On the Investigating of Iranian EFL University Teachers' Conception Regarding Formative Assessment

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Abstract
The present mixed-method study investigated Iranian EFL teachers' perception toward formative assessment at Birjand University. The participants were both interviewed using a semi-structured interview, and surveyed through formative assessment questionnaire by Yan and Cheng (2015). The results indicated that most language teachers in Birjand University hold a positive view about formative assessment. They find it useful for themselves and for the students. In addition, formative assessment is, more or less implemented by all of them in their classes, though attention should be accorded to varieties of formative assessment. The findings of the study may be of prime significance to teacher trainers who are in charge of preparing skillful language teachers. In addition, further research may need to focus on formative assessment at other educational levels, i.e., high schools or private language institutes.

Key words: Iranian EFL context, formative assessment, teachers' perception, tertiary level

INTRODUCTION
Assessment's role in academic success of the students is undeniable. In most educational setting, students' skill or knowledge is evaluated in form of formal assessment (often summative tests) at the end of the course which will be considered as the main criterion to decide whether a student is passed or failed. More recent approaches to education; however, consider assessment more than a means to evaluation, rather an approach to teach (Turner & Purpura, 2015). An example of which is assessment's role in educational approaches such as learning-oriented assessment (Carless, 2003) in which the whole process is based on the feedback the students' receive through formative assessment.
A type of assessment which has recently been a focus of attention is formative assessment. Formative assessment, contrary to summative assessment, is carried out to inform the students of their progress, weaknesses and strengths (Nicol, & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). It is, as stated by (Sadler, 1989), a tool to provide students with feedback and encourage them to improve their skills. Formative assessment, on the other hand, brings about self-regulated learning (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). As formative assessment is a significant asset to learning and teaching processes in EFL/ESL contexts, it is worth understanding what teachers' perception about this approach is. Teachers who hold a positive view about formative assessment may implement this type of assessment more often in their classes; on the other hand, those who do not value this approach to assessment may ignore it in their classes. To this end, this study aimed at understand what the perception of Iranian EFL university teachers is about formative assessment.

Problem Statement

Although numerous studies support the positive effect of formative assessment on language learning (Bennett & Gitomer, 2009; Clark, 2012; Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007), formative assessment may not be implemented in all language classes. Variety of reasons can contribute to absence of formative assessment in language classes, e.g., insufficient time, ignorance about the significance of formative assessment, and finally teachers' perception about formative assessment. As for the last reason, the teachers' belief, as posited by (Chappuis & Chappuis, 2007) is among the reasons which identifies whether formative assessment is employed in language classes or not. Although this issue is of prime significance, the researchers could not find studies that dealt with Iranian EFL teachers' perception about formative assessment as university level. Ignorance towards this issue can, in turn, result in poor outcome in classes, as teachers do not use this type of assessment to raise students' awareness, in turn, lack of this knowledge can severely affect language learning.

Not only there is a wealth of literature on implications of formative assessment, but also it is significant to consider variety in implementing it. Underutilizing some types of formative assessment, as stated by William (2006) has been observed in some ESL/EFL settings. Lack of variety in formative assessment can cause inadequate feedback and affects learning (Sadler, 1989).

Research Question

1. What kind of formative assessment is mostly used by Iranian EFL university teachers?
2. What is the perception of Iranian EFL university teachers about formative assessment?
Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study is to find out the perception of Iranian EFL teachers' at university level about using formative assessment in Language classes. These teachers have a crucial role in education and are in charge of preparing language learners for undergraduate studies. In addition, the researcher wishes to know what type of formative assessment, if any, is preferred by these teachers. This knowledge can help policy makers conclude whether the teachers in EFL context of Iran should be informed about the significance of implementing formative assessment or are already aware of it.

Significance of the Study

The literature heretofore has shown significant contribution of formative assessment to language learning. In the EFL context of Iran; however, the findings are not as comprehensive as other contexts. This study can reveal the status quo of formative assessment in Iran which reminds us whether teacher trainers should inform teachers about the significance of formative assessment or not. In addition, this study informs the readership of the types of corrective feedback incorporated in language classes; hence, less utilized formative assessment techniques which require more attention will be notified.

