

Assessment practice of English language teachers in Myanmar

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Article Info

Article history:

Received September 11, 2021

Revised January 13, 2022

Accepted March 26, 2022

Keywords:

assessment
assessment practices
gender differences
perceptions of university
teachers

ABSTRACT

Good assessment practices benefit both students and teachers in several ways: They give information to help teachers determine the appropriateness of content and the pace of the lesson. They also help teachers monitor student learning throughout the course. This research is set up to explore teachers' perceptions of assessment in order to determine their beliefs, attitudes and views that affect their assessment practices. It also seeks to determine whether there are significant differences in teachers' perceptions of assessment by gender. Data were collected from a questionnaire survey with 130 teachers. Teachers' perceptions of assessment were measured through a calculation of the percentage, mean and standard deviation. The findings revealed that university teachers who participated in the research reported favorable and positive perceptions of assessment. Participants considered the ultimate goal of assessment is to evaluate students' learning progress followed by to make decisions on teaching and learning. Most of the teachers also perceived that the basic role of assessment is to raise students' learning and teaching practices. Furthermore, role-play is the most favored type of activities used for conducting assessment by English language teachers and teacher assessment was maintained by a large proportion of the participants.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment can include consideration of expressive and receptive language, speech production and perception, phonological awareness and preliteracy, hearing, and or musculature. Assessment of each of these areas can be undertaken using formal and informal assessment procedures as well as dynamic assessment. Reynolds, Livingston, & Willson (2006) argue that while many teachers love teaching, many are not very interested in assessing students. As a result, teachers tend to have a negative view of assessment. More often than not, this negative view stems from personal experiences. Terms such as assessment, testing and evaluation usually have a negative connotation as they are associated with anxiety, stress, pressure or failure. Moreover, tests play a powerful role in the lives of language learners (Shohamy, 2001). They provide information about both student achievement and growth, but tests are also used to provide rewards or sanctions for universities, teachers, and students. For instance, tests are used to determine who passes or fails a course, to control discipline, to threaten students, among other things.

This is in part why so many people have a negative view of assessment. Something that could help minimize this negative perception is to understand the differences found in assessment, testing and evaluation. Assessment is “a term often used interchangeably with testing; but also used more broadly to encompass the gathering of language data” (Davies et al., 1999). In other words, an assessment is any systematic procedure to collect information about students. This information is then interpreted and used to make decisions and judgments about the teaching-learning process. Testing, on the other hand, is simply one way to assess, so it can be described as a procedure to collect and interpret information using standardized procedures.

Finally, evaluation can be described as a “systematic gathering of information in order to make a decision” (Davies et al., 1999). All these terms combined describe the classroom assessment process. Teachers

gather information about what students know and can do; they interpret this information and make decisions about what to do next. Sometimes they quantify this data to assign grades and then make judgments based on them. What we, the authors, have learned from our experiences is that some teachers usually collect information at the end of the process and therefore the assessment cannot be used to enhance learning.

Furthermore, what some teachers lack the most is the ability to use and interpret this information to guide the decision-making process. Another aspect that needs to be mentioned here is that the assessment component is recognized as an essential part of the curriculum, but it is the area in which many teachers express a lack of confidence and claim the least knowledge (Nunan, 1988). Moreover, teachers commonly conceive assessment as an isolated activity (separate from teaching); equate assessment to simply giving a grade or score, and view assessment as a summative process rather than an ongoing process. Since the 20th century, recent studies have advocated for assessment as an important aspect and an integral component of effective teaching and learning (McMillan et.al., 2002).

Goodrum et.al. (2001) maintain that effective learning occurs when correspondence exists between teaching, evaluation, and results. Therefore, due to its close relation with instruction and learning outcomes, assessment has a key role in learning. In this context, Goodrum et.al. (2001) state that “assessment enhances learning, provides feedback about student progress, builds self-confidence and self-esteem, and develops skills in evaluation”. Classroom assessment is an essential aspect in the teaching process since it informs the teacher about what students think and about how they think. Assessment then helps teachers to recognize what students already know and what they need to learn. It is an important tool through which teachers can use to inform their teaching and the learning of their students. However, the way teachers perceive assessment may influence the way they teach and assess their students. Thus, teachers’ perceptions will build a foundation and rationale for the assessment practice they use in their classrooms. This research seeks to understand the meaningfulness of classroom assessment through teachers’ lenses. It is set up to investigate teachers’ perceptions of the role classroom assessment in teaching and learning.

