillo and Hidalgo (2020) definition of language assessment and the definition of language testing accentuates their sharp contrast. As Wang et al. (2020) noted, testing comprises a summative process that targets learners' output, including their test performance and strives to empower teachers or other stakeholders to make decisions on learners' language competence that constitutes the basis of their placement in a specific proficiency level. Yan et al. (2021) pointed out that the emphasis of the testing procedure on students' output emanated from the belief that the evaluation of language performance was inferior to language instruction. According to them, this belief made evaluation subservient to instruction and highlighted its peripheral role in language classes.

Notwithstanding, the advent of communicative approaches to language teaching, such as Communicative Language Teaching modified this belief (Yang & May, 2023; Zhang et al., 2021; Zhao & Qi, 2023). More specifically, researchers and teachers became cognizant of the utility of integrating assessment procedures into language instruction in order to facilitate and expedite learners' acquisition of the various aspects of the target language (López-Hernández et al., 2023; Zhou & Deneen, 2016). This awareness resulted in developing Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) (Karlen et al., 2024; Leung, 2020).

Researchers have provided different definitions of LOA. For instance, Turner and Purpura (2016) defined LOA as the procedure that values all of the agents in language learning and takes advantage of self-assessment, teacher-assessment, and peer-assessment as the instruments for empowering the learners to monitor their language acquisition process. As Turner and Purpura (2016) pointed out, learners' ability to monitor their performance ameliorates their formative and summative assessment skills, which help them improve their and their peers' performance and specify their own and their weaknesses. In addition, Carless (2015) defined LOA as the process that apprizes the learners of the relevant assessment procedures and criteria and prompts them to use these criteria to determine their weaknesses and to take remedial measures to ameliorate their language ability.

The perusal of the above-mentioned definitions of LOA shows that they highlight the integration of language assessment into language learning (Figueras, 2021). Considering this point, Alsowat (2022) itemized the underlying principles of LOA, which include *knowledge, implementation, learner involvement, provision of feedback and feedforward*, and *challenge response*. As he explained, knowledge and implementation refer to the extent to which language instructors are knowledgeable about the main tenets of LOA and can operationalize it in their classes. Moreover, as he noted, learner involvement and provision of feedback and feedforward principles encompass language teachers' capability to involve the learners' in the process of assessment-based decision making and their proclivity to provide the learners with constructive feedback and feedforward in the process of the LOA tasks. Finally, as he pointed out, challenge response determines teachers' ability to deal with various contextual issues, such as time constraints that constitute barriers to LOA implementation. Alsowat (2022) concluded that there is a need for several studies of LOA to determine teachers' ability to follow these principles in their classes.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The perusal of the empirical studies of LOA indicates that they have predominantly focused on its impact on the language acquisition process and language learners without dealing with language teachers. For instance, Almalki (2019) conducted a mixed-methods study to determine the extent to which LOA influenced EFL learners' critical thinking ability and speaking skill. Accordingly, the researcher gathered both quantitative and qualitative data on the effectiveness of LOA for improving the above-mentioned skills. The results of the study showed that LOA significantly ameliorated EFL learners' critical thinking ability and speaking skill. Likewise, the qualitative findings accentuated the fact that EFL learners had favorable perspectives on this approach to language assessment in their classes.

In addition, Cheng et al. (2015) scrutinized EFL learners' perspectives on LOA in university settings. To this end, the researchers took advantage of an interview protocol to delve into the learners' perspectives on the efficacy of LOA in their classes. Based on the findings, the participants believed that LOA had an advantageous impact on their language acquisition process. Notwithstanding, the above-mentioned studies have disregarded language teachers' role and their

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perspectives on the use of LOA in language classes. This issue highlights the need for more studies of LOA in second and foreign language contexts including the Iraqi context.

1.2 The Present Study

LOA constitutes a relatively new approach to the assessment of learners' language ability (Davidson & Coombe, 2022; Zhao & Qi, 2023). Consequently, the empirical studies of this approach have not examined all of its pertinent aspects. More specifically, several of these studies (e.g., Almalki, 2019; Cheng et al., 2015; Estaji & Safari, 2023; Yang, 2020) have scrutinized the efficacy of LOA for facilitating learners' acquisition of the target language. Moreover, some of the studies (e.g., Nemati et al., 2021; Zhao & Qi, 2023; Zolfaghari et al., 2023) have examined language learners' reactions to the use of LOA in their classes. In addition, certain studies (e.g. Jalilzadeh & Coombe, 2023; Khalili et al., 2024) have scrutinized EFL teachers' perceptions of the utility of LOA in the classroom context. Finally, a few studies (e.g., Zhang et al., 2021) have strived to determine the contextual factors (e.g., teaching materials) that predict language teachers' ability to implement LOA in their academic settings.

Nonetheless, the above-mentioned studies have not examined teachers' proclivity in following the main principles of LOA in their classes. Moreover, these studies have not scrutinized the degree to which teachers' individual factors, such as their gender influences their attitudes towards LOA and their tendency to adopt this approach to language assessment in their language classes. Finally, the relevant studies of LOA have used either a quantitative or a qualitative design and have not triangulated their data collection using mixed-methods designs. The present study made an effort to deal with these inadequacies of research on LOA in the context of foreign language in Iraq. To this end, the study strived to answer the following research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' LOA knowledge?

2. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' implementation of LOA?

3. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices?

4. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward?

5. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' attitudes toward the challenges of implementing LOA?

6. What are Iraqi male EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA?

7. What are Iraqi female EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA?

2. Literature Review

The scrutiny of the related literature on language assessment accentuates the fact that researchers have increasingly focused on LOA as a viable alternative to traditional testing procedures. In this regard, Yang (2020) conducted an experimental study to determine the extent to which LOA influenced EFL learners' writing competency in university settings. The participants were a group of male and female university learners from different majors. The obtained results indicated that LOA significantly ameliorated these learners' writing ability in their setting.

Moreover, Nemati et al. (2021) examined the utility of LOA for improving EFL learners' ability to use writing strategies. Considering the objectives, the researchers selected a group of EFL learners at language institute settings as the participants and utilized a semi-structured interview protocol to gather the data. The findings of the study indicated that LOA empowered the learners to use diverse writing strategies in an effective way.

Furthermore, Estaji and Safari (2023) examined the impact of LOA on reflective and impulsive EFL learners' writing ability. To this end, they selected 57 reflective and 59 impulsive EFL learners as the participants and carried out their study using an explanatory mixed-methods design. The quantitative results showed that LOA had a more beneficial impact on reflective learners' writing ability than impulsive learners. In addition, based on the qualitative findings, both reflective and impulsive learners had favorable views on the utility of LOA.

