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Constraints in employing learning-oriented assessment in EFL classrooms: teachers' perceptions

Kaveh Jalilzadeh^{1*}  and Christine Coombe²

*Correspondence:
Kaveh.j@iuc.edu.tr

¹ Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa,
Istanbul, Turkey

² Dubai Men's College, Higher
Colleges of Technology, Dubai,
United Arab Emirates

Abstract

Learning-oriented assessment has been called a practice that can be employed to increase the power of assessment practices in the classroom and one that has been said to promote efficient student learning. However, it is not always easy to employ learning-oriented assessment in English classes, because of a number of constraints. This study aimed at investigating the constraints which hinder teachers' use of learning-oriented assessment in EFL classes. A phenomenological research method was used to explore the constraints associated with learning-oriented assessment. EFL teachers were selected through purposive sampling. The interviews were thematically coded into three main categories: teacher-related, institute-related, and learner-related constraints. It can be inferred that coordination among the different components of the curriculum is a necessary step that teachers need to take before attempting to employ LOA principles in their classes. Findings are theoretically and practically significant to EFL teachers and teacher educators as assessment instructors.

Keywords: Assessment, EFL teachers, Learning-oriented assessment, EFL teachers

Introduction

Classroom-based assessment has gained increasing attention over the last decades, and a great deal of attempts have been made to create new trends and developments. As Hamp-Lyons (2007) notes, the “learning culture” is one of those recent trends and developments which has been introduced and supported against an “exam culture.” Instead of preparing students for assessment, the “learning culture” gives primary attention to learners and the learning processes. As it may be implied, in this radical shift, learning-oriented aspects are put before measurement-oriented aspects in classroom assessment with the aim of promoting students' learning in substantial ways. In a sense, these perspectives have laid the theoretical groundwork for movements in classroom assessment, such as formative assessment and assessment for learning (Wiliam, 2011). Proponents of these types of assessment advocate designing, administering, and grading assessments formatively in the classroom to inform pedagogy and learning.

The “learning culture” and the subsequent movements have paved the way for some alternative assessment methods, such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and

conference learning — typically involve the student visiting the teacher's office, usually by appointment, to discuss a particular piece of work or learning process, or both, portfolio assessment, dynamic assessment, project-based assessment, and diary studies (Lee, 2017; Leung et al., 2018). Despite their delicate differences, as Davison (2019) stresses, all the alternative assessment methods rest upon the idea of integrating assessment and instruction to promote student learning. As opposed to traditional assessment methods, alternative assessment methods not only focus on the processes of learning but also place a premium on the outcomes of learning (Brown & Hudson, 1998).

One of the theoretical models which is built on the premise of the “learning culture” is learning-oriented assessment (henceforth, LOA) (Carless, 2015; Turner & Purpura, 2015). In 2004, Purpura conceptualized the term LOA for the first time, and from that point on, it has been receiving burgeoning attention. According to Purpura (2004), LOA can be viewed as the actions taken to collect and interpret evidence about students' performance such that the judgments made lead to promote language development. In other words, LOA can be defined as “assessment where the primary focus is on the potential to develop productive student learning processes” (Carless, 2015, p. 964). LOA places an emphasis on the fact that all levels of assessment, both macro and micro, should have a positive impact not just on the efficiency with which learning occurs but also on the evaluation of the outcomes of that learning (Davidson & Coombe, 2022, pp. 89-95). From this aspect, quality assessment practices are those that result in promoting student learning. When assessment practices are designed based on the tenets of LOA, students are required to use higher levels of cognitive engagement, leading to higher levels of learning.

Considering the robust theoretical foundations of LOA, a range of factors may facilitate or impede its application in the classroom. It is evident that context-related factors play a crucial role in assessment literacy and assessment practices of teachers in the classroom. For example, institutional demands, workload, dominant assessment culture, and the lack of development and training resources are among the determining factors in the implementation of assessment practices in the classroom (Abrar-ul-Hasan & Douglas, 2020). As such, it is important to disclose the factors that may constrain the implementation of LOA in different assessment contexts, including Iran. Arguably, it is essential to reveal if Iranian university-level English teachers have accommodated the new assessment trends and developments such as LOA in their assessment literacy repertoire and if they are considering it in designing, administering, and scoring of classroom assessments (Hamp-Lyons, 2007). Particularly, it is deemed that assessment practices in the classroom are planned and implemented based on the English language teachers' knowledge base and perceptions. Thus, it is of paramount importance to delve into language teachers' perceptions of LOA and the factors which may impede its implementation in the classroom. However, given its recency, it is interesting to note that this issue has remained largely unexplored in the Iranian context. Therefore, this study is an attempt to respond to this lacuna by exploring Iranian language teachers' perceptions of LOA and the factors that may impede its implementation in the classroom. The findings of this study can further our understanding of the status of LOA and provide a window into the factors which impede its implementation in the classroom. It is hoped that language teachers gain clear insights into those factors and take urgent steps to reduce

