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Demystifying Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of learning-oriented assessment (LOA): challenges and prospects in focus

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Abstract

As a growing approach to assessment, learning-oriented assessment (LOA) has recently flourished to position learning at the center of assessment practices. It aims to unify assessment, teaching, and learning. However, little is written and known about its benefits, challenges, and practices in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. To shed light on these aspects, the present study was a bid to unpack Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions about the benefits, challenges, and professional activities that facilitate LOA understanding and practice. To this end, 40 EFL teachers including both genders were invited to a semi-structured interview held in person. The results of the thematic analysis obtained by MAXQDA revealed that Iranian EFL teachers had different perceptions regarding LOA. They argued that LOA is a process-based, feedback-oriented, formative, and alternative assessment technique that foregrounds feedback and progress rather than the final outcome. Furthermore, it was identified that LOA can be practiced by using alternative assessment, performance assessment, dynamic assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment, and portfolio assessment. Likewise, the results demonstrated that LOA is beneficial in enhancing classroom interaction, collaboration, and engagement, integrating assessment, teaching, and learning, and monitoring students' progress. However, the time budget, large classes, and teachers' lack of knowledge and training on LOA were perceived as challenges for applying LOA. Furthermore, it was found that Iranian EFL teachers supported the use of training courses, reading articles and books, and attending assessment-related workshops, webinars, seminars, and conferences to improve LOA knowledge and skills. The study provides implications for EFL teachers and trainers, who can use different assessment techniques/practices representative of LOA.

Keywords: Alternative assessment, English as a foreign language teacher, Formative assessment, Learning-oriented assessment

Introduction

Assessment has long been approved to be an indispensable part of language teaching and learning (Derakhshan et al., 2020; Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2021; Sonnenburg-Winkler et al., 2020). It considerably influences classroom instruction and students' achievement (Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). However, in many educational contexts, there is a mismatch between instruction and assessment due to teachers' poor assessment knowledge and literacy (Xu & Brown, 2017; Yilmaz, 2020). Assessment has failed to embody and project learning because of its systematization through large-scale tests, test-based assessment cultures, accountability impositions, and negative washback effects on various stakeholders (Gebril, 2021; Jones & Saville, 2016). The root of this failure is that many language teachers, policy-makers, and curriculum designers still treat assessment, learning, and teaching as three isolated segments instead of an integrated whole (Figueras, 2021). Against these pitfalls, several attempts have been made in the past decade to develop new assessment approaches to engage teachers and students in assessment practices, extenuate the negative washback effect of tests, redesign the assessment-learning-pedagogy cycle, and reconcile between progress and accountability in assessment to inform learning (Gebril, 2021; Hamp-Lyons, 2017; Mok, 2012).

In light of these developments, several terminologies appeared in education that came under the categories of alternative assessment and classroom-based assessment (Alsowat, 2022). They questioned traditional assessments and underscored the process and product of student learning (Fazel & Ali, 2022). A recently blossomed assessment approach that redefined the roles of assessment in education is learning-oriented assessment (LOA). It was first invented by Carless (2007) as an assessment tool that connects assessment with learning. LOA accentuates students' learning in all assessment practices (Mok, 2012). This approach calls for a synergy between formal and classroom assessment as well as summative and formative assessment (Carless, 2007; Jones & Saville, 2016). After positing itself in the literature, LOA has gained a growing body of scholarly attention in various educational contexts, especially its role in language skills' development (Green, 2017; Hamp-Lyons, 2017), practicality (Alsowat, 2022), and determining factors (Farhady, 2021). This assessment approach is pivotal in L2 education given the inherent complexities of acquiring a second/foreign language and students' language deficiencies and proficiency problems.

Nevertheless, insufficient attention has been paid to teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA in EFL contexts, while examining their views is vital to ensure classroom engagement and effective assessment practices. Another gap that motivated this study was that the existing literature has limitedly inspected EFL teachers' perceptions of challenges and prospects of implementing LOA and the ways through which their knowledge and practice of this approach can be improved. To practically encourage EFL teachers to practice and apply LOA, it is crucial to have an understanding of its pitfalls and challenges from insiders' perspectives. To bridge the gaps in this line of inquiry, via a qualitative design, this study addressed the hindrances and prospects of implementing LOA in second/foreign language classes from the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers.

Literature review

The genesis of learning-oriented assessment (LOA)

It is argued that LOA has built upon and grown from different theoretical bases (Carless, 2007). The first genesis of LOA is the social constructivism theory (SCT) proposed by Vygotsky (1978) which treated reality as a social and dynamic entity. Hence, in LOA, reality changes in tune with the needs of the learners (Ashegh Navaie, 2018). SCT also perceives reality to be created in a person's minds in society through interactions. That is why LOA capitalizes on assessment practices in which teachers have effective interactions with their students to assess their needs. Furthermore, in LOA, learners can assess their peers' performance, and this proves zone of proximal development (ZPD) as another theory underlying LOA design and practice. More specifically, students can enter into the ZPD of others to dynamically learn through discussion, collaboration, and investigation (Dang et al., 2013). Another foundation stone of LOA was placed by formative assessment, which emphasizes providing feedback to learners in order to improve learning and assess its quality (Farhady, 2021). As pinpointed by Bell and Cowie (2001), formative assessment, in the context of LOA, can be planned or interactive depending on the conceptions of the teacher. The third relevant theory behind LOA concerns the combination of three assessment approaches, namely assessment of learning (AoL), assessment for learning (AfL), and assessment as learning (AaL). According to Zeng et al. (2018), LOA mediates these three approaches and strikes a balance among them. Within the LOA framework, AoL intends to assist the teacher and his/her students to endorse their learning outcomes, while AfL aims to bridge the gap between teachers' and students' desired goal and the current level of learning. Finally, AaL balances learning and assessment for learners to help them monitor and evaluate self and others' performance (Zeng et al., 2018).

