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Demystifying Iranian EFL Teachers' Alternative Assessment Literacy Beliefs, Practices, and Challenges: A Mixed Methods Study

Mostafa Naraghizadeh [1], Faramarz Azizmalayeri [2]*, Hamid Reza Khalaji [3]

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Abstract

The present study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' alternative assessment literacy (AAL). The study employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design, including qualitative and quantitative approaches. To achieve more accurate results, the AAL inventory (Mertler & Campbell, 2005) and an interview with ten teachers (to explore their challenges) were used to collect the data. The study participants were 306 Iranian TEFL teachers teaching English in different language institutes in Tehran. The study results revealed that Iranian EFL teachers enjoyed moderate knowledge of AAL. Also, their beliefs in employing AAL standards in L2 classroom assessment and its related methods were valuable and appreciated presenting their awareness of the issue. In addition, they claimed to have used specific alternative assessment-related strategies and practices in the L2 classroom. The findings imply that EFL teachers' AAL is inadequate as they cannot perform well in practice, while theoretically, they are knowledgeable enough. Therefore, continuous in-service training programs on educational assessment and AAL should be considered to cater to teachers' assessment literacy problems in the Iranian context.

Keywords: alternative assessment literacy; Assessment literacy; Iranian EFL teachers; teachers' beliefs

1. Introduction

Teachers have tremendous effects on students' learning and achievement. As Darling-Hammond (2000) stated, the teacher is the most important factor affecting student learning. On the other hand, according to Eckhout et al. (2005), one of the main components of the learning process is classroom assessment in that "good teaching is impossible in the absence of good assessment (p. 3) because as Stiggins (1999) stated in the context of assessment literacy, the quality of instruction in any classroom turns on the quality of the assessments used there" (p. 20). Assessment literacy

[1] English language teaching department, Islamic Azad University, Malayer Branch, Malayer, Iran. Email: mostafanaraghizadeh@mail.com
[2] English language teaching department, Islamic Azad University, Malayer Branch, Malayer, Iran, Email: F_azizmalayeri@malayeriau.ac.ir
[3] English language teaching department, Islamic Azad University, Malayer Branch, Malayer, Iran. Email: hrkhalaji20@gmail.com

originated from Stiggins' (1991) work and refers to the variety of talents and skills that a number of benefiters need to cope with the new horizons of assessment (Rezagah, 2022; Stiggins, 1991).

Within the literature on second language assessment literacy (Scarino, 2013; Sharififar et al., 2018; Taylor, 2013), alternative assessment literacy (AAL) has emerged as teachers' familiarity with and application of alternative assessment can pave the way for the improvement of language knowledge of the L2 learners (Monib et al., 2020). AAL is an umbrella term to lump together any nontraditional or non-standardized assessment methods. Hence, alternative assessment has been interchangeably identified as authentic assessment, informal assessment, productive assessment, portfolio-based assessment, and performance-based assessment (Vidergor, 2015; Yusop et al., 2022). Alternative assessment methods include exhibitions, interviews, journals, teacher observation, oral presentations, portfolios, and projects (McMillan, 2018).

As Wang et al. (2008) declared, even though the advantages of assessment literacy and, more specifically, AAL, are known, many teachers lack assessment literacy and are not familiar with proper assessment practices. AAL is claimed to be the key to effective teaching (Popham, 2009; Schafer, 1993). By the same token, AAL is pivotal in how effective language teaching can be implemented and evaluated, especially so given the new perspectives on testing such as assessment for learning (Ghorbanpour et al., 2021; Mohammadkhah et al., 2022), assessment as learning (Taras, 2002), and dynamic assessment (Ashraf et al., 2016; Birjandi et al., 2013; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; Zarei & Rahmaty, 2021). However, the literature on AAL is still under-researched in many EFL contexts. The current study aims to extend this line of research by exploring Iranian EFL teachers' AAL using a mixed methods perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Language Assessment Literacy

One of the most challenging concerns in education has been learners' output assessment (Al-Malki & Weir, 2014; Boroughani et al., 2023; Trace, 2021; Xodabande & Boroughani, 2023). Moreover, teachers, as the main source of knowledge in the education system, should have the ability to share the results of classroom assessments with both learners and parents and make appropriate adjustments and revisions in their teaching ways to make their instruction more efficient (Bastian et al., 2016; Beziat & Coleman, 2015; Nazari & Xodabande, 2022). Teachers may also feel they need to be equipped with a sufficient assessment knowledge base, known as assessment literacy (Bustamante, 2022; Coombe et al., 2020; Mansouri et al., 2021; Sultana, 2019). In addition to developments in the areas of "literacy" and "assessment literacy", some developments have also taken place in language assessment literacy (LAL) (Farhady, 2019).