In addition, Zolfaghari et al. (2023) carried out a qualitative study to determine EFL learners' attitudes towards LOA in university settings. To this end, they used convenience sampling to select a large number of EFL learners as the participants. The study data were gathered using a researcher-developed LOA questionnaire. Based on the results, the participants considered LOA to be an advantageous assessment approach.

Finally, Zhao and Qi (2023) carried out a qualitative study to determine EFL learners' reactions to the use of LOA in their classes. Based on the aims of the study, the researchers selected a small number of limited-proficiency learners

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in school settings as the participants and used an interview protocol to collect the data. According to the results, learners had favorable perspectives on the use of LOA in their classes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

In light of the above-mentioned objectives, first, the researchers contacted the managers of 37 public high schools in Baghdad (Iraq), apprised them of the objectives and procedure of the study, and obtained their consent to it. The managers provided the researchers with the contact information of 247 EFL teachers, including 119 male and 128 female teachers. Second, the researchers contacted these teachers in one month and invited them to participate in the study. Twelve male teachers and nine female teachers did not answer the researchers' calls or messages. In addition, four male and five female teachers refused to participate in the study due to different reasons, such as their busy schedules.

Consequently, 103 male and 114 female teachers agreed to take part in the study and completed the written consent forms. These participants ranged in age from 25 to 56 and had a B.A. or M.A. degree in Applied Linguistics. Moreover, they were native speakers of Arabic, Kurdish, or Turkish. Lastly, the experience of these teachers was in the range of 2 to 31 years in their relevant academic setting.

3.2 Instruments

The researchers employed the following instruments to gather the required data:

3.2.1 LOA Questionnaire

Considering the aims of the study, the researchers used Aloswat's (2022) LOA questionnaire to examine participants' knowledge of LOA along with their perceptions of its uses, advantages, and disadvantages. This self-report instrument encompasses 50 Likert-scale items that are rated on a 5-point scale in the range of *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. The relevant items focus on five principles of LOA, including *LOA knowledge, implementation of LOA, learner involvement in LOA practices, learner engagement in LOA-based feedback and feedforward*, and *challenges of implementation of LOA*. In order to examine the reliability of this instrument in Iraqi context, the researchers used Cronbach's alpha measure in a pilot study that involved 15 male and 15 female teachers who were similar to the study participants in terms of their characteristics. Based on the results, the reliability index of the complete questionnaire was .87. Furthermore, the reliability of its individual sections, including LOA knowledge (.81), implementation of LOA (.86), learner involvement in LOA practices (.83), learner engagement in LOA-based feedback and feedforward (.85), and challenges of implementation of LOA (.82) were satisfactory. Therefore, the instrument could be utilized in the present study.

3.2.2 Semi-Structured LOA Interview Protocol

In this study, the researchers use a 5-item researcher-developed semi-structured LOA interview protocol to examine Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of various aspects of LOA. In order to develop this protocol, first, the researchers asked four professors of Applied Linguistics to take part in a focus-group interview and to discuss the diverse characteristics of this approach to language assessment. The focus-group interview was recorded. Second, the researchers transcribed the recorded interview discussion and used thematic analysis to analyze the collected data and to specify their underlying themes. Finally, the researchers developed the relevant interview protocol in light of the extracted themes of the focus-group interview.

In order to ensure the content validity and face validity of the relevant protocol, the researchers provided the above-mentioned professors with the protocol and asked them to evaluate it in terms of content and form. Next, they made a number of modifications to the items of this instrument based on the professors' feedback and developed the final version of the interview protocol.

3.2.3 Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that qualitative research studies have to provide adequate information on their *trustworthiness* to assure the other researchers of their methodological rigor. They defined this concept as the extent to which researchers have confidence in various aspects of their studies. These aspects range from the soundness of the research method to the interpretation of the findings of the studies. Accordingly, they itemized four main sub-components of trustworthiness: *credibility*, *transferability*, *confirmability*, and *dependability*. As they explained, credibility determines the accuracy of qualitative findings. Moreover, transferability encompasses the possibility of generalizing the findings to similar contexts and settings. Furthermore, confirmability specifies the extent to which the findings reflect the participants' perspectives on the examined variables without being influenced by researchers'

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own perspectives on the relevant variables. Finally, as they noted, dependability specifies the consistency of the findings of qualitative studies.

In light of the above-mentioned discussions, the researchers took certain measures to ensure the trustworthiness of the qualitative phase of the present study. To this end, they used *member-checking* (Rubin & Babbie, 2008) and *thick description* (Hammersley, 2008) to ensure the credibility and transferability of the study. That is, they provided the interview participants with their transcribed interviews and prompted them to confirm their accuracy. Moreover, the researchers provided a detailed description of the participants' attributes and the study procedure to ensure that its findings could be generalized to similar participants in various language contexts and academic settings.

In addition, the researchers used *audit trail* (Koch, 2006) and *peer review* (Grinnel & Unrau, 2008) techniques to examine the confirmability and dependability of the study. More specifically, they kept an audit (i.e., a detailed record) of their decisions in the study's data collection and analysis processes. Additionally, they asked three of their colleagues, Applied Linguistics professors, to scrutinize the findings and provide the researchers with feedback on their consistency.

3.4 Design

The researchers used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to carry out the present study. Creswell (2009) stated that, in this design, the researchers gather data on the examined variables in two main phases: the *quantitative phase* and the *qualitative phase*. As he pointed out, the study's qualitative findings are used to corroborate the quantitative results and explain them in detail. Accordingly, in the present study, the researchers first gathered quantitative data on male and female teachers' adherence to LOA using the study's LOA questionnaire. Second, they took advantage of the semi-structured interview protocol of the study to gather qualitative data for explaining the obtained quantitative results in more detail and for expounding on the reasons behind the relevant results.

3.5 Procedure

In the present study, the researchers first used convenience sampling to select 103 male and 114 female teachers in 37 public high schools in Baghdad (Iraq) as the participants and obtained their written informed consent. Second, they administered Aloswat's (2022) LOA questionnaire to examine male and female teachers' perceptions of various aspects of this assessment approach in their relevant academic setting. The participants completed this questionnaire in 20 minutes. Third, the researchers used the semi-structured interview protocol to conduct 30-minute interviews with male and female teachers' and to delve more deeply into their perspectives on LOA. To this end, they used the data saturation criterion (Creswell, 2009) to gather the qualitative interview data. That is, they continued data collection until the point at which further data collection did not result in new insights into the participants' perceptions of LOA. As a result, 15 male and 17 female teachers were interviewed in the present study. Finally, the researchers used SPSS 25 and thematic analysis to analyze the quantitative and qualitative data.

