



Assessment Literacy of Iranian EFL Teachers: A Review of Recent Studies

Qotboddin Jan-nesar M.

Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e-Heydarieh, Iran

Hossein Khodabakhshzadeh

Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e-Heydarieh, Iran

Khalil Motallebzadeh

Islamic Azad University, Torbat-e-Heydarieh, Iran

Introduction

Assessment literacy is defined as understanding the techniques, tools or strategies which can be used by EFL teachers to collect evidence of the learners' progress (Chen, 2003). It is considered to be a significant factor in language education (Fulcher, 2012). Scholars such as Popham (2009), and Bachman (2000) perpetuate the need for bringing this issue to the foreground. Although assessment has been a tool to gauge the learners' educational success, Bachman (2000) notes that assessment literacy is not confined to checking the learners with a pencil and paper in formal tests. Indeed, as mentioned by Thompson (1992) assessment should see "... a more general mental structure, encompassing beliefs, meanings, concepts, propositions, rules, mental images, preferences, and the like" (p. 130). Such views about assessment literacy and the fact that teachers spend half of their career dealing with assessment (Plake, 1993) indicates the need for special attention to be paid to assessment literacy.

Although the significance of assessment literacy has been discussed in many studies, some shortcomings still exist. Schafer and Lissitz (1987, as cited in Fard & Tabatabaei, 2018) state that not all teachers have sufficient knowledge of assessment to conduct accurate tests. As for the EFL context of Iran, Janatifar, Marandi, and Babaei (2018, p. 307) state that, "Despite being trained in pre-service teacher education programs, most EFL teachers are underprepared when faced with language assessment-related activities." Also, assessment is a context-bound concept and affected by contextual factors such as attitude and beliefs of the learners (Brindley & Scoffield, 1998). However, many of the concepts discussed in the literature such as approaches to collecting evidence, reliability, validity, biases, types of assessment etc., point to the more general aspects of assessment literacy and have not looked into assessment literacy in one particular context. Moreover, in an EFL context such as Iran, which consists of both a public and a private sector with distinct educational objectives (Borjian, 2013) the range of assessment issues to consider is wide and not all teachers are aware of them. To this end, this study provides a comprehensive look at aspects of assessment literacy considered by Iranian scholars and researchers. The main objectives of this study were to highlight the main problems that exist in the EFL

context of Iran, to find the variables that have correlations on assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers and finally, as an ancillary purpose, to see what instruments have been used in previous research to gauge assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers

Method

To accurately conduct this study, a systematic approach to conducting a review study as suggested by Thomé, Scavarda, and Scavarda (2016) was adopted and used. These scholars suggest 5 stages in conducting an accurate review study, i.e., formulating the research problems, identifying relevant work, assessing the quality of studies, summarizing the evidence, and interpreting the findings. As for the first step (formulating the research problem), the researchers identified the main problem as lack of a comprehensive look at assessment literacy issues in the EFL context of Iran. To conduct the second step (identifying relevant work), the researchers looked at a number of reputable databases, i.e., SCOPUS, Taylor and Francis Journals, Oxford Journals, Science Direct, and the Wiley Online library. However, upon screening these databases for published works related to assessment literacy of EFL teachers in Iran, a limited number of publications ($n = 7$) were found. Thus, the researchers searched open access scientific journals which were not indexed in these databases. A total of 37 publications were found. These publications are presented in detail in this study. The quality of these studies was assessed by looking into their procedures and how accurately the studies had been conducted and reported. To summarize the studies, the researchers prepared a table (Table 1), and took note of the instruments, the participants, the results, and the main focus in each study. The findings of the research were then interpreted and discussed.

Previous Studies

As mentioned earlier 37 studies had investigated assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers. These studies were conducted between 2011 and 2019. We avoided representing a synopsis of all these studies in this paper, especially those with similar procedures or results. However, some of the studies with significant findings are presented in this section.

Mellati and Khademi (2018) focused on teacher-mediated classroom assessment and its effect on the teachers' development and the learners' writing. Indeed, they looked at how the teachers' knowledge of assessment and their activities in the class affected the learners' writing. To do so, the researchers used 4 instruments, i.e., teachers' assessment literacy inventory, semi-structured interviews, non-participatory observation, and Writing Competence Rating Scale (WCRS). The participants of their study included 10 instructors (all male) and 75 male sophomores in the EFL context of Iran. They found that the learners' writing was significantly affected by the teachers' assessment literacy; therefore, teachers' assessment knowledge should be highlighted in teacher training courses.

