TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT CLASSROOM LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: COLLABORATIVE DISCUSSION AS A MEDIATIONAL SPACE

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Abstract: In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted on language teachers' beliefs about language assessment; however, teachers' collaborative discussion as a mediational tool has received scant attention. The present study aimed to investigate non-native language teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment regarding features of effective assessment, assessment of learners by teachers, peers, and themselves, benefits of assessment, informal assessment vs. formal assessment, and continuous assessment. Participants of the study were positioned in two collaborative discussion groups of novice and experienced teachers. Analysis of the data indicated that the teachers in each focus group held similar beliefs about most of the issues on classroom language assessment. The findings also demonstrated that the participants believed in the important role of classroom language assessment for different purposes, the utilization of both informal and formal assessment, and the utilization of continuous assessment as a fair mode of assessment. Furthermore, they believed that classroom language assessment should accurately assess what is taught in the course while focusing on all four language skills and sub-skills. Although they had positive attitudes toward teacher assessment and self-assessment, they were not in favor of peer assessment. The results of this study have implications for teacher education as adequate attention should be paid to teachers' assessment beliefs due to their vital role in classroom assessment. Collaborative discussions can be enacted in teacher education to shape and reshape teachers' assessment beliefs.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs, classroom assessment, teacher assessment, collaborative discussion

Teachers' beliefs, also known as opinions and attitudes, are inclusive concepts that are personal, experience-based, contextualized, socially constructed, interpretive, and reflective (Zheng, 2015). Mo (2020) stated that a teacher's belief system has certain key features: being a mental construct, involving both cognitive and affective aspects, being value-laden, being contextually situated, and significantly affecting teaching practice. Teachers' beliefs are of particular interest in language teaching (Borg & Sanchez, 2020). They are considered a crucial factor for teachers' quality and hence teacher education programs should be designed in a way that can "promote the development and transformation of teacher beliefs for teachers' professional growth" (Song, 2015, p. 263).

Although there are studies that explore teachers' beliefs and practices regarding assessment in language teaching (Ha et al., 2021; Reynolds et al., 2022; Tsagari et al., 2023; Wafa, 2021), very few studies specifically concentrated on teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment. The studies that exist tend to focus on other aspects of language teaching and assessment, such as dynamic assessment (García, 2019). There is a need for more research that specifically examines teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment, as this information is crucial for developing effective language assessment practices in the classroom. Borg and Sanchez (2020) stated that the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices has been largely explored. However, scant research has utilized collaborative discussion for the exploration of teachers' beliefs about assessment. Due to the importance of teachers' beliefs when enacted in language assessment (Abrar-ul-Hassan & Douglas, 2020), the present study sought to shed light on teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment. Since very few studies, if any, have explored teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment by utilizing collaborative discussions as a mediational space despite their importance in teachers' professional development (Kuchah et al., 2019), this study addressed this gap. Collaborative discussions play a crucial role in fostering a supportive and enriching environment for teachers' professional growth and learning because through collaborative discussions teachers can find solutions to problems, share their own solutions, gain ideas for teaching, discuss new teaching concepts, and support each other's growth (Ur, 2012).

The significance of this study in the field of language assessment is related to its contribution to the development of effective assessment systems since understanding teachers' beliefs about features of an effective assessment system can help identify areas where assessment systems can be improved to better meet the needs of learners (DeLuca et al., 2018; Farhady & Tavassoli, 2021). Moreover, by exploring teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment with regard to teacher assessment, peer assessment, and self-assessment, the present study can shed light on how teachers assess their learners, and how they involve learners in the classroom assessment process. This can help find out about appropriate practices for involving learners in the classroom assessment process to promote learner assessment abilities (Andrade, 2019; Yan et al., 2020). In addition, by focusing on the benefits of classroom assessment, this study can aid in justifying the use of classroom assessment as a valuable tool for language learning and assessment. Besides, as this study aims to explore teachers' beliefs about informal and formal assessment and how they use each type of assessment in their classes, findings can assist in understanding best practices for using both types of assessment (Latif & Wasim, 2022). Finally, using collaborative discussion, as both a mediational space and a research instrument, can promote teachers' learning while simultaneously exploring their beliefs about classroom language assessment. The inclusion of both novice and experienced teachers as participants was an effort to spot differences in the beliefs of these two groups. This can help identify best practices for supporting the professional development of both novice and experienced teachers.

Teachers' Beliefs about Language Assessment

Contextual factors can influence teachers' beliefs (Li, 2019). Johnson (2009) argued that language teachers' beliefs are socially situated and constituted. Therefore, it is vital to explore

language teachers' beliefs in various contexts. To this end, researchers in different countries have focused on investigating language teachers' beliefs about assessment. Following what Borg (2006) stated about the importance of exploring the connection between language teachers' beliefs and practices, most of these researchers have tried to shed light on the connection between language teachers' beliefs and practices of assessment in the language teaching context of their countries. Some of these studies that have addressed teachers' beliefs about and/or practices of assessment are reviewed in this section.