3.6 Data Analysis

In view of the objectives, the researchers used both descriptive statistics, including Mean and Standard Deviation (SD) values, and inferential statistics, including independent samples t-test to analyze the quantitative data. Furthermore, they used thematic analysis to extract the underlying codes and themes in male and female EFL teachers' interview data.

4. Results

4.1 Quantitative Results

In this study, first, the researchers examined the characteristics of the obtained data in order to determine the appropriate statistical test that had to be used to perform the data analysis. The preliminary analysis indicated that the data did not violate the parametric test assumptions since they were interval and were gathered independently. Moreover, they were normally distributed based on the results of normality tests. Table 1 and Table 2 show these results for male and female teachers, respectively:

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Table 1. Male teachers' normality test results on LOA questionnaire sections

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
Questionnaire section	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
LOA Knowledge	.152	103	.373	.811	103	.355
Implementation of LOA	.197	103	.354	.975	103	.487
Learner Involvement in LOA Practices	.165	103	.297	.954	103	.492
Learner Engagement In LOA-Based Feedback and Feedforward	122	103	.235	.829	103	.453
Challenges of Implementation of LOA	184	103	.274	.937	103	.366

Table 2. Female teachers' normality test results on LOA questionnaire sections

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
Questionnaire Section	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
LOA Knowledge	.179	114	.276	.944	114	.477
Implementation of LOA	.163	114	.269	.866	114	.354
Learner Involvement in LOA Practices	.175	114	.373	.862	114	.378
Learner Engagement In LOA-Based Feedback and Feedforward	194	114	.332	.912	114	.427
Challenges of Implementation of LOA	151	114	.228	.877	114	.482

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, the data were normally distributed ($p>.05$). Therefore, the researchers used independent-samples t-test (i.e., a parametric test) to analyze the quantitative data. The following section answers the research questions:

1. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' LOA knowledge?

Considering the objective of this question, the researchers compared male and female teachers' results on the LOA knowledge section of the questionnaire. Table 3 shows these results:

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Table 3. Descriptive statistics on male and female teachers' LOA knowledge

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Male Teachers	103	19.09	2.773	.273
Female Teachers	114	23.88	3.508	.329

Moreover, the researchers used Welch's independent-samples t-test (due to unequal sample sizes) to determine the significance of the difference between the group means. Table 4 provides the relevant results:

Table 4. Welch's t-test of male and female teachers' LOA knowledge

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.252	.616	-11.079	215	.000	-4.790	.432	-5.642	-3.938
Equal variances not assumed			-11.210	211.356	.000	-4.790	.427	-5.632	-3.948

Welch's t-test assumes unequal variances. The examination of the unequal variances line in Table 4 indicated that female teachers' LOA knowledge was significantly higher than that of male teachers ($p<.05$). Figure 1 demonstrates these results:

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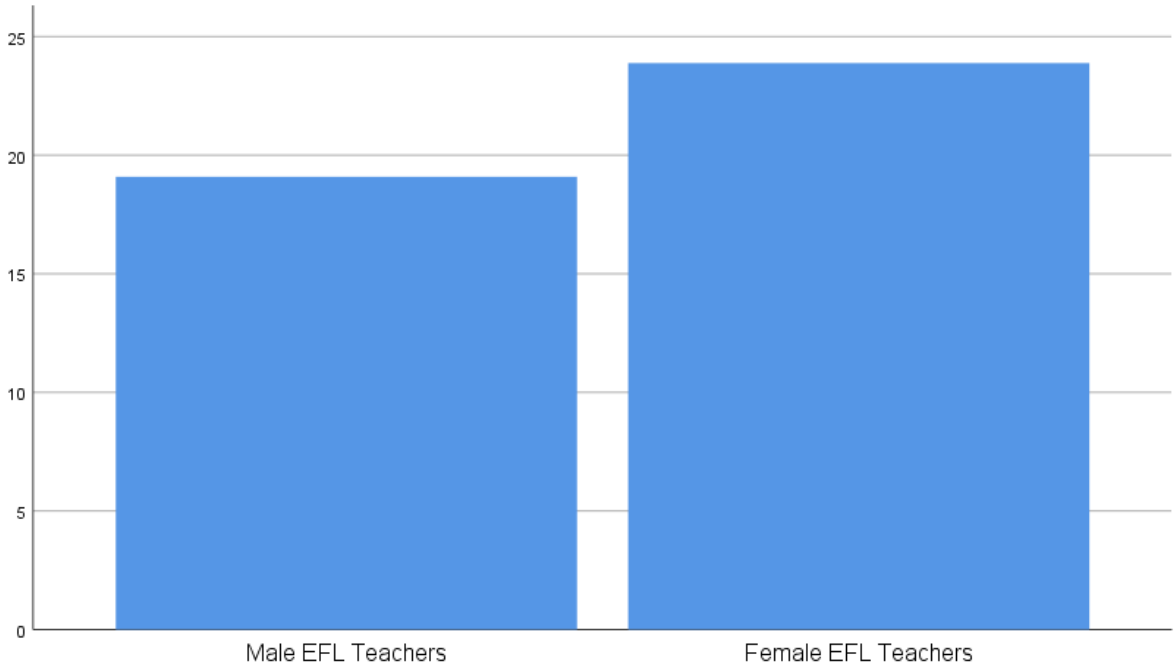


Figure 1. Male and female teachers' LOA knowledge

2. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' implementation of LOA?