them, and, accordingly, they can create an environment in the classroom, leading to promoting student learning substantially.

Learning-oriented assessment

LOA is defined as a systematic approach to learning that uses different assessment practices to make the grounds for better planning for student learning, better measurement of students' progress, better identification of the areas for students' improvement, and offering students' measurable improvements (Carless et al., 2006). After its introduction by Purpura in 2004, other scholars have attempted to expand LOA conceptualisation (Carless et al., 2006; Keppell & Carless, 2006). The common point among these attempts is that LOA has been viewed as a set of processes that increase the power of assessment practices in the classroom leading to the promotion of student achievement. As Turner and Purpura (2015) note, LOA is predicated on the overriding premise that learning should be prioritized "when considering the interrelationships across instruction, assessment, and learning" (p. 255). Compared to other similar concepts like assessment for learning, as Keppell and Carless (2006) stress, the outstanding strength of LOA lies in its applicability to all kinds of assessment practices, including both summative and formative as long as the central focus is given to foster student learning. It is of particular note that notwithstanding their similarities, LOA should be considered different from other alternative assessment methods, such as dynamic assessment and diagnostic assessment (Alderson, 2005; Lantolf & Poehner, 2011). As laid out by Carless (2015), the assessment practices which are compatible with LOA feature three interrelated central attributes. First, they are designed and administered to promote deep student learning. Second, they require students to engage in assessing their own, as well as their peers' learning, and to apply assessment criteria accurately and consistently. Third, they provide forward-looking feedback which results in further deep learning among students.

To expand the abovementioned features of LOA, it should be noted that the first outstanding feature pertains to the design of assessment practices. That is, they should be devised in such a way that they be conducive to promising learning and make the way for deeper student learning. In simple terms, assessment practices should be essentially learning oriented because they are designed to answer this question: have they supported student learning? As noted by Carless et al. (2006), assessment practices compatible with LOA are not to measure if students are ready for taking exams; rather, they aim to be as authentic as possible. In a sense, they engage students in learning tasks that they have to handle in communicative contexts outside the walls of the classroom. Assessment practices which are in conformity with LOA are conducive to deep learning since they consider learning outcomes (Fazel & Ali, 2022). Additionally, they are designed and administered to foster students' sensibilities and higher-order thinking skills.

The second feature of LOA calling for further explanation posits that it lays the ground for students' engagement in evaluative practices through self-assessment and peer assessment (Carless, 2015). In this regard, the proponents of LOA have argued that in order to help students detect and address their learning needs and wants, they need to have a good awareness of evaluation criteria (Fazel & Ali, 2022; Smyth & Carless, 2021). For this purpose, they should be exposed to sufficient exemplars and samples. As Bell et al. (2013) note, along with providing students with enough samples to gain a deep

understanding of such evaluation criteria, they should be granted opportunities to critically evaluate their own performance (self-assessment) and their peers' performance (peer assessment) considering the evaluation criteria. When students are able to critically evaluate their own and their peers' performances, they can consolidate their learning and achieve deeper and higher levels of learning (Jalilzadeh et al., 2023, b; Lim, 2007; Rezai et al., 2021).

The third outstanding feature of LOA is offering feedback with the overarching aim of fostering student learning. Feedback is considered effective when it is actionable, timely targeted, and forward-looking (Duncan, 2007). In other words, it is often labeled feed-forward, meaning that "students engage with and apply the feedback not only to the task at hand but also to future tasks that are similar in nature" (Fazel & Ali, 2022, p. 3). It should be stressed that when students are meaningfully and deeply involved in the feedback, it can lead to promoting deep learning. Thus, the assessment practices designed and administered in line with the tenets of LOA accommodated appropriate feedback attuned to students' needs and wants.