According to Purpura (2016), LAL is a systematic procedure in which data from tests and other language assessment tools are elicited to make inferences. Taylor (2009) also defined language assessment literacy as "the level of knowledge, skills, and understanding of assessment principles and practice that is increasingly required by other test stakeholder groups, depending on their needs and contexts" (p. 24). As Inbar-Lourie (2017) stated, LAL is broader than the concept

of assessment literacy because in language assessment literacy, we need to combine assessment literacy skills with language-related skills. According to Taylor (2009, 2013), language teachers need to be trained in testing and assessment to effectively select, administrate, interpret, and share the results obtained from implementing large-scale tests designed by testing organizations, as well as develop, score, and improve their classroom-based assessment.

Teachers' belief plays a striking role in the assessment process. As McMillan and Nash (2000) argue, teachers' beliefs and values are not related to their assessment practices in a direct manner. Others, like Semanišinová (2021) state that teachers' beliefs are an influencing factor regarding assessment. According to McMillan (2008), assessment practices vary while assessing students' abilities and learning. Studies have revealed that teachers possess distinct ideas and thoughts about assessment practices. In a study conducted by Brown et al. (2011) on 784 primary school teachers, the results showed that teachers are more advocates of formative assessment to improve teaching and learning outcomes. Similarly, Antoniou and James (2014) conducted a study using classroom observation, document analyses, and semi-structured interviews. They concluded that teachers believe more in formative assessment as a tool to enhance productive teaching and learning. In another study, Leighton and Gierl (2007) tried to investigate teachers' perceptions of assessment. Their results showed that the teachers were more interested in classroom assessment than those large-scale standardized tests. A related line of LAL research has been teachers' AAL.

2.2. Alternative Assessment Literacy

Richards and Schmidt (2010) defined alternative assessment as different methods of evaluation that are thought to be alternatives to or additions to typical standardized testing. Traditional assessment methods are not regarded to mirror real-world situations accurately and are not taught to gather crucial information regarding the test-taker's language proficiency. Self-assessment, peer evaluation, portfolios, learner diaries or journals, student-teacher conferences, interviews, and observation are all methods utilized in alternative assessment. Alternative assessment has been taken into consideration as a performance assessment. Therefore, assessing L2 development as both a process and a product has been attractive enough for the EFL /ESL researchers to follow (Atifnigar et al., 2020; Zakian et al., 2022). In addition, alternative assessment has shifted L2 evaluation from a product-oriented approach to a process-oriented view which tries to be less stressful and more productive (Bachman, 2013; Cui et al., 2022; Roslan et al., 2022).

AAL incorporates the information and abilities teachers need to (1) distinguish, select, or make assessment ideally intended for different purposes, for example, responsibility, instructional program assessment, learners development observing as well as advancement, and determination of explicit learners' needs (learning gaps), (2) examine, assess, and utilize the quantitative and subjective evidence produced by external summative and between time evaluations, classroom summative evaluations, and instructionally installed developmental assessment practices to settle on fitting choices to improve projects and explicit instructional ways to deal with advance learners learning (Mohammadkhah et al., 2022; Scarino, 2013). Hence, proper choices rely on a good comprehension of test quality considerations and similarity issues. In the same vein, Bachman

(2013) signifies the importance of AAL in L2 acquisition specifying it as one of the essential modules of teacher education, which later could account for at least one-third of the instructional time a teacher allocates to the teaching process.

When the argument of assessment literacy, specifically AAL, deals with assessing language skills, EFL/ESL teachers' literacy is likely less than comprehensive (Karaca & Uysal, 2021). The reason might lie that becoming more specific in this respect and dealing with the assessment of language skills such as reading, writing, or speaking requires a more atomistic and analytical view (Kim & Kim, 2021). Concerning assessing language skills, Shahzamani and Tahririan (2021) focused on medical ESP practitioners' reading comprehension assessment literacy and evaluated the perceptions and practices of the mentioned L2 learners. Similarly, Jalilzadeh and Dastgoshadeh (2011) investigated the role of alternative assessment techniques in improving Iranian EFL learners' speaking skills. They found alternative assessments effective in testing students' knowledge and helping them to be aware of their learning and monitor themselves continually. Also, Nezakatgoo (2011) found that portfolios, as a form of alternative assessment, can be a viable alternative in writing assessment. Some other studies have focused on the L2 writing assessment literacy of teachers (Bacha, 2001; Nemati et al., 2017; Valizadeh, 2019).

