A Gap Analysis between EFL Teachers' Assessment Literacy in Iranian Public Schools and Their Pre-service Assessment Curriculum

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Abstract

The design, implementation and outcomes of curriculums must be ongoingly evaluated. Using quantitative gap analysis, this study evaluated Iranian EFL teachers' satisfaction with their pre-service education in developing their assessment literacy in reference to the perceived importance of knowledge and skills areas of classroom language assessment. To this end, the study included 100 EFL teachers who graduated from state universities in Iran with at least a Bachelor's degree and three to five years of teaching experience at public schools. Data were collected using a 44-item researcher-made semantic differential Likert scale. It involved two parts tapping into their perceptions of importance and the level of their pre-service preparation. Descriptive analysis and inferential statistics revealed that the teachers rated all the areas almost highly (M ≥ 4.67 out of 6). The participants attached the highest importance to the areas of "assessing different language skills and sub-skills". In contrast, the areas relating to "interpreting students' test performance" and "making the appropriate decision about the students' test results and test washback" were perceived to be the least significant in classroom assessment. The gap analysis also indicated that there was a significant difference between the teachers' perception of the importance of assessment knowledge and skills areas and their level of pre-service education, construed as their under-preparedness for classroom assessment. Further, the gaps were perceived to be sharper in assessment skills areas. The study discusses the implications of the findings in the context of teacher education and classroom assessment in Iran.

Keywords: Assessment Literacy, Pre-service Curriculum, Gap Analysis, English Teacher, Public Schools

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Assessment is a crucial aspect of instruction processes to provide main instruments through which teachers can assess their students' learning to see the influence and capability of their teaching (Webb, 2002). This entails teachers as both consumers of assessment results and assessors of their own. Therefore, teachers' assessment literacy is essential and has a noticeable impact on the quality of their assessment in instruction. That is why the concept of assessment literacy (AL) has commenced a fresh line of inquiry in assessment literature and introduced language assessment literacy (LAL) in English language education as an ongoing process that links teachers' assessment knowledge, skills, and their notions of assessment in relation to their context of use (DeLuca et al., 2019).

Teachers are arguably supposed to have an efficient literacy of all the domains of classroom assessment to satisfy the demands and expectations of learners and stakeholders competently. Without adequate LAL, language teachers may not be able to assist students in reaching higher levels of educational achievement (Fulcher, 2012).

Because of the key formative role of assessment in education (Black & Wiliam 1998), there has been an increasing need to promote teachers' knowledge and skill areas in language assessment. In particular, in Iran's educational system, universities are supposed to be an ideal context where students, including teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL) students, are trained and prepared for their future professions as teachers and classroom assessors. Developing AL of pre-service students as future teachers is essential in the TEFL higher education curriculum (Bustamante, 2022). Thus, there arguably follow attempts to ensure that the prospective teachers are becoming adequately prepared to take responsibility for classroom assessment and to be accountable to students, their parents, and the educational system through a pre-service assessment training curriculum (Mashhadi & Dehghani, 2022; Soodmand Afshar & Ranjbar, 2021).

An area under-researched in TEFL higher education is the degree to which prospective teachers are prepared through the provision of the relevant assessment knowledge and skills in their pre-service education. English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers working in schools are the best informants to appraise how well their training and education prepared them for their current job. In other words, there should not be any gaps or discrepancies between teachers' educational services and the actual service provided in the assessment curriculum. Gap analysis as one of the up-to-date outcomes measuring tools "lends itself particularly well to the measurement of alumni attitudes and perceptions" (Davis et al., 2002, p. 18) of educational service quality. As a first of its kind,

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this paper is motivated to employ a gap analysis technique to evaluate the relevance and significance of the pre-service assessment curriculum and what EFL teachers actually need in classroom assessment. More specifically, the following research questions guide the inquiry:

1. What is the descriptive hierarchical distribution pattern of knowledge and skill areas significant to the English teachers' current classroom assessment in Iranian public education?

2. Is there a significant gap (i.e., under-preparedness or over-preparedness) between the English teachers' perception of the skills and knowledge important to their current classroom assessment at public education and the preparation provided for them by the TEFL programs at the Bachelor level in Iranian universities?

Literature Review

Language assessment is indispensable to any language education, including English courses at high schools in Iran. Since it is the teachers' responsibility to carry out such assessments, they are expected to have become proficient enough in AL. Teachers' AL should provide comprehensive coverage of all essential knowledge and skill areas for language assessment (Yamtim & Wongwanich, 2014).

In case a given teacher training curriculum is based on the perspective of the development of human resources to act as future teachers, this may connote recognizing and increasing relevant intrinsic capabilities in the trainees to make them qualified at teaching as well as testing (Rouda & Kusy, 1996). A training course must be periodically scrutinized to check its compatibility with the nature and scope of the issues encountered by the trainees (in this case, English teachers). Such Gap Analysis is considered by Sofia and Zirinigulo (2020) as a conventional type of outcome evaluation. Likewise, Lewis and Klein (1986) define it as "a difference between an intended service and a delivered one from a customer's point of view" (p. 33). As concerns the present study, under educational systems, the main "customers" of training services would be (prospective) teachers. The probable gap between the teachers' required assessment knowledge and skills, on the one hand, and the programmed/delivered services, on the other hand, is considered a skill and knowledge gap. This divergence weakens and handicaps the teacher in conducting effective teaching and assessment because these two fields are interconnected, and no one is complete without the other (Rouda & Kusy, 1996).