Considering the aim of this question, the researchers compared male and female teachers' results on LOA implementation questionnaire section. Table 5 provides these results:

Table 5. Descriptive statistics on male and female teachers' LOA implementation

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Male Teachers	103	18.95	2.788	.275
Female Teachers	114	24.26	2.981	.279

The researchers utilized Welch's t-test to examine the significance of the difference between the group means. Table 6 shows these results:

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Table 6. Welch's t-test of male and female teachers' LOA implementation

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.336	.563	-13.516	215	.000	-5.312	.393	-6.086	-4.537
Equal variances not assumed			-13.562	214.737	.000	-5.312	.392	-6.084	-4.540

The scrutiny of the unequal variances line in Table 6 highlighted the fact that female teachers' LOA implementation was significantly higher than that of male teachers ($p<.05$). Figure 2 shows these results:

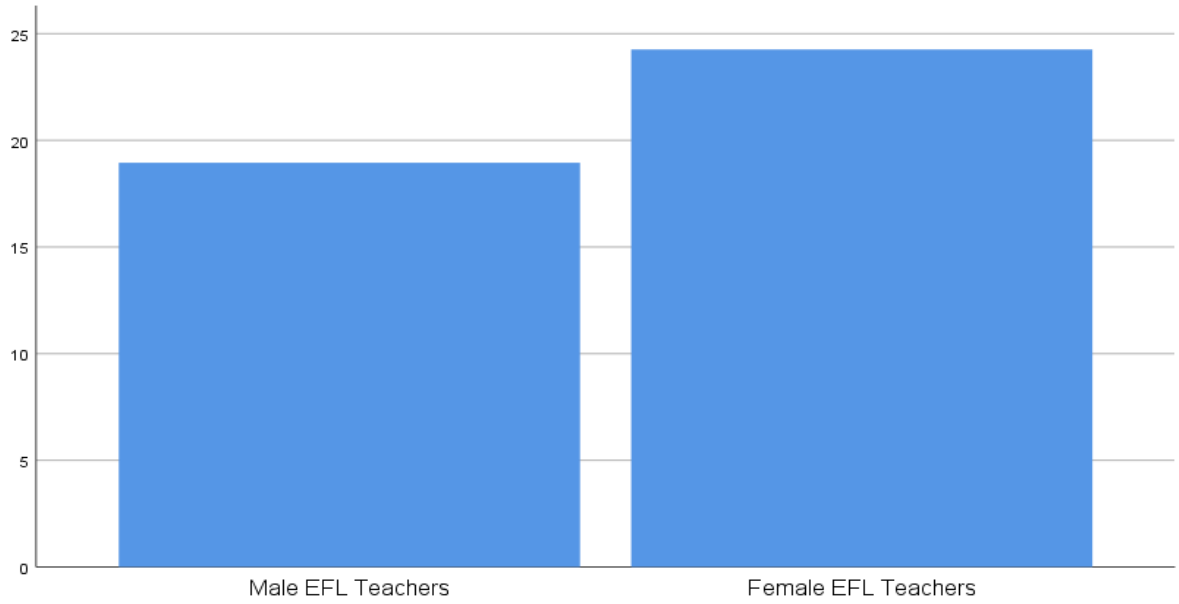


Figure 2. Male and female teachers' LOA implementation

3. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices?

Considering the aim of this question, the researchers compared male and female teachers' results on the learner involvement in LOA practices section of the questionnaire. Table 7 provides the relevant results:

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Table 7. Descriptive statistics on male and female teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Male Teachers	103	26.83	3.457	.341
Female Teachers	114	34.33	2.547	.239

The researchers took advantage of Welch's independent-samples t-test to determine the significance of the difference between the group means. Table 8 provides these results:

Table 8. Welch's t-test of male and female teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	9.793	.782	-18.329	215	.000	-7.508	.410	-8.316	-6.701
Equal variances not assumed			-18.054	186.193	.000	-7.508	.416	-8.328	-6.688

According to the unequal variances line in Table 8 female teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices was significantly greater than that of male teachers ($p<.05$). Figure 3 demonstrates these results:

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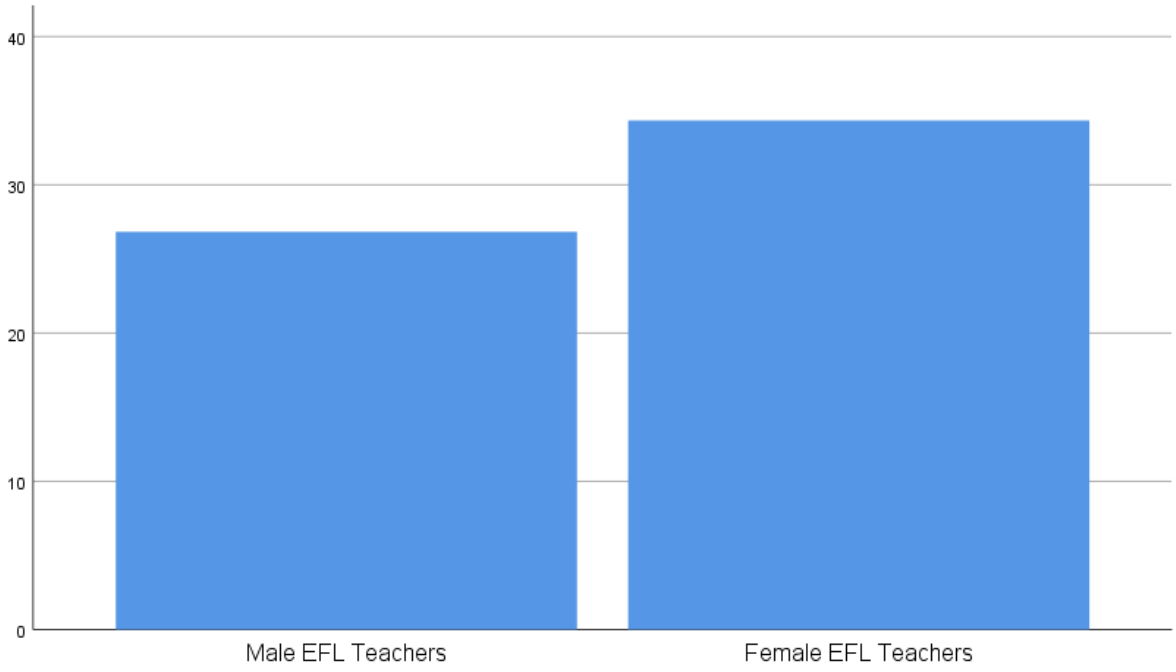


Figure 3. Male and female teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices

4. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward?