1.1 Assessment

Language tests are formal instruments of assessment. They can be used either to measure proficiency without reference to a particular program of learning or to measure the extent to which learners have achieved the goals of a specific course. Assessment has been defined variously in the literature. Linn & Gronlund (2000) define assessment of student learning as a systematic process of collecting information about student progress towards the learning goals. They maintain that students’ performance can be measured in various ways, including “traditional paper and pencil tests, extended responses (essays), performance of authentic task, teacher observation, and student self-report” (Linn & Gronlund, 2000). Similarly, Dhindsa et.al. (2007) describe assessment as a key component of teaching and learning, “a systematic process of data gathering” about students’ progress.

Therefore, assessment can be seen as the process of collecting information purposefully using different methods/strategies and tools for the purposes of informing decision. Thus, assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning which involves the process of gathering, interpreting and recording information related to student progress in learning and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. It aims at bringing about improvement for both the teacher who is assessing and the students who are being assessed. Assessment enables teachers to gather information about the students’ progress as well as the extent to which methods of instruction used are helping the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Through assessment teachers can explore better ways of supporting students’ learning and regulating their teaching strategies.

On the other hand, assessment helps the students to know the areas that they need to work hard so as to attain the desirable learning outcomes. Assessment is used to improve both teaching and learning and is crucial in ensuring the quality of education offered. It can contribute to enhancing quality of education if appropriate decisions and measures are taken based on the information revealed through assessment. However, determining what to assess and how to assess effectively and establishing remedial measures required, is a complex process. Other researchers consider assessment as a key tool for sustaining students’ engagement in learning as well as for stimulating their commitment and efforts to research.

This means that students are likely to focus and concentrate in their studies if they know that they will be assessed. Their commitment tends to correlate highly with the stake associated with the decisions to be made based on assessment they undertake. For instance, when promotion to the next class depends on attaining a certain pass mark score, they will tend to take studies more seriously than they would if the scores were to be used only for reporting purposes. Assessment also has an influential role in encouraging and motivating students’ learning and in formation of good research habits. According to Linn and Gronlund (2000), encouragement and reward of individual efforts would have been difficult if there was no assessment and excellence in achievement would be less demonstrable.

1.2 Perceptions on assessment practice

The growth of English as an International language has challenged the validity of many assessment practices, especially in contexts where students are learning English as an international language (EIL). The

constructs of many tests center on standardized, inner circle English language norms, and the content of these tests are often sampled from similar contexts. EIL research challenges the validity of these practices in a globalized world, where speakers are using English in its plurality within fluid cultures and context. When assessing EIL, it is necessary to refocus practices to center on learners' strategic competence in using the language rather than their grammatical knowledge of it.

Although assessment practices in classroom contexts are reflexive to change, standardized testing remains more resistant to change due to inherent difficulties in measuring language use, as opposed to linguistic knowledge of language forms. The significance of the research lies on the fact that perceptions of teachers on assessment have implications on how assessment is implemented and on the use the information generated to enhance teaching and learning. In emphasizing the importance of perceptions, although teachers are trained to develop sound and valid assessment measures, their perceptions and beliefs may affect the way they teach and assess their students and their rational may influence the way students precede with learning and the way it is tested. It is well documented that assessment has a great influence in teaching and learning.

The desire to ensure alignment of assessment with teaching and learning process has led to a growing interest to investigate teachers' perceptions of assessment and their assessment practices and skills. The purpose of this research is to explore perceptions of university teachers in Myanmar on assessment. Researching teachers' perceptions of assessment is important due to the fact that perceptions affect behavior (Brown, 2006). Thus, the research is designed to investigate the perceptions of assessment held by university teachers in Myanmar.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The major purpose of the research is to explore university teachers' perceptions of assessment in Myanmar. The research intended to achieve the following objectives:

- (1) To investigate teachers' attitudes and views of assessment.
- (2) To determine assessment practice of English language teachers in Myanmar.