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Compared to other evaluation methods, gap analysis is a practical technique for outcome assessment, and it can be applied as a major or complementary assessment criterion. It dedicated itself specifically to the measurement of graduates' views and understandings. Moreover, it can present an indirect index of the degree of satisfaction displayed by the then pupils and the current teachers regarding the quality of the training program. It can be concluded that achieving the anticipated educational goals and appropriate products indirectly indicates delivering a well-prepared program in all its areas (Davis et al., 2002). Along the same lines, a number of studies conducted in this area are briefly described below.

Empirical Studies on Language Assessment Literacy

As concerns inadequacies in teachers' AL, researchers (e.g., DeLuca et al., 2019; Mertler, 2003; Sayyadi, 2022; Shah Ahmadi & Ketabi, 2019) ascribe teachers' assessment deficiency to their assessment illiteracy. Similarly, there were other researchers, Shepard et al.(2018) and Stiggins (2002), who believe teachers misunderstand the concept of assessment. In addition, Jawhar and Subahi (2020) have found that trained teachers recognize some assessment deficiencies when they begin their actual teaching assessment experience, soon realizing that their efficiency is restricted without the needed knowledge and skills.

Besides Shim (2009) who demonstrated that despite their being theoretically knowledgeable about assessment, the Korean teachers could not use all of their knowledge of assessment in action; Ogan-Bekiroughlu and Suzuk (2014) conducted a study on the trained Turkish teachers who proved to better perceive theoretical aspects of AL but not its practical aspects.

The share of assessment education in teacher training programs was also the concern of DeLuca et al. (2019), who analyzed teacher training programs to study teacher assessment training across Australia, Canada, England, and New Zealand. They concluded that there was a gap between the application of assessment knowledge and skills, especially in the case of the teachers who were practically under-prepared for classroom assessment.

Considering the dynamic nature of teaching/assessment practices, teacher training/development education is expected to be flexible enough to reflect the currently accredited development and trends. As an instance of the outcome of the failure to appreciate the need for such resemblance, in a study on the relationship between teachers'

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AL and pre-service education, Mertler (2003) demonstrated that traditional teacher training courses are not practical and they cannot equip teachers to fully cope with real classroom assessment circumstances. Furthermore, he emphasized the effect of pre-service education on teacher assessment, as "teachers often believe that they have not received sufficient training in their undergraduate preparation programs" (p. 22). In a more up-to-date study, Ballidag and İnan-Karagul (2021) noted an urgent need for training prospective teachers to be vocationally prepared in all pedagogic areas since the quality of education, including classroom assessment, is influenced by the quality of teachers' AL.

In the context of Europe, in the probes into the teachers' pre-service training in language assessment (e.g., Gok et al., 2012; Shepard et al., 2018; Vogt &Tsagari, 2014). European teachers were reported to believe that their instruction did not prepare them properly for classroom assessment. They stated that most European teachers thus received very little or no education in AL. In those studies, the AL of the European teachers seemed to be unsatisfactory since they only learned some components of language assessment, such as grading by experience.

In the same way, in an inquiry, Peacock (2009) reported that nearly 50% of the teacher training programs in the United States do not consider assessment in their curriculums. And those programs taking into account the assessment in their curriculums do not cover all assessment knowledge and skills. Therefore, teacher preparation at most U.S. universities in the scope of assessment training is either insufficient or does not completely exist.

Evaluating the AL of Iranian EFL teachers, Dehqan and Asadian (2020) and Razavipour and Rezagah (2018) argued that the Iranian EFL teachers' AL was not adequate in many areas of language assessment. Even if they are assessment literate, they might find it challenging to put to use their literacy and skills in actual classroom assessment (Homayounzadeh & Razmjoo, 2021; Jannati, 2015; Tayyebi et al., 2020. Firoozi et al. (2019), making a case for updating Iranian EFL teachers' LAL contend that they have a traditional perception of language assessment akin to methods of assessment of learning and thus are resistant to embracing more recent assessment approaches like alternatives in assessment or alternatives to assessment.

Concentrating on the overall appropriateness and usefulness of the pre-service assessment curriculum based on the teachers' views in Iran, Khanjani et al. (2016) reported that the pre-service assessment curriculum was not acceptably laid-out. But

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Ranjbari et al. (2020) demonstrated that the latest pre-service assessment curriculum was adequately developed and assessed positively by the Iranian EFL teachers based on pedagogic and linguistic suitability, although some deficiencies in it must be remedied.

The status of the professional training of EFL teachers in assessment in Iran is not generally obvious because of the deficiency of associated research and literature (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009). Despite numerous studies on educational assessment areas over the past decades, little is known about the effectiveness of pre-service curriculum regarding students' preparation as prospective teachers doing their classroom assessments properly. As far as Iran's educational context is concerned, few studies have evaluated the pre-service assessment curriculum with respect to how well it develops EFL teachers' knowledge and skills to, in effect, enable them to conduct efficient classroom assessments. Ultimately, a review of the literature did not lead to any studies looking into the significance of the knowledge and skill areas that teachers need.