In light of the aim of this question, the researchers compared male and female teachers' results on the learner engagement in LOA-based feedback and the feedforward section of the questionnaire. Table 9 shows these results:

Table 9. Descriptive statistics on male and female teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Male	103	24.29	3.095	.305
Female	114	32.54	3.275	.307

In order to specify the significance of the difference between the group means, the researchers took advantage of the Welch's independent-samples t-test. Table 10 shows the pertinent results:

Table 10. Welch's t-test of male and female teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances	t-test for Equality of Means

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	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.436	.232	-19.002	215	.000	-8.244	.434	-9.099	-7.389
Equal variances not assumed			-19.057	214.558	.000	-8.244	.433	-9.096	-7.391

The unequal variances line of results in Table 10 showed that female teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward was significantly greater than that of male teachers ($p<.05$). Figure 4 shows these results:

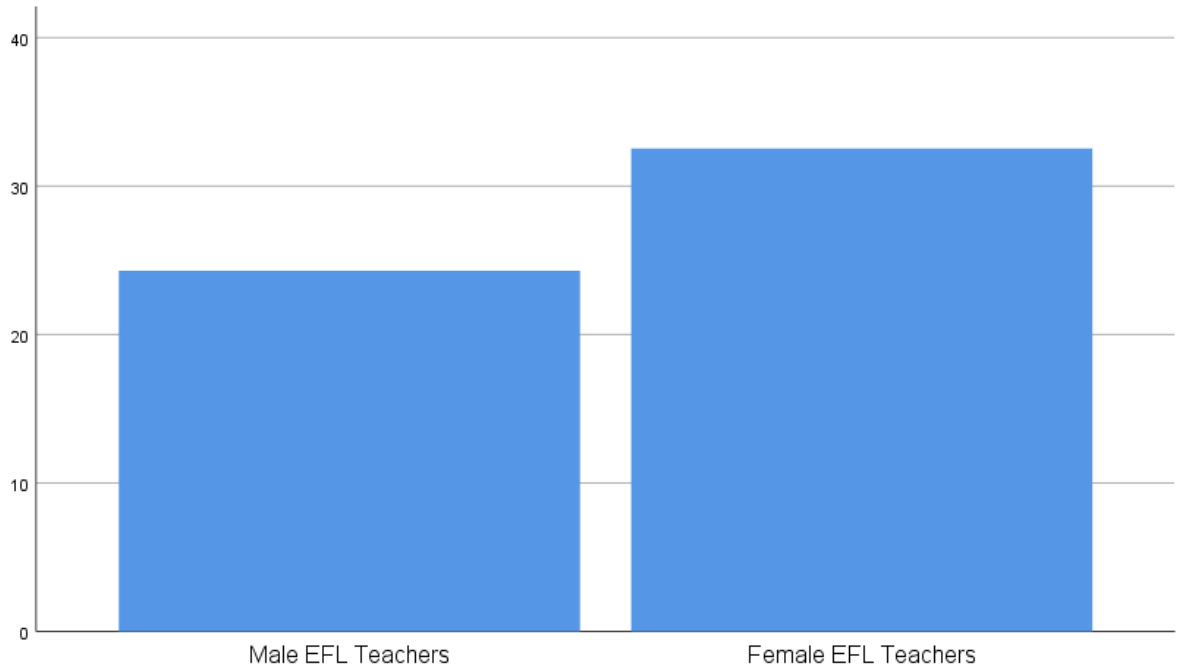


Figure 4. Male and female teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward

5. Is there a significant difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' attitudes towards the challenges of implementing LOA?

Considering the objective of this question, the researchers compared male and female teachers' results on the challenges of implementing LOA section of the questionnaire. Table 11 provides the relevant results:

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Table 11. Descriptive statistics on male and female teachers' attitudes towards challenges of implementing LOA

Groups	N	Mean	SD	Std. Error Mean
Male	103	41.08	3.460	.341
Female	114	29.16	3.630	.340

In order to determine the significance of the difference between the group means the researchers used Welch's independent-samples t-test. Table 12 provides these results:

Table 12. Welch's t-test of male and female teachers' attitudes towards challenges of implementing LOA

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
								95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.070	.791	24.695	215	.000	11.920	.483	10.968	12.871
Equal variances not assumed			24.755	214.373	.000	11.920	.482	10.971	12.869

As shown in the unequal variances line of results in Table 12, male teachers' attitudes towards the challenges of implementing LOA were significantly more negative than that of female teachers ($p<.05$). Figure 5 demonstrates the relevant results:

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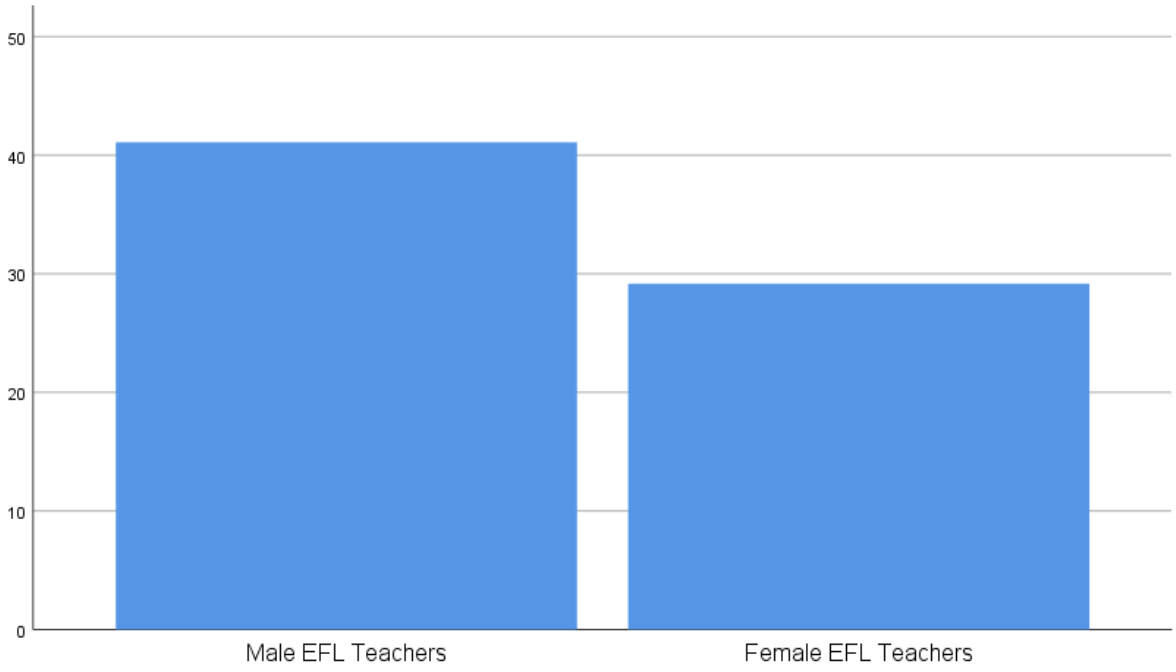


Figure 5. Male and female teachers' attitudes towards challenges of implementing LOA

4.2 Qualitative Results

In the qualitative phase of the study, the researchers used thematic analysis to specify the underlying codes and themes in the interview data of male and female teachers. The following section answers the remaining research questions based on the findings of thematic data analysis:

