ASSESSMENT AND GRADING PRACTICES OF EFL TEACHERS IN TURKEY

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Abstract

It is generally stated that assessment and grading are essential aspects of effective teaching. The purpose of this investigation is to describe actual classroom assessment and grading practices of EFL teachers teaching in different levels; namely, primary school, secondary school, high school, and university and also to understand whether they are aware of alternative assessment methods and if they are aware, how often they actually use them in the classroom. The participants of this study consist of 25 EFL teachers from Turkish state schools and the data were collected by means of a questionnaire adapted from McMillan (2001). The findings of the study suggest that the participants are well-aware of alternative assessment methods and they mostly believe in their usefulness; however, they do not use them in their classes as they think their classrooms are too crowded and the number of English course hours is not sufficient for it.

Keywords: alternative assessment, assessment, EFL teachers

INTRODUCTION

Teachers are expected to assess their students’ performance in different ways regardless of the subject and level they are teaching. Research shows that teachers spend at least one-third of their instructional time on assessment-related activities (Stiggins, 1991; Quitter, 1999; Mertler, 2003; Bachman, 2014). For this reason, there is an undeniable link between the quality of assessment used in the classroom and the data were collected by means of a questionnaire adapted from McMillan (2001). The findings of the study suggest that the participants are well-aware of alternative assessment methods and they mostly believe in their usefulness; however, they do not use them in their classes as they think their classrooms are too crowded and the number of English course hours is not sufficient for it.

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learning, and affecting the development of enduring learning strategies and skills (cited in Tao, 2014).

The terms ‘assessment’, ‘testing’ and ‘evaluation’ are used in the literature interchangeably in spite of the differences in their meanings. The term ‘assessment’ refers to the process of gathering and organising evidence of student learning for making inferences about teaching and learning activities (Lamprianou & Athanasou, 2009; Chappuis, Stiggins, Chappuis, & Arter, 2012; Russell & Arians, 2012; McMillan, 2014; Popham, 2014). Testing, on the other hand, aims to determine the worth of an individual’s effort with the help of some questions to be administered during a specific period of time (Griffin & Nix, 1991; Miller et al., 2013). Evaluation includes making judgments about the worth of an individual or a thing (Griffin & Nix, 1991). In spite of these meaning differences, they are used interchangeably in the related literature.

The question of whether to use traditional or alternative assessment or to use them together is an issue that is still debated. Traditional tests are the most common means of testing, evaluating or assessing someone’s performance. With the emergence of the constructivist assessment paradigm, teacher and student roles have been redefined (Anderson, 1998) and the term alternative assessment started to appear. According to Gronlund (1998), alternative assessment refers to assessment methods that provide an alternative to the traditional paper-and-pencil tests. McNamara (2001, p.239) defines alternative assessment as a movement “away from the use of standardized multiple choice tests in favor of more complex performance based assessments’. In this sense, Tao (2014, p.32) makes the following categorization of the main types of assessment methods:

### Traditional/Objective Assessment

- **Selected-response assessments include:**
  - True-false items
  - Matching items
  - Multiple-choice items

- **Constructed-response assessments include:**
  - Gap-filling items
  - Short answer items

### Innovative/Alternative Assessment

- **Authentic assessments include:**
  - Performance-based assessments
  - Self- and peer assessments
  - Portfolio assessments

When these two types of assessment are compared and contrasted, alternative assessment methods are generally favoured as they assess higher-order thinking skills and they focus on the growth and the performance of the students (Dikli, 2003).