Farhady and Tavassoli (2018) focused on the EFL teachers' knowledge of the instruments for assessing the EFL learners' knowledge of language. They used Fulcher's (2012) needs assessment questionnaire and administered it to 246 language teachers. They found that most teachers have different priorities in assessment, although, in general, they agreed on the same topics as being important for assessment. The majority of the participants believed that they needed more knowledge of assessment.

Ashraf and Zolfaghari (2018) who have conducted a number of studies with regard to Iranian EFL teachers' assessment literacy focused on reflective teaching and assessment literacy of the teachers. They believed that reflective teaching prepares more aware and analytical teachers. Thus, they endeavored to investigate the relationship between assessment literacy and reflective teaching by administering two questionnaires to 120 EFL teachers. The first instrument was an assessment literacy inventory designed by them and the second instrument was the reflective teaching questionnaire designed by Behzadpour

(2007). They found a positive and significant relationship between reflective teaching and assessment literacy.

Fard and Tabatabaei (2018) studied the level of assessment literacy among 52 Iranian EFL teachers in the city of Ighlid, Fars Province. They made use of Mertler's (2003) Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory and found that most Iranian EFL teachers have insufficient knowledge of assessment literacy.

Janatifar, Marandi and Babaei (2018) believe that language assessment literacy (LAL) is an understudied construct in the EFL context of Iran. They used Fulcher's (2012) LAL survey which includes both constructed and closed response items. Having administered the survey to 280 EFL teachers at 17 different provinces they found that Iranian EFL teachers complain about the lack of hands-on experience of assessment which has confined them to theoretical aspects of assessment literacy. Through the survey the researchers could also identify various aspects of language assessment in Iran which included designing and developing tests, large-scale vs. classroom tests and aspects of testing which occur beyond the tests.

Zolfaghari and Ahmadi (2016) had a different look at the issue of assessment literacy and distinguished its two main components, i.e., the general and the specific assessment literacy components. They interviewed both EFL teachers and non-EFL teachers ($n = 32$). Through the interviews they found a number of significant determinant factors of assessment literacy as noted by the respondents. These determinants included: identifying the main content to be tested, knowledge of assessment processes, ethical issues and understanding the learners which were classified as general issues. As for the specific components, they considered the learners' belief about the teachers as the main determinant. They also concluded that assessment literacy can be used to identify the learners' strengths and weaknesses.

Rahmani (2016) delved into the relationship between teachers' success and their assessment literacy. To measure this relationship, the researcher used an assessment questionnaire to measure assessment literacy (based on the participants' view). On the other hand, the teachers' professional success was checked using the Successful Iranian EFL Teacher Questionnaire (SIETQ) developed by Moafian and Pishghadam (2009). The data obtained from 40 Iranian EFL teachers who took part in the study revealed that the relationship between these two variables was positive and significant. Two ranges of age, i.e., 23 to 33 and 34 to 45 were considered in this study. It was found that the assessment literacy of the participants in these two groups is significantly different.

Zolfaghari and Ashraf (2015) looked into the intricacies between teaching experience, age and assessment literacy. They investigated the possible relationships by administering the assessment literacy by surveying 658 experienced male and female EFL teachers. They found the relationship between assessment literacy and experience, and assessment literacy and age to be significant and positive.

Ahmadi and Mir Mirshojaee (2016) conducted a qualitative study to explore the abilities and skills of 20 Iranian EFL teachers in assessment. The respondents had a minimum of 5 years of experience in language teaching and; thus, were considered experienced. The soft data collected through semi-structured interviews revealed that these teachers lack knowledge about and/or skills in assessment reliability, validity, formative assessment, and alternative assessment. They respondents also did not show enough literacy with regard to learners with disabilities, the social consequences of assessment and learners' engagement.

Esfandiari and Nouri (2016) believe that language teachers cannot be professional in their careers if they are not assessment-literate. They examined the assessment literacy of English language instructors and content instructors by administering a questionnaire to 310 participants which was then followed by interviews. It was observed that the knowledge of assessment literacy among the language teachers and content instructors was statistically different; meaning that more trained instructors had a higher level of assessment literacy. Qualitative analysis showed that these differences refer to the amount of training in assessment, methods of evaluation, purpose of assessment, and familiarity with psychometric properties of tests.