The conceptualizations of LOA: definitions and principles

LOA, as an approach to classroom-based assessment, has been given different conceptualizations and definitions in the past decades. It situates learning at the center of assessment practices and intends to promote students' learning and scaffold pedagogy (Ploegh, 2009). LOA refers to an assessment approach that integrates assessment into learning by capitalizing on students' learning in all assessment practices (Mok, 2012). It considers assessment as a fundamental element of learning and informs instructional decisions (Purpura & Turner, 2014). As posited by Carless et al. (2006), LOA does not intend to challenge other assessment approaches but seeks to establish a learning-informed assessment culture, wherein the learning elements are highlighted more than measurement ones. In doing so, it reflects formative assessment and focuses on the process of learning in an integrative manner (Carless, 2007). This approach to assessment stresses synergies between formal-informal and formative-summative assessments to aid learners to obtain strategic disciplinary and generic knowledge and skills (Carless et al., 2006). In practice, LOA builds feedback loops into learning to enhance the quality of students' learning (Carless, 2015). Operationally, LOA is the use of different assessment practices and techniques that unify assessment and learning.

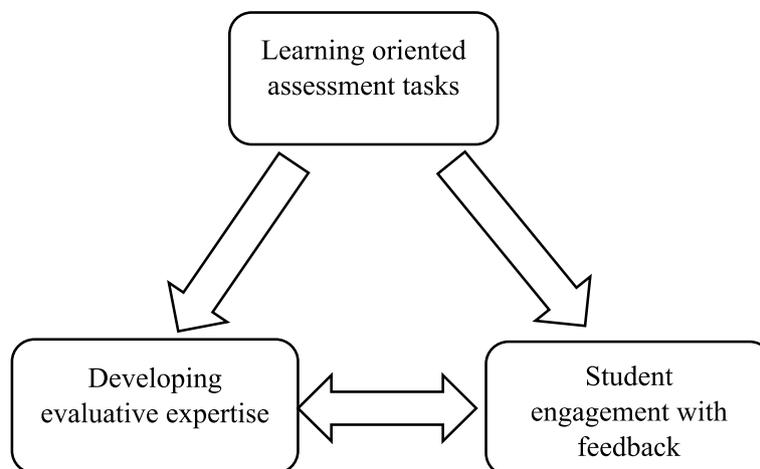


Fig. 1 Carless' (2009, p. 59) model of LOA

LOA foregrounds the depth of learning through three key principles (Carless, 2007). They include the following: (1) assessment tasks should promote and inspire learning, (2) students should be actively engaged in self and peer assessment, and (3) appropriate and effective feedback should be given to students to support their present and future performance (also called feedforward). These three principles must be seen as unified rather than mutually exclusive elements. Consequently, LOA is best seen as an integrative approach to assessment that underscores a transition from summative assessment to formative and autonomous assessment (Gao, 2017).

The characteristics of LOA

LOA, as an emerging approach to assessment, has some unique characteristics. First, LOA was an assessment movement in support of assessment rather than a reaction against previous approaches (Jones, & Saville, 2016). Second, LOA highlights the criticality of information in assessment, which had long been ignored in assessment cultures that favored summative assessment (Purpura, 2016). The third important feature of LOA concerns its focus on learners' cognitive abilities and needs. In this approach, students think, decode, and analyze their learning content based on self-needs (Savery, 2006). Fourth, LOA functions as a post-method approach to language learning in that it foregrounds learners' autonomy, tasks' cognitive load, self-directed learning, and collaboration, which are three key aspects of post-method education (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). The last characteristic of LOA is its cooperative and collaborative nature by which the learners interact, share mutual feedback, and enter each other's ZPDs (Keppell et al., 2006).

Models of LOA

Two models have been proposed for the implementation of LOA in the classroom. The first and the most widely cited model of LOA has been proposed by Carless (2009) in the form of a triangle. It includes three dimensions of learning-oriented assessment tasks, developing evaluative expertise, and student engagement with feedback (Fig. 1).