Method

Participants

Around two thousand EFL teachers were accessed either directly (in person or by telephone) or through a Telegram group. Seven hundred students with three to five years of teaching experience were invited to participate in the study. It was assumed that invited teachers had faced and developed an understanding of classroom assessment demands and challenges and could also recall as well their pre-service content of instruction. Two hundred and twenty of the invited teachers consented to participate in the study. They were sent the scale by a cyberspace link. Only 120 of the teachers filled in and returned the scales. The scales which were not carefully filled out were also excluded from the dataset. In total, 100 scales were included in the study. The participants' demographic information is shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Participants' Demographic Information

		frequency	percentage
Major	TEFL	100	100%
Gender	Male	45	45%
	Female	55	55%
Age group (years)	24 to 26	32	32%
	27 to 30	51	51%
	31 or older	17	17%

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		frequency	percentage
Major	TEFL	100	100%
Teaching Experience (years)	3	19	19%
	4	46	46%
	5	35	35%
Degree	B.A.	43	43%
	M.A.	46	46%
	Ph.D.	11	11%

Instrumentation

In order to evaluate the alignment of the assessment course content and the needs of EFL teachers, a semantic differential scale was used. In developing the scale, an item pool was first generated. Item development was guided by several sources, including insights from the relevant literature, the first researcher's first-hand experience as a high school classroom assessment teacher, university assessment curriculum and course standards, interviews with five university professors of assessment courses, and twenty EFL teachers of public schools. Initially, an attempt was made to take into account any relevant issues, demands, and challenges of classroom assessment. This led to a lengthy set of items with rather specific wording. Through further discussion and iterative item content analysis, the items were modified and reduced to 48. The items were intended to tap main language assessment knowledge and skill areas essential in test development, administration, analysis, and reporting (for detail, see Bachman & Palmer, 1996).

The first draft of the scale was developed in two parts, including 6 demographic questions and 48 items evenly divided into knowledge and skill areas of assessment. All items were formatted as a 6-point Likert semantic differential scale in two columns of forced choices anchored 1 (column 1: the least important and column 2: the least adequately prepared) to 6 (column 1: the most important and column 2: the most adequately prepared). The first column concerned the significance of the intended knowledge and skill areas needed for classroom assessment. The second column sought the respondents' evaluation as to how adequate the provided pre-service program was.

A panel of three university educators evaluated this scale with expertise in language assessment well aware of the objectives of the study. They were asked to check out individual items and the whole scale and provide comments in the margin of the draft. Based on their comments, several items were reworded or amended for clarity and length. However, two knowledge and two parallel skill items were beyond correction and excluded mainly because of overlap with other items and trivialness. As a result, the number of items was reduced to 44.

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To assess the internal reliability of the scale, it was piloted involving thirty participants with characteristics similar to the target population. The Cronbach's Alpha reliability estimated was 0.95, suggesting relatively high internal consistency of the scale items. The final version of the scale can be seen in Appendix.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected from 100 high school teachers of English from all provinces of Iran employing the scale, which was available through www.Porsall.com. This website is to develop and distribute the online academic scales to intended participants. They were not accessed in person because of the challenges involved in recruiting them and the outbreak of COVID-19. The data were collected between February and July 2020.

The collected data were divided into two parts. Part one concerned the significance of the intended knowledge and skill areas needed for classroom assessment. Part two related to the extent of their preparation through the Iranian university curriculum. Each of these two datasets involved 44 items with 100 differential responses. Using SPSS (version 26), the researchers ran descriptive and inferential data analyses to answer the research questions. That is, descriptive statistics (e.g., frequency counts, means) were used to achieve a descriptive hierarchical distribution pattern of the importance of knowledge and skill areas significant to their classroom assessment in Iranian high schools and the level of their preparation through the B.A. TEFL program in Iranian universities for knowledge and skill areas. The inferential statistics (independent samples t-test) were also used to contrast the importance and preparation to see whether the EFL curriculum of Iranian universities had prepared the teachers for their role as examiners. Any significant differences between the importance of the assessment knowledge and skill areas and their preparation were suggestive of the gap (over-preparedness or under-preparedness).

Results

Table 2 summarizes the teachers' perceptions of the importance of knowledge areas of language assessment in their classroom assessment and their preparation for these areas via their pre-service training. The mean of the importance of assessment knowledge areas ranged between 4.33 and 5.29 (mean = 4.71) out of 6 and the mean of their perceived preparation was from 3.37 to 4.48 (mean = .3.92). From the teachers' point of view, the knowledge of "how to test various language components" had the highest importance

(5.29 of 6), followed by knowledge of "how to test different language skills" (5.21 of 6), while both were the most adequately prepared (4.62 and 4.48) through pre-service education. Interestingly, all 22 knowledge areas were perceived to have high importance for classroom assessment for which they were under-prepared. The "knowledge of assessment theories" (4.33) and the "knowledge of test washback" (4.42) had the least importance, and the "knowledge of different eras of testing" and the "knowledge of the procedures of test administration" (3.37) were rated as the least adequately prepared.

Table 2.