6. What are Iraqi male EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA?

Considering the aim of this question, the researchers extracted the codes and themes in male teachers' LOA interview data. Table 13 shows the relevant codes and themes:

Table 13. Codes and themes in male teachers' LOA interview data

Codes	Themes
Being unable to define LOA in a precise way Considering learning and assessment as separate and unrelated concepts Adopting a product-oriented attitude towards assessment	Lack of sufficient familiarity with LOA
Taking advantage of tasks that are usually used in language classes Considering group work and pair work to be time-consuming Assessing language skills subsequent to language instruction	Misconceptions about LOA
Considering teacher assessment to be more favorable than peer assessment Highlighting the role of tethers as the authoritative figures in class Deemphasizing the role of learners' assessment-oriented decisions in their learning	Inadequate attention to learners' role in LOA

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Providing feedback on students' task outcome Considering feedback and feedforward in task process to be a waste of time Allotting limited time to teacher and peer feedback	Inadequate provision of feedback and feedforward in LOA
Considering the lack of time to be a barrier to LOA Highlighting the learners' negative attitudes towards assessment Believing that learners are not able to objectively assess their own and their peers' language ability	Delineation of LOA as a troublesome procedure

As shown in Table 13, the first theme in male teachers' data was *lack of sufficient familiarity with LOA*. Twelve of the participants stated that they were not able to itemize the main principles of LOA and considered assessment to be separate from instruction and learning. In this regard, the second participant noted that:

"I think that LOA is an idealistic concept. Every teacher wants to use assessment to promote language learning. Nonetheless, in practice, teachers carry out assessments after ensuring learners' satisfactory language learning."

Similarly, participant 8 pointed out that:

"You cannot ensure the learners' language acquisition without examining their test performance. Emphasizing assessment in the process of learning is not very practical."

Furthermore, based on Table 13, the second major theme in male teachers' data was *misconceptions about LOA*. The scrutiny of male teachers' responses indicated that eleven of them did not have realistic perspectives on LOA. For instance, participant 14 stated that:

"The frequent use of group or pair work is not possible in our language classes. LOA procedures presuppose teachers' ability to use group work and are not congruent with our classes."

Likewise, participant 10 pointed out that:

"LOA tasks are very different from the usual tasks that are used in my classes. I believe that they can distract my learners instead of expediting their language learning."

Moreover, according to Table 13, the third main theme in male teachers' interview data was *inadequate attention to learners' role in LOA*. Ten of the participants noted that learners could not make logical assessment-based decisions. Regarding this belief, participant 5 pointed out that:

"Leaners' assessment of their language ability cannot be accurate and reliable. They are influenced by their emotions instead of the facts."

Similarly, participant 15 stated that:

"Teacher's assessment of learners' language ability is conclusive evidence of their learning. Learners themselves evaluate their language acquisition based on their teacher's opinions."

In addition, as shown in Table 13, the fourth underlying theme in male teachers' data was *inadequate provision of feedback and feedforward in LOA*. Twelve of the participants noted that providing the learners with comprehensive feedback and feedforward was not practical in their classes. For instance, participant 7 pointed out that:

"Feedback has to be given to the learners whenever it is necessary. Providing the learners with feedback on different aspects of their language use is likely to confuse them."

Likewise, participant 12 stated that:

"Teachers should not interrupt the language learners' task performance by giving feedback and feedforwarding it to them. Instead, they have to wait until their learners complete the tasks and should provide them with feedback on the outcome of the relevant tasks."

Finally, as shown in Table 13, the fifth theme in male teachers' interview data was *delineation of LOA as a troublesome procedure*. Fourteen of the participants stated that implementing LOA was very demanding and challenging. Regarding this belief, participant 1 noted that:

"It is very hard to use LOA in our classes. We must deal with the lack of time in the class in every session. I think it is not possible to allot extra time to LOA procedures."

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Similarly, participant 5 stated that:

"Allotting time to LOA procedures is not useful in these classes. These learners are accustomed to final exams and may adopt negative attitudes towards the constant assessment of their language ability."

7. What are Iraqi female EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA?

Based on the aim of this question, the researchers specified the codes and themes in female teachers' interview data. Table 14 shows the pertinent codes and themes:

Table 14. Codes and themes in the female teachers' LOA interview data

Codes	Themes
Being able to distinguish LOA from other assessment approaches	LOA-promoting beliefs
Highlighting the utility of the integration of assessment into learning	
Considering assessment as the facilitator of language teaching and acquisition	
Accentuating the superiority of group work over individual language learning	Efficacious use of LOA procedures
Focusing on the significance of learner decisions in the effectiveness of LOA	
Using LOA tasks without being concerned about their time requirements	
Underlining the role of learners' interaction with their peers and teacher in LOA tasks	Depiction of learners as main agents of LOA
Considering self-assessment and peer-assessment to be main aspects of LOA	
Encouraging learners to reflect on their assessment results to improve their learning	
Providing learners with formal and informal feedback on their performance	Focus on feedback and feedforward as the keys to efficacious LOA
Prompting learners to provide their group members with feedback	
Giving oral and written feedback and feedforward to learners	
Being able to adapt teaching materials and curricula to LOA	Ability to meet LOA-based challenges
Arousing learners' interest in LOA procedures	
Allotting adequate time to LOA without disrupting the process of language instruction	

As shown in Table 14, the first underlying theme in female teachers' interview data was *LOA-promoting beliefs*. Fifteen of the female teachers stated that they had adequate information about LOA and implemented it in their classes. In this regard, participant 17 noted that:

"I have examined various LOA-based articles. Moreover, I have read some textbooks that provide enough information on LOA. I believe that LOA is the most practical approach to assessment in language classes."

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Likewise, participant 10 stated that:

"The integration of assessment into learning is the ultimate solution to the problem of language ability assessment. Otherwise, assessment remains as the unwanted and obligatory section of a language course."

Furthermore, based on Table 14, the second main theme in female teachers' data was *efficacious use of LOA procedures*. Fourteen of the participants pointed out that they implemented LOA in their classes without being concerned about time-related and contextual issues. Regarding this belief, participant 8 noted that:

"I make an effort to engage the learners in LOA procedures by engaging them in assessment-based decisions. When learners consider themselves as active agents in this process, they use it to expedite their own language acquisition."

Similarly, participant 2 noted that:

"I strive to make optimal use of group work in my classes. LOA procedures that depend on group work may take more time than the usual activities. Nonetheless, they are worth the extra time and maximize the learners' acquisition possibility."