Several studies on language teachers' beliefs and practices of assessment have been conducted particularly in the school context (e.g., Al-Harrasi et al., 2021; Hussain et al., 2019; Narathakoon et al., 2020; Othman, 2018; Seden & Švaříček, 2018; Wafa, 2021). Wafa (2021) explored three English language teachers' beliefs and practices regarding classroom assessment. The participants believed that both cognitive and affective aspects of learners should be of importance in assessment. Besides, from the participants' perspective, the learning process and learners' attitudes were crucial in assessment. Moreover, it was shown that both the teaching and learning experiences of the participants could shape their beliefs and practices of classroom language assessment. Likewise, Al-Harrasi et al.'s (2021) investigation of three Omani language teachers' beliefs and practices of continuous assessment indicated that they had positive attitudes about continuous assessment and believed that it was beneficial in providing learners with continuous feedback on their learning. However, there were disagreements between the participants' beliefs and practices regarding continuous assessment. The reasons for such mismatch included the syllabus load and timetable load. In the context of Thailand, Narathakoon et al.'s (2020) study showed incongruencies between the Thai EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of classroom assessment, which were caused by contextual factors such as national educational policy, time limitations, and teachers' workload. Similarly, Seden and Švaříček's (2018) study examined how 10 EFL teachers in Czech lower secondary schools perceived their assessment beliefs (subjective theories) and how these beliefs influenced their assessment practices within the classroom. The findings showed that although the majority of the teachers used a wide range of sources to construct their subjective theories of assessment, most of their assessment practices were based on old-fashioned routines.

A body of research on language teachers' beliefs and practices of assessment has been conducted in the tertiary/university context (e.g., Elshawa et al., 2017; Önalan & Karagül, 2018; Rasyid, 2022; Wang et al., 2020; Wicking, 2017). For instance, Wang et al. (2020) limited their research to Chinese EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of writing assessment. Findings revealed discrepancies between the participants' beliefs and practices of writing assessment. In addition, they indicated that macro-level and micro-level factors contributed to the mismatches between the participants' beliefs and practices. In their research on Turkish EFL teachers' perceived language assessment beliefs, Önalan and Karagül (2018) focused on areas such as formative assessment, summative assessment, and learners' self-assessment. Findings demonstrated that the participants favored the use of assessment for formative purposes and strongly believed in the importance of learners' self-assessment. In addition, the results revealed that the participants' teaching experience did not influence their reported beliefs about language assessment. Along the same lines, Wicking (2017) focused on native and non-native EFL teachers' beliefs and practices of language assessment in the EFL context of Japanese universities. The findings

showed differences between native speaker teachers and non-native speaker teachers regarding their beliefs and practices of language assessment. However, in general, all the participants seemed to have a learning-oriented approach toward assessment and regarded assessment as a positive force that could improve learning.

As the review of these studies indicates, there is still a need to conduct more research on teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment in various contexts. Hence, the setting of the present study was a private foreign language institute, rather than a school or university. In addition, as the preceding review shows, studies on teachers' assessment beliefs have not drawn on collaborative teacher discussion as a mediational tool to unravel teacher beliefs. Against this backdrop, the present study aimed to use collaborative discussion to investigate non-native EFL teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment in terms of features of an effective assessment system, assessment of learners by teachers, peers, and themselves, benefits of classroom assessment, informal assessment vs. formal assessment, and continuous assessment. Another aim of this study was to find out if teaching experience affects EFL teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment. For these two purposes, the following question was raised:

RQ: What are novice and experienced teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment?

METHOD

Participants

Participants of this study were eight EFL teachers, including five males and three females. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from one to fifteen years ($M = 5.41$), and their ages ranged from 20 to 33 ($M = 25.34$). The participants were selected based on two main criteria. First, they all had the experience of teaching English to adult learners in the setting of the study. Second, they all had passed a Teacher Training Course (TTC) before starting to teach and consequently had received the same kind of pre-service training. The research setting was a private language institute in Tehran, Iran. The participants' informed consent was obtained before the data collection procedure started. The participants were categorized into two focus groups. There were four EFL teachers in each focus group. The criterion for grouping the participants was their teaching experience. The two focus groups are called HG (high-experience group: more than five years of teaching experience) and LG (low-experience group: less than two years of teaching experience) hereafter based on their teaching experience. Following Farrell (2012) and Tsui (2005), those teachers who had less than two years of experience were regarded as novice and those having at least five years as experienced. Participants of the HG group were four EFL teachers who taught adult EFL learners at the advanced level of proficiency. Their teaching experience ranged from 8 to 15 years ($M = 10.75$) and their age ranged from 28 to 33 ($M = 30$). Two of them held an MA degree and the other two held a BSc degree. Two of the participants' fields of study at the university were related to the English language major, while the other two had studied in non-related fields at the university. None of the participants of HG had certificates such as CELTA or TESOL. Participants of LG were four EFL teachers who taught adult EFL learners at the elementary level of proficiency. They all had