Mohammadi, Kiany, Samar, and Akbari (2015) focused on pre-service teachers' assessment literacy, their assessments' alignment with curricular objectives and the syllabus, their cognitive processes and

knowledge type. They studied pre-service teachers at five teacher training centers in the public sector and found an unbalanced coverage of curriculum and course content in the summative exams. According to Mohammadi et al. (2015, p.8), “Three combinations of cognitive process level and knowledge type was dominant in the data set: (1) Remember Factual Knowledge, (2) Understand Conceptual Knowledge, and (3) Apply Procedural Knowledge.”

Khanjani, Vahdany, and Jafarigohar (2016) studied the quality of teacher training programs in Iran. They were of the belief that the evaluation of these programs is vital to the teachers’ development. They 346 high school EFL teachers, 20 EFL teacher educators, and 97 preservice teachers. The researchers used a questionnaire, semi-structured interview and an observation checklist. The results of the study showed that the teacher training programs cannot successfully enhance assessment literacy of the EFL teachers.

Moradan and Pourasadollah (2014) emphasized the teachers’ beliefs and attitudes of their own teaching practices’ believing that teachers’ attitude is a crucial factor in designing course materials and in educational planning. The researchers designed and validated a questionnaire and administered it to 267 Iranian TEFL teachers in 18 cities in Iran. In addition, 60 teachers were randomly selected for follow up interviews. The findings of this mixed-methods study revealed that the relationship between the teachers’ thinking and their beliefs is weak. This was observed in all groups of teacher communities. The novice teachers were found not to be confident in assessment and experienced teachers (who were usually older) were not familiar with recent technology-based types of assessment.

Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi, and Rashidi (2011) designed a study and investigated the impact of teachers’ assessment literacy on the washback effects of summative tests. The study was conducted with 53 secondary school teachers (male and female) in the public sector. They researchers used Plake (1993) test of assessment literacy and a Likert-Scale questionnaire and observed insufficiency of the teachers’ knowledge of assessment literacy, as they solely tailor their tests based on the demands of the exam. Such a practice has resulted in a negative washback effect. The summary of the studies on assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers is presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Summary of the Studies

<i>Author and Year</i>	<i>Title</i>	<i>Instrument</i>	<i>Participants</i>	<i>Main Focus</i>	<i>Results</i>
Mellati & Khademi (2018)	Exploring Teachers’ Assessment Literacy: Impact on Learners’ Writing Achievements and Implications for Teacher Development	Teachers’ assessment literacy inventory, semi-structured interview, non-participatory observation, and Writing Competence Rating Scale (WCRS).	10 teachers and 75 sophomores	Teacher-mediated classroom assessment	The learners’ writing is significantly affected by the teachers’ assessment literacy
Farhady & Tavassoli (2018)	Assessment Knowledge Needs of EFL Teachers	Fulcher’s (2012) needs assessment questionnaire	246 male and female EFL teachers	Requires instruments or assessment	Most teachers have different priorities in assessment although, in general, they agreed on same topics as being important for assessment.
Ashraf & Zolfaghari (2018)	EFL Teachers’ Assessment Literacy and Their Reflective Teaching	Assessment literacy inventory (Zolfaghari & Ashraf, 2015) and The reflective teaching questionnaire designed by Behzadpour (2007).	120 Iranian EFL teachers	Reflective teaching	A significant and positive relationship between assessment literacy and reflective teaching
Fard &	Investigating	Melter’s (2003)	52 male and	Classroom	Most Iranian EFL