The first dimension concerns tasks that involve students in authentic problem-solving processes that are related to their discipline. The second angle is learners'

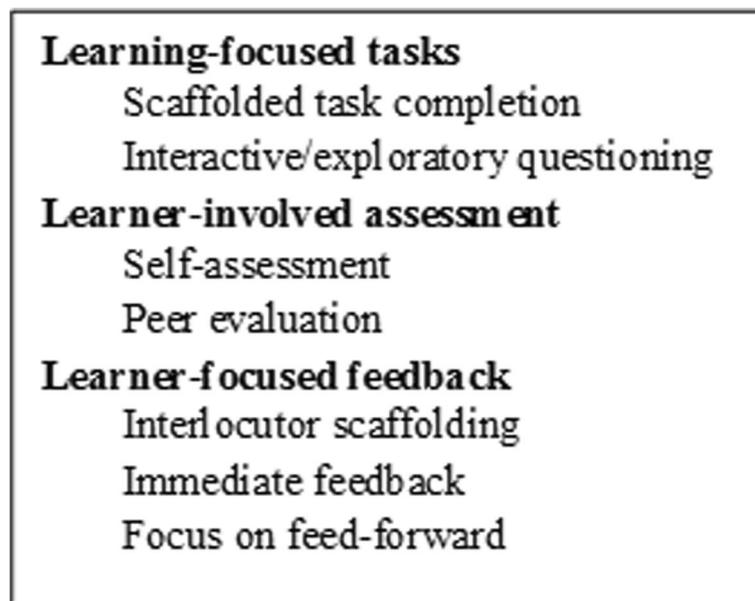


Fig. 2 Hamp-Lyons' (2017, p. 92) model of LOA

evaluative expertise, which pertains to their ability to evaluate their own as well as others' performances. The third part of the model concerns how learners receive feedback from the teacher or their peers and the way they can use this feedback to progress in learning. Drawing on this model, in a more recent study, Hamp-Lyons (2017) introduced another model for LOA that is basically conceptual. It includes learning-focused tasks, learner-involved assessment, and learning-focused feedback (Fig. 2).

In this model, the focus is on the interaction between the teacher and his/her students. The behaviors of the interlocutor play a crucial role in completing classroom tasks. Tasks are usually completed with the help of the teacher, there is a possibility of questioning the teacher, self and peer assessment are encouraged, scaffolding is highlighted throughout the assessment process, and feedback is provided to promote the current and future performance of the students (i.e., feeding forward). In sum, both these models are insightful in that they highlight the three core principles of LOA explained earlier.

Benefits and challenges of LOA

As an assessment approach, LOA underscores and prioritizes learning during assessment (Carless, 2007). The intention is to promote students' learning via constructive feedback. Hence, it is asserted that implementing LOA can generate several positive outcomes and benefits in L2 education such as informing program decisions, promoting the effectiveness of teaching and learning, showing the attainment process of the students, ensuring the achievement of instructional objectives specified in advance, and enhancing classroom engagement (Carless, 2015; Gibbs, 2006; Zeng et al., 2018). Additionally, LOA serves some cognitive, metacognitive, and affective functions as well (Kim, 2009). Cognitively, it helps students confirm their understanding and

bridge information gaps and replace wrong information with precise ones. It also assists them to restructure their schemata during their learning process. Metacognitively, LOA increases students' self-awareness, control, and monitoring. Affectively, it improves learning motivation and engagement and reduces stress (Ali, 2013).

Despite these benefits, the implementation of LOA in actual classes is not an easy task. There are some challenges hindering the proper application of this approach. More specifically, LOA requires teachers' professional knowledge and assessment literacy considering the principles of LOA (Alsowat, 2022). Other challenges of LOA include assessment resources, logistic issues, students' attitudes toward assessment, score-polituted assessment culture, top-down assessment policy, heavy teaching load, and limited instructional time (Farhady, 2021; Fazel & Ali, 2022). Moreover, LOA needs professional training courses for teachers in which the theoretical and practical aspects of this approach are clearly taught.

Related studies

Given its emphasis on the learning dimension of assessment, LOA has recently gained currency over other assessment approaches in the past couple of decades (Jones & Saville, 2016). It has captured the attention of several scholars from different parts of the world, who inspected different aspects of this growing approach to L2 assessment. For years, scholars were concerned about the conceptualizations of the concept of LOA and its features (Carless, 2007; Hamp-Lyons, 2017; Purpura & Turner, 2014). After positioning and clarifying the principles of LOA, other studies were carried out on the utility of employing this assessment approach to the development of different language skills such as speaking (Almalki, 2019; Hamp-Lyons L, Green A: Applying a concept model of learning-oriented language assessment to a large-scale speaking test, unpublished), writing (Saygili, 2021; Yang, 2020), and pronunciation (Ashugh Navaie, 2018). Furthermore, the use of LOA has been identified to enhance both teachers' and students' classroom engagement and interaction skills (Carless, 2014).

Other studies focused on the practicality of LOA in different contexts. As a case in point, Ali (2013) ran a qualitative study on 25 EFL teachers in Oman concerning their perceptions of the benefits and challenges of implementing LOA. The results indicated that all the participants hold a positive view of LOA and supported its implementation in L2 classrooms. However, they argued that for a proper application of LOA, both teachers and students need some pieces of training. Likewise, Alsowat (2022), in a quantitative study, investigated the challenges of implementing LOA in the EFL context of Audi Arabia. He found that different some individual, contextual, and organizational factors limit the use of LOA in L2 classes including time budget, large class size, inadequate training, and exam-oriented culture. In the context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), Fazel and Ali (2022) ran a cross-cultural study and examined Canadian and Malaysian teachers' knowledge and use of LOA. They also scrutinized the potential and challenges of implementing this approach to classroom-based assessment. The results of their research demonstrated that 95% of the participants in both settings concurred with to need LOA and approved its significance. Nevertheless, only 35% of the teachers terminologically knew LOA. The potential of LOA has also extended to the virtual milieu as corroborated by Farhady (2021).