Although research on LAL has grown in the past decades, the scope of research on AAL is limited. It is significant to explore EFL' AAL because this exploration can extend our understanding of how teachers perceive and use alternative assessment in their classes, which ultimately helps language schools devise better professional development programs that expand on teachers' assessment literacy. Thus, the current study explored Iranian EFL teachers' AAL perceptions and practices by addressing the following questions:

1. What are Iranian EFL teachers' alternative assessment beliefs?
2. To what extent are Iranian EFL teachers' alternative assessment beliefs and practices related?
3. What are the main challenges of Iranian EFL teachers in alternative assessment?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design of the Study

The current study employed a sequential explanatory mixed methods design based on (Creswell & Clark, 2017), including both qualitative and quantitative approaches with respect to the data collection and data analysis phases of the study. A mixed-methods approach is one type of inquiry in which quantitative and qualitative approaches are merged in one study (Creswell & Clark, 2017; Hashemi & Babaii, 2013).

3.2. Participants

A total number of 315 Iranian EFL instructors teaching in private institutes in Tehran affiliated to Safir, the ILI, Milad, Marefat, and Kish, as educational centers, were randomly selected from among a total number of 900 EFL teachers (N=900) and requested to fill out the modified version of alternative assessment literacy inventory (Mertler & Campbell, 2005). The link to the

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inventory was sent to the participants via a locally popular social media platform (i.e., WhatsApp). Three hundred six of the participants mentioned above completed the questionnaire anonymously and returned them. Nine respondents who did not agree to cooperate dropped out. Table 1 displays the participant EFL teachers' background information.

Table 1
Teachers' Background Information (Percentages are in Parentheses)

Gender	Female	185 (60.5)
	Male	121 (39.5)
Degree	B.A.	54 (17.6)
	M.A.	183 (59.8)
	Ph.D.	69 (22.5)
Teaching Experience	0-3 years	62 (20.3)
	3-6 years	55 (18.0)
	6-10 years	96 (31.4)
	10 -16 years	47 (15.4)
	16 years above	45 (14.7)

In the qualitative phase of the study, which followed the quantitative phase, ten EFL instructors (5 males and five females) teaching at private language institutes also took part in the study. They were selected from the main study participants who had already completed the AAL questionnaire. In this respect, a criterion-based selection method, rather than a random one, was chosen as the sampling method for the interview phase. In this method, the researcher specified the criteria essential to the purposes of the task and sought participants fulfilling those specific attributes (Creswell & Clark, 2017). The criteria included: (1) being highly experienced in language assessment,(2) holding M.A. or PhD degrees in applied linguistics, and (3) having teaching experience of different levels and skills in private language institutes.

3.3. Instruments

To achieve more accurate results, two instruments were employed in the present study based on the theoretical principles of EFL teacher AAL in the literature. The instruments were Alternative Assessment Literacy Inventory (Mertler & Campbell, 2005) and a semi-structured interview with the teachers participating in the study. Regarding the quantitative part, the researcher used the Alternative Assessment Literacy Inventory (Mertler & Campbell, 2005) to survey Iranian EFL teachers' alternative assessment beliefs. This instrument originally included 13 items. After the process of expert judgment validity, due to the data analysis and cultural issues, and experts' views, it was used in the current study.

The scale, besides demographic questions, includes 13 items addressing the beliefs of EFL instructors about alternative assessment and seven items measuring their practices. The 13 items (9-21) included notions such as self-assessment, the role of assessment in L2 classes, teacher-made tests, and scoring of performing exams are among the main concepts addressed in this section of the inventory. Part two of the questionnaire, relying on seven items in its original form, dealt with EFL teachers' alternative assessment practices. Concepts such as scoring rubrics when grading learners' performances, using portfolios, and discussing with colleagues the result of the students' exams are among the notions focused on in this section of the questionnaire. The reliability of the questionnaire in this study was .84.