3. METHOD

Assessment is an integral part of the language learning process and a powerful informed decision-making tool. Unfortunately, not many language teachers are trained to make assessment decisions that will engage and motivate students and, as a result, enhance learning. In this research, we present the results of a research that examines teachers' perceptions about language assessment and the way they use language assessments in their classrooms. The findings suggest that there is a significant difference in the perceptions that teachers have depending on the level of training they have in language assessment. Thus, we highlight the importance of providing adequate training in language assessment for all prospective language teachers in Myanmar.

3.1 Participants

Since the research is concerned with teachers' perceptions of assessment and the context is Myanmar EFL setting, the target participants are EFL teachers teaching in different regions in Myanmar. The sample included 130 university teachers who volunteered to take part in the research. It is to be noted that there are significantly higher number of female teachers, which is reflected in the gender profile of the participants (68 female and 62 male participants). Analyzing the first part of the questionnaire which is concerned with the demographic characteristics of the participants reveals the major characteristics of university teachers who willingly participated in this research. The following table 1 indicates the composition of participants by gender and by teaching experience.

Table 1 The composition of the participants by gender

Gender	No. of mentions	No. of mentions
Female	68	52.30%
Male	62	47.70%
Total	130	100%

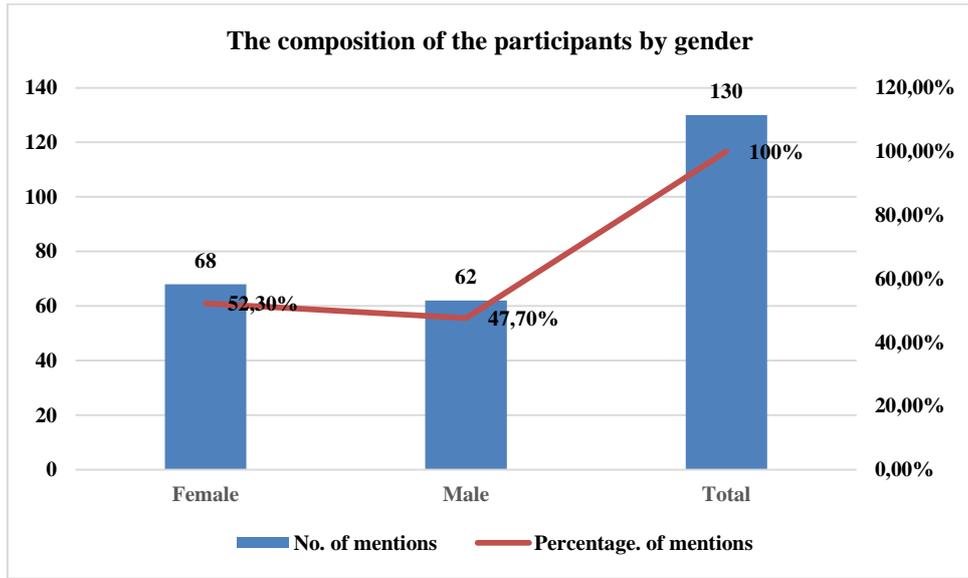


Figure 1 The composition of the participants by gender

Table 2 The composition of participants by teaching experience (N=130)

Teaching experience	No. of mentions	No. of mentions
Less than 5 years	11	8.46%
6 - 10 years	14	10.77%
11 - 15 years	23	17.69%
16 - 20 years	31	23.85%
21 - 25 years	19	14.62%
More than 25 years	32	24.61%
Total	130	100%