one year of teaching experience ($M = 1$) and their age ranged from 20 to 25 ($M = 21.5$). One of them held a BSc degree, one of them was a BSc student, and two of them were BA students. Three of the participants' fields of study at the university were not related to the English language major, while one of them was studying a related field at the university. None of the participants of this group had certificates such as CELTA or TESOL.

Data Source

Collaborative discussions were chosen as the main data source of the study for investigating teachers' beliefs as focus group discussion is a suitable instrument for gathering the participants' beliefs, perceptions, ideas, opinions, and views (Mackey & Gass, 2016; Wray & Bloomer, 2012). Panel discussion sessions were held to exchange ideas about language assessment. To discuss the issues in an organized fashion, a panel discussion framework was designed and developed based on the main topics found in the literature about language assessment (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Brindley, 2001; Brown, 2004, 2005; Cohen, 2001). This framework was piloted in a panel discussion session that took around one hour. The participants of the pilot session were two female teachers (Mean of experience = 5 years).

The second author coordinated and led the pilot session by asking questions and guiding the discussions. Based on her observation of the pilot session and the participants' discussions in that session, the potential problems were identified, and the framework questions were modified and revised. The final framework that was applied for data collection included five questions. The prompt questions about language assessment were based on five themes: (a) criteria for evaluating an assessment system and features of an effective assessment system; (b) assessment of learners by teachers, peers, and themselves; (c) benefits of assessment; (d) informal assessment vs. formal assessment; and (e) continuous assessment. However, whenever necessary, based on the flow of the discussions and the participants' answers, the second author led the panel discussion sessions further by asking extra questions to clarify an issue or engage the participants in the collaborative discussion. The language that was used in panel discussions was English. In addition, the participants were administered a teacher background questionnaire that aimed at gathering their demographic information, such as age, gender, educational background (university degree, major, and English language teaching certificates), and teaching background (teaching experience and teaching level).

Data Collection and Analysis

The second author negotiated the entry to the selected research setting with a gatekeeper. After entering the site, she selected the participants from among the teachers who taught in that context. As stated earlier, the participants were EFL teachers who taught at two branches of a private language institute in which English was taught as a foreign language from elementary to advanced levels. After selecting the participants and categorizing them into two focus groups and before holding the collaborative discussion sessions, a briefing session was held for each group to give the participants requisite information about the nature of the collaborative discussions and to answer all their possible inquiries about the research project. Besides, a short briefing was given at the beginning of every discussion session to introduce the topic and

subtopics that were covered in that session. The participants' beliefs about classroom language assessment were explored in the collaborative discussions. Every panel discussion had a pre-determined agenda in the form of a discussion framework.

The second author acted as a coordinator during the data collection procedure. She organized the focus group meetings and led the focus groups' discussions by introducing the topics and subtopics, asking questions, and guiding the discussions. The discussions were recorded, and the audio recordings were organized, labeled, and transcribed. One panel discussion session was held for each group. The HG's discussion session took 65 minutes, and the LG's discussion session took 39 minutes. Naturally, the direction and the flow of discussions and consequently the time spent were not the same for the two focus groups.

After the data were collected, they were organized and prepared for analysis. First, the second author listened to the audio recordings of the discussions to get more familiar with the data for transcription, and then she transcribed the audio recordings. Before coding, all the transcribed data were read through twice to gain a general understanding of the content of the transcripts. In the second reading, she also wrote notes about the ideas that came to her mind in the margins of the transcripts. Then, she went through a process of reading, thinking, coding, rereading, rethinking, recoding, and searching for and finding the themes and patterns in the data. The panel discussions' transcriptions of each focus group were analyzed to find the main themes in the data for each group of participants. Several themes emerged from the data and each theme was labeled. Then, all these labels were listed, and all data were carefully analyzed again by both authors to check if any new themes might emerge. Finally, both authors interpreted the themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

At panel discussion sessions about classroom language assessment, the participating teachers in each group discussed the questions regarding this issue. The discussion framework included five questions about language assessment. These questions were categorized into five topics, as reported below.

Criteria for Evaluating an Assessment System and Features of a Good Assessment System

In this part, the findings from both groups are presented separately: first, the criteria of the HG participants regarding the evaluation of an assessment system, and after that the criteria of the LG participants.

