



Language Assessment Practices of In-Service English Language Teachers at Pakistani Universities

Samar Kamal Fazli^{1*}, Dr. Muhammad Umer Azim², Muhammad Imtiaz Saeed³

Abstract

This research study explores the language assessment practices of teachers of English language courses taught at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities. The study aimed (1) to find which language skills and aspects are mostly assessed in practice; (2) to find the teachers' practices in using test items to assess English language; and (3) to see the types of assessment tools frequently used for language assessment by in-service Pakistani universities' teachers of English. Using convenient purposive sampling technique, the data was collected through a questionnaire with constructed response items from 104 in-service university teachers of English language courses. The frequencies of responses were calculated with the help of SPSS. The findings indicate that teachers assess writing skills more than other language skills through short-answer and long-answer questions. The findings also show that Pakistani teachers' assessment practices involve utilization of limited assessment techniques and test items that are mostly traditional in nature. Use of limited alternative assessment types is also noticed with projects and oral presentations as the most frequently used forms. Assessment of listening skills seems compromised in this scenario. There is a need to expand the scope of language teachers' assessment practices by utilizing the full range of assessment tools and techniques in assessing the language proficiency of the learners within the contemporary context of language use to make the language assessment process more reliable.

Keywords: Language Assessment Practices, Test Items, Alternative Assessment, English Language Assessment

1. Introduction

The practice of assessment is pivotal in the process of formal education and is essentially present at all levels in modern-day academia. Erwin (1991) reaches a comprehensive definition of assessment as a process including the practices of defining, selecting, designing, collecting, analyzing, interpreting, and using information to increase students' learning and development in the concept of assessment. Plenty of authors have written on language testing and assessment (Shohamy 1995; Brown & Hudson 1998; McNamara 2000; Weir & Weir 1993; Alderson et al., 1995). Researchers have established that teachers spend a considerable amount of time (almost 25 to 30 percent) assessing their students during their teaching career (Cheng 2001; Crooks, 1988). Teacher assessment knowledge and practices are considered as a critical factor for the success of teaching processes (Wang et al., 2008), quality of student learning (Ara & Saeed, 2022; DeLuca et al., 2010; Mertler, 2003; White, 2009), and student motivation (Alkharusi, 2013; Leung et al., 2018; Dorman & Knightley, 2006).

Assessment took a new turn and fascinated researchers when Stiggins (1991) suggested looking at it as a type of literacy. This concept was quickly picked by English language teachers and researchers, and Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) emerged as a specialized field of investigation involving empirical studies (Cheng et al., 2004; Inbar-Lourie, 2013; Vogt, Tsagari, & Spanoudis, 2020; Taylor, 2013; Harding & Kremmel, 2016). As a result of the attempts to reach a broad and grounded definition and framework for language assessment literacy, researchers started re-addressing the practices of language assessment under this umbrella term. Davies (2008) uses "skills + knowledge" construct for LAL where "Skills" is the applied competence in constructing and analyzing an assessment tool, whereas "knowledge" is "relevant background in measurement and language description" (Davies, 2008). So, the language assessment practices are now being studied and explored as a component of language assessment literacy.

An expanded scope of LAL is proposed by Scarino, (2013) that adds a teacher's beliefs, attitudes, contexts, theories and practices to testing as contributing factors to their overall LAL. Mostly, the LAL studies focused on language teachers as the main stakeholders of assessment process through the multidimensional perspectives of their knowledge levels, skills, practices, training needs, training courses and their effects on students' performance although many researchers included students, parents, institutions, and even countries as the stakeholders of LAL. Research on teachers' practices related to LAL is being carried out in the various regions across the globe where one can find English as the native language or a second language or a foreign language according to the circles that Kachru (1985) proposed.