Descriptive Hierarchical Distribution Pattern of Significance of Assessment Knowledge Areas to Classroom Assessment and Their Related Preparation

| Variables | Hierarchical Order | |
	Importance	Preparation
Item13	5.2900	4.6200
Item12	5.2100	4.4800
Item18	4.8600	3.9800
Item19	4.8600	4.0900
Item14	4.8300	4.3000
Item 6	4.8000	3.8700
Item7	4.7900	3.9200
Item20	4.7700	4.0900
Item15	4.7700	4.1200
Item5	4.7200	3.9500
Item21	4.6800	3.7800
Item3	4.6600	3.8100
Item10	4.6400	3.9000
Item11	4.6300	3.9900
Item9	4.5600	4.0100
Item4	4.5600	4.0400
Item17	4.5500	3.3700
Item2	4.5100	3.9500
Item16	4.5100	3.7500
Item1	4.4600	3.3700
Item22	4.4200	3.6500
Item8	4.3300	3.8200

Table 3, incorporating mean values, indicates the teachers' perception of the importance of skill areas for classroom language assessment and their preparation in these

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areas. The mean values of the importance of assessment skills ranged from 4.29 to 4.95, with an average of 4.61. The two skills of "how to align assessment methods with intended learning objectives "and "using best assessment method aligned with the goals of specific teaching method" were equally the most important areas (4.95) for teachers' classroom assessment. In addition, "using statistics in scoring and interpreting students' test performance" was deemed the next most important skill (4.80). Albeit all the areas were perceived to be highly important, the "skill of how to assess thinking skills" (4.29), and the "skill in making an appropriate decision about the student's test results in a given situation" (4.33) were seen as the least important items.

Compared to importance means, the overall means of preparation in assessment skills were lower (3.85) and ranged from 3.37 to 4.11. The "skill of developing formal and informal assessment methods (e.g., essay items, discussion, quiz)" (4.11) and the "skill of how to identify and eliminate unethical practices in assessment" were the most adequately prepared items from the perspectives of teachers. But on the other hand, the "skill of how to improve test quality" (3.37) and the "skill of how to involve students in cooperative assessment" (3.64) were viewed as the least adequately prepared areas.

The mean of assessment knowledge importance was 4.71 and rather higher than the importance means (4.61) of parallel skill areas. Overall, the findings suggest, rather surprisingly, that the teachers tended to rate knowledge areas more highly than skills. It should be noted that the average knowledge preparation was 3.92, a little higher than that of skills (3.85).

In general, in regard to the first research question, it can be concluded that the teachers attached high importance to all the 44 assessment components for language assessment in public schools. However, their perception of preparation in these areas was not as positive. It is noteworthy that the areas rated as being the most important included both knowledge and skills, implying that the teachers valued both the assessment of theoretical underpinnings and practical skills and applications.

Table 3.

Descriptive Hierarchical Distribution Pattern of Significance of Assessment Skill Areas to Classroom Assessment and Their Related Preparation

Variables	Hierarchical Order	
	Importance	Preparation
Item24	4.9500	3.9700
Item23	4.9500	3.9700
Item42	4.8000	3.8700

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Variables	Hierarchical Order	
	Importance	Preparation
Item26	4.7400	3.9700
Item30	4.7200	3.9500
Item31	4.7200	4.1100
Item41	4.7200	3.9500
Item43	4.7200	3.9200
Item28	4.6700	3.8700
Item25	4.6600	3.6400
Item39	4.6600	3.8100
Item40	4.5600	4.0400
Item35	4.5500	3.8000
Item32	4.5300	3.8400
Item33	4.5200	3.8200
Item27	4.5200	3.6500
Item38	4.5100	3.9500
Item36	4.5000	3.8500
Item37	4.4600	3.3700
Item34	4.4100	3.8500
Item44	4.3300	3.8200
Item29	4.2900	3.6900

The gap between the importance of knowledge areas and their related preparation ranged from 0.51 to 1.09 (mean=0.74). By using a t-test, as depicted in Table 4, the gap analysis shows that out of the 22 variables relating to knowledge areas that the pre-service assessment curriculum tries to impart, all the 22 knowledge areas indicated divergence between their perceived importance to teachers' current classroom language assessment and their level of preparation through pre-service assessment curriculum. Of these 22 items, the Iranian EFL teachers perceived that they were "under-prepared" in all areas in the sense that they rated their importance as being significantly higher than their level of preparation (p < .05).

Table 4.

Gap Analysis of Teachers' Perception of the Importance of Assessment Knowledge Areas vs. Their Preparation by Pre-service Assessment Curriculum

Variables	knowledge means				
	Importance	Preparation	Gap	t -value	Sig.
Item1	4.4600	3.3700	1.09	5.880	.000*
Item2	4.5100	3.9500	0.56	3.218	.002*
Item3	4.6600	3.8100	0.85	4.759	.000*
Item4	4.5600	4.0400	0.52	2.772	.006*

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| Variables | knowledge means | | | | |
	Importance	Preparation	Gap	t -value	Sig.
Item5	4.7200	3.9500	0.77	3.915	.000*
Item6	4.8000	3.8700	0.93	4.726	.000*
Item7	4.7900	3.9200	0.87	4.627	.000*
Item8	4.3300	3.8200	0.51	2.635	.009*
Item9	4.5600	4.0100	0.55	2.678	.008*
Item10	4.6400	3.9000	0.74	3.691	.000*
Item11	4.6300	3.9900	0.64	3.199	.002*
Item12	5.2100	4.4800	0.73	3.709	.000*
Item13	5.2900	4.6200	0.67	3.658	.000*
Item14	4.8300	4.3000	0.53	2.971	.003*
Item15	4.7700	4.1200	0.65	3.398	.001*
Item16	4.5100	3.7500	0.76	3.709	.000*
Item17	4.5500	3.7700	0.78	4.021	.000*
Item18	4.8600	3.9800	0.88	4.749	.000*
Item19	4.8600	4.0900	0.77	4.216	.000*
Item20	4.7700	4.0900	0.68	3.518	.001*
Item21	4.6800	3.7800	0.90	4.518	.000*
Item22	4.4200	3.6500	0.77	3.623	.000*

*p ≤ .05.