3.4. Procedures

After administering the alternative assessment literacy inventory and conducting data analysis, in the qualitative phase of the study, 10 EFL teachers were selected for an in-depth semi-structured interview (15-30 min). The interviewees were singled out based on criteria such as the results of the quantitative data analysis and data saturation notion in line with Bachman (2005), provided those selected instructors had given their consent for further cooperation. In order to develop the interview guide, the researcher carried out a thorough literature review to figure out the main components of alternative assessment literacy for which any English teacher in the Iranian EFL context should be prepared. Then, the researcher interviewed ten experts (EFL teachers in private language institutes) in the field to receive informed notions regarding the content of the alternative assessment literacy items to be used in an interview. Likewise, the available alternative assessment literacy inventory (Mertler & Campbell, 2005) was used to develop the interview items more meticulously. The questions for the interview were developed by the researcher and the items were reexamined by three language experts to ensure the appropriateness of content and language. Hence, expert judgment validity criteria confirmed the content and construct validity of the contents in the interview guide and construct validities (Creswell & Clark, 2017).

To ensure the reliability of the interview, the researcher, who played the role of the interviewer, relied on the measures of minimizing biases and limits that were likely to impact his decision-making (Dörnyei, 2007). In this respect, the researcher welcomed all the answers and views presented, did not push the interviewees toward his own beliefs and intentions, and provided them with freedom of speech (Creswell & Clark, 2017). This interview guide encompassed seven items focusing on the notions such as (1) factors felt significant in assessing EFL students' L2 performance, (2) alternative assessment techniques that are more applicable in L2 classes, (3) the way EFL instructors react to the EFL students' errors while performing tasks in the L2 classroom, (4) implementing alternative assessment knowledge in the L2 classroom, especially in the L2 productive courses, (5) considering psychological and sociocultural factors in the L2 classroom assessment, (6) considering unethical, ethical, and illegal practices in the classroom assessment, and (7) theoretical and practical needs for professional development in alternative assessment.

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3.5. Data analysis

According to Pallant (2016), descriptive statistics provides a simple overview of data, thus allowing the researcher to expand her/his overall understanding of the data set. Therefore, in the quantitative phase of the present study, to address the teachers' AAL, the mean, standard deviation, frequencies, and percentages of the questionnaire items pertained to every single component were calculated and reported. Likewise, a Pearson correlation was run between Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs in alternative assessment and their practices in an attempt to answer the second research question.

To answer the third research question of the study, a content analysis (Rourke & Anderson, 2004) of the interviews with EFL teachers was conducted. It should be noted that, firstly, all interviews were transcribed and summarized. Then, the data were analyzed and categorized based on open and axil coding systems. Such a categorization process led to identifying the predominant general patterns (open codes) and the specific issues in this respect (axial codes) presented by the instructors concerning their views and perceptions about AAL challenges.

4. Results

Table 2 displays the mean, standard deviation (SD), and frequencies and percentages for the 13 items related to the Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about alternative assessment. The highest percentage of agreement, i.e., 84.8% was on "Alternative assessment provides good feedback for language instruction", with a mean of 4.06, and 84.4 % on "Assessment plays an important role in L2 classes", with a mean of 4.03. These were followed by 79.4 % of EFL teachers who believed that "A portfolio is a good tool for assessing L2 learners' performance" with a mean of 3.98 and 68.3% of the EFL teachers who believed that "Self-assessment provides an accurate picture of students' language ability." with a mean of 3.68. The least agreement; i.e., 29.2 %, concerned "Teacher-made tests are better than large-scale standardized exams" with a mean of 2.80.

Table 2
Frequency and Percentages, Mean and Standard Deviation for Iranian EFL Teachers' Beliefs about Alternative Assessment (Percentage are in Parentheses)

	Disagree	Not sure	Agree	Mean	SD
1. Language performance of EFL learners can be assessed indirectly through multiple-choice questions.	132(41.9)	69(21.9)	114(36.2)	3.03	1.181
2. Scoring of students' performance is always subjective.	48(15.2)	72(22.9)	195(61.9)	3.61	.979
3. Alternative assessment provides good feedback for language instruction.	10(3.2)	39(12.4)	265(84.8)	4.06	.708
4. Productive skills are best assessed when integrated with other skills (receptive skills) like reading and listening.	76(24.1)	62(19.7)	177(56.2)	3.47	1.132