Researchers have tried to investigate the assessment practices in vogue in language classrooms at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels in many countries. A rich array of dimensions has been explored. There are research studies that address the teachers' attitude towards formative and summative assessment techniques. Research on EFL/ESL teachers' language assessment practices reveal a complex landscape. Teachers employ various assessment methods, including traditional pen-and-paper tests, portfolios, and group discussions, though

^{1*} PhD Scholar, Riphah International University, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan, samarkamal@cuilahore.edu.pk

Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities, COMSATS University Islamabad, Lahore Campus, Lahore, Pakistan

² Assistant Professor of English, Higher Education Department Punjab, Pakistan

³ Lecturer, Riphah Institute of Language and Literature, Riphah International University, Lahore Campus Lahore, Pakistan

classroom observations indicate a predominance of conventional techniques like essays and multiple-choice questions (Asif & Naz, 2021). Assessment practices are influenced by teachers' experiences, intuition, and adherence to traditions rather than formal training (Işık, 2021). Studies highlight a gap between teachers' perceived assessment skills and actual practices, with many lacking proper pre-service and in-service assessment training (Işık, 2021; Farhady & Tavassoli, 2021). The purposes, methods, and procedures of assessment vary across different ESL/EFL contexts, reflecting the multifaceted roles of assessment in teaching and learning (Cheng et al., 2004). While teachers with higher language assessment knowledge tend to create more varied tests, research suggests no significant relationship between teachers' assessment knowledge and students' performance on achievement tests (Farhady & Tavassoli, 2021). It was found in Colombia that teachers resort to summative assessment practices more frequently as compared to the formative assessment due to their lack of awareness of the information various types of language assessments offer to the teachers as well as learners (Mendoza, 2009). It was also found that in countries like Bangladesh, teachers' inadequate academic and professional testing backgrounds can hinder their ability to perform assessment-related tasks effectively (Sultana, 2019).

Another dimension that caught the attention of the researchers is teachers' familiarity with and use of alternative assessment methods. Recent studies have explored teachers' assessment literacy and attitudes towards alternative assessment methods in English language education. Research indicates that teachers' use of alternative assessments and their assessment literacy correlate positively (Afsahri & Heidari Tabrizi, 2017). Teachers generally hold positive attitudes towards alternative assessment, though concerns exist regarding cheating, time requirements, and subjective marking (Denman & Al-Mahrooqi, 2018). Factors influencing assessment knowledge and practice include knowledge of alternative assessment, academic degree, and teaching experience (Soodmand Afshar & Farahani, 2018). However, many teachers still demonstrate only moderate levels of assessment literacy and prefer traditional evaluation methods over alternative approaches (Gaikwad et al., 2023). The studies highlight that language teachers need to be trained more in alternative practices of assessment to enhance and improve teaching and learning experiences in higher education.

The use of different formats of test items in designing assessment activities has also led the experts to establish the suitability of these formats. For example, multiple-choice items are used to measure readers' understanding, their word knowledge, and their knowledge of grammar because they afford quick and massive tests, which are easy to grade and easy to cover numerous socio-academic content areas. In fill-in-the-blanks items, accurate word knowledge and grammar are tested; these items are useful in contextualized assessment (Hughes, 2003). True/false statements are easy to mark and give scores and can easily be used to test simple yes or no knowledge in reading and listening comprehension (Brown, 2004). Matching items are suitable for assessing vocabulary, grammar and reading skills. They allow for estimating the connections between the knowledge points and are easy to score as well (Alderson, Clapham, & Wall, 1995). Cloze tests assess reading, contextual, and grammatical knowledge (Bachman, 1990). Transformation items probe grammar rules, and a learner's capacity to manipulate language (Hughes, 2003). Last of all, gap-filling exercises, which involve the vocabulary and grammar in context, are particularly useful for checking and confirming an individual knowledge of specific language points and collocations (Thornbury, 2002).

The assessment practices of teachers of English have been the object of research in Pakistan as well although their focus has been on tracing and exploring the need of formal training in language assessment. Research on assessment practices particularly in Pakistani education reveals a complex landscape. While formative assessment is recognized as valuable, many teachers still rely heavily on summative techniques (Shahzad et al., 2022; Saeed et al., 2018). Private institutions tend to employ more formative assessment methods compared to public ones, which focus more on summative approaches (Huma & Akhtar, 2021).