(A) HG
The participants of this group stated the following points as their criteria for the evaluation of an assessment system:

a)   It assesses what has been taught in the course, i.e., it is in line with the objectives of the course and covers all the content of the course.

b) It assesses all the skills and sub-skills, i.e., it covers all language skills and sub-skills and integrates all of them.
c) It assesses learners' ability to communicate in English.
d) It is continuous.
e) It includes both teacher assessment and self-assessment.

These criteria suggest that a good assessment system should be comprehensive, covering all the necessary skills and sub-skills, and should be motivating for learners. It should also be standardized and consistent, moving from teacher assessment to self-assessment. Additionally, a good assessment system should provide students with an understanding of their weaknesses and areas for improvement. These criteria can be useful for educators and institutions when designing and evaluating assessment systems. Extract #1 reflects the HG participants' criteria.

> Extract #1
> **Researcher:** *What are your criteria for evaluating an assessment system? What are the features of a good assessment system?*
>
> **HG1:** *The assessment system must be motivating for students, and it must cover all the content of the course and all the skills and sub-skills.*
>
> **HG2:** *And integration of skills and sub-skills. And also it must assess students' ability to communicate in English.*
>
> **HG3:** *Yes, it must cover all the skills and sub-skills. The format must be standard. It must be in line with the purpose of the course, it must assess the same thing.*
>
> **HG4:** *Also, a good assessment system is continuous. And it moves from teacher assessment to self-assessment.*
>
> **HG2:** *I agree. A good assessment system includes self-assessment. And it gives students an understanding of their weaknesses.*

(B) LG

The panelists of this focus group mentioned the following points as their criteria for the evaluation of an assessment system:

a) It assesses what has been taught in the course, i.e., it is in line with the objectives of the course and covers all the content of the course.
b) It assesses all the skills and sub-skills, i.e., it covers all the language skills and sub-skills and integrates all of them.
c) It is continuous.
d) It does not put learners under stress.

They believed that a good assessment system should be comprehensive, fair, and transparent. Also, they stated that assessment should not cause undue stress or anxiety and should be continuous throughout the term. They agreed that a good assessment system should cover all the materials taught, including all the topics and language skills and sub-skills. The

participants emphasized the importance of understanding the materials rather than just memorizing them. Extract #2 reflects the LG participants' criteria.

Extract #2

Researcher: *What are your criteria for evaluating an assessment system? What are the features of a good assessment system?*

LG1: *A good assessment system assesses learners on all the topics and language skills that they are supposed to know. It covers everything that was taught during the term, including words and grammar.*

LG2: *Besides, a good assessment system is one that is not scary, and students do not have any fears of it or stress about it. Also, if students just memorize the things, they cannot answer the questions, because they must understand the things to have a good result.*

LG3: *A good assessment system is continuous, I think. It happens in all the sessions during the term, it is not just a final test.*

LG4: *Yes, and students should know about the criteria for their assessment. They should be aware of it.*

Assessment of Learners by Teachers, Peers, and Themselves

(A) HG

The panelists of this focus group believed that although assessment of learners by their teachers had always been known as the most common form of assessment, self-assessment was advantageous because it could improve learner autonomy. They added that self-assessment should be used for formative purposes, while assessment of learners by their teacher should be used for summative purposes. They stated that they preferred a combination of teacher assessment and self-assessment, depending on the purpose and target of assessment as well as learners' knowledge (language proficiency level). They also said that they did not believe in peer assessment because some learners did not like to be assessed by other learners, and applying peer assessment might cause problems for the teacher under such circumstances. They also expressed concerns about the effectiveness and fairness of peer assessment. The focus group panelists' preference for combining teacher assessment and self-assessment aligned with the idea that self-assessment should be a tool for promoting learner autonomy and self-regulated learning. Extract #3 shows the HG participants' argumentation.

Extract #3

Researcher: *Who should do the assessment: teacher, peers, or learners themselves? And why?*
HG1: *I think it's like a continuum. I think the order is teacher assessment, self-assessment, and finally peer assessment. It must be a combination of them, but I don't like peer assessment, and I don't use it that much. You know, all in all, it depends on the purpose of assessment, the target of assessment, and also on the level of students' knowledge.*

HG3: *Since learner autonomy is a very important issue, I believe self-assessment is more important. I don't like peer assessment, because I don't know any systematic way of doing it, perhaps maybe just for writing.*

HG4: You know, I am against peer assessment, because some students don't like to be assessed by other students, and it may create problems for me and for the class. Teacher assessment is the best, mixed with self-assessment.

HG1: We can use the can-do sections of the book for self-assessment. It shows our students what to focus on and what to look for.

HG2: I kind of agree with all. I think teacher assessment is good for summative assessment. Self-assessment gives insight to the students and I think is good for formative assessment.