**ASSESSMENT IN THE ELT CURRICULUM OF THE MINISTRY OF NATIONAL EDUCATION (MEB)**

As the ELT Program adopts the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), alternative assessment methods suggested by CEFR, particularly self-assessment, are the emphasized in the 2nd-8th grade English Curriculum. When it comes to 9th-12th ELT curriculum, a mixture of traditional, alternative and electronic assessment types is the main principle of the assessment component of the program. In the *English Language Curriculum for Primary Education* (2006), it is stated that

“...What is more, the pedagogical functions of the ELP– making the language learning process more transparent to learners, helping them to develop their capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and thus enabling them gradually to assume more and more responsibility for their own learning – coincides with the emphasis on learning how to
learn and developing critical thinking skills that are found in contemporary language teaching approaches and methods... (p.23)

As creating a productive, communicative and dynamic learning environment is an important aim in the ELT program, assessment methods and techniques that will support such an environment is considered to be a necessity. However, whether there is match between what the program suggests and what teachers actually do in the classroom in terms of assessment is still an important question to ask and this question is the major impetus behind this study.

THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to describe the classroom assessment and grading practices of EFL teachers teaching in different levels; namely, primary school, secondary school, high school, and university and also to understand whether they are aware of alternative assessment methods and if they are aware, how often they actually use them in the classroom. The participants of this study consist of 25 EFL teachers from Turkish state schools and the data were collected by means of a questionnaire adapted from McMillan (2001). Different state schools in Kocaeli were visited by the researchers and the participants filled out the questionnaires. The distribution of the participants is given in Table 1 below:

Table 1. The distribution of the participants based on their gender and the levels they are teaching

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary school</th>
<th>Secondary school</th>
<th>High school</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of the participants in this study are female teachers of English (N=23). One of the male participants is a teacher at a primary school while the other male participant works at a high school. Out of 23 female participants, 12 of them work at different secondary schools, 7 of them are primary school teachers, 3 of them are university instructors and 1 of them is a high school teacher. Table 2 below displays the mean and standard deviation scores related to the participants’ age, experience, work load and the number of students the participants teach.

Table 2. The mean and standard deviation scores based on the participants’ age, experience, work load and the number of students they teach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>x</th>
<th>Std. Dev.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>6.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work load</td>
<td>26.6</td>
<td>5.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The number of students</td>
<td>27.5</td>
<td>9.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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As can be seen in Table 2 above, the mean score of the participants’ age is 33. The most striking number based on the participants is the average work load they have, which is 26.6 course hours.

The Instrument

The data of this study were collected through a questionnaire including scaled items adapted from Tao (2014) and some open ended questions to gather data about teachers’ self-reported literacy level related to ‘alternative assessment’.

Research Questions

This study aims the answer the following research questions:

1. What are the teachers’ opinions about the usefulness of alternative assessment methods and traditional assessment methods?
2. What assessment methods do EFL teachers in Kocaeli use?
3. What are the reasons behind the teachers’ assessment method preferences?

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigated the assessment and grading practices of EFL teachers working at different levels; namely, primary school level, secondary school level, high school level and university level. This study led to the following results:

Table 3. Participant teachers’ opinions about the usefulness of alternative assessment methods and their use frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Types (Alternative)</th>
<th>Perceived Usefulness</th>
<th>Use Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-assessment (students’ work being assessed by themselves)</td>
<td>69 %</td>
<td>52 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peer assessment (students’ work being assessed by their classmates)</td>
<td>69 %</td>
<td>51 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portfolio (a collection of students’ work being assessed by teachers at the end of the year)</td>
<td>83 %</td>
<td>57 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual assignment/project work</td>
<td>83 %</td>
<td>77 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflective journal</td>
<td>60 %</td>
<td>46 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oral presentation</td>
<td>77 %</td>
<td>65 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual conference (a face-to-face discussion about a particular piece of student’s work with the teacher)</td>
<td>76 %</td>
<td>64 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As illustrated in Table 3 above, individual assignment/project work and portfolio are perceived to be the most useful with the percentage of 83 % but reflective journal is considered to be the least useful with the percentage of 60 % among the alternative assessment methods. When it comes to the frequency of use, individual assignment/project work is the most commonly used method (77 %) whereas reflective journal is the least commonly used method (46 %) among all the alternative assessment methods listed above.
Table 4. Participant teachers’ opinions about the usefulness of alternative assessment methods and their use frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Types (Traditional)</th>
<th>Perceived Usefulness</th>
<th>Use Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Discrete point items (multiple choice, sentence completion, true-false, cloze test)</td>
<td>74 %</td>
<td>87 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown in Table 4 above, 74 % of the participant teachers believe that traditional assessment types are useful and 87 % of them use it frequently.