Tabatabaei (2018)	Assessment Literacy of EFL Teachers in Iran	Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory	female EFL teachers in both the public and private sector	assessment literacy	teachers have insufficient knowledge of assessment literacy.
Janatifar, Marandi, & Babaei (2018)	Iranian EFL Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) under an Assessing Lens	Fulcher's (2012) LAL survey	280 male and female EFL teachers in 17 provinces	Hands-on experience of assessment	Iranian EFL teachers complain about lack of hands-on experience of assessment which has confined them to theoretical aspects of assessment literacy.
Zolfaghari & Ahmadi (2016)	Assessment literacy components across subject matters	interview	32 EFL and non-EFL teachers (both male and female)	Main components of assessment literacy	General components: knowledge of assessment processes, ethical issues and understanding the learners Specific components: the learners' belief about the teachers
Ahmadi & Mir Shojaee (2016)	Iranian English Language Teachers' Assessment Literacy: The Case of Public School and Language Institute Teachers	Semi-structured interviews	20 EFL teachers	Reliability, validity, learners' engagement, social aspects of assessment, formative and alternative assessment	The EFL teachers were not assessment literate and lack skills in assessing reliability, validity, learners' engagement, social aspects of assessment, formative and alternative assessment
Rahmani (2016)	EFL Teacher Education in Iran: Does It Promote Trainees' Pedagogical Content Knowledge?	40 EFL teachers in two age groups	Successful Iranian EFL Teacher Questionnaire (SIETQ) developed by Moafian & Pishghadam (2009).	Teachers' professional success	It was found that the assessment literacy of the older and younger participants is significantly different.
Esfandiari & Nouri (2016)	A Mixed-methods, Cross-sectional Study of Assessment Literacy of Iranian University Instructors: Implications for Teachers' Professional Development	310 participants and respondents	An interview and a questionnaire	Professional development	Knowledge of assessment literacy among the language teachers and content instructors is statistically different. Qualitative analysis showed that these differences refer to the amount of training in assessment, methods of evaluation, purpose of assessment, and familiarity with psychometric properties of tests.
Khanjani, Vahdany & Jafarigo-	EFL Teacher Education in Iran: Does It Promote Trainees'	346 high school EFL teachers, 20 EFL teacher educators, and 97 preservice teachers	Questionnaire, semi-structured interview and	Teacher training courses	The teacher training programs cannot successfully enhance assessment literacy of

har (2016)	Pedagogical Content Knowledge?		an observation checklist.		the EFL teachers.
Zolfaghari & Ashraf (2015)	The Relationship between EFL Teachers' Assessment Literacy, Their Teaching Experience, and Their Age: A Case of Iranian EFL Teachers	the assessment literacy standards of Michigan university	58 experienced EFL teachers, male and female	Age and experience of the EFL teachers	the relationship between assessment literacy and experience, and assessment literacy and age was significant and positive
Moham-madi, Kiany, Samar, & Akbari (2015)	Appraising Pre-service EFL Teachers' Assessment in Language Testing Course Using Revised Bloom's Taxonomy	Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking	Male and female teachers at 5 teacher training centers in the public sector	Curriculum, syllabus and the assessment instruments.	An unbalances coverage of curriculum and course content in the summative exams was observed. They also observed a dominant combination of cognitive process level and the knowledge types among the EFL teachers.
Moradan & Pourasa-dollah (2014)	Teachers' Thinking about their Teaching: A Critical Study on Iranian TEFL Teachers	Newly designed questionnaire and interview	267 Iranian TEFL Teachers in 18 various cities in Iran	beliefs and attitudes toward the teachers' own teaching practice	The relationship between the teachers' thinking and their beliefs is weak. This was observed in all groups of teacher communities. novice teachers were not found to be confident and experienced teachers (who were usually older) were not familiar with recent technology-based types of instruction.
Kiomrs, R., Abdol-mehdi, R., & Rashidi (2011)	On the Interaction of Test Washback and Teacher Assessment Literacy: The Case of Iranian EFL Secondary School Teachers	Plake (1993) test of assessment literacy, and a Likert-Scale Questionnaire	13 female and 40 male teachers	Washback effect	Iranian EFL teachers' have insufficient knowledge of assessment literacy. This causes a washback effect.

Discussion

In congruence with Bachman (2000) and Popham (2009) who believe assessment literacy of language teachers in many EFL/ESL contexts is insufficient, this study showed that most of the previous studies in the EFL context of Iran consider Iranian EFL teachers as not sufficiently assessment literate. In line with Mertler (2003), Zolfaghari and Ashraf (2015) saw a relationship between experience, age and assessment literacy; stating that novice and younger teachers have fewer assessment skills. Scholars such as Fulcher (2012), Ashraf and Zolfaghari (2018), and Bachman and Palmer (2010), consider reliability, validity, and

other general issues in assessment as very significant. These factors were also assessed in the studies in the Iranian context, especially those which used instruments designed by Fulcher (2012), and Mertler (2003). However, insufficient knowledge of these variables was observed.