(B) LG

The teachers of this focus group believed that the assessment of learners by their teachers was the best form of assessment. They mentioned that self-assessment was also useful and that they sometimes applied it in their classes, as it could help learners develop metacognitive skills and take ownership of their learning. This showed that combining teacher assessment and self-assessment could ensure the provision of more inclusive results. They also had negative views about peer assessment and gave learners' unwillingness to be assessed by other learners as the main reason. They believed peer assessment could cause conflict among learners in their classes. This highlighted the importance of creating a positive classroom environment that fosters trust and respect among learners and of providing clear guidelines for peer assessment to ensure fairness and accuracy. Extract #4 shows the LG participants' argumentation.

Extract #4
Researcher: Who should do the assessment: teacher, peers, or learners themselves? And why?

LG3: Self-assessment is effective.

LG1: Yes, and teacher assessment is also effective.

LG4: I think teacher assessment is the best because you can be sure about the results, especially for lower proficiency level students.

LG2: I like using a mixture of teacher assessment and self-assessment.

Researcher: And what do you think about peer assessment?

LG3: after self-assessment

LG4: But again I think teacher assessment is the best. My students don't like to be assessed by their peers, and so peer assessment may create conflict among students.

LG1: Yes, it changes the atmosphere of the class.

Benefits of Classroom Language Assessment

(A) HG

The panelists of this focus group believed that the assessment of learners had two benefits. First, the results of classroom language assessment help teachers and learners to recognize learners' weaknesses. Teachers would use assessment results to plan their lessons and improve their teaching. Besides, the results would help learners track their progress by providing them

with insight into their strengths and weaknesses, which, in turn, could motivate them to study. Consequently, both teachers and learners can make a better plan for learners' improvement. Second, the results of classroom language assessment show the teachers' weaknesses that supervisors and teachers can deal with. Consequently, supervisors can evaluate the effectiveness of teachers, and teachers themselves can make a better plan for their improvement. The decisions that supervisors make about teachers based on the result of the language assessment of learners can affect the future programs of that institute or school. These participants also stated that the following groups would benefit from the assessment of learners: learners, teachers, supervisors and managers, and institute or school. Language institutes and schools can evaluate the effectiveness of their programs and make necessary improvements based on assessment results. Extract #5 manifests the HG participants' beliefs.

> Extract #5
>
> **Researcher:** *What are the benefits of classroom language assessment? Who can benefit from such assessment? And how?*
>
> **HG2:** *It can show the students' progress which is useful for both students and the teacher. It creates a picture. Also, head teachers and supervisors can find out about the effectiveness of their teachers. And we make decisions based on the results.*
>
> **HG3:** *I think the whole system, the whole organization, and the language institute, can benefit from assessment. Students also benefit, it also motivates them, makes them study, and gives them an insight and understanding of where they are, where they should go and what their weaknesses are. Also, the results of the assessment of learners can be used for assessing the teacher. Results of the assessment can show the weaknesses of both students and teachers.*
>
> **HG4:** *I agree with them. Both teachers and students benefit. Teachers can plan their course and their lessons based on the results of the assessment during a term.*
>
> **HG1:** *The benefit is mostly for students. Both the teacher and the students will have a picture of the students' progress and their achievement. But teachers can also assess themselves based on the assessment of their learners. And also the school or institution benefits.*

(B) LG

The panelists of this focus group believed that the assessment of learners had two main benefits. First, the results of classroom language assessment show the learners' weaknesses to teachers and to learners themselves. Consequently, both teachers and learners can make a better plan for learners' improvement in the future. Besides, the results of classroom language assessment show the teachers' weaknesses to teachers themselves. Consequently, teachers themselves can make a better plan for their improvement. The participants believed that two groups would benefit from the assessment of learners: learners and teachers. Learners would use assessment results to guide their learning and improvement, while teachers would use the results to frame their instruction and professional development. Extract #6 reveals the LG participants' beliefs.

Extract #6

Researcher: *What are the benefits of classroom language assessment? Who can benefit from such assessment? And how?*

LG3*: The teacher and the students. It can show the weak points and the strong points of both teachers and students.*

LG2: *Yes, and also it makes students study and learn something.*

LG3: *yes*

LG1: *And it gives them a reason, a motivation for studying.*

LG4: *I agree.*

LG3: *It also creates a picture for students of what things they must study and learn in the future.*

Informal Assessment vs. Formal Assessment

(A) HG

As claimed by the panelists of this focus group, both informal and formal assessments were important and should be applied during the course. They mentioned that learners took formal assessment more seriously and got prepared for it; however, formal assessment might cause stress for learners. They added that informal assessment puts learners under less stress, yet learners might not take it seriously. They claimed that if we had a combination of both formal and informal assessment, our assessment was more likely to be fair, and it could provide a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' knowledge and skills, while also reducing the stress that might arise from relying solely on formal assessments. Through this combination, informal assessment could help learners struggle with formal assessment, and formal assessment could provide a more structured evaluation of learners' performance. They also stated that teachers should not misuse formal assessment to show off their power to learners and exert their power over them. Extract #7 indicates the HG participants' perceptions.