Language teachers' conceptions of LOA

When discussing the behaviors of human beings, one of the first things that come to mind is their conceptions. According to Coll and Remesal (2009), conceptions can be understood as a system of beliefs that are organized systematically and are shaped by an individual's experience and interactions with the surrounding environment. As Van den Berg (2002) notes, as conceptions are constructed and consolidated through interactions with the surrounding environment, they bear a social quality. Linked with their educational settings, teachers' conceptions can be viewed as the system of beliefs that shape and affect their interactions with the classroom environment (Prieto & Contreras, 2008; Remesal, 2011). One of the crucial factors that may greatly effect teachers' conceptions is their professional practices which are done to make the educational objectives realized (Murillo & Hidalgo, 2020). Undoubtedly, as Brown and Gao (2015) point out, one of the factors that plays a key role in classroom teaching and assessment practices is teachers' conceptions. For example, it is obvious that if language teachers have not formed comprehensive conceptions of LOA, it is unlikely to happen in their classes.

In the literature, a mass of studies have been conducted on teachers' conceptions and perceptions of different assessment issues. Compatible with the purpose of the study, we critically review some of the studies which have addressed teachers' perceptions of LOA to lay the groundwork for the present study. In their study, Mui So and Hoi Lee (2011) explored secondary teachers' perceptions of implementing assessment for learning. Their findings evidenced that the participants expressed positive attitudes toward assessment for learning because they reasoned that if it can be implemented appropriately, it can significantly improve student learning. Additionally, in the research by Gan et al. (2017), language teachers' conceptions of assessment for learning and how these conceptions were related to their teaching styles were investigated in the Chinese context. Their results documented a significant correlation between the participants' perceptions of assessment for learning and their tendency to incorporate teaching approaches and techniques which resulted in deep and meaningful learning among students. Furthermore, Nasr et al. (2018) examined EFL teachers' perceptions of assessment

learning and its salient features, including scaffolding and monitoring. They gathered the required data using a self-assessment report questionnaire, class observations, and semi-structured interviews. The findings indicated that the participants conceived the implementation of assessment for learning as useful to improve their students' learning. Furthermore, the findings indicated that the participants were of the opinion that scaffolding and monitoring were found to be important regardless of their academic degree, teaching experiences, and level of proficiency taught.

Concerning LOA, Hartle (2020) explored the viability and efficacy of its implementation in the context of an Italian university. The results disclosed that when summative and formative assessment practices were implemented compatible with the tenets of LOA, they exerted significant positive effects on instruction and student learning. Furthermore, Leung (2020) studied the perceptions of a group of teachers who had experienced LOA. The results revealed that the implementation of LOA was affected by curricular infrastructure and contextual dynamics. Moreover, in another study conducted in the Iranian EFL context, Beikmohammadi et al. (2020) investigated the university teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA to assess reading comprehension skills. Their findings unveiled that the participants used both traditional assessment methods and assessment practices aligned with LOA, such as self-assessment and peer assessment to measure students' reading comprehension skills. Finally, in an exploratory study, Fazel and Ali (2022) scrutinized a group of EAP teachers' knowledge and practices with respect to LOA in the two different contexts of Malaysia and Canada. Their findings showed that the participants reported not having sufficient knowledge of the principles and procedures of LOA. In terms of practices, they reported that they did not implement their assessment practices in line with the principles and procedures of LOA.

What can be implied from the above-reviewed studies is that to date, no study has explored university teachers' perceptions of LOA and the factors that may constrain its implementation in the Iranian EFL context. Therefore, this study is an attempt to respond to this gap in the literature by exploring Iranian English university teachers' perceptions of constraints in implementing LOA. To achieve these objectives, the following research question was put forward:

- RQ: What are Iranian English university teachers' perceptions of constraints in implementing learning-oriented assessment in the classroom?

Research method

Design of the study

The researchers employed a phenomenological design to meet the purposes of the current study. In the phenomenological approach, researchers gather data to describe a phenomenon while preserving the spontaneity of individuals' experiences (Priest, 2002). As a qualitative research approach, it is used by researchers to shed light on the different perspectives of a phenomenon (Riazi, 2016). In a sense, it is useful to disclose the experiences of a group of individuals considering the preconceived assumptions that researchers hold about the phenomenon under investigation. Overall, the researchers adopted the phenomenological design to uncover Iranian university-level English teachers' perceptions of constraints in implementing learning-oriented assessment in the classroom.