To identify the gap between the importance and preparation in skill areas, a t-test was conducted (see Table 5). The data analysis indicated that the mean value of identified gaps of the 22 skills, ranging from 0.56 to 1.02, was 0.80. The gap analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the extent to which the teachers perceived classroom assessment skills as important and the extent to which they were prepared during their pre-service assessment curriculum. For these 22 skills, the teachers were also "under-prepared" in all areas. That is to say, they rated the importance of these areas higher than their preparation (p < .05).

Table 5.

Gap Analysis of Teachers' Perception of the Importance of Assessment Skill Areas vs. Their Preparation by Pre-service Assessment Curriculum

| Variables | Skill Means | | | | |
	Importance	Preparation	Gap	t -Value	Sig.
Item23	4.9500	3.9700	0.98	5.018	.000*
Item24	4.9500	3.9700	0.98	5.018	.000*
Item25	4.6600	3.6400	1.02	5.252	.000*
Item26	4.7400	3.9700	0.77	3.711	.000*
Item27	4.5200	3.6500	0.87	4.037	.000*

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Variables	Skill Means				
	Importance	Preparation	Gap	t -Value	Sig.
Item28	4.6700	3.8700	0.80	4.295	.000*
Item29	4.2900	3.6900	0.60	3.238	.001*
Item30	4.6300	3.8400	0.79	4.459	.000*
Item31	4.7200	4.1100	0.61	3.114	.002*
Item32	4.5300	3.8400	0.69	3.294	.001*
Item33	4.5200	3.8200	0.70	3.368	.001*
Item34	4.4100	3.8500	0.56	2.797	.006*
Item35	4.5500	3.8000	0.75	3.785	.000*
Item36	4.5000	3.8500	0.65	3.151	.001*
Item37	4.4600	3.3700	0.98	5.018	.000*
Item38	4.5100	3.9500	0.98	5.018	.002*
Item39	4.6600	3.8100	1.02	5.252	.000*
Item40	4.5600	4.0400	0.77	3.711	.006*
Item41	4.7200	3.9500	0.87	4.037	.000*
Item42	4.8000	3.8700	0.80	4.295	.000*
Item43	4.7900	3.9200	0.60	3.238	.000*
Item44	4.3300	3.8200	0.79	4.459	.009*

*p ≤ .05.

As regards the second research question, the gap analysis generally showed a divergence between the perceived importance of all 44 knowledge and skill areas of assessment to Iranian EFL teachers' current classroom assessment and their level of preparation through their pre-service assessment curriculum. It is noteworthy that "under-preparation" involved both the knowledge and skill areas, with the gap mean of the skills (0.80) higher than that for the knowledge (0.74) areas. This can be interpreted as the teachers being more "under-prepared" in skills than in the knowledge areas.

Discussion

This study set out to empirically investigate the descriptive hierarchical distribution pattern of knowledge and skill areas in terms of their importance to EFL teachers' classroom assessment in Iranian public schools. It also examined the probable gap (i.e., under-preparedness or over-preparedness) between teachers' perception of the skills and knowledge important to their current classroom assessment at public schools and the preparation provided for them by the B.A. TEFL program in Iranian state universities.

The results showed that Iranian EFL public school teachers attached fairly high importance (M= 4.67 out of 6) to all knowledge and skill areas of AL to carry out classroom assessments. This can be indicative of teachers' awareness of the importance of LAL in which all knowledge and skill areas of assessment stages, including planning,

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implementation, monitoring, recording, and dissemination, play an instrumental role (Coombe et al., 2020; Firoozi et al., 2019; Pastore & Andrade, 2019) for teachers to develop and implement sound assessments in their classes.

Hierarchically ordered, the knowledge and skill areas of "assessing language skills and subskills", "using the best assessment method aligned with the goals of specific teaching method", and "aligning assessment methods with intended learning objectives" were conceived as the most important. On the other hand, the knowledge and skill areas related to "assessing thinking skills", "making the appropriate decision about the student's test results", and "knowledge of test washback" were perceived as the least important areas.

This finding can be considered as a reflection of the contents of conventional testing books of pre-service assessment curriculum (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 2004; Brown, 2008; Douglas, 2014; Fulcher, 2010; Henning, 2001; Weir, 2005) since in the domain of language assessment, teachers' impression about the function of testing books would be mainly confined to "assessing language skills and subskills". Therefore, teachers would be reasonably expected to attach the highest importance to the referred areas among all knowledge and skill areas of AL. Additionally, this result is consistent with Hasselgreen et al. (2004) and Henning (2001), who pointed out that the EFL teachers' AL revolves around teachers' knowledge to measure candidates' proficiency in language skills and subskills. But deciding which skills or subskills should be assessed is determined by the English curriculum of the intended educational context.