Despite these insightful studies, the challenges and prospects of utilizing LOA in EFL contexts require more research since the current studies are limited to two Arab countries (Oman, and Saudi Arabia). Moreover, scant studies (if any) have taken an insider perspective to unveil EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA in various educational contexts. Understanding teachers' standpoints and opinions is crucial before encouraging them to implement LOA in their L2 classes. To fill these gaps, this qualitative study made an effort to demystify Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA along with its prospects and challenges. Moreover, the professional practices that EFL teachers may use to maintain and promote their LOA practice were examined. More particularly, the study intended to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Iranian EFL teachers' regarding learning-oriented assessment (LOA)?
2. What are the benefits and challenges of implementing LOA from Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives?
3. What professional activities/practices do Iranian EFL teachers employ to improve their knowledge and practice of LOA?

Method

Participants and research setting

The data of this study were collected from 40 Iranian EFL teachers, who agreed to partake in the study from an initial sample of 50 teachers. They were teaching English at different universities and language institutes in Tehran (Table 1). They majored in applied linguistics, English literature, and translation studies including both genders (38.5% males, 62.5% females). The age of the participants ranged from 22 to 50 ($M =$

Table 1 EFL teachers' demographic information

Demographic information	No. (%)
Age	
22–24	2 (5%)
25–27	6 (15%)
28–30	12 (30%)
31–33	10 (25%)
34–36	4 (10%)
37+	6 (15%)
Gender	
Male	15 (38.5%)
Female	25 (62.5%)
University degree	
BA	5 (12.5%)
MA	15 (37.5%)
PhD	20 (50%)
Field of study	
Applied linguistics	24 (60%)
English literature	7 (17.5%)
Translation studies	9 (22.5%)

31.45, $SD = 5.39$), and they were selected non-randomly through a convenience sampling technique. Before running the study, the researchers informed the participants of the aim of the research and ensured that their identity, responses, and personal information would be kept confidential.

Instruments

Semi-structured interview

To obtain pertinent responses to the research questions, the researchers benefited from an audio-recorded semi-structured interview that included two sections (Additional file 1). The first section concerned the participants' background information, while the second one involved five questions on teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA. Forty Iranian EFL teachers were individually recruited for an interview done by the researchers that lasted about 15 min. During the interview, the respondents were asked to express and explain their perspectives on different aspects of LOA. The interview questions were developed by the researchers, and their content validity was checked by three experts in applied linguistics, who had sufficient experience in practicing and researching L2 assessment. Although the five interview questions were determined in advance, during the interview, the respondents could explain and delve into other related points as well.

Data collection procedure

To gather the required data, the researchers conducted a semi-structured interview with 40 Iranian EFL teachers. In so doing, first the interview questions were formulated and given to three experts to examine their content validity. The relevancy, clarity, and language appropriateness of each question were qualitatively investigated by the experts in a week. After obtaining the experts' opinions, some revisions were made to the items, and the content validity index was approved in terms of relevancy, clarity, and appropriateness of language. Next, an audio-recorded interview was held with the participants during noninstructional time taking about 15 min of their time. During the interviews, the interviewees were asked probe questions as well so that they clarify the issues in more detail.

After collecting the whole interview data, the researchers conducted a verbatim transcription of the interviews by means of Atlas.ti software (v. 9). They also relistened to the interviews to ensure the accuracy of the transcriptions before running the final analysis by MAXQDA software (v. 2020). Having the qualitative data analysis completed, the researchers adhered to the principle of member checking by requesting the participants' opinions and views on the extracted codes and themes. Additionally, a second coder, who was a Ph.D. holder of applied linguistics, was invited to examine the codes/themes as an effort to check the inter-coder agreement level. To this end, 10% of the data obtained by interviews were cross-checked. Cohen's Kappa coefficient was calculated whose results demonstrated an inter-coder reliability of 0.95. Lastly, another researcher with the experience of running qualitative research in L2 assessment was asked to audit trial the data analysis process to safeguard

confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings were then represented through figures, percentages, and interview excerpts.

Data analysis

The data analysis was carried out qualitatively in tune with the design of the study. More precisely, a thematic analysis was carried out on the interview data using MAX-QDA software. In doing so, first, all the interviews were double-checked, transcribed, and fed into the software. Next, the researchers began codification drawing on the “open coding,” “axial coding,” and “selective coding” model offered by Corbin and Strauss (1990). They iteratively inspected the interview data and produced some open codes. Afterward, in the axial coding stage, the open codes were linked to generate larger codes. Lastly, “selective coding” was done in which the extracted themes were collated into larger categories (Creswell, 2008). Likewise, the credibility and confirmability of the findings that drew on the codes were examined by a second coder.