Participants

The informants were recruited among the EFL teachers at different state universities in Tehran. They were teaching speaking and writing courses to undergraduate students majoring in Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL) and English literature. Purposive sampling was used to recruit the informants in this study. The informants invited for this study were relevant because they equally had the chance to add data that could lead to saturation in the emergent categories and the emerging theory (Creswell, 2007). The researchers, therefore, selected EFL teachers who had been involved in the study and exposed them to a 3-h workshop on learning-oriented assessment. The lead researcher who positioned himself in the study as the teacher nominated the informants and sent each a message through WhatsApp and e-mail, and the interview date was announced to each of the selected EFL teachers. The majority of the informants (12) were met at college, while the remaining (4) were interviewed through online applications such as WhatsApp. Data saturation occurred when the researcher interviewed the 16th teacher. That is, in the last three interviews, no new information was obtained. Therefore, we stopped interviewing when the 16th respondents were interviewed. To have a homogeneous group, the researcher selected EFL teachers with Ph.D. degrees from state universities and teaching experience of no less than 3 years in the English language department.

Research method

As the study addressed the constraints/challenges of practicing LOA in EFL classes, as noted above, it was appropriate to use the phenomenological research method. Phenomenological studies delve into human lived experiences through the descriptions of those involved in the phenomenon. This type of qualitative research is mainly used to study fields with little or no knowledge (Oxford et al., 2018). In this study, the teachers who had experienced practicing LOA were invited to take part in the study. "Individual participation was accepted on a volunteer-only basis after an initial explanation of how the study would be carried out was explained to all individuals present" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 50). In line with research ethics, I (the first author) advised informants of the time parameters and advised them that there might be some follow-up interviews in the next stages of the research process. In-depth interviews were used to collect the data. Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 35) have stated that "Qualitative case study evaluations collect data from in-person interviews, direct observations and written documents such as private diaries."

One type of data collection tool that allows for a deep understanding of the phenomenon is an interview, variants of which include individual face-to-face interviews, electronic interviews, and phone interviews (Tavakoli & Howard, 2012). To carry out the interviews, the interviewer approached possible candidates individually. This was done by briefly introducing himself and his research to see whether they were willing to participate. If their response was affirmative, the researcher made arrangements before the interview session at the participant's earliest convenience and made sure that the individual did not feel "pushed" to participate. Also, in the case of teachers, attempts were made to include teachers with different teaching experiences. As teachers were all proficient in English speaking skills, we conducted the interviews in English. The teachers

were asked to elaborate on the challenges, constraints, and problems while employing LOA principles. All the interviews were digitally recorded.

To do the recordings, the researcher made sure that each participant was aware of the recording and obtained their consent for their vocal responses to be recorded. After each session, the researcher reviewed and listened to each interview once before the transcription. Then, he listened to the recordings again to transcribe the participants' statements and remarks verbatim. Moreover, as the structure of the interviews was informal, the researcher also tried to reflect this informality by recording exactly the colloquial expressions and phrases used by the participants. The transcriptions were carried out using a word processing software (Microsoft Word 2013) to be able to take advantage of available digital data analysis tools.

Moreover, the transcriptions were undertaken on a daily basis, which means the researcher would transcribe the participants' statements after the interview sessions. Each transcription was then checked for the initial phases of the data analysis, which are described in the next section. Usually, the researcher would carry out one or two interviews on a single day, and the rest of the time went to the transcription. Each interview took an average of 30 min, and the whole discussion varied from between 20 and 70 min in duration.

Data analysis

Along with the phenomenological design employed in this study, the researchers analyzed the data moving through a two-phase method. The first phase included reflection, intuition, and production of first textual description, and the second phase entailed consideration and management of the collected data. Concerning the first phase, the first researcher undertook a period of reflection and intuition to generate an initial descriptive account of the topic under investigation. This reflection allowed the first researcher to reach "a logical, systematic and coherent resource for carrying out the analysis and synthesis needed to arrive at essential descriptions of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 50). During this initial reflection, he used personal experience, relevant literature, and the findings of the previous studies to gain correct understanding of the topic and generate an initial written description of the phenomenon (Saldaña, 2013). It acted as a template against which he compared all the data subsequently presented. Regarding the second phase, the first researcher was involved in the collected data. For this purpose, he reread over and over the first participants' generated transcripts. He went through the transcripts to identify that all statements were relevant to the topic under investigation. In doing so, he highlighted all relevant statements and compared them with the initial textual description, remaining alert to prejudices and presuppositions in order not to reject statements that do not readily fit into the initial account. Afterward, he integrated the selected statements into pertinent sections of the initial description. In this way, he created a second textual description out of the initial description plus integrated statements and additional elements. He repeated these steps with the collected data from other participants and produced a new written account of the topic under study. Once the data from all the participants had been considered, the first researcher produced a final written account and sent it to the participants. The underlying reason for this was to check if the final account resonated with their experience of the phenomenon. All