Every educational context, including public schools, adopts a specific curriculum that targets specific goals; the stakeholders (including learners and instructors) would be expected to follow the established curriculum. To implement a given curriculum, teachers – as the main curriculum agents – are required to adopt specific teaching approaches and methods. To verify the fulfillment status of the instructional objectives, teachers select their assessment approaches aligned with their teaching methods/ objectives; that is, as pinpointed by Janatifar and Mardani (2018), the assessment type is assigned by the educational objectives. It is for the same reason that teachers, in order to approach the targeted objectives, would give high importance to the knowledge and skills of "using the best assessment method aligned with the goals of specific teaching method" and "aligning assessment methods with intended learning objectives".

Likewise, Henning (2001) believes that selecting the assessment type to match the school curriculum and learning objectives means that the teachers must have

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instructionally traceable information about students' language learning. Along the same lines, Farhady et al. (2004) also concur that the classroom assessment aims to assess what is taught in the school curriculum, and the goals of this curriculum assign what to be assessed. To meet that requirement, teachers should be literate enough to know how to assess the school curriculum objectives.

A finding worthy of note in this study is the least importance the EFL teachers attached to "assessing thinking skills". This finding, together with the highest perceived significance placed on the language-related skills and knowledge reported above, suggests that the teachers deem language assessment in its limited sense to be their main assessment responsibility. A literature review (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2008; Fulcher, 2012; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Henning, 2001; Weir, 2005) suggests that these skills and their contribution to learning have not been adequately addressed. Given the recently growing significance of promoting and hence assessing thinking skills in all areas of education, this negligence of or inadequate attention to these skills is a cause of concern (Sultan, 2019). The present study concurs with Firoozi et al. (2019) in that Iranian EFL teachers need to develop knowledge and skills areas of assessing thinking skills.

Among the language assessment areas that the participants regarded as the least important were the interpretation of test results and test washback. This is while many assessment scholars   (e.g., Bachman & Palmer, 1996; Brown, 2008; Farhady et al., 2004; Fulcher & Davidson; 2007; Fulcher, 2012; Henning, 2001; Weir, 2005) have long emphasized the importance of correct interpretation of the test results to make meaningful decisions about the language learning. However, in the particular context of Iran, this study, similar to those carried out by Jafari (2012) and Razavipour and Rezagah (2018), implies that the Iranian EFL teachers' classroom assessment still involves assigning numerical values to the test results. More specifically, test results are conceived merely as raw grades of students' exams without any interpretation; subsequently, it is the same raw figures that teachers pass on to assessment stakeholders. What makes the situation even more inefficient is the fact that higher pass rates, with higher grades, are desired by Iranian assessment stakeholders, including school principals, students, and parents (Jafari, 2012). Moreover, in public schools in Iran, the same pass-failure ratio of the students based on their raw scores is used as a benchmark to judge teachers' literacy and efficacy. Therefore, not surprisingly, English teachers are likely to leniently give high

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grades regardless of the students' level of language proficiency (Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018).

The findings and reasons indicated in the above-mentioned studies (Jafari, 2012; Razavipour & Rezagah, 2018) can be helpful in understanding why the EFL teachers of Iranian public schools do not attach high importance to the knowledge of proper interpretation of test results, making an appropriate decision about the student's test results and washback effect. As such, initially, the pre-service English teacher education curriculum may require some revision to properly educate the would-be teachers on the significance of proper interpretation of test results in order for them to make appropriate decisions about students' learning and test washback. Further, as detailed above, the expectations and criteria of the real-world educational settings in Iran may require a shift of prioritization away from having the students' higher raw scores as their ultimate goals.

Based on a comparison of the importance teachers attached to knowledge and skill areas of assessment in classroom assessment, on the one hand, and the degree of preparedness they are supposed to have obtained for those areas via pre-service assessment curriculum. On the other hand, the results of the present study suggested that although Iranian EFL teachers of public schools relatively highlighted the importance of all areas, the pre-service assessment curriculum failed to provide them with the degree of knowledge and skill areas they require to properly tackle their role as assessors in classroom assessment tasks.

Well expectedly, as also pinpointed by Davidson (2007) and Fulcher (2012), the more important an activity is, the more it necessitates its executor to be prepared for its implementation. In the same vein, considering the criticality and significance of LAL, the teachers expected their pre-service assessment curriculum to prepare them well for their job as classroom assessors. Nevertheless, considering Iranian EFL teachers' negative attitudes towards their pre-service assessment curriculum, this study revealed the teachers' under-preparedness for language assessment in both knowledge and skill areas. Language teachers' dissatisfaction with the assessment education they received from the pre-service assessment curriculum has generally been echoed in multiple studies (e.g., Gok et al., 2012; Khanjani et al.,2016; Sayyadi, 2022; Shepard et al., 2018; Vogt & Tsagari, 2014). These studies pointed to the little or no education language teachers received through their pre-service assessment curriculum. As regards Iranian EFL teacher education, a recent study by (Ranjbari et al., 2020), however, demonstrated that the pre-service assessment curriculum was acceptably developed and assessed positively by the

teachers based on pedagogic and linguistic suitability, although some deficiencies in it need to be removed.