Teachers' beliefs and prior knowledge significantly influence their choice of assessment strategies, with both trained and untrained teachers showing similar beliefs about assessment (Martin Thomas, 2013). Studies indicate inadequacies in formative assessment practices among university teachers (Shahzad et al., 2022). However, there is a growing recognition that a combination of formative and summative assessment techniques can enhance student learning outcomes (Saeed et al., 2018).

According to Shahzadi & Ducasse (2022), university teachers in Pakistan lacked adequate training in language assessment literacy (LAL) which negatively impacted their assessment practices. Teachers' prior experiences as students and teachers influenced their assessment practices in the classroom.

Some studies have been conducted to see the difference in teachers' perceived competence in language assessment and their actual practices e.g., Öz and Atay (2017) with the conclusion that differences lie therein. Their findings revealed that teachers had discrepancies in their perception and practice of assessment knowledge in real situations. Despite the fact that teachers considered assessment significant, and they were able to identify some best practices and principles in assessment too, they were observed to be practicing without principles. Thus, they do demonstrate some knowledge but what their practice revealed raises questions. A good number of recent qualitative studies in EFL contexts reported that teachers' assessment practices were mainly grounded in past experiences in both capacities as students and trainers as they were deficient in qualification and/or training in assessment. Most of them expressed the need for assessment training (Berry et al., 2019).

There are challenges inherent in education and assessment systems of certain countries that hamper the actual application and use of the elements of language assessment knowledge. Ashraf & Zaki (2020) found that language teachers in higher education in Pakistan face multiple challenges in language assessment, including limited assessment literacy, large class sizes, and students' weak language proficiency. These challenges lead to restricted assessment practices that focus primarily on reading and writing skills, while neglecting listening and speaking skills. The assessment practices are also misaligned with the curriculum and teaching practices, leading to a disconnect between instruction and assessment.

Mahmood et al., (2021) investigated the level of awareness among schoolteachers of English language about assessing reading skills. The teachers exhibited a satisfactory performance on the scale they used. However, teachers serving in private institutes possessed a comparatively better awareness level than the public teachers.

Practice of assessment has gone through shifts with the passage of time. Magno & Ouano (2010) have developed a comparison of old and contemporary assessment practices. The old practice of assessment means assessment by paper and pencil, one-right-answer paper mostly administered as a set of tasks after completion of the course. The modern approaches in assessment seek other modes because some skills are better measured through assessing performance like presentations, interactive tasks, and demonstrations. Current practices invite students to make self-assessment. People now agree that an assessment takes place during achievement of learning objectives in addition to the end of learning process. There is also transition towards the assessment items that are even more contextualized and practical in use. Instead of assessing learners on defining different forms of lexical items, they are asked to develop and present an oral/written assignment on the things they like most.

More work is required to see in detail the assessment practices carried out by the large pool of teachers in tertiary education in Pakistan. As the part of an attempt to frame a large picture of language assessment literacy knowledge, skills, and practices of Pakistani English language teachers at tertiary level, the present study gathers data on teachers' knowledge about assessment and their practices related to the choice of different types of language assessment and test items in the context of compulsory English language courses taught at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities.

1.1. Research Objective

This research was carried out with the objective to explore major trends of assessment practices in using assessment tasks and techniques to assess the learners of the courses of English language taught at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities by in-service teachers of English language.

1.2. Research Questions

The objective of the study led to the following research questions:

1. Which language skills and aspects are assessed in practice by in-service Pakistani universities' teachers of English at undergraduate level?
2. What are the practices of teachers in using test items to assess their students of English language courses at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities?
3. Which types of assessment tools are frequently used for language assessment by in-service Pakistani universities' teachers of English?

2. Methodology

The present study follows the quantitative research design based on a questionnaire that was filled by 104 teachers of English language courses taught in Pakistani universities.