Moreover, according to Table 14 the third main theme in female teachers' interview data was *depiction of learners as main agents of LOA*. Twelve of the participants noted that efficacious LOA depended on the learners instead of the teachers. In this regard, participant 9 pointed out that:

"I try to make the learners aware of the fact that their assessment of their own and their peers' language performance is worthwhile similar to teacher assessment."

Likewise, participant 12 noted that:

"Learners' interaction is the key to the effective implementation of LOA. I constantly supervise their interaction in task performance and try to play the role of facilitator when they experience communication-related problems."

In addition, as shown in Table 14, the fourth theme in female teachers' interview data was *focus on feedback and feedforward as the keys to efficacious LOA*. Fourteen of the participants highlighted the consequential role of feedback and feedforward in LOA. Regarding this belief, participant 2 pointed out that:

"Learners have to be provided with feedback on their output. This can be either peer feedback or teacher feedback. I believe that feedback paves the way for more effective learning."

Similarly, participant 7 stated that:

"I try to provide my learners with all kinds of feedback and feedforward. Sometime they need written feedback to make comparison between their written output and native speakers' use of the language. In task performance, oral feedback suffices and does not interfere with their flow of interaction."

Lastly, based on Table 14, the last major theme in female teachers' interview data was *ability to meet LOA-based challenges*. Fifteen of the participants stated that using LOA procedures did not interfere with their language teaching procedure. In this regard, participant 5 noted that:

"Learners will engage in LOA if they understand its purpose and advantages. To this end, I provide them with adequate information on LOA procedures prior to the onset of their tasks."

Likewise, participant 1 pointed out that:

"LOA is a main part of the teaching process. I consider it to be the most useful part of my teaching. Therefore, it saves time in the class instead of wasting it."

5. Discussion

Research question one of the study examined the difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' LOA knowledge. The results indicated that female teachers' LOA knowledge was significantly higher than male teachers. In general, these results corroborate the results of a number of previous studies, including the studies that were conducted by Mohammadnia and Khalili (2014), Ajideh, et al. (2017), Naraghizadeh et al. (2023), and Zolfaghari et al. (2023). These studies reported that female teachers were more concerned about the effectiveness of their assessment practices in their classes than male teachers.

Ma (2023) pointed out that, in general, female teachers are more idealistic compared to male teachers. As a result, they endeavor to take advantage of the state-of-the-art assessment approaches, including LOA, more effectively than the male teachers. Moreover, Cheng et al. (2015) stated that female teachers' concern about their learners' optimal

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learning prompts them to scrutinize effective assessment procedures such LOA that integrate assessment into learning and expedite their language acquisition.

Considering these discussions, it can be argued that in this study, female teachers were more knowledgeable than male teachers about LOA since they were idealistic and scrutinized the modern and effective approaches to assessment that facilitated learners' acquisition of diverse aspects of the target language.

Research question two focused on the probable difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' implementation of LOA. The results showed that female teachers' LOA implementation was significantly higher than that of male teachers. Generally, these results are in line with the results of the studies that were cried out by Sonnenburg-Winkler et al. (2020), Yang (2020), Estaji, and Ghiasvand (2021), and Jalilzadeh and Coombe (2023). These studies reported that female teachers were able to implement LOA more effectively than male teachers.

Yang (2020) stated that female teachers are generally more creative than male teachers and develop various LOA tasks involving group work and pair work. As he noted, these teachers' creativity in task development is a main factor in their effective use of LOA procedures. Moreover, Sonnenburg-Winkler et al. (2020) pointed out that female teachers are generally more concerned about the effectiveness of their instruction than male teachers and use LOA to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their teaching practices.

In light of these discussions, it can be argued that in this study, female teachers implemented LOA more effectively than male teachers since their creativity enabled them to develop diverse types of LOA tasks. Moreover, they used LOA as a criterion to ensure the efficacy of their language instruction.

Research question three examined the difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices. Based on the results, female teachers' ability to involve learners in LOA practices was significantly greater than that of male teachers. In general, these results support the results of the studies that were conducted by Almalki (2019), Derakhshan et al. (2020), Figueras (2021), Davidson and Coombe (2022), and Estaji and Ghiasvand (2024). These studies showed that female teachers were more concerned about learners' participation in LOA procedures in comparison with the male teachers.

Figueras (2021) noted that female teachers pay more attention to learners' autonomy than male teachers, prompting them to actively participate in LOA practices. In addition, Davidson and Coombe (2022) also stated that female teachers are more likely to provide their learners with information on the assessment criteria than male teachers. According to them, learners' information on these criteria prompts them to carry out self-assessment and peer-assessment more effectively.

Based on these discussions, it can be averred that, in this study, female teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA practices was greater than that of male teachers owing to the fact that they strived to ameliorate their learners' autonomy and provided them with sufficient information on their assessment criteria.

Research question four scrutinized the difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward. The results highlighted the fact that female teachers' ability to engage learners in this kind of feedback and feedforward was significantly greater than that of male teachers. Generally, these results underpin the results of the studies that were carried out by López-Hernández et al. (2023), Yang and May (2023), Zhao and Qi (2023), Esfandiari et al. (2024), and Khalili et al. (2024). These studies reported that female teachers were more adept at providing their learners with feedback and feedforward and enabling them to give feedback to their peers.

López-Hernández et al. (2023) stated that female teachers are more likely to provide their learners with feedback and feedforward compared to male teachers. According to them, while male teachers give feedback to learners whenever they consider it to be necessary, female teachers provide the leaners with feedback as a main part of language instruction. Moreover, Yang and May (2023) noted that female teachers promote peer feedback more than male teachers since they believe that it is more comprehensible and less threatening than teacher feedback.

Based on these discussions, it can be argued that in this study, female teachers were more capable than male teachers to engage learners in LOA-based feedback and feedforward due mainly to the fact that they considered feedback and feedforward to be major sections of language instruction. Moreover, they believed peer feedback was not a threatening strategy in their classes.

Research question five examined the difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' attitudes towards challenges of implementing LOA. Based on the results, male teachers' attitudes towards the challenges of implementing LOA were significantly more negative than that of female teachers. Generally, these results are in line

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with the results of the studies that were carried out by Gao (2017), Murillo and Hidalgo (2020), Fazel and Ali (2022), Endale et al. (2024), and Karlen et al. (2024). These studies reported that male teachers were less inclined than female teachers to use LOA due to its implementation difficulties.