participants confirmed that the final generated account was compatible with the experiences and conceptions of the topic under investigation. This showed that the final findings enjoyed a high level of credibility.

Results

The interviews were analyzed, and the main challenges were classified into three main categories: teacher related, learner related, and institution related. Each type of constraint is described in detail as follows.

Teacher-related constraints

The teacher-related constraints of LOA are divided into five main categories, namely *lack of knowledge of the foundations of LOA*, *inability to design tasks for learning*, *lack of knowledge of LOA practice*, and *lack of knowledge to develop a rubric for assessing the students' progress*, *teachers' resistance to change*, and *teachers' lack of interpretation knowledge*.

Teachers' lack of knowledge about the foundations of LOA

All interviewees believed that they were not familiar with the elements and principles of LOA. The following excerpts exemplify this theme:

Before being exposed to this workshop, I had not heard of the main principles of LOA. In this workshop, I learned about the principles of LOA: designing tasks for learning, students' engagement, feedback and forward. (T3).

Inability to design appropriate tasks for learning

Another constraint teachers face in employing LOA, as reported by 12 teachers, was thematically coded teachers' inability to design tasks for learning. The teachers reported that designing tasks for students with various language proficiency levels is really demanding. For instance, teachers 5, 6, 8, and 10 stated that they prefer to use the tasks and exercises in the handbooks rather than develop individual tasks for each student. Teacher 11 also argued that "I am not good at designing tasks for all language learners because some tasks are easy for a group of language learners and some are difficult."

Lack of knowledge of LOA practice The third teacher-related constraint as quoted by 10 of the teachers was thematically coded as "teachers lack of LOA practice knowledge." Teachers 1, 2, 6, and 8 stated that theoretically speaking, they find LOA interesting, but when it comes to practice, they find it difficult and challenging. Teacher 9 also stated, "it is easy to provide feedback but very difficult to engage all students because of the class size (35 students in each class)." This quotation is in line with teacher 3 who stated that "I am good at theories of LOA and its principles, but unable to monitor all students' learning progress."

Lack of knowledge to develop a rubric for assessing the students' progress Nine teachers stated that in order to assess the students' learning progress, they need to have a valid rubric. As LOA procedure varies based on the language learners' level of proficiency

and learning goals, it is necessary for teachers to develop an assessment rubric for their classes. However, the interviewees mentioned that they could not develop appropriate rubrics. For instance, teacher 8 stated that “there is no objective rubric for assessing the speaking performance of language learners in speaking classes.”

Teachers' resistance to change Resistance to change in the challenge was observed as reported by 8 of the teachers. Overall, assessment practices in the education system of Iran have not changed much. At the individual level, some teachers stated they are used to employing traditional testing approaches. The teachers' comments indicate that, mostly, the requirements set out in LOA approaches are not feasible, because of the time. Some, for example, stated that they continue to evaluate the students as before because they are used to practicing summative evaluation.

Learner-related challenges

Content analysis of the interviews with the teachers revealed that six learner-related challenges lead to difficulties in practicing LOA in EFL classes. Each of these challenges is explained and exemplified in the following sections.

Learners' reluctance to engage in learning As mentioned by 12 teachers, language learners are not always willing to participate in doing the assigned learning tasks, because they find the tasks either difficult or boring. To exemplify this theme, excerpts from interviews with teachers 9 and 10 are mentioned.