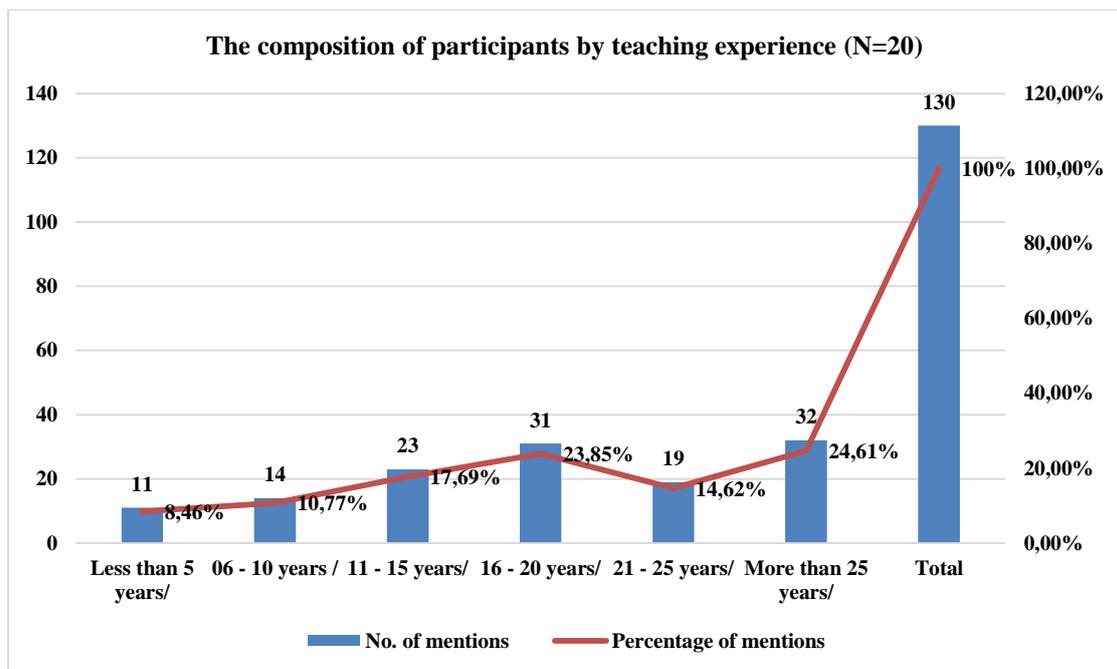


Figure 2 The composition of participants by teaching experience

As shown in table 1, female teachers comprised of 52.30% percent whereas male teachers comprised of only 47.70% percent of the participants. The following figure 1 illustrates the composition of participants by gender.

3.2 Instrument

Questionnaires are among the most widely used instruments in research studies. They are very useful for gathering large-scale information regarding different kinds of issues, such as language needs, communication difficulties, preferred learning styles, preferred classroom activities and attitudes, and beliefs (Nunan, 1988). Data of this research were gathered by means of a questionnaire survey developed by the researcher and administered to university schoolteachers in Myanmar. The questionnaire comprised two parts: one part included items concerning the demographic information of the participants; and the other consisted of items relating to teachers' perceptions of assessment. The internal consistency estimate of reliability for the questions was estimated to be. The use of piloting in the case of a questionnaire is necessary to establish whether it is too long or too short, the wording is not ambiguous, the type of questions and general format are easy to comprehend, the questionnaire is visually adequate, the questions are not redundant, and the directions are easy to follow.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

In this research, the questionnaire was piloted with two English language teachers to check its content and written expressions. In this research, questionnaires were distributed to 130 English language teachers via email. The teachers' consent to participate in the research was sought and secured. They were assured that all the data collected were for research purposes only, and their confidentiality would be respected during the research.

4. RESULT

This research uses cross-sectional design to gather quantitative data on the demographic information of the participants and their perceptions of assessment. It also aims at exploring any differences in perceptions relating to gender. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: items relating to personal information and items relating to teacher's perceptions of assessment. Descriptive percentage was used in this research. Data are used to identify the frequency of perceptions of the participants and to capture any significant difference that may be reflected by gender.

4.1 Teachers' Perceptions of Assessment

University teachers perceive assessment is divided into five sections:

- The purpose of assessment
- Teachers' views and attitudes on the role of assessment
- The timing for conducting assessment
- The types of activities used for conducting assessment
- Source of assessment

Each section reflects teachers' understanding and views of assessment. Teachers were asked to indicate their responses to various statements that they were given regarding assessment.

4.2 Purpose of conducting assessment

This is important because, in order to make an effective assessment, which improves learning, teachers' perception about assessment and the way how teachers understand assessment results should be changed. The analysis of the teachers' responses revealed their reasons for implementing assessment. The responses of the teachers are provided in Table 3.