Murillo and Hidalgo (2020) pointed out that male teachers are mainly concerned with the instruction of the language based on the pertinent curricula of their academic setting and consider LOA to be a time-consuming procedure that interferes with their effective instruction. According to them, this issue negatively affects these teachers' tendency to use LOA in their classes. In addition, Karlen et al. (2024) stated that male teachers mainly give priority to teaching instead of assessment and believe that assessment is necessary after ensuring learners' language learning.

Considering these discussions, it can be argued that in the present study, male teachers were more concerned about LOA-based challenges since they considered it to be a procedure that interfered with their language instruction. Moreover, they preferred a product-based assessment procedure instead of LOA which is mainly a process-based approach to language assessment.

Research question six examined Iraqi male EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA. The findings indicated that male teachers were not adequately familiar with LOA and had misconceptions about it. Moreover, they did not pay attention to learners' role in LOA, did not provide the learners with adequate feedback and feedforward, and complained about the difficulties of implementing LOA. In general, these findings support the results of the studies that were carried out by Zhou and Deneen (2016), Ha et al. (2021), Yan et al. (2021), Zhang et al. (2021), and Aliakbari et al. (2023). These studies showed that male EFL teachers were not adequately knowledgeable about LOA and were not inclined to take advantage of it in their classes owing to its purported implementation difficulties.

Zhou and Deneen (2016) stated that male teachers are generally more conservative than female teachers. According to them, this issue has a negative effect on their openness to change and prevents them from accepting new approaches to assessment such as LOA. In addition, Zhang et al. (2021) noted that male teachers are less likely to use new assessment approaches such as LOA because they consider them idealistic approaches that are incompatible with the realities of the classroom.

In light of these discussions, it can be argued that in this study, male teachers were not inclined to use LOA in their classes owing to the fact that they were conservative and considered LOA to be an idealistic approach that was not practical in their classes.

Lastly, research question seven scrutinized female EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA. Based on the findings, female teachers held LOA-promoting beliefs and used LOA in an effective way. Moreover, they were able to engage learners in LOA practices, give them sufficient feedback, and feedforward their performance to them. Lastly, female teachers believed that they were capable of meeting LOA-based challenges. In general, these findings support the results of the studies that were conducted by Gan et al. (2017), Leung (2020), Wang et al. (2020), Nemati et al. (2021), and Wafa (2021). These studies reported that female teachers had adequate knowledge about LOA procedures and used them in their classes without being concerned about their difficulties.

Gan et al. (2017) noted that female teachers constantly search for more up-to-date teaching and assessment approaches, such as LOA to expedite their professional development and to alleviate their learners' language acquisition. In addition, Leung (2020) pointed out that female teachers are more adept at managing their time than male teachers. As he explained, this ability empowers female teachers to implement LOA more effectively than the male teachers.

Based on these discussions, it can be argued that in this study, female teachers had sufficient information about LOA and used it effectively in their classes since they considered it to facilitate their professional development and as an instrument for expediting their learners' language acquisition. Moreover, they were skillful managers of their class time and implemented LOA without being concerned about time constraints.

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the difference between Iraqi male and female EFL teachers' ability to adhere to LOA principles. Moreover, it scrutinized these teachers' perceptions of LOA. The results of the study indicated that female teachers were more knowledgeable about LOA than male teachers and could implement it more effectively than their male counterparts. Moreover, female teachers were more skillful at involving their learners in LOA practices in comparison with male teachers and provided them with feedback and feedforward more frequently than the male teachers. In addition, female teachers were able to meet LOA-based challenges in a more satisfactory way in comparison with their male counterparts. Finally, based on the findings, female teachers had more favorable perceptions of LOA compared to male teachers.

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It is possible to draw a number of conclusions based on these results. First, revising the current teacher education courses in the EFL context of Iraq is essential. The overhaul process of these courses has to redress their content and needs to re-educate their educators. More specifically, the current courses are mainly concerned with the instruction of diverse language skills and aspects and tend to disregard the state-of-the-art approaches to language assessment including LOA. Therefore, it is necessary to include a specific LOA section in the syllabi of these courses to inform prospective teachers of the main principles of this assessment approach.

Moreover, the examination of the teacher-educators' characteristics shows that most of them are experienced teachers who have attended different teacher education courses. As a result, they may not be adequately informed about the modern assessment approaches including LOA. Consequently, the re-education of these educators has to make them cognizant of the principles and implementation requirements of LOA. The educators' knowledge of LOA can help them prepare the pre-service and in-service teachers for using LOA procedures effectively.

Second, revising the present teacher manuals in Iraqi high school settings is essential. The scrutiny of the content of these manuals shows that they have been specifically designed to guide the teachers through the instruction process of their relevant EFL materials. As a result, these manuals do not provide the teachers with information on assessment procedures including LOA. Therefore, it is necessary to add an assessment section to these manuals to make the teachers cognizant of the utility of LOA and to help them operationalize it in their classes.

Finally, it can be averred that EFL teachers have to obtain adequate information on modern assessment approaches, including LOA. To this end, teachers can take advantage of the results of recent empirical studies, including the present study. Moreover, they can attend diverse events including national and international conferences, webinars, and education courses. Finally, they can seek advice from their supervisors and more experienced peers.

The above-mentioned discussions highlight the fact that the study is likely to have certain implications for Iraqi EFL teacher educators, syllabus designers, and teachers. More specifically, Iraqi EFL teacher educators have to include LOA in their education courses as a viable alternative to traditional testing procedures. The inclusion of LOA in these courses is likely to ameliorate teachers' utility in integrating the process of language assessment into language instruction in their classes. Moreover, Iraqi EFL syllabus designers have to provide teachers with adequate information on LOA in their manuals and should include LOA tasks in the EFL textbooks to prompt the teachers to implement LOA in their classes in an effective way. Finally, EFL teachers have to cast aside their inhibitions about using LOA in their classes to ameliorate their learners' language acquisition. To this end, they can attend various LOA-related events that are likely to empower them to put the theory of LOA into practice in their classes.

The present study suffered from several limitations since the researchers could not select the participants from different cities in Iraq and focused on Baghdad. Moreover, they could not determine the impact of participants' age, experience, and language background on the results obtained. In addition, the researchers limited the study by focusing on EFL teachers and not dealing with EFL learners. Future studies need to address these issues. Furthermore, these studies have to examine instructors' practices and perceptions of LOA in English for Specific Purposes courses. Moreover, these studies have to determine the extent to which learners' individual factors, such as their gender, age, and proficiency level, influence the utility of LOA in language classes. Lastly, future studies should scrutinize the effectiveness of LOA procedures in diverse academic settings, including language institutes and universities.

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