THEORETICAL GROUNDWORK

One of the key factors that can help professionals in all levels of education to decide where they are and where they want to get is assessment (Jamali & Gheisari, 2015). Policy makers, administers, curriculum designers, syllabus designers, teachers and language learners all need feedback of teaching and learning process and assessment can provide them with this feedback (Garcia, Holland, & Kupczynski, 2011). Historically speaking, assessment was not as diverse as it is today and was only to assess students' achievement. Language teaching methods such as grammar translation method (GTM) were deprived from any sort of assessment other than formal achievement tests and did not make use of assessment as a tool to learning (Larsen-Freeman & Martin, 2000). As the purpose and role of assessment in education was changed, it became an asset to language learning and new types of assessment were born. Assessment was recently categorized by Perie, Marion, Gong, and Wurtzel (2007) into 3 distinct types i.e., summative, interim and formative. While summative assessment was generally used to measure the learner mastery of certain prescribed standards (Black & William, 2009), formative assessment was considered a process which was directly linked to activities conducted in the classroom (Prier et al., 2007). The high status of this type of assessment is reflected in recent documents. For example, The Curriculum Development Council of Hong Kong (Carless, 2005) has urged a change in assessment practices to a system in which schools place more emphasis on formative assessment, making the latter an integral part of classroom teaching.
Interim assessment, on the other hand falls between these two types of assessment; as a result, it is very often referred to as medium-cycled assessment. Although the result of the summative assessment is very often used by the educational system, and the results of the formative assessment is used by the language learners, interim assessment results are beneficial to both teachers and learners (Taras, 2008). The result of this type of assessment is used for diagnosis purposes and to pinpoint how far the standards have been achieved. In simple words and as stated by Popham and Popham (2005, p.113) interim assessment refers to "tools to monitor student progress during learning".

Teachers' conception which causes their personal orientation towards performing particular behavior in the classroom is of two general types: affective and instrumental (Ajzen, 1991). While the former incorporates feelings or attitudes arising from the prospect of performing the behavior; while instrumental attitude carries an appraisal of the consequences of performing the behavior, instrumental orientation is an incentive which gives teachers a boost to perform a particular behavior. These conceptions are based on teachers' norms. Ajzen (2002) suggested that a behavior's controllability, which refers to people's beliefs that they have control over the behavior, is another important indicator of perceived behavioral control.it is also supported the distinction between self-efficacy and controllability across a broad range of behaviors exists (Trafimow, Sheeran, Conner, & Finlay, 2002).

Various definitions with, more or less, the same intention have been found in the literature which refer to formative assessment. Formative assessment was defined by Firestone, Mayrowetz, and Fairman (1998). As a tool to inform learners of their progress, Earl (2012) also referred to formative assessment as "qualifying any set of activities or tools as-"formative"- when information is used to inform or adapt instruction" (p. 68). Indeed, the variety in the way formative assessment is defined causes different perspectives among language teachers. As a result, although formative assessment has been highly effective in terms of language learners' attainments, misconceptions about this approach to assessment have been evoked among language teachers. As posited by Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshal, and William (2004) different types of formative assessment strategies such as questioning techniques, feedback without grades, peer assessment, self-assessment, and formative use of summative assessment have proved to be effective in language classes, however, not all language teachers are aware of them or are willing to use them in language classes.

Taras (2009) believed that language teachers' perception about formative assessment is the key factor in determining the reality of language classes. Language learners who are provided with more feedback on their progress will, eventually, turn out to be more successful. In addition, Box, Skoog and Dabbs (2015) who investigated the constraints and facilitators of implementing formative assessment in classes came to the conclusion that
teachers' perception is a two-edged weapon that can foster using formative assessment in classes if it is considered beneficial by them, or constrain its use if it is considered useless.

**Theoretical Framework**

There are a number of theoretical frameworks based on which the study is designed. As the study is a qualitative one, the underlying assumption about reality will be based on constructivism. The researcher does not hold any particular view about the nature of reality, rather awaits to see how it is built by the individuals. Constructivism, as posited by Creswell (2009), is considering reality as it is built by the individuals which suits conducting qualitative studies.

The other theoretical framework employed in this study is the taxonomy of formative assessment as presented by Black and William (2009) which considers types of formative assessment as follows:

a) Questioning,

b) Feedback without grades,

c) Self-assessment,

d) Peer-assessment,

e) Formative use of summative assessment

**METHOD**

**Research Design**

The research is a cross-sectional survey study, as 12 EFL university teachers were surveyed through a questionnaire and also interviewed to find out what their perception about formative assessment is and what type of formative assessment is used by them.