Extract #7

Researcher: *Which of them do you think is more beneficial: informal assessment or formal assessment? And why?*

HG1: *Both of them are equally important. Students are more relaxed when we are informally assessing them and it's a benefit.*

HG3: *A combination of both is better. Because when we have a combination of both, then we can assess students in different situations. The fact about formal assessment is that it causes a lot of stress which is deteriorating. And there are students who are not good test takers and generally don't gain good results in formal assessment but informal assessment can give them a chance. So we should have a combination of both.*

HG4: *I call formal assessment "over assessment" because it's too much for students, and when teachers want to show their power to the students they use formal assessment.*

> **HG2:** *Formal assessment creates stress but informal assessment doesn't. However, people take formal assessment more seriously and they prepare themselves for it. So we must have a combination of them, because it's not fair to rely on one of them.*

(B) LG

The panelists of this focus group believed that both informal and formal assessments should be applied. The panelists recognized the value of both informal and formal assessments in evaluating various aspects of students' language learning. Informal assessment would provide invaluable insights that might not be captured by formal assessment alone. On the other hand, formal assessment would offer a more structured and standardized way of measuring learners' knowledge and skills. By combining both types of assessment, educators would gain a more comprehensive understanding of the students' learning progress and educational needs. They also claimed that informal assessment should be conducted more frequently because informal assessment could be easily integrated into daily instruction and provide immediate feedback to both teachers and learners. Additionally, informal assessment would help identify learners' misconceptions, gaps in understanding, and areas of improvement, allowing for timely interventions and adjustments in teaching strategies. By conducting informal assessment regularly, educators would create a more responsive and personalized learning environment for their learners. The participants also emphasized that informal assessment could be more effective for learning, as learners would not simply memorize information materials for it. Extract #8 evidences the LG participants' perceptions.

> Extract #8
>
> **Researcher:** *Which of them do you think is more beneficial: informal assessment or formal assessment? And why?*
>
> **LG3:** *Both of them, but informal assessment should happen more in the class and during the term. Formal assessment should happen once or twice during the term like a midterm exam and a final exam. But informal assessment must happen every session. Informal assessment should be frequent.*
>
> **LG2:** *I prefer to have both in my classes. Because for a formal assessment, students memorize things and they don't really learn. But informal assessment is not like that, so we should have more of it.*
>
> **LG1:** *Yes, informal should be included more frequently, because too much formal assessment destroys the friendly atmosphere of the class.*
>
> **LG4:** *I agree with them.*

Continuous Assessment

(A) HG

The panelists of this focus group believed that continuous assessment prevented learners from cramming for the final test. They believed that teachers could monitor learners' progress by applying continuous assessment, as it allows them to identify areas where learners might be struggling so that they could provide learners with additional support or resources as needed.

They further added that the most significant point about continuous assessment was that it was fair since it did not just rely on the results of a final test. Instead, it would take into account learners' performance throughout the instructional period, providing a more comprehensive evaluation of learners' abilities. They also mentioned the crucial role of teachers in continuous assessment, as teachers are responsible for designing and administering assessment, providing feedback to learners, and using assessment results to inform their instruction. They acknowledged that the effectiveness of continuous assessment would depend on the commitment and motivation of teachers. Extract #9 demonstrates the HG participants' ideas.

Extract #9

Researcher: *What do you think about continuous assessment?*

HG2: *It stops students from cramming for the final exam.*

HG1: *Exactly, and the teacher can monitor the students' progress continuously and make decisions based on that. Both for planning his or her own next steps and for advising students on their next steps.*

HG3: *Yes, and it's fair I think, because it's not the result of just one final exam.*

HG4: *Continuous assessment is beneficial but the point is that not all teachers assess their students continuously, sometimes they are lazy and they don't do it, and sometimes they are not motivated enough to do it. The role of the teacher is so important.*

HG1: *I cannot agree more.*

(B) LG

The panelists of this focus group believed that continuous assessment could motivate learners to study during the course. They agreed that continuous assessment would provide learners with regular feedback on their progress, which could help them stay engaged throughout the course; however, it should not put learners under stress. While it could be a source of motivation, assessment tasks might lead to stress and anxiety among learners. They claimed that continuous assessment was fair since it did not just rely on the scores of a final examination. They believed that continuous assessment would allow learners to demonstrate their understanding and skills in various ways, such as projects, presentations, and teamwork. They added that such a multi-faceted approach to assessment could better reflect learners' overall performance and provide a more comprehensive evaluation of their learning. Extract #10 demonstrates the LG participants' ideas.