One of the mistakes by EFL teachers that can lead to washback effect is according focus to some content for the purpose of success in exams and ignoring other content (Cheng & Watanabe, 2004). In the current review, a negative washback effect was observed in the assessment practices of Iranian EFL teachers by Mohammadi, Kiany, Samar, and Akbari (2015) and Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi, and Rashidi, (2011). Moreover, Brown and Hudson (1998) believe that assessment knowledge affects the quality of teaching and, in turn, affects the students' learning. This issue was observed in the study conducted by Mellati and Khademi (2018) who noted that the assessment literacy of the EFL teachers' affects the writing quality of the EFL learners.

Conclusion

This study was an attempt to gauge the assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers in light of previous research. To this end, the researchers conducted a systematic search on previous studies in the EFL context of Iran. It was found that the most frequently-used instruments to assess the EFL teachers' assessment literacy were: Assessment literacy inventory (Zolfaghari & Ashraf, 2015), The reflective teaching questionnaire (Behzadpour, 2007), Merlter's (2003) Classroom Assessment Literacy Inventory, and Fulcher's (2012) LAL survey. In addition, the researchers found that in many studies (i.e., Esfandiari & Nouri, 2016; Kiomrs, Abdolmehdi, & Rashidi, 2011; Zolfaghari & Ashraf, 2015) Iranian EFL teachers' assessment literacy was found to be insufficient. Other problems cited with regard to assessment literacy were negative washback effects, low confidence of novice teachers, unbalanced coverage of curriculum and course content in the summative exams, impracticality of Teacher Training Courses (TTC). Additional factors responsible for low levels of Iranian EFL teachers' assessment literacy are cited as a lack of hands-on experience and unfamiliarity with technology-based assessment. Some relationships were also observed in previous research. Although the relationship between the teachers' thinking and their beliefs was found to be weak, the relationship between assessment literacy and experience, assessment literacy and age, and assessment literacy and professional success was found to be positive and significant.

Implications of the Study

This study highlights the need for both technical and socio-cultural aspects of assessment. Teacher trainers should consider that EFL teachers need practical knowledge of assessment issues such as reliability, validity, and test designs, etc. EFL teachers should also be familiarized with their learners' needs so that they can include relevant content in their tests. Similarly, EFL teachers should attempt to increase their assessment literacy, as previous research shows that assessment literacy has an impact on their students' learning.

Suggestions for Further Research

A shortcoming with regard to assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers is that significant concepts such as the teachers' preferences, mental structures, emotion and also the role of the learners' in assessment have not yet been studied. We suggest these areas for further research on assessment literacy of Iranian EFL teachers in the context of Iran.

The Authors

Qotboddin Jan-nesar M. is a faculty member at Islamic Azad University, Birjand Branch since 2001. Currently, he is a PhD student in TEFL, in Torbat-e-Heidarieh Islamic Azad University. He is also a member of Asia TEFL. His fields of interest include Language Assessment, ESP and the recent issues in ELT.

Department of English Language and Literature
Torbat-e-Heidarieh Branch, Islamic Azad University
Torbat-e-Heidarieh, Iran
Tel: +98 5152294950
Email: jannesar@iaubir.ac.ir

Hossein Khodabakhshzadeh is an assistant professor at Islamic Azad University of Torbat-e Heydarieh, Iran. His research interests are English Language Teaching (ELT), Foreign Language Acquisition (FLA), and Second Language Acquisition (SLA).

Department of English Language and Literature
Torbat-e-Heidarieh Branch, Islamic Azad University
Torbat-e-Heidarieh, Iran
Tel: +98 5152294950
Email: H.Khodabakhshzadeh@iautorbat.ac.ir

Khalil Motallebzadeh is associate professor at the Islamic Azad University (IAU) of Torbat-e-Heidarieh and Mashhad Branches, Iran. He is a widely published and established researcher in teacher education, language testing and e-learning. He has been a visiting scholar at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC) in 2007-2008. He is also an accredited teacher trainer of the British Council since 2008 and is currently Iran representative in Asia TEFL.

Department of English Language and Literature
Torbat-e-Heidarieh Branch, Islamic Azad University
Torbat-e-Heidarieh, Iran
Tel: +98 5152294950
Email: k.motalleb@iautorbat.ac.ir

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