Table 3 Teachers' perceived views on the purpose of assessment

The purpose of assessment	No. of mentions		Calculation		Interpretation
	No	Yes	Mean	SD	
Make decisions on teaching and learning	24.44%	75.56%	1.76	0.43	Good
Assign marks to students	62.98%	37.02%	1.37	0.48	Poor
Rank students at the end of each term	42.39%	57.61%	1.58	0.49	Good
Evaluate students' learning progress	21.25%	78.75%	1.79	0.41	Good
Evaluate the effectiveness of the English textbook	65.67%	34.33%	1.34	0.47	Poor
Average	43%	57%	1.57	0.50	Good

Note:

1.00-1.50=Poor

1.51-2.00=Good.

Based on the statistical findings presented in Table 3, a large proportion of the participants (Mean=1.76) indicate that the primarily purpose of implementing assessment is to make decisions related to teaching and learning. This entails that those university teachers perceive assessment as a necessary tool in guiding them in terms of “what to teach next” and “how to teach”.

Many researchers demonstrated also that the major aim of conducting assessment is to make decisions related to teaching and learning. They further argued that classroom assessment should provide feedback to modify the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, a few teachers assume that they use assessment for the sake of assigning marks to the students (Mean=1.37) and some believe that assessment is necessary to rank students at the end of the each term (Mean=1.58). This implies that university teachers were mostly concerned with the accountability function of assessment. Since they are required to generate and report marks and grades to each pupil based on his oral performance in the classroom, this shows that they put lots of emphasis on the formative type of assessment.

This finding is consistent with Airasian (1994) who contended that “administratively, universities need grades to determine such things as student’s rank in class, credits for graduation, and suitability for promotion to the next level”. Similarly, in this research it was revealed that teachers had the university accountability conception of assessment. Furthermore, most of the participants perceive the purpose of implementing assessment is to evaluate learner’s learning progress. In this regard, the university teachers’ emphasis on this particular purpose of assessment displays their regular consolidation and review of the learners’ acquired knowledge (Mean=1.79).

They aim to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their learners through assessment and oral feedback. A small proportion of the participants (Mean=1.34) indicate that teachers resort to assessment to evaluate the effectiveness of currently used English textbooks. Those university teachers can offer valuable insights about the efficiency of certain teaching practices and learning objectives since they ultimately seek to identify and criticize the elements and the parts of the textbooks that require revision, modification and change. Thus, their view is based on summative purposes. Finally, the analysis of the teachers’ responses to the first part of the questionnaire displays significant variation that is attributed to differences in assumptions regarding the purpose of assessment.

4.3 Teachers’ attitudes and views on the role of assessment

Teachers’ responses concerning their attitudes and views towards the role of assessment are analyzed and presented in the table below.

Table 4 The different attitudes and views towards assessment

Views towards assessment	No. of mentions		Calculation		Interpretation
	No	Yes	Mean	SD	
Assessment raises students’ concentration, motivation, and engagement in learning.	50.00%	50.00%	1.50	0.50	Not favorable and positive
Assessment makes the pupil confident for his final examination.	44.00%	56.03%	1.56	0.50	Favorable and positive
Assessment increases the workload for teachers.	51.24%	48.76%	1.49	0.50	Not favorable and positive
Assessment plays an important role in enhancing students’ performance.	24.47%	75.53%	1.76	0.43	Favorable and positive
Assessment significantly contributes to the improvement of the learning and teaching practices.	35.56%	64.44%	1.64	0.48	Favorable and positive
Average	41%	59%	1.59	0.49	Favorable and positive

Note:

1.00-1.50=Not favorable and positive

1.51-2.00=Favorable and positive.

Table 4 shows that university teachers have highly favorable perceptions of the role of assessment in enhancing learners’ performance (Mean=1.76), improving the learning and teaching practices (Mean=1.64) and making the student confident for his final examination (Mean=1.56). The fact that the majority of the participants perceive assessment as a key tool to enhance students’ performance and augment their concentration, motivation and engagement in the classroom setting reflects a motivational perspective. It is widely observed that students tend to focus and concentrate more on a subject matter if they already know that they will be assessed than if they know that they will not be assessed.