More specifically, the results of this study revealed that Iranian EFL teachers were more "under-prepared" in skills than in the knowledge areas. This is relatively consistent with the related literature (e.g., Davis et al., 2002; DeLuca et al., 2019; Firoozi et al., 2019; Gok et al., 2012; Herrera, 2015; Jannati, 2015; Khanjani et al., 2016; Mertler, 2003; Sayyadi, 2022; Shepard et al., 2018; Stiggins, 2002; Vogt &Tsagari, 2014), suggesting that there has been a gap between the teachers' training of assessment knowledge and skills in their pre-service education, in a way that they were more literate in assessment knowledge than in skills areas. Thus, the teachers were more "under-prepared" in assessment skill areas for classroom assessment. As pointed out by Ogan-Bekiroughlu and Suzuka (2014) and Shim (2009), language teachers are known to be more acquainted with the theoretical underpinnings of AL than assessment skills. The divide between knowledge and skills areas has long been lingering in education, hindering language teachers from translating theory into adequate practice. This was also documented in this study as far as classroom assessment of English is concerned in Iran. Overall, the gaps indicated in this study for the areas at stake in classroom assessment suggest that the teachers seem to be dissatisfied with the pre-service curriculum for falling short of adequately preparing them for classroom assessment. The inadequacy and ensuing dissatisfaction are more acute when it comes to assessment skills.

Conclusion

This quantitative gap analysis study was an attempt to explore Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions, as the best informants, of the importance of knowledge and skill areas of AL in language assessment at public schools and to see how well their pre-service assessment curriculum prepared them as classroom assessors. The results demonstrated that both knowledge and skill areas of AL, from the participants' views, are like two sides of the same coin and are both necessary components of language assessment.

In terms of hierarchical distribution of importance pattern, the findings also indicated that knowledge and skill areas related to "assessing language skills and subskills", "using the best assessment method aligned with the goals of specific teaching method"; and "aligning assessment methods with intended learning objectives" were attached the highest importance but the ones related to interpretation and communication of assessment results were seen as the least important areas.

As the participants' perception of the relatively high importance of all knowledge and skill areas did not match their pre-service preparation level, the findings showed that the teachers were "under-prepared" in all knowledge and skill areas for language assessment. Moreover, they were more "under-prepared" in skills than in the knowledge areas. This under-preparedness and imbalance in preparation and provision of assessment skills and knowledge areas, as perceived by the teachers, can be interpreted as the failure of the EFL pre-service curriculum in Iran to adequately prepare EFL teachers to take the role of classroom assessors, specifically in skill areas.

The identified gaps relating to Iranian EFL teachers' under-preparation in all assessment areas can raise the educational authorities' awareness about the deficiencies of the pre-service education in developing teachers' AL. They can also be a sound start for considering the EFL curriculum potentialities to be adjusted to the requirements of classroom assessment and enriching the current status of EFL assessment curricula in Iranian universities.

Preparing Iranian EFL teachers for classroom assessment is a joint educational endeavor that the teachers from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology should cooperatively get involved. Given the necessity to incorporate different knowledge and skills areas of language assessment in the pre-service assessment curriculum, both ministries should address the teachers' classroom assessment needs in public schools to bridge the gap between the knowledge and skills areas of language assessment and the actual classroom assessment preparation of the current teachers. It is imperative that Iranian universities update their curricula, resources, and instructional methodology to satisfy more adequate classroom assessment needs of prospective teachers. It is also suggested that the development of LAL be emphasized in pre-service education in EFL majors in order to support future teachers' dual role of teaching and assessing. The emphasis on pre-service education, however cannot play down the role and significance of in-service education supporting and complementing what teachers attain through the university curriculums.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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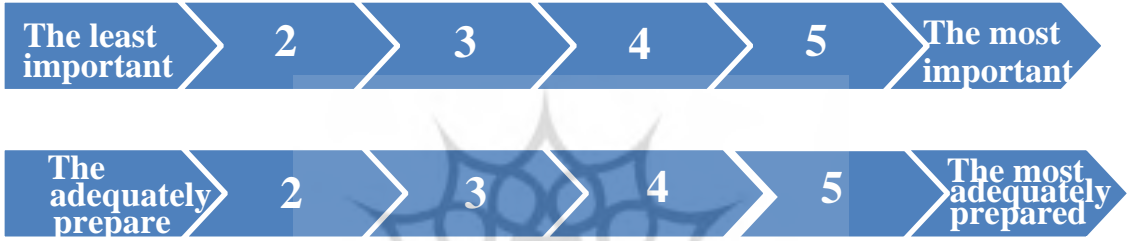|	Teaching English as a Second Language Quarterly (TESLQ) (Formerly Journal of Teaching Language Skills)	**79**
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Appendix: Semantic Differential Likert Scale

The assessment-related courses in TEFL B.A. program in Iranian universities

Dear respondent!

This scale was devised to evaluate the assessment-related courses at B.A level in the Iranian universities intended to prepare students of TEFL as future teachers. Your careful answers are appreciated and will be meaningful to the curriculum developers. The information will be kept <u>confidential</u> and will be used just for evaluation by the researcher. Please read each item carefully and select your response.