Extract #10

Researcher: *What do you think about continuous assessment?*

LG4: *It motivates the students and they study more during the term. It keeps the class alive.*

LG3: *Yes, It's really useful. But students should not know that they are being assessed continuously because they lose their confidence and become stressed. I prefer a kind of informal continuous assessment. We must assess them continuously but they must not know that they are being assessed.*

> *LG2: Continuous assessment should be applied but it must be in a form that students like and it's fun for them. Continuous assessment is good because you will always have an idea of what is going on in the class. It must be done in a fun way so that it does not give stress to the students.*

> *LG1: It's useful because you can have a general overview of the students' performance during the whole term and you do not give your students scores just based on their final exam. And this way it's fair, I think.*

Another aim of the study was to investigate whether teaching experience could impact teachers' beliefs regarding their criteria for evaluating a classroom language assessment system. In general, teaching experience did cause great variation in EFL teachers' beliefs as the results showed several similarities among the two focus groups regarding their beliefs about classroom language assessment. All the participants of the two groups believed in the importance of classroom language assessment. Table 1 shows a comparative analysis of the participants' beliefs regarding the criteria for the evaluation of classroom language assessment.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of the Participants' Criteria for the Evaluation of Classroom Language Assessment

Themes	HG	LG
It assesses what has been taught in the course (it is in line with the objectives of the course).	*	*
It assesses all the skills and sub-skills.	*	*
It assesses learners' ability to communicate in English.	*	
It is continuous.	*	*
It includes both teacher assessment and self-assessment.	*	
It does not put learners under stress.		*

As indicated in Table 1, the two groups maintained that a good language assessment system is continuous and assesses what has been taught in the course; besides, it assesses all the skills and sub-skills. The participants of HG also believed that a good language assessment system includes both teacher assessment and self-assessment; in addition, it assesses learners' ability to communicate in English. The participants of LG stated that a good assessment system does not put learners under stress.

Discussion

Results of the present study revealed that the participants believed in the importance of language assessment, which is in line with the findings of Othman (2018). The participants had a good understanding of the different aims of language assessment such as measuring learners' achievement (the aim stated by Nation & Macalister, 2010), evaluating learners' progress, and evaluating learners' weaknesses and strengths (the aim highlighted by Ur, 2012). Similarly, the results of Elshawa et al. (2017) revealed that their participants, who were Malaysian English

language teachers in tertiary ESL classrooms, conceived the aim of language assessment to be the improvement of teaching and learning. Likewise, the participants in Wicking (2017), who were EFL teachers at Japanese universities, believed in language assessment as a positive force that could improve learning. Having a clear understanding of the aims of language assessment can help teachers align their assessment practices with these goals.

Besides, the participants considered language assessment as a tool that is used for making decisions not only about language learners' progress and achievement but also about the effectiveness of language teachers. This function was pointed out by Bachman and Palmer (2010). The teachers in the two groups argued that learners, teachers, and supervisors could benefit from the results of language assessment. Moreover, the participants of HG believed that the language institute, in general, could draw on the results of language assessment. They added that a good assessment system assesses learners' communicative abilities. This is in agreement with Johnson's (2008) accentuation of the significance of assessing learners' communicative abilities in English. The participants of HG maintained that being an assessor is one of the roles of an EFL teacher, which reflects Harmer's (2007) perspective on the roles of EFL teachers. EFL teachers should be trained to be effective assessors, as this is one of their roles. They should be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to effectively assess their learners, while also balancing their other roles. This result can inform language teacher educators to better prepare teachers for their multifaceted roles.

Further, the findings showed that the teachers perceived both informal and formal assessment as important and suggested that it should be applied in language classes. This perception is in agreement with the beliefs of the participants in Elshawa et al. (2017). Moreover, the teachers supported the combination of formal and informal assessment for fair assessment, as argued by Abrar-ul-Hassan and Douglas (2020). In the present study, the participants' preference for combining formal and informal assessments can be attributed to the various benefits of informal assessment, such as promoting learners' engagement, fostering a positive learning environment, and supporting formative assessment practices. It is also because informal assessment often involves learners in the learning process, encourages them to reflect on their own learning, and provides opportunities for peer feedback and collaboration. Moreover, informal assessment can help reduce learners' anxiety and stress associated with high-stakes formal assessments, as they often cause little pressure and are focused on growth and improvement.