Many scholars argued for the use of assessment to enhance students' performance and learning. Similarly, it is believed that the feedback motivates learners to research (Dweck, 2006). Dweck stated that, "Students are different. Some of them perform well, while others need to put a big effort to perform well. Therefore, I stimulate those students who may struggle to research by giving them feedback such as: you made a good job keep on doing it." However, some authors criticize this kind of feedback because it leads to increasing self-esteem of students. Instead, students should be motivated to learn in order to meet requirements of teacher. More importantly, they should know and understand their own progress. Respondents' perception on a statement that assessment makes the learner confident for his final examination was favorably high with a percentage of 56.03%. Statement that assessment increases the workload of teachers is agreed by a medium proportion of teachers as reflected by 48.76%. Teachers with such views tend to consider assessment as a burden for them rather than an important tool which generates useful information for enhancing both teaching and learning.

4.4 Timing of Implementing Assessment

The timing through which teachers deliver assessment is displayed in the Table 5.

Table 5 The timing of employing assessment

Timing	No. of mentions		Calculation		Interpretation
	No	Yes	Mean	SD	
At the end of a module	50.94%	49.06%	1.49	0.50	Slightly agree
At the start of a module	81.66%	18.34%	1.18	0.39	Slightly agree
Assessment should be based on teacher convenience	42.40%	57.60%	1.58	0.49	Very much agree
Average	58%	42%	1.42	0.49	Slightly agree

Note:

1.00-1.50=Slightly agree

1.51-2.00=Very much agree.

According to Table 5, the analysis of the teacher's responses concerning the timing of implementing assessment reveals that a large proportion of the participants (Mean=1.58) report that assessment should be conducted based on teacher convenience. While some of the participants suppose that assessment is to be implemented at the end of a module (Mean=1.49), others think that assessment should be conducted at the start of a module (Mean=1.18). Their views can be explained as such: first, the practice of not assessing at the start of a module precludes the opportunity to modify / design teaching in response to student understanding (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Secondly, the practice of not allowing students to be assessed when they feel ready for assessment i.e., at the end of the module denies that students may need differential amounts of time to achieve desired learning outcomes.

4.5 Types of activities for conducting assessment

EFL teachers have at their disposal a variety of classroom communicative activities that can be used in order to assess learner's performance. Table 5 below presents teachers' choice of activities.

Table 6 Types of activities used for conducting assessment

Types of activities	No. of mentions		Calculation		Interpretation
	No	Yes	Mean	SD	
Role-plays	49.83%	50.17%	1.50	0.50	Good
Oral interviews	56.92%	43.08%	1.43	0.50	Poor
Picture description or stories	62.29%	37.71%	1.38	0.48	Poor
Project-works	80.95%	19.05%	1.19	0.39	Poor
Average	62%	38%	1.38	0.48	Poor

Note:

1.00-1.50=Expressing favorable

1.51-2.00=Expressing more favorable.

According to the statistics presented in Table 6, most teachers favor the use of 'role plays', 'picture description or stories' and 'oral interviews' as useful communicative activities designed for assessing learner's performance. A small percentage of respondents (Mean=1.19) favor the use of 'project-works'. The use of 'Role plays' is strongly agreed (Mean=1.50) followed by 'interviews' (Mean=1.43) and 'picture description or stories' (Mean=1.38). This shows that when carrying out oral feedback, university teachers tend to highly focus on

interactive activities which create an authentic and dynamic learning environment. Teachers who agreed upon the use of 'picture description' hold the assumption that pictures are ideally suited for eliciting language from learners. For this reason, they can be included in the assessment of individual learners. The use of 'Project works' is agreed but with least mean value (Mean=1.19). This implies a summative view of assessment. This type of activity is a great way to help students make real-life connections with the material, as well as increase motivation, collaboration and engagement. Hence, depending on their purposes and convictions, university teachers rely on diverse classroom activities for the sake of conducting assessment.

4.6 Sources of assessment

Teachers' responses to the different sources from which assessment can be generated are displayed in the following Table 7.

Table 7 Perceived sources of assessment

Sources of assessment	No. of mentions		Calculation		Interpretation
	No	Yes	Mean	SD	
Teacher assessment	21.64%	78.36%	1.78	0.41	Expressing more favorable
Peer assessment	49.64%	50.36%	1.50	0.50	Expressing favorable
Self-assessment	68.71%	31.29%	1.31	0.46	Expressing favorable
Average	47%	53%	1.53	0.50	Expressing more favorable

Note:

1.00-1.50=Expressing favorable

1.51-2.00=Expressing more favorable.