Results

The first research question

In order to answer this research question concerning Iranian EFL teachers’ perceptions of LOA, the first two interview questions were used. The questions sought out the participants’ understanding of LOA and its practice. The results obtained by MAXQDA revealed that Iranian EFL teachers had different perceptions about the concept of LOA. Thirteen codes were extracted from the interview data (Fig. 3). The most frequent codes regarded LOA as a/an “alternative assessment technique,” “feedback-oriented assessment technique,” “process-based assessment technique,” “classroom-based assessment technique,” and “integration of assessment, teaching, and learning,” which were respectively raised 16, 13, 11, 10, and 8 times across the data. Moreover, three codes, which perceived LOA as “an interaction-based assessment

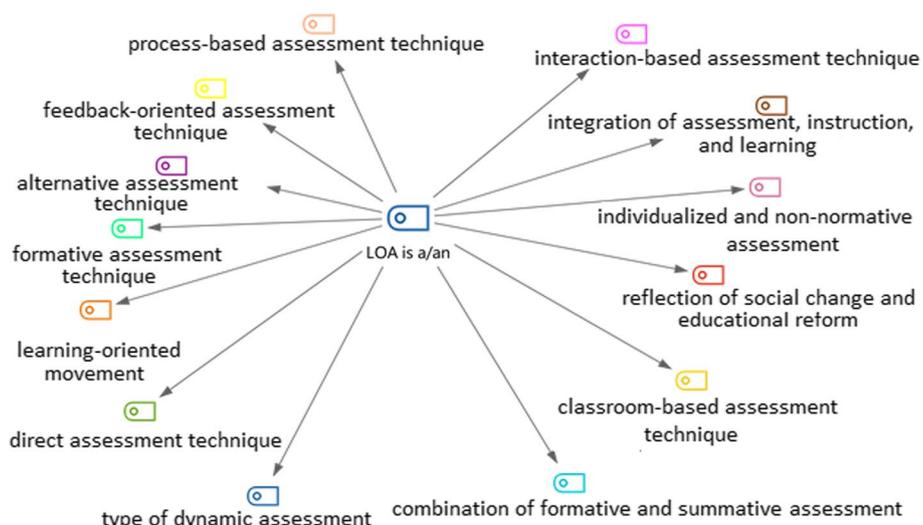


Fig. 3 EFL teachers’ perceptions of LOA

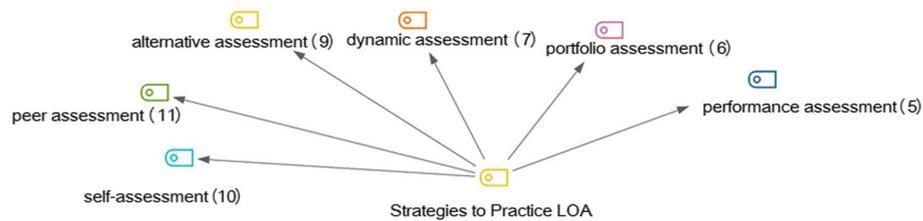


Fig. 4 EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA practice

technique," "a combination of formative and summative assessment," and "a learning-oriented movement," were similarly repeated 5 times in the interviews. Other respondents associated LOA to "formative assessment" (4 times), "dynamic assessment" (3 times), "individualized and non-normative assessment" (3 times), "direct assessment" (2 times), and "a reflection of social change and educational reform" (2 times).

The following excerpts represent the extracted codes:

I am familiar with the concept. It is a classroom-based assessment technique that puts emphasis on feedback (Teacher 3).

Learning-oriented assessment reflects social change and it is a sort of educational reform emphasizing a learning society (Teacher7).

To me, LOA is assessment for learning using alternative assessment techniques that focus on process rather than product. They highlight feedback and interaction not just simple scores (Teacher 13).

LOA uses alternative assessment techniques such as portfolio to measure each student's learning. It is individualized, ongoing, and criterion-referenced testing that unifies assessment, teaching, and learning (Teacher 21).

Additionally, in this research question, the respondents were asked about their actual implementation of LOA in their classroom practices. The analysis of interview responses indicated that 75% of the participants had practically implemented LOA in their classes. However, 25% of the teachers maintained that they had not practiced LOA in their instructions. As a further attempt, the researchers asked the teachers, who claimed to use LOA, about the strategies through which they implemented this approach. The results of the thematic analysis demonstrated that most of the participants asserted to implement LOA through the utilization of "alternative assessment," "peer assessment," and "self-assessment" (Fig. 4). Likewise, the respondents raised other codes in this regard arguing that they practice LOA via "dynamic assessment," "portfolio assessment," and "performance assessment."

Below are some sample interview responses considering the extracted codes/themes:

No. I haven't employed LOA yet. I prefer to use traditional strategies to assess my students (Teacher 4).