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5. Alternative assessment forms (open book exams, crib sheets, take home exams, collaborative testing, student portfolios, performance tests, retake policies, and replacing tests with summaries) are time consuming	61(19.4)	72(22.9)	182(57.8)	3.51	1.023
6. Teacher-made tests are better than large-scale standardized exams.	147(46.7)	76(24.1)	92(29.2)	2.80	1.200
7. A portfolio is a good tool for assessing L2 learners' performance.	16(5.1)	49(15.6)	250(79.4)	3.98	.810
8. Self-assessment provides an accurate picture of students' language abilities.	41(13)	59(18.7)	215(68.3)	3.68	.908
9. When scoring productive skills (speaking & writing), I believe content should receive more weight than accuracy (grammar).	86(27.3)	67(21.3)	162(51.4)	3.32	1.069
10. Assessment plays an important role in L2 classes.	15(4.8)	33(10.5)	267(84.4)	4.03	.779
11. It is difficult to work with other colleagues during the scoring of performance tests.	58(18.4)	72(22.9)	185(58.7)	3.54	1.010
12. In general, retake policies (providing students with the opportunity to repeat an exam) provide a good estimate of learners' language ability.	52(16.5)	82(26)	181(57.5)	3.44	1.034
13. My students usually do poorly on performing exams.	128(40.6)	52(16.5)	135(42.9)	3.11	1.129

In response to the second research question, Table 3 displays the Pearson correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs in alternative assessment and their practices in this respect. The results ($r (304) = .285$ representing a weak effect size, $p < .05$) indicated that there was a significant but weak correlation between Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs in the alternative assessment and their practices.

Table 3
Pearson Correlation between Belief and Practices

		Practice
Belief	Pearson Correlation	.285**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000
	N	315

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The third research question of the study explored the teachers' AAL challenges. Thematic analysis of the interviews through open coding showed that some themes existed for each question. Likewise, axial coding revealed that one could find some supporting notions for each theme. Hence, the themes and codes were extracted, and finally, descriptive statistics were used for an

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accurate and better interpretation of the obtained results. Table 4 below best shows the category of the main themes of the ideas, open coding (generally related views), and axial coding (specific issues) based on the teachers' interview data.

Table 4
Themes (Open Codes) and Axial Codes related to Teachers' Assessment Challenges

Open Codes (Themes)	Axial Codes	Frequency	Percent
1. Important factors in alternative assessment	1. Accuracy of what students present both in speaking and writing	6	%60
	2. Coherence and cohesion in the spoken and written forms	7	%70
	3. Making logical relations between sentences and paragraphs written	6	%60
	4. Relative mastery over the four skills	8	%80
	5. Ability in using L2 vocabulary effectively	7	%70
	6. Focusing on a good choice of grammar	6	%60
	7. Ability in using the mechanics of writing including syntactic and semantic issues	5	%50
2. Assessment techniques and methods	8. Looking at the student's past records and test scores to plan teaching and developing tests	8	%80
	9. Developing tasks based on the instructional materials.	7	%70
	10. Developing appropriate assessment methods such as oral and written exams in line with instructional objectives	5	%50
	11. Replacing tests with summaries	6	%60
	12. Using collaborative exams	3	%30
	13. Using peer correction	5	%50
	14. Encouraging self-correction	3	%30
3. Reacting to the EFL students' errors	15. Students' mistakes shouldn't be lionized.	5	%50
	16. Students shouldn't be demotivated by highlighting the number of mistakes and errors found in their performances.	4	%40
	17. Focusing on both direct and indirect corrective feedback is important.	3	%30
	18. Employing both oral and written corrective feedback is suggested.	4	%40
	19. Providing learners with both cognitive and emotional feedback types.	3	%30
	20. Interpreting the results of assessments in the class	4	%40
	21. Letting the students check their problems with the teacher and be fully informed of the nature of their scores	5	%50

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	22. Asking the students to present their ideas about the difficulty level of the exam, test, or task they have taken	5	%50
4. Implementing assessment knowledge	23. portfolio-assessment	4	%40
	24. Using teacher-assessment	4	%40
	25. Employing dynamic assessment	4	%40
	26. Using Peer assessment	5	%50
	27. Using task-based collaborative output activities	5	%50
	28. Using task-based instruction	4	%40
5. Considering psychological and sociocultural factors	29. Considering learners' fatigue in long and difficult exams,	3	%30
	30. Taking into account the state of children with special needs,	4	%40
	31. Paying attention to the learners with learning difficulties,	3	%30
	32. Taking learners' anxiety and stress in the exam session into account,	4	%40
	33. Focusing on students deprived of family support whether financially or emotionally.	5	%50
	34. Making the learners familiar with the final exam samples	5	%50
6. Recognizing Unethical or Illegal Practices	35. never letting students see the other students' graded tests	4	%40
	36. assessing learners based on the concepts covered in the lesson	4	%40
	37. recognizing unethical and illegal practices in assessment and not differentiating between the learners while assessing them	5	%50
	38. not announcing the scores in public unless they are high to encourage the learners	4	%40
	39. not belittling the weak students in front of their classmates	5	%50
	40. assessing the learners based on the concepts covered in the lesson	4	%40