The statistical information shows that teacher assessment is highly favored by a significant percentage of 78.36% (Mean=1.78). Self-assessment and Peer assessment are respectively favored by percentages of 31.29% (Mean=1.31) and 50.36% (Mean=1.50). It seems that assessment is closely intertwined with teacher based assessment. This can be related to the roles attributes to the teacher inside the classroom as the one who has the power to guide and direct the teaching process. Even the self based assessment should be supported and encouraged by the teacher. However, this disregard to the importance of peer assessment and self-assessment reflects teachers' unawareness of their benefits. In fact, peer assessment and self-assessment are important part of helping students' realize about their role in their learning and helping them participate in their learning more actively (Black & William, 1998b).

Self-assessment and peer-assessment helps students to know about their own progress and what else they need to do to reach desired goals of course. More importantly, self-assessment and peer-assessment helps students to be a self-directed learner. Hence, the majority of the respondents reported a high preference of teacher-assessment at the expense of peer and self- assessment. However, recent studies advocate for including students in the process of developing assessment tools because student involvement in peer assessment adds more value to the learning process.

5. DISCUSSION

In our experience we have found that in some language classrooms, assessment is not a continuous process, and it tends to be more summative than formative, in the sense that the only feedback students get is their grades. When we observe foreign language classrooms, more often than not we notice that assessment is generally not used appropriately. Likewise, we find that language testing is not given the importance it should have. An example of this is that some teacher education and teacher-training programs do not offer extensive training in language assessment. As a result of this lack, tests and testing systems are often subject to abuse because test scores and test interpretations are put to a host of different uses (Danpradit et.al., 2021). Thus, tests are frequently used unethically for purposes other than those they were intended for originally and do not facilitate the language learning process. Previous studies about language testing have highlighted the need for more research as regards the use of assessment practices in the Colombian context.

Therefore, we feel we need to begin a conversation about the role of language testing in the classroom and in the language learning process. This is why it is critical to examine the perceptions that English language teachers have about the purpose of assessment, the use and interpretation of assessments and the impact that these have on the educational system and individuals (Luo, 2021). Research about teachers' perceptions of assessment is important because teachers' conceptions of teaching, learning, and curricula have a strong impact on how teachers teach and what students learn or achieve (Brown, 2006). The main goal of this research is to create awareness among the language teaching community in Myanmar about the importance of adequately and effectively using assessments in the classroom to promote language learning.

Assessment practices are currently undergoing a major paradigm shift mainly because of the emphasis on standardized testing and its perceived shortcomings. Alternative assessments were proposed as a response to large-scale assessment instruments with the idea that they would enable educators to attend to differences in learners, address learning over a period of time, and include communicative performances in a variety of ways. Some of the most commonly used alternative assessment instruments or procedures are writing samples, journals, portfolios, classroom projects, and interviews (Brown, 2006). Chamot & O'Malley (1994) developed an approach that combines assessing thinking skills with language learning skills and content learning, so students would learn how to learn in an academic environment through English. Similarly, Short (1993) discusses the need for better assessment models for instruction where content and language instruction are integrated. She describes examples of the implementation of a number of alternative assessment or approaches such as checklists, portfolios, interviews and performance tasks.

6. RECOMMENDATION

Results of this research point out that, generally, university teachers who participated in the research have highly favorable perceptions of assessment and they hold highly the motivational function of assessment. They also strongly agreed to the usefulness of assessment in improving the learning and teaching practices and in enhancing students' performance. Although most of the participants reported favorable perceptions of oral assessment and they acknowledge its importance, they seem to be facing a problem in employing effective oral assessment in their classrooms. Some respondents deem assessment as a supplementary load to their work in class and consider it necessary only for reporting purposes. They are unlikely to use assessment to design remedial measures for students because for them using assessment for reporting purpose is more important than using it in facilitating teaching and learning.

To conclude with, this research advocates that training programs should focus on equipping university teachers with necessary skills for assessing their students and also encouraging them to appreciate the role of assessment rather than considering it as an additional workload. This research was limited by the fact that it has relied exclusively on the reported perceptions of teachers. It is likely that there is mismatch between what is being reported and what is actually practiced. Future studies could establish a relationship between perceptions and assessment practices. It could also be important to explore challenges that teachers are facing in implementing classroom assessment.

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