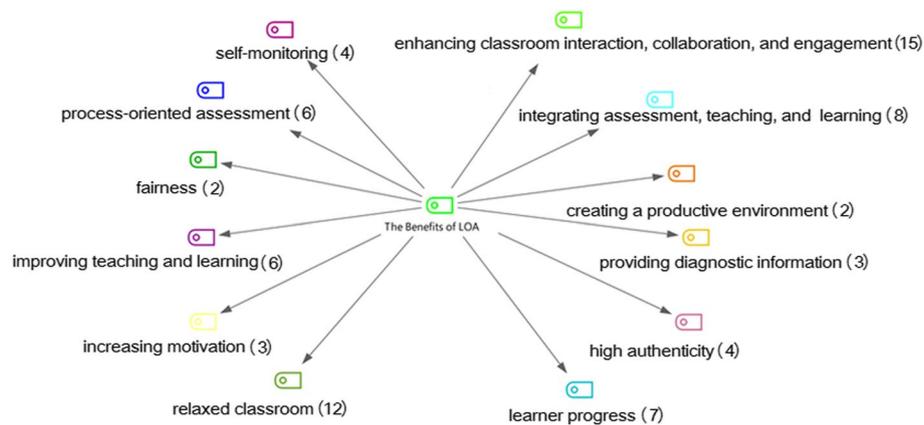


Fig. 5 EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA benefits

Yes, I have used dynamic assessment, portfolio assessment, self-assessment, and peer assessment with lots of feedback (Teacher 14).

Yes, I have employed alternative assessments like performance assessment, peer assessment, and dynamic assessment (Teacher 22).

In sum, the results of this research question demonstrated that Iranian EFL teachers had different perceptions of LOA and practiced it through some popular assessment strategies. They mostly perceived LOA as a process-based, feedback-oriented, formative, alternative, and learning-oriented assessment technique that highlights feedback and progress rather than scores or end products. It was also found that LOA can be implemented in EFL classes through alternative assessment, performance assessment, dynamic assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment, and portfolio assessment.

The second research question

To provide appropriate responses to this research question that concerned the benefits and challenges of implementing LOA in EFL classes, the third and fourth interview questions were employed. The results of MAXQDA indicated that the most frequent benefits and prospects of implementing LOA in EFL classes include “enhancing classroom interaction, collaboration, and engagement,” “relaxed classroom,” “integrating assessment, teaching, and learning,” and “learner progress” (Fig. 5). Furthermore, other respondents posited that LOA is beneficial as it can “improve teaching and learning” and offer “a process-oriented assessment.” LOA was also perceived fruitful in enhancing “motivation,” “fairness,” “self-monitoring,” and “productivity” in the class and “providing diagnostic information” concerning students’ needs, strengths, and weaknesses.

As for the challenges of implementing LOA, the results demonstrated that “time budget,” “large class size,” and “teachers’ lack of knowledge on how to practice LOA” were the most frequently raised challenges of practicing LOA in the EFL context of Iran (Fig. 6). Additionally, the participants asserted that “teachers’ lack of training on LOA” and “exam-oriented educational culture” are big challenges that preclude the implementation of LOA in EFL contexts. Other less frequent codes included “subjectivity and bias”

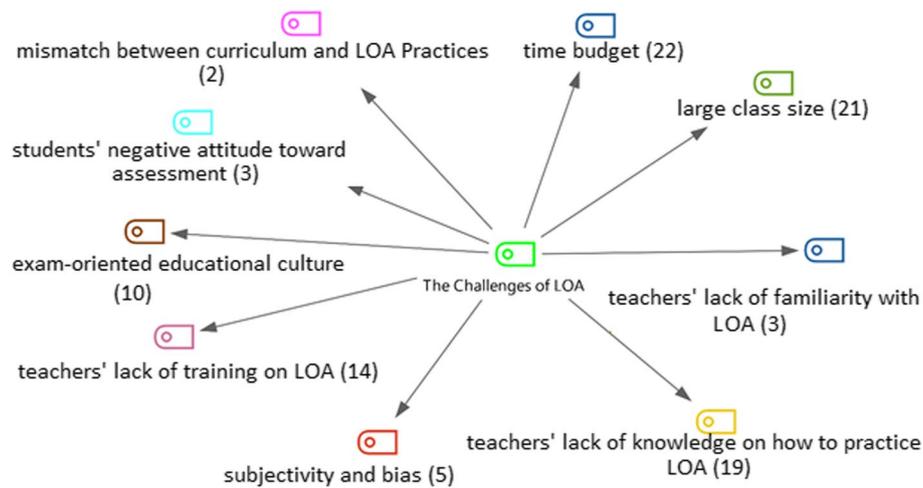


Fig. 6 EFL Teachers' perceptions of LOA challenges

in implementing LOA given its individualized nature, “teachers' lack of familiarity with LOA,” “students' negative attitude toward assessment,” and “mismatch between curriculum and LOA practices.”

The following sample interview responses represented the mentioned benefits and challenges of implementing LOA in EFL contexts from the perspective of Iranian EFL teachers:

In my opinion, LOA is useful in that it integrates assessment, teaching, and learning and facilitates classroom interaction, engagement, interaction, and self-monitoring among students (Teacher 11).

LOA is beneficial in EFL classes since it can evaluate both teaching and learning effectiveness and improve them; understand students' needs, weakness, and strength, and create productive environment (Teacher 36).

As LOA is individualized, it triggers the motivation of students more. Also, the point that you can see the trend of student's progress is so cool. I think another benefit is that it removes much of the stress that students had in traditional testing and establishes a relaxed classroom (Teacher 40).