**Participants**

The participants for this study were 12 EFL teachers teaching language learners at the university level. The participants were selected non-randomly through the convenience approach, as they are the available population in the context where the study was conducted. In order to control the confounding variables that could affect the results of the study, the researcher used both male and female teachers who came from various social background and taught English at 3 different universities.

**Research Instruments**

The study endeavored to delve into the perception of Iranian EFL university teachers about the implementations of formative assessment in language classes and also to find out what strategies are used by them more often. To this end, the data was collected using the following instruments:
Teachers' conceptions and practices of formative assessment questionnaire by (Yan & Cheng, 2015) which is a forty-item Likert scale questionnaire in order to investigate teachers' perception and practices about formative assessment on different scales; namely, subjective norm scale, controllability scale, self-efficacy scale, intention scale and behavior scale. Although the scales by themselves were not among the intentions of this study, the overall perception of the teachers was understood using this literature.

A semi-structured interview with the participants with regard to the type of formative assessment they use in their classes. Through the interview, the participants were asked to order 5 strategies of formative assessment based on Black and Williams (2009) and to rank them in order based on their frequency of implementation in the class.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study, as mentioned earlier, sought the answer to two researcher questions. In order to answer the first research question, "what kind of formative assessment is mostly used by Iranian EFL university teachers?", the results of the semi structured interview were analyzed. The participants (n=12) were asked about each type of formative assessment one by one. They were asked which type of formative assessment, if any, is used by them in the class. Table 1 visualized the frequency of answers given by each respondent.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Frequency of Answers with Regard to Types of Formative Assessment</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questioning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent 4</td>
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<td>Respondent 5</td>
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<td>Respondent 6</td>
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<td>Respondent 7</td>
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<td>Respondent 8</td>
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<td>Respondent 9</td>
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<td>Respondent 10</td>
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<td>Respondent 11</td>
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<td>Respondent 12</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
As shown in Table 1, the most frequent formative assessment strategy used by the respondents in this study was questioning (n= 9).

Respondent 1: "Questioning is good because the students directly know what is going to be asked from them in the exam".

Respondent 12: "Questioning attracts students’ attention".

The second strategy mostly used strategy, as mentioned by the respondents was formative use of summative assessment.

"I usually give the students a test, pretending that it is serious, but after the test I use the results to inform them of their weaknesses".

Three teachers also asserted that they use self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques in their classes. Only 2 teachers used feedback with no grading, and 4 teachers used more than 1 form of formative assessment.

In order to answer research question 2 "what is the perception of Iranian EFL university teachers about formative assessment?", the results of the questionnaire by Yan and Cheng (2015) and interview were both considered. The interview transcripts were prepared and were analyzed by NVIVO software to extract the most frequent themes. This helped the researcher stay close to the data and conduct an unbiased data analysis. In addition, the researcher could conceptualize the underlying patterns in the transcripts.

The results of the interview revealed that, not all language teachers were aware of the concept of formative assessment, as 4 language teachers asked the researcher what he meant by formative assessment.

"Do you mean, like, informal tests or mid-term exams?"

Though primarily, it showed that formative assessment had not been implemented by these language teachers in their classes, more investigations in the interview revealed that they were unaware of the title. Other teachers seemed to be more aware of formative assessment. While 2 teachers mentioned that formative assessment is an integral part of their classes, others stated that they use formative assessment if they have time.

"Basically, we should follow our own schedule, and we hardly have time for extra activities, if I get the time, yes, why not?"

When asked what their idea about formative assessment is, 5 teachers found it even more significant than summative assessment. One teachers considered it learning rather than assessment. Four teachers mentioned that they might implement it in their classes in future. And 2 found it as significant of summative assessment.

"Students prefer rigorous scoring procedures, they like final term exams… I also follow their will".

In general the results of the interview shows that some language teachers were not aware of formative assessment (n=4), but others found it at least as significant of summative assessment and utilized it as a tool to learning.
Questionnaire Analysis

In the first step of analyzing the results of the questionnaire, the reliability of the questionnaire was gauged. 12 teachers answered the 40 item questionnaire. By assigning 1 to 6 for answers (1, strongly disagree, 2, disagree, 3, slightly agree, 4, Slightly agree, 5, agree, 6, strongly agree), the data was analyzed. Based on Cronbach’s Alpha method, reliability test was carried out. The test result on Table 2 (α = 0.972, p = 0.05) proved that the reliability of the survey was acceptable according to many scholars (α > 0.7).