No	Knowledge /skill	Importance						Preparation					
		The significance of the following knowledge or skill areas needed for classroom assessment						The provided preparation of the following knowledge or skill areas delivered through your university curriculum for classroom assessment					
		1	2	3	4	5	6	1	2	3	4	5	6
1	The knowledge of different eras of testing (e.g. pre-scientific, scientific, modern, communicative, and innovative)												
2	The knowledge of what domain of language learning (e.g. thinking,												

	communicating, etc.) needs to be assessed in the context of class			
3	The knowledge of various purposes of classroom assessments (e.g. diagnosis, placement, etc.)			
4	The knowledge of advantages and limitations of different assessment methods			
5	The knowledge of self- and peer–assessment			
6	The knowledge of how to assess the learning of students with special needs (e.g. impaired or talented)			
7	The knowledge of essential criteria for a good classroom assessment (e.g. validity, reliability, practicality, washback, etc.)			
8	The knowledge of the assessment theories (e.g. classical true score, item response, and generalizability) as a guide to design and evaluate tests			
9	The knowledge of the test construction process, from defining the purpose through items writing to pre-assessment and item/test analysis			
1 0	The knowledge of test rubrics (e.g. test organization, instruction, time			

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	allotment, scoring method)
11	The knowledge of test specification (e.g. test purpose, definition of constructs, etc.)
12	The knowledge of how to test different language skills (e.g. listening, speaking, reading ,or writing)
13	The knowledge of how to test various language components (e.g. vocabulary, grammar, etc.)
14	The knowledge of advantages and limitations of different formats of test items (e.g. short answer tests, open-ended tests, etc.)
15	The knowledge of how to write test items (e.g. item wording, etc.)
16	The knowledge of how to analyze and interpret item characteristics (e.g. Item difficulty, discriminability, etc.)
17	The knowledge of the procedures of test administration (e.g. Preparing the environment, collecting materials, etc.)
18	The knowledge of external factors that might affect student's performance on a test (e.g. individual differentiations, anxiety, etc.)

19	The knowledge of ethics in classroom assessment (e.g. fairness, avoiding bias, etc.)
20	The knowledge of scoring procedures (e.g. subjective or objective) of language tests
21	The knowledge of how to report a student's test performance to relevant stakeholders (e.g. telling its purpose, student's weakness, and strength, etc.)
22	The knowledge of test washback (negative or positive test impact on stakeholders)
23	The skill of using the best assessment method aligned with the goals of specific teaching method
24	The skill of how to align assessment methods with intended learning objectives
25	The skill of how to involve students in cooperative assessment (e.g. self and peer assessment)
26	The skill to provide and implement appropriate accommodation to test the learning of students with special needs
27	The skill of going through the test development stages (e.g. setting clear and

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		unambiguous objectives, drawing up test specifications, etc.)
2 8	The skill of how to devise test rubrics (e.g. selecting process or product to be assessed performance, description of the assessing criteria, etc.)	
2 9	The skill of how to assess thinking skills (e.g. problem solving, decision making, etc.)	
3 0	The skill of developing different types of tests (e.g. subjective vs. objective, direct vs. indirect, discrete vs. integrative)	
3 1	The skill of developing formal and informal assessment methods (e.g. essay items, discussion, quiz, role play, etc.)	
3 2	The skill of how to avoid common problems at the item writing stage (e.g. mixed response, redundancy, etc.)	
3 3	The skill for assembling tests (e.g. organizing the test by item type, allowing sufficient spaces, etc.)	
3 4	The skill of how to reduce the sources of threat to test validity (e.g. invalid application of the test, inappropriate selection of content, etc.)	

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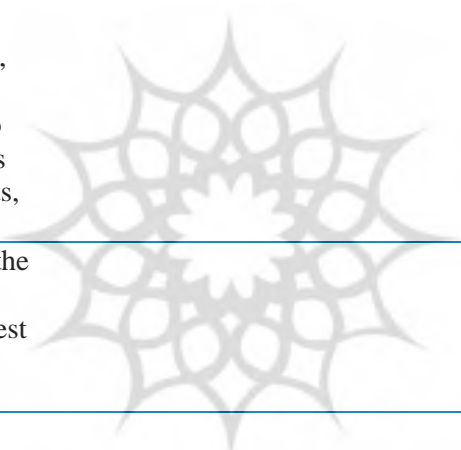|	
3 5	The skill of how to reduce the sources of threat to test reliability (e.g. fluctuation in the learner, in scoring, in test administration, etc.)
3 6	The skill of computing test reliability (e.g. test-retest, parallel forms, etc.)
3 7	The skill of how to improve the test quality (e.g. validity, reliability, practicality, impact, etc.)
3 8	The skill in administering the test economically by properly using available resources (e.g. human, material, etc.) so as not to overextend the school or institute
3 9	The skill to control the extraneous variables (e.g. anxiety, situational factors, etc.) that may affect the test performance
4 0	The skill of how to identify and eliminate the unethical practices in assessment (e.g. cheating, using assessment as a device to threaten and embarrass the student, etc.)
4 1	The skill to interpret test scores regarding specific framework (e.g. norm-referenced, criterion- referenced)

4 2	The skill of using statistics (e.g. inferential or descriptive) in scoring and interpreting students' test performance (e.g. percentile ranks, standard deviation, T score, etc.)
4 3	The skill to report in a clear, timely, accurate, and useful manner (for e.g. by anecdotal records, checklist, rating scales, rubrics, and portfolios) the assessment results to relevant stakeholders (e.g. students, parents, school)
4 4	The skill in making the appropriate decision about the student's test results in a given situation