Time limit, class size, lack of proper training on how to apply LOA, exam-oriented culture, and bias in some LOA practices like self and peer assessment (Teacher 23).

Since LOA focuses on mediation and feedback, large classes, limited time of instruction, and lack of teachers' knowledge of how to efficiently apply it in EFL classes are challenges (Teacher 28).

Lack of sufficient time, teachers' low knowledge of LOA, lack of training, mismatch between curriculum and LOA practices, teachers' lack of skills in applying LOA practices, and potential subjectivity and bias of LOA as it is individualized and feedback-oriented (Teacher 32).

In conclusion, the results of this research question revealed that LOA has several benefits and challenges in EFL classes, as pinpointed by Iranian teachers. The most frequent benefits had to do with the potential of this assessment approach to enhance classroom interaction, collaboration, and engagement; integrate assessment, teaching, and learning; and monitor students’ progress. However, the implementation of LOA was perceived as challenging given the insufficient time budget, large classes, and teachers’ lack of knowledge and training on LOA principles and practices in EFL contexts.

The third research question

To answer this research question concerning the activities that Iranian EFL teachers use to promote their knowledge and practice of LOA, the fifth interview question was posed and analyzed. The results of the thematic analysis indicated that most of the Iranian EFL teachers highlighted and supported “reading articles,” “reading books,” and “attending assessment-related seminars, webinars, and workshops” to maintain and promote their knowledge and practice of LOA (Fig. 7). Moreover, the participants argued that “attending training courses” and “conferences” on assessment can be beneficial, as well. The last code extracted from the interview data considering this question was “consulting with colleagues,” which was raised 4 times across the interviews.

Below are some excerpts taken from teacher interviews:

Reading books and articles, attending training courses and workshops are really beneficial, to me (Teacher 26).

I think, as EFL teachers, we can raise our knowledge and practice of LOA by taking part in workshops, conferences, webinars, and reading books and articles (Teacher 17).

Well, in my opinion, reading about LOA is very useful plus consulting and sharing ideas with experienced colleagues. These activities really improve one’s knowledge and practice of LOA as a new assessment approach (Teacher 36).

In sum, the analysis of interviews in this research question pinpointed that Iranian EFL teachers mostly resort to professional development activities like attending training courses and attending workshops, seminars, webinars, and conferences related to assessment. Furthermore, they highlighted reading articles and books on LOA to enhance their LOA knowledge and practice.

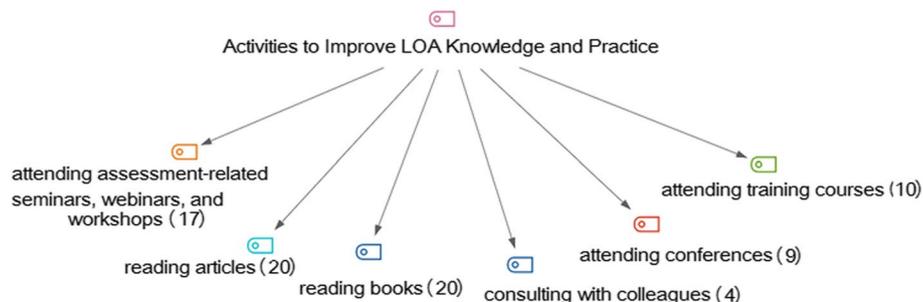


Fig. 7 Activities to maintain and improve EFL teachers’ knowledge and practice of LOA

Discussion

In this qualitative study, it was found that Iranian EFL teachers had different perceptions about LOA as a flourishing assessment approach. They mostly regarded it as a process-based, feedback-oriented, formative, alternative, and learning-oriented assessment technique that foregrounds feedback and progress rather than the final outcome. Furthermore, it was identified that the implementation of LOA in EFL classes can be represented by employing alternative assessment, performance assessment, dynamic assessment, peer assessment, self-assessment, and portfolio assessment techniques. The findings are in line with previous studies (e.g., Carless, 2009, 2015; Jones & Saville, 2016), which argued that LOA is an assessment technique that capitalizes on feedback and learning and tries to integrate assessment and instruction by focusing on process rather than product when assessing students' performance. Likewise, the results lend support to those of Carless (2007) and Gao (2017), who posited that LOA transition toward alternative and formative assessment, especially through self and peer assessment and techniques that entail feedback and mediation during assessment. A justification for this finding can be Iranian EFL teachers' high language assessment literacy (LAL), which may have helped them form an enhanced knowledge and understanding of LOA. The participants seemed to already establish a clear understanding of LOA theory and practice, which is attributable to their previous pieces of training at university or institute. Additionally, the variations in EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA can be ascribed to the heterogeneous nature of their working environments (i.e., institute, university).