Table 2
Reliability Statistics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cronbach's Alpha</th>
<th>N of Items</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>.863</td>
<td>40</td>
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</table>

p = .05

Twelve teachers were surveyed and by assigning 1 to 6 for answers, the data was analyzed. Table 3 shows the frequency distribution of the data.

Table 3
Frequency Distribution, All Teachers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assigned Score</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Questions</td>
<td>Frequencies (Percent)</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q1</td>
<td>0 10 10 25 15 40</td>
<td>100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q2</td>
<td>0 15 15 40 15 100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q3</td>
<td>10 20 0 10 40 20 100</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q4</td>
<td>15 35 20 0 15 15 100</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q5</td>
<td>0 5 10 25 25 35 100</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q6</td>
<td>0 0 50 25 35 25 100</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q7</td>
<td>0 15 25 15 35 15 100</td>
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<td></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q8</td>
<td>0 5 5 5 35 50 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q9</td>
<td>0 0 45 40 15 0 100</td>
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<tr>
<td>Q10</td>
<td>0 5 40 50 5 5 100</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Q11</td>
<td>0 0 45 50 5 0 100</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Overall, the results of questionnaire show language teachers' positive perception about formative assessment. More than 50% of the teachers stated that like formative assessment. Only 30% of the participant found formative assessment almost unenjoyable, and majority of them enjoyed the process of formative assessment. Notwithstanding such a great interest in formative assessment, the teachers did not totally agree that formative assessment makes teaching easier for them.
The majority of teachers (83%) asserted that formative assessment encourages the students to learn, and facilitates the learning environment, and raises students interest in learning. Finally, 66% of the teachers found formative assessment worthy of their attempt. Not all teachers (42.5%) believed that formative assessment can cause a positive appraisal among students. However, almost all teachers (92%) formative assessment can be integrated in language classes to use assessment as a teaching tool. All teachers posited that formative assessment gives teachers an understanding of their weaknesses and strengths.

Discussion

The results of this study are generally in line with what has been indicated in literature. Black and William (2009) believed that assessment is not merely for evaluation and can be used to give feedback to the language learners. This study, as well, revealed that formative assessment is used for giving feedback to students by many Iranian EFL university teachers. Box, Skoog and Dabbs (2015) posited that although formative assessment has a variety, not all types of it are implemented by language teachers in classes. The findings of this study also revealed that two mostly used types of formative assessment are questioning and formative use of summative assessment. As stated by the teachers in the interview, they hardly find the time to make use of formative assessment in their classes.

Scholars such as Black, et al. (2004) believed that teachers' perception is among the main reasons whether or not formative assessment is implemented in language classes. This urged the need to design formative assessment questionnaire by Yan and Cheng (2015) to investigate teachers' perception about formative assessment. Considering different questions in the questionnaire, it was observed that teachers who hold a more positive position for formative assessment tend to implement it in their classes more often. Congruent with the findings of this study, Yan and Cheng (2015), and Taras (2008) posited that what occurs in language classes with regard to formative assessment has a strong relationship with teachers' belief.

Smith and Gorard (2005) endeavored to investigate what type of formative assessment, as categorized by Black and William (2009) was used mostly in language classes. Having observed 14 language classes, they came to the conclusion that 'assessment without mark' was the mostly used of assessment by the teachers in the U.K. The findings if this study does not show congruence in this case as 'feedback with no grade is among the least used formative assessment techniques used by Iranian EFL teachers at university.

Perrenoud (1998) criticized formative assessment for its superficial look at assessment. Black and William (2009) taxonomy of formative assessment and other studies by Taras (2008) showed that the effect of formative assessment is, to an acceptable range, true. This study also revealed that what was mentioned by these scholars is actually being implemented in language classes; thus, all types of formative assessment are actually occurring in classes.
CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that most language teachers in universities in the context of the study hold a positive view for formative assessment. They find it useful both for themselves and for the students. In addition, formative assessment is, more or less, implemented by all of them in their classes, though attention to variety of formative assessment may be required. The findings of the study may be of prime significance to teacher trainers who are in charge of preparing skillful language teachers. Finally, further research may need to focus on formative assessment at other levels of education such as high schools or private language institutes.

REFERENCES