Table 5. The comparison of alternative and traditional assessment methods in terms of their perceived usefulness and use frequency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment types (alternative vs. traditional)</th>
<th>Perceived Usefulness</th>
<th>Use Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alternative methods</td>
<td>76 %</td>
<td>63 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional methods</td>
<td>74 %</td>
<td>87 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When these two different assessment methods were compared and contrasted in terms of their perceived usefulness and use frequency, the participant teachers in this study think that alternative assessment methods are useful but they do not use them in their classrooms very often.

In the second part of the questionnaire, the participant teachers stated their opinions about the alternative assessment methods and they mainly tried to explain why they were reluctant to use them in their classrooms. The following are some example reasons for teachers’ reluctance of using them in their classrooms:

Teacher A: “I want to benefit from the methods of alternative assessment AA in my teaching, however the classes are super-crowded I have only 3 hours of English lessons for each week. This means I don’t have time to deal with students privately.”

Teacher B: “Yes, I know AA but I cannot say that I benefit from the methods of AA, because the population of our classes are so high. Also AA focuses on communication not on multiple choice or right-wrong answers. It deals with students’ self development. We have three hours for each lesson and time is not enough to control each student.

When the opinions of these two teachers are taken into consideration, it is possible to say that participant teachers mainly complain about the crowdedness of their classrooms and they state it as the main reason why they are not willing to benefit from alternative assessment methods in their classrooms. Another important reason behind their reluctance to use alternative assessment methods is that insufficiency of English course hours. They believe that having the English course for 3 hours weekly will not make it easy for them to follow each student’s development individually.

Up to now, teachers’ assessment and grading practices have been investigated in different settings and from a variety of perspectives. In an early study by Gulickson (1985), which included 150 randomly selected teachers, teachers teaching different subjects used essay tests and student papers as well as despite their preference for objective teacher-made assessments. Marso and Pigge (1993) reviewed a number of assessment-related studies and found out that teachers primarily made use of self-constructed assessment types but they benefitted from many different item types. Brookhart (1994) reviewed 19 studies on
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teachers’ grading practices. The findings of his study revealed that pen-and-paper achievement tests are the most common type teachers prefer and teachers’ grading practices are not in line with the recommendations of educational specialists. In a Turkish state school context, Örsdemir (2010) investigated the use of alternative assessment methods in the EFL young learners’ classroom with the participation of 43 ELT teachers. The participants explained their opinions related to performance tasks as a method of alternative assessment as suggested by the ELT Program of the Ministry of National Education. Even though teachers’ perceptions towards them are generally positive, they find it difficult to administer in the classroom due to the fact that classrooms are too crowded, which is a finding that is similar to the findings of this study.

Another strand of research aimed to identify teachers’ perceptions of different assessment methods. Cirit (2014) investigated the perceptions of the ELT pre-service teachers toward the traditional, alternative, and on-line assessment methods and examined whether the participants’ attitudes changed toward the types of assessment after the tasks were implemented. She found out that the participants in the study preferred alternative assessment to on-line or traditional assessment. In another study carried out by Buyukkarci (2014), primary school teachers’ beliefs about formative assessment were investigated. The findings of the study illustrated that despite the very positive beliefs and attitudes of teachers and the course requirements, language teachers do not apply formative assessment practices as required in the national curriculum. The findings of this research are generally consistent with those of the previous suggesting that teachers mostly benefit from traditional forms of assessment in their language classrooms. Even though there are some pre-defined principles of assessment by the Ministry of National Education (MEB) focusing on the necessity of combining traditional and alternative assessment methods and techniques, actual classroom practices are generally different due to such reasons as crowded classrooms and insufficient course hours.

REFERENCES

Anderson, R. S. (1998). Why Talk About Different Ways to Grade? The Shift from Traditional Assessment to Alternative Assessment. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 74, 5-16.