5. Discussion

The concept of EFL teachers' AAL was investigated in this study by three questions (What are Iranian TEFL teachers' alternative assessment beliefs? To what extent are Iranian TEFL teachers' alternative assessment beliefs and their practices related? And what are the main challenges of Iranian EFL teachers in alternative assessment).

Findings of the first question revealed that Iranian EFL teachers mainly believe that alternative assessment provides good feedback for L2 instruction, assessment plays an important role in L2 classes, a portfolio is a good tool for alternative assessment, and self-assessment can be

a good technique for alternative assessment. The findings are in line with what White and Bruning (2005) found in terms of enhancing ESL learners' writing quality and their beliefs in alternative assessment, as well as the criteria based on which L2 learning would be assessed. As they proposed, implicit learning beliefs of the learners ensuing from the teachers' set criteria could affect the development of learning quality among ESL learners. This could energize the notion that the criteria used for alternative assessment may play the role of a feedback source (Atifnigar et al., 2020). Likewise, other studies have already signified that alternative assessment could provide proper feedback for L2 instruction (Barrot, 2016; Karaca & Uysal, 2021; Nemati et al., 2017; Sadeghi & Abdi, 2015). In this respect, Lee's (2007) study on the role of feedback in Hong Kong L2 writing classrooms could be considered an implication of teachers' beliefs manifested in the learners' performance.

The present study can take support from Muñoz et al's (2012) work on teachers' beliefs about assessment in the Colombian EFL context. His study results also indicated no significant difference between the beliefs of trained and untrained teachers in this respect, meaning that teachers with different abilities approved of using portfolios as an alternative assessment device in the language classroom. In addition, as Valizadeh (2019) probed, Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs about writing assessments represented portfolio as a prime instrument most teachers believe in. In the same vein and regarding the practices, analysis of questionnaire data revealed that Iranian EFL teachers claim to practice alternative assessment in terms of (1) using scoring rubrics when grading essays, (2) using portfolios in their classes, (3) discussing the result of their exams with a colleague, and (4) integrating productive skills (speaking and writing) with other skills when designing exams.

These findings are in line with similar studies conducted in different ESL/EFL contexts, including Brookhart (1993), who considered the significance of EFL teachers' familiarity with writing rubrics which could lead to a meaningful assessment of learners' performance. In addition, the present study findings can take support from Bol and Strage's (1996) study on the contradiction between teachers' instructional goals and their assessment practices which proved that most of what teachers do in the classroom would not follow what they propose when they are asked about their conducts in the classroom. In the present study, a high rank was given to assessment rubrics in the teachers' beliefs (84.4%) which is supported by their claims (78%), but it cannot be approved unless the real teachers' practices in the classroom could be observed.

In terms of the relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' beliefs in alternative assessment and their practices, the result of the Pearson correlation showed a significant but weak correlation in this respect. These findings align with Al-Azani's (2015) study on EFL teachers' views and practices in teaching and alternative assessment in Oman. The study mentioned above also revealed that such a correlation is weak, though teachers' beliefs and practices pertained to alternative assessment in some cases coordinate; most of the time, what teachers believe in and what they can do in the classroom or prefer to do are not alike. Likewise, the significant but weak correlation between L2 assessment beliefs and practices of the teachers in the present study can take support from Crusan et al. (2016) study in the Iranian context showing that most of the experienced teachers

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presented sophisticated beliefs which were rarely followed in practice. As Braden et al. (2005) found, effective professional development (PD) can be manifested in EFL teachers' practices. Hence, in line with Giraldo (2018), teachers' beliefs shape the core concept partially mirrored in the teachers' real practices.