The participants were in favor of continuous assessment, which is in line with Harmer's (2007) ideas about this kind of assessment. The participants believed that continuous assessment is one of the features of a good assessment system. This finding is also in agreement with those from Al-Harrasi et al. (2021), which revealed the teachers' positive attitudes toward continuous assessment as a beneficial mode of assessment. It is noteworthy that, according to the participants in the present study, although continuous assessment has its benefits, its successful implementation can be challenging. Teachers need to plan and prepare for continuous assessment effectively, ensuring that it aligns with the course objectives and provides learners with meaningful feedback. Additionally, adequate support and training for teachers may be required to implement continuous assessment successfully. It should also be noted that the participants of the present study argued that assessment should not put learners under stress and

mental pressure. This concern was among the findings of Wafa (2021) indicating teachers' beliefs in the importance of learners' affective factors. The findings of the present study can inform the development of effective assessment practices that support teaching, learning, and decision-making processes relevant to assessment.

The results of the present study revealed several similarities between novice and experienced teachers regarding language assessment, which suggests that teaching experience could not influence EFL teachers' beliefs about language assessment very strongly. This finding supports the results of Önalan and Karagül's (2018) study, which demonstrated that the participants' teaching experience did not affect their beliefs about language assessment. Furthermore, the results of the present study indicated that various factors might influence the participants' beliefs about the criteria for the evaluation of language assessment. These factors include the teachers' educational background, learning experience, teaching experience, teaching practice, rules of the teaching context, and learners' expectations (for instance, as indicated in extract #3 and extract #4, the participating teachers referred to their teaching experience, their teaching practice, and their learners' expectations, to talk about their beliefs about peer assessment). In the same vein, the findings in Wafa (2021), Wang et al. (2020), and Narathakoon et al. (2020) revealed that such factors could affect language teachers' assessment beliefs and practices. Li (2019) also accentuated the effect of contextual factors on teachers' beliefs.

In the present study, collaborative discussions were used as the main data source to explore teachers' beliefs. Collaborative discussions can be a valuable instrument in research on teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment. They can aid in identifying the factors that shape teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment. Besides, collaborative discussions can increase teachers' awareness and understanding of classroom language assessment by providing opportunities for teachers to learn from each other and develop new insights and perspectives (Ur, 2012). Additionally, they can encourage collaboration among teachers, which can lead to the sharing of ideas and best practices (Dehghani et al., 2023). Finally, collaborative discussions can promote reflection among teachers (Huang et al., 2020) about their beliefs and practices related to classroom language assessment. Overall, they can promote professional development for effective assessment among teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this study was to explore non-native EFL teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment in terms of features of an effective assessment system, assessment of learners by teachers, peers, and themselves, benefits of classroom assessment, informal assessment vs. formal assessment, and continuous assessment. Another aim of the study was to find out if teaching experience influences EFL teachers' beliefs about classroom language assessment. Although the participants were divided into two focus groups based on their teaching experience, all of them shared a set of core beliefs. Seemingly, regardless of their teaching experience, they held several common beliefs about classroom language assessment. However, there were more similarities among teachers who shared almost the same amount of teaching experience. Furthermore, the teachers in HG were better able to articulate their beliefs

in comparison with those in LG. To conclude, it can be said that the participants in the context of the study had a sound understanding of classroom language assessment.

The findings have implications for teacher educators, teachers, supervisors, and head teachers. As teachers are considered the most important factor in any language teaching procedure (McDonough et al., 2013), ample attention should be paid to teachers' assessment beliefs on account of their pivotal role in classroom assessment. In addition, teachers should be more aware of the importance of discussing their assessment beliefs with their colleagues as teachers' collaboration plays an important role in shaping and reshaping these beliefs (Narathakoon et al., 2020). Collaborative discussions with colleagues can contribute to teachers' professional development (Ur, 2012). Therefore, supervisors, managers, and head teachers should create an opportunity for holding such collaborative discussion sessions in their teaching contexts. If teachers attend such collaborative discussion sessions, they can share their assessment beliefs, experiences, and problems with their colleagues; moreover, they can learn from each other. A supportive teaching context can make such collaborative discussion sessions more useful for teachers. The present study's contribution to the existing body of research is that it highlights the importance of teachers' beliefs about classroom assessment and the need for teacher education programs to pay adequate attention to teachers' classroom assessment beliefs. The novelty of the findings is that it explored both novice and experienced teachers' assessment beliefs in a private language institute context by employing collaborative discussions as a research instrument, which was utilized scantily in previous studies.

This study had limitations. The main limitation of this study was related to the context and generalizability. The results of this study, like other qualitative studies, may not be generalizable to other contexts. Yet, the aim of qualitative studies is not the generalization of the results. Also, there was a limitation related to the number of participating teachers in this study (8 participants). Other studies may include more participants involved in discussion sessions. Another limitation was regarding the small hours of discussion and the number of discussion sessions. Other researchers may decide to replicate this study by holding longer discussion sessions, or by increasing the number of discussion sessions. Besides, the lack of data about the impact of the discussions on teachers' assessment practices was another limitation. Further research can be conducted, triangulating the discussion data with data gathered through observing teachers' assessment practice, to find out about such an impact.

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