In this study, it was also found that the implementation of LOA in EFL classrooms can have various benefits and challenges for teachers and students. It was claimed to be beneficial in enhancing classroom interaction, collaboration, and engagement, integrating assessment, teaching, and learning, and monitoring students' progress. Nevertheless, the implementation of LOA was perceived challenging because of instructional time constraints or time budget, large classes, and teachers' lack of knowledge and training on LOA in EFL contexts. The findings partly echo those of Gibbs (2006) and Zeng et al. (2018), who argued that LOA is fruitful in promoting the effectiveness of teaching and learning, showing students' achievement process, and enhancing classroom engagement. Moreover, the findings are on a par with Alsowat (2022), who examined the challenges of implementing LOA in Saudi Arabia and found that time budget, large class size, inadequate training, and exam-oriented culture are the biggest challenges preventing LOA implementation in EFL contexts. A reason for these findings can be the participants' knowledge of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective factors that interfere with proper L2 assessment in EFL contexts. This may have been obtained by gaining more experience in teaching and assessment. Another possible cause can be the limitations and challenges that L2 learners and teachers face in acquiring English in EFL contexts. In many EFL contexts, the facilities and infrastructures for implementing alternative assessment techniques and LOA that revolve around feedback and mediation are insufficient. Hence, in most cases, EFL teachers resort to traditional assessment approaches.

Finally, this study indicated that Iranian EFL teachers took advantage of different activities to maintain and promote their knowledge and practice of LOA. They mostly supported the use of training courses, reading articles and books, and attending assessment-related workshops, webinars, seminars, and conferences. They endorsed the

dynamism of LOA understanding and practice. This finding can be ascribed to Iranian EFL teachers' high assessment literacy and knowledge of professional development. They were familiar with various ways of promoting LOA practice. This might be due to their experience level or previous pieces of training they received in in-service programs or university courses. Another reason for the participants' high understanding of LOA and professional development practices can be their already established assessment identity (Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2021). They seem to have crafted an identity system for themselves before partaking in this study. Such identity and LAL may have enhanced their knowledge of different aspects of LOA, considering it as a segment of professionalism that can improve through some activities.

Conclusions and implications

Given the findings obtained in this qualitative study, it can be concluded that LOA as a growing assessment approach is really beneficial for L2 education given its feedback and learning orientation that prioritizes learning over other aspects. However, the implementation of LOA is not an easy task, especially in EFL contexts that suffer from various lacks and insufficiencies. To practice this approach, educators need to fulfill some fundamental prerequisites such as increasing instructional time, reducing the number of students in the class, and training teachers on how to apply LOA. Furthermore, it can be asserted that knowledge of LOA is dynamic and shifting, which can develop in case EFL teachers do professional activities like reading articles and books, attending professional development courses, and taking part in assessment-related workshops, seminars, and conferences. In light of these insightful findings, the results of this study can have implications at both theoretical and pedagogical levels. Theoretically, this study is momentous in that it extends the conceptualization of LOA in EFL contexts by disclosing factors that facilitate or damage the implementation of this approach to assessment. Likewise, the results may add to the current understanding of formative assessment by allocating LOA to a separate position that rests on formative assessment but varies from it in some parts.

Pedagogically, the findings may be fruitful for EFL teachers of various experience levels in the sense that their understanding of LOA principles and practices can improve. Moreover, they can realize the utilities and challenges of implementing LOA in their own classes and the ways through which they can deal with such challenges. Teacher trainers are the second group that may benefit from this research by enriching their training courses, especially by injecting LOA principles to pre-service and in-service teachers' assessment knowledge and literacy. They can offer assessment-specific courses to L2 teachers in which different principles along with practical strategies to implement LOA are taught and explained. Program designers may also find this study promising in that they can design professional development programs for EFL teachers, where the assessment side of L2 education is also given the same weight as the pedagogical side. In such courses, EFL teachers may develop their LAL and construct their identity as teachers and assessors. Finally, this study may be advantageous for L2 researchers by triggering their scholarly curiosity and inspiring them to run further studies on this burgeoning approach to assessment. Most of the studies in this domain are exclusively quantitative, qualitative, or theoretical analyses. Hence, future

studies can use mixed-methods research designs and gather data from larger samples. Not being an exception, the present study suffered from these limitations and used a qualitative design and recruited only 40 Iranian EFL teachers which constrained the generalizability scope of the findings to other contexts. Another limitation was the collection of the data from a heterogeneous sample (i.e., teachers working at institutes and universities). Therefore, it is advisable to focus on the perceptions of EFL teachers, who work in the same context. Future studies are also recommended to unpack the role of teaching experience and educational background in EFL teachers' knowledge of LOA. Cross-cultural studies may also be interesting to inspect the role of cultural factors and differences in the perceptions of LOA understanding and practice. Moreover, future research can be carried out on the matches and mismatches in EFL students' perceptions of LOA and teachers' actual practice of this assessment approach. Finally, specific assessment techniques like teacher questioning strategies can be examined in light of LOA.

Abbreviations

AaL	Assessment as learning
AfL	Assessment for learning
AoL	Assessment of learning
EFL	English as a foreign language
LOA	Learning-oriented assessment
SCT	Social constructivism theory
ZPD	Zone of proximal development

Supplementary Information

The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-022-00204-2>.

Additional file 1. Interview Questions. Section 1: Teachers' Demographic Information. Section 2: Teachers' Perceptions of Learning-oriented Assessment (LOA).

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Authors' contributions

All authors have materially participated in the research and article preparation. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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Availability of data and materials

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Declarations

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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