2.1. Participants

In-service English language teachers who teach English language courses that relate to EAP at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities were the population for this study. Data was collected through convenient purposive sampling. For this quantitative study, data was collected from 104 teacher participants. These teachers represented 31 universities (operating in public as well as private sectors) located in major cities in Pakistan including Lahore, Faisalabad, Multan, Dera Gazi Khan, Mianwali, Bahawalpur, Loralai, and Karachi in addition to the universities located in the capital territory of Islamabad.

2.2. Instrument

To seek answers to our research questions, a constructed response questionnaire was designed for circulation as Google Forms. It was shared to the respondents with the help of an online link through different platforms including e-mails, WhatsApp and Facebook groups. The conceptual frameworks of LAL given by Fulcher (2012) and TALiP presented by Xu & Brown (2016) were used to prepare the questionnaire with a purpose to frame a bigger picture of language assessment literacy knowledge, skills, and practices of Pakistani teachers of English serving in universities. The relevant survey items were borrowed from four sources and were re-worded for the purpose of the study. Dörnyei (2003) endorses the idea of using items from already established scales as a reliable source to develop questions for data collection.

After necessary adaptation of items, a self-reporting questionnaire on the perceived LAL of in-service university teachers was developed containing 49 assessment knowledge and practice items in addition to personal information items to collect the relevant data. The questionnaire had multiple choice structured responses. Section

1 of the questionnaire recorded demographic details about teachers' gender, age, professional affiliation, academic qualification, and teaching and assessment experience. The rest of the questionnaire included 49 self-response items on the 9 identified features that construct Language Assessment literacy of a teacher. These items included, inter alia, sixteen questions on knowledge and practices of the teachers related to using forms of assessment, using different task types, and choosing language skills and aspects for assessment. The present study uses these 16 items that were related to its research questions. These items were designed with a four-point Likert scale response option. Normally, a five-point Likert scale is used by most of the researchers; however, there are many researchers who find the "neutral/ average/can't say" option as misleading to answer and problematic for data interpretation. Therefore, the researchers opted for a 4-point scale.

Ten in-service teachers including one associate professor and nine assistant professors having doctorate degree in linguistics with a considerable experience in teaching and assessing English language and mentoring research studies were consulted to review the questionnaire for content and face validity. The changes in statements and formats of certain questions were made as suggested by two of them.

The reliability coefficient of the questionnaire was calculated through SPSS version 27. The value of Cronbach's Alpha was .889 for the questionnaire which means the scale was reliable.

2.3. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	No. of Items
.889	49

2.4. Data Analysis

SPSS version 27 was used to calculate frequencies of the responses. A descriptive statistical analysis was done to record the findings.

2.4.1. Demographic Details

Section 1 of the questionnaire collected demographic information of the respondents. The details are shared in table 1.

Table 1: Demographic details of the respondents

Sample characteristics	Options	Frequency	Percentage
Gender:	Male	37	35.6%
	Female	67	64.4%
Age:	21-25	5	4.8%
	26-30	24	23.1%
	31-35	24	23.1%
	36-40	26	25.0%
	41-45	21	20.2%
Academic Qualification:	46-50	4	3.8%
	MA/M Sc English	5	4.8%
	MPhil/MS English	72	69.2%
	PhD English	27	26.0%
Experience (in years):	1 – 5	31	29.8%
	6 – 10	32	30.8%
	11 –15	20	19.2%
	16 –20	10	9.6%
	More than 20	11	10.6%

As shown in table 1, 65% of respondents were females and 35 % were males. 25% of the respondents fell in the 36 to 40 age range; 23% of all respondents were in the 26-30 and 23% in 31-40 age ranges, whereas 20% fell in 41-50 age group. In addition to this, a fraction of respondents, i.e., 4.8% lay in the smallest age range of 21-25 years and another small fraction of 3.8% lay in highest age range of 46-50 years.