It is argued that concordance between EFL teachers' beliefs in alternative assessment and their real practices is an ideal expectation. However, Hussain (2017) found a significant correlation between writing assessment literacy and classroom assessment practices of teacher trainers; However, "no significant relationship was found among teacher trainer AL knowledge, classroom assessment practices, and students' academic achievement" (p. 145). Based on some studies on teacher AAL (Rezagah, 2022; Scarino, 2013; Sharififar et al., 2018), connecting the ideal situation manifested in the perceptions and beliefs of the EFL teachers proposed and real practices either manifested in the learners' achievements or observed in the EFL classroom is not easily possible. It seems that most practitioners, teachers, or teachers are theoretically informed of some assessment ideals, representing their knowledge at the first level of Bloom's taxonomy of learning. Meanwhile, the educators as mentioned earlier are not well prepared when it comes to application or practice and innovation, which show higher cognitive abilities. The reason might lie in the expectations of the educational systems from teachers, the lack of real assessment practices of the teachers, and the unescapable interest of EFL teachers in testing rather than assessment and alternative assessment models (Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020).

The third question of the study explored the challenges of Iranian EFL teachers' literacy. The data analysis from the challenges showed that the teachers referred to various pedagogical, institutional, and sociocultural factors as principals to enacting AAL. Among different categories, the teachers were chiefly concerned with the students' skill-based competencies. This finding aligns with the body of knowledge on assessment literacy (Monib et al., 2020; Scarino, 2013; Taylor, 2013) in that skill-based measurement of literacy is one of the major challenges teachers face in developing their literacy skills. Moreover, the teachers' reference to broader sociocultural challenges reveals that they perceive literacy in general and assessment literacy in particular as connected to a wide range of socio-educational factors and not just pedagogical purposes.

Teacher educators could use this finding to run professional development courses that cover pedagogical and institutional dimensions and tap into sociocultural dimensions. In this regard, as the literature on assessment literacy (Coombe et al., 2020; Inbar-Lourie, 2017; Schafer, 1993) has shown, assessment literacy should move beyond just pedagogical purposes to include the range of cultural and social factors that define teachers' professional work. In this sense, it seems that the teachers participating in this study are well aware of the importance of such factors in their work. Thus, such factors could be effective alternatives for PD courses that explicitly enhance teachers' knowledge across various factors shaping their assessment literacy. This way, teachers can use their assessment literacy as a resource for developing their different needs and dealing with the challenges whose benefits can reach students and the school.

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6. Conclusion

The present study aimed to demystify AAL among EFL teachers in the Iranian context. The findings imply that EFL teachers' AAL on educational assessment is inadequate as they cannot perform well in practice, while theoretically, they are knowledgeable enough. Therefore, continuous in-service training programs on educational assessment and alternative assessment literacy should be considered to cater to problems of low levels of AAL. Although the EFL teachers with an EFL background in this study had taken courses in assessment and language testing in their undergraduate, graduate, and post-graduate studies, which are educational assessment courses, two or three courses in assessment and measurement are not sufficient to cover the necessary contents that EFL teachers need to know. Mertler and Campbell (2005) stated that educational measurement trends are changing toward assessment. The traditional focus of pre-service assessment courses has been more on standardized tests. Since EFL teachers deal with modern trends in the assessment such as competency-based assessment and performance assessment, the content of pre-service training and in-service training programs on educational assessment should focus more on alternative assessment and cover notions such as competency-based assessment and performance assessment.

Instead of traditional tests and testing services, English teachers could employ AAL in their classes to assess the learners' performances and facilitate learning for them. This way, a less stressful situation based on learners' performance in reading, writing, listening, and speaking will be created, and classroom interactions could be enriched. They would help subsequent EFL development of the learners. Materials developers in the EFL domain could also employ the findings of the present study and similar ones to present tasks in which learners' awareness toward learning is enhanced. Such tasks may help the learners achieve performance, self-correction, autonomy, and meaningful learning.

In terms of limitations and future research, further studies might consider examining the residual effects of in-service training and instruction of the EFL teachers in terms of alternative assessment to explore whether and how long-term these effects could be. A semi-longitudinal study of the concept of AAL on a specific group of teachers can reveal whether this theory energizes the retention of literacy principles and models in the teachers' mentality. In addition, the present study focused on the EFL teachers of private language institutes in the Iranian context with different experiences. Future studies may be needed to replicate the findings with general English university professors. Further research is also recommended to explore the role of AAL instruction in developing teachers' competency-based assessment and its relationship with teachers' autonomy, self-regulatory factors of teaching, and learner motivation.

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