About 26% of the sample held a doctorate as their highest qualification and more than 69% held an MPhil degree. The respondents of the survey were the faculty members serving in universities which require 18 years of education (MPhil/MS in English) as the minimum eligibility criterion for teaching assignments. However, in case of a foreign MA/MSc (master level) degree, the applicant's education level is considered equivalent to 18 years of qualification in Pakistan. Therefore, it is not surprising to have 5 teacher participants of the study serving in universities with an MA/MSc. qualification.

3. Findings

The results are presented through a question-wise analysis of the research data.

RQ 1: Which language skills and aspects are assessed in practice by the in-service Pakistani universities' teachers of English at undergraduate level?

The respondents were asked to select the language skills and aspects that they mostly assess in the compulsory courses of English language. They were presented with seven options to select from. Each respondent could select more than one option. The results are displayed in table 2 below.

Table 2: Language skills formally assessed by teachers of English

Responses	N	Percentage
Listening skills	49	47.1
Speaking skills	64	61.5
Reading skills	59	56.7
Writing skills	72	69.2
Grammar and vocabulary	65	62.5
Integrated language skills	68	65.4
Cultural aspects	24	23.1

The respondents had to choose the skill(s) and/or aspect(s) of language for assessment that they used in their classes of English language courses. Most of the respondents selected more than one options. The findings indicate that writing skill is the most assessed language aspect by 72 responding teachers (69.2%). The cultural aspect was the least assessed component i.e., by 24 (23.1%) respondents. This might be because English is not first language in Pakistan, so the teachers might not consider culture as the aspect that should be linked with language assessment. Integrated language skills (the use of multiple language skills and aspects in real life situations) is the second most assessed aspect (65%) in the language courses. It is worth mentioning here that some of the respondents verbally expressed their varied interpretations of the aspect of integrated language skills. Consequently, the scores of this aspect are difficult to interpret for a definite explanation. This aspect needs to be explored further through triangulation of research methods like participants' interviews or analysis of their question papers.

Another significant finding was the assessment of speaking skills that is as high as 61%. This needs to be seen with role-playing and presentation as the types of assessment tools used by the teachers; of which, role playing received lesser score as a practice used by the teachers as compared to the presentations, according to this study. Frequencies of practicing both types of alternative assessment are given in the results of research question 3 of this study.

RQ 2: What are the practices of teachers in using test items to assess their students of English language courses at undergraduate level in Pakistani universities?

After a thorough review of literature on language test item types, nine most effective types were selected to measure the frequency of use by the teachers through four options. The results are displayed in table 3.

Table 3: Assessment task types used by English language teachers

Usage	Items								
	MCQs	Cloze -test	Long answers	Fill in the blank s	Matchin g items	Sentenc e building	Sentence transformatio n	Short answer s	True/Fals e
Never	6	16	0	20	26	9	13	2	27
Sometime s	38	54	29	48	53	39	43	31	43
Usually	38	25	48	32	22	47	38	48	27
Always	22	9	27	4	3	9	10	23	7

The nine types of test items that are mostly used in language proficiency assessments included MCQs, cloze test, long answers, fill in the blank questions, sentence completion, sentence transformation, matching items, true/false items, and short answers tasks. The highest count of item type that is always used was for long answers (essay type questions) that is 27 means 26%; whereas short answers item type is used 'always' by 23 respondents which is 22.1%. Both types of test items are used 'usually' by a majority 48 each. So, the test items which are mostly chosen by the teachers are long answers, short answers, MCQs, and sentence building; whereas, cloze test, matching items and fill in the blanks are least used types of test items. Considering the results to this question indicate that teachers like to assess high order skills in writing through short-answer and long-answer questions at undergraduate level. This interpretation is in line with Weir, (1993) and Heaton, (1990). Short answer questions enable the teacher to evaluate the student's recall and comprehension of a topic and ability to write coherent sentences (Weir, 1993). Considering the results of Heaton, (1990) essay questions test writing skill, coherence, grammar and fluency of the language as well as the range of vocabulary while proffering a comprehensive analysis of the thinking and writing skills at advanced level.

RQ 3: Which types of assessment tools are frequently used for language assessment by in-service Pakistani universities' teachers of English?

This question was investigated through a construct of six items, each with four options to choose from. Six most popular tools of alternative assessment were selected to measure the frequency of use by the respondents. Table 4 showcases the results.

Table 4: Alternative assessment tools used

Usage	Items					
	Peer-assessment	Portfolios or e-portfolios	Presentations	Projects	Roleplaying	Self-assessment by students
Never	11	22	13	6	10	8
Sometimes	53	47	1	31	51	53
Usually	35	31	52	40	28	29
Always	5	3	38	27	15	14

All the items in this table relate to the alternative assessment. The table suggests that presentations and projects are most frequently used forms of language assessment, whereas peer-assessment, role playing, and self-assessment by the students are least frequently used by the Pakistani university teachers of English language.

4. Discussion

The study was designed to explore the trends in language assessment practices exhibited by the in-service teachers of English in Pakistani universities. Although some researchers have tried to measure the perceived level of language assessment literacy of Pakistani teachers focusing on their training needs in LAL, only the present study so far has tried to explore the choices and practices opted and utilized by Pakistani university teachers to assess the language learners. Interpreting the findings of the study on the comparison of old and contemporary assessment practices developed by Magno & Ouano (2010), Pakistani teachers show a tilt to rather old practices of assessment though some of them show inclination to modern trends as well.

Pakistani teachers of English language courses at undergraduate level need to make informed choices of various task types that fit for assessing a certain manifestation and use of language. Moreover, they can also benefit from understanding and applying various types of alternative assessment tools that are contemporarily used in the developed world to make a more efficient, fair and valid assessment of students' language proficiency. For instance, portfolios evaluate writing ability and foster metacognition; they illustrate a student's development of various language abilities across time (Genesee & Upshur, 1996). Engaging a student in self-assessment strengthens the learner's metacognition skills as well enhances learner autonomy (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). Peer assessment fosters self and peer evaluation, cultivates critical thinking and hones skills in the process of peer learning as well as in the virtue of assessing others, thus offers a range of perspectives (Topping, 2009). Projects facilitate mastery and development of ideas that includes reading, writing, speaking and listening (Fried-Booth, 2002). It is revealed that presentations foster the aspect of public speaking skills and enhance the way that information is disseminated and presented (King, 2002). The same way, Livingstone (1983) noted that role-plays are helpful in giving realistic practice in using language in various domains, thus boosting creativity and engagement.

Same holds true for the use of various formats of test items that include multiple-choice questions, fill-in-the-blanks items, True/false statements, Matching items, Cloze tests (Hughes, 2003; Brown, 2004; Alderson, Clapham, & Wall, 1995; Bachman, 1990) for their effectiveness in assessing different aspects of language use.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the quantitative data leads to the conclusion that Pakistani teachers' assessment practices involve utilization of limited types of assessment techniques and test items that are mostly related with assessing writing skills. There is indication of use of alternative assessment types as well. Given the nature of exams (both mid-term exams i.e., formative and final exams i.e., summative assessment), writing is the skill that is the focus of assessment. A teacher can at best evaluate writing and reading skills along with grammar and vocabulary through the written exams format. However, formative assessment through alternative assessment techniques makes it possible for the teacher to assess speaking and listening skills of the learners. Projects and oral presentations emerged as most frequently used out of nine tools which again come with their strengths for writing and speaking options, however assessment of listening skills seems compromised in this scenario. There is a need to expand the use of role playing and self and peer assessment to make assessment process all encompassing to determine a real level of language proficiency of the learners within the contemporary context of language use.

English language teachers in Pakistan, in addition to traditional pen-and-paper writing assessment of language, need to learn and practice the variety of contemporary assessment options that are instrumental in improving the language proficiency of Pakistani learners to bring them at par with the international community in this global village.

Further study is needed to verify the teachers' reported assessment practices especially related to the use of forms of alternative assessment and choice of test items during the given semester of study. Moreover, it will also be

insightful to explore if a more conventional impressionistic marking or the contemporary analytic marking trend is followed by the teachers in awarding grades to learners of English at tertiary level.

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