Some students ignore doing the assigned tasks. Some do the tasks partially. So how one can practice LOA in classes where the students are not interested in doing the assigned tasks. (T9)

I asked Mina to evaluate her writing in terms of mechanics and syntax. She just submitted it to Grammarly and mailed it to me. In fact, she was not fully engaged in doing the task. (T10)

Students' reluctance to give feedback to the peers Students' reluctance to give comments on their classmates' performance was coded as another constraint for employing LOA in EFL classes. Students do not know how to give feedback to the students when speaking English or writing texts. Participants believed that students need to learn skills and strategies to assess the language tasks completed by their peers. Informants believe that one of the major blocks of LOA is reluctance on the part of students to criticize their classmates' work — a reluctance that has been found by several others including Papinczak et al. (2007), Clifford (1999), and Williams (1992). As university teachers, we have used peer assessment extensively over many years and encountered significant numbers of students who were uncomfortable with its use. For instance, teacher 7 stated: “I have always tried to involve the students in peer assessment; however, I have noticed the students being reluctant to criticize their peers. Sometimes I felt they were unable to give each other any useful advice.”

As teacher 8 stated:

As the students are not qualified to assess the performance of their classmates, they do not engage in the learning process and do not accept to assess the others' performance.

Learners' resistance to the teachers' feedback Fear of learners' resistance to teachers' comments prevents many teachers from using active learning strategies most particularly LOA. As teacher 6 stated, these strategies significantly increase student learning and improve retention in academic programs. However, such a fear discourages them to use LOA strategies in their EFL classes.

Learners' difficulties in assessing others' works Students' difficulties in self-assessing, peer assessing, and journaling their progress hinder teachers from employing LOA strategies. Participants stated that in most cases, only the teacher can give feedback to students' performance on language tasks. Since teachers, who are superior to the language learners in aspects of language, have an irreplaceable status in giving comments and feedback, students are not sure if they can substitute for teachers to provide peers with qualified feedback. Second, language learners do not trust peer feedback. Students admire teachers' authority and rely on their commentary, and they are not sure of their peers' ability to give feedback and thereby distrust feedback from peers, especially peers they consider to be of lower competence. Third, positive feedback is absent in peer feedback. For a long time, most researchers and instructors consider feedback as error correction. This view also affects students deeply.

As teachers 5, 10, 11, 9, and 3 stated, to employ LOA in their classes, they need to have learners engaged in assessing themselves and their peers. That is why they avoid employing active learning strategies and LOA.

Students' dependence on teacher summative assessment As reported by the informants, the students' preferences for summative assessments given at the conclusion of an instructional period are another aspect that hinders LOA. This finding confirms the quotation by teacher 13 who stated that although summative assessments are evaluative, rather than diagnostic, the students and teachers prefer summative assessments to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching, and make placement decisions, among different applications.

Institute-related constraints

Institute-related constraints consist of three main categories. Each is explained in detail as follows.

Top-down assessment policies The first subcategory of school/institute constraints as reported by the informants was coded as evaluation policies. The interviewees argued that top-down policies imposed on teachers by schools and institutes make interference

with teachers' performance in the classroom. That is, they have to abide by the policies handed down to the teachers by school authorities. Schools and institutes determine (a) classroom size, (b) class time, (c) syllabus, (d) teaching activities, (e) evaluation method, and (f) contact with students' parent.

We as teachers have no autonomy to practice what is in our minds because school regulations are obstacles. For instance, I feel peer assessment enhances the language learners' academic retention, but school/institute managers restrict our activities.

Once I complained about the syllabus preassigned by the institute to the supervisor, he just asked me to follow the rules of the institute. Also, most of my colleagues were dissatisfied with the tests designed by the institutes but they were mostly irresponsible

One problem I have with some institutes I work for is the time allocation for teaching a lesson unit. They force us to teach each unit in one session, while employing LOA practices, we need more time.

One policy which institute pushes is for the teachers not to exchange any phone numbers directly with students and their' parents while they are not at school, but to practice LOA we need to contact students and give them feedback to see how well they did.

A study done by Ayeni (2017) on major constraints faced by teachers and the findings are as follows: excessive workload, ill-equipped laboratory, ill-equipped library, shortage of instructional materials, lack of students' learning materials, and congested class size. Besides, according to Salkovsky et al. (2015), if the policy-makers and administrators at the school/institute level do not support the teachers, they will leave the profession, and soon they will face burnout.

Reluctance to promote teacher autonomy in practicing LOA Another challenge as reported by informants was thematically coded as the institute's reluctance to promote teacher autonomy in practicing LOA. Teachers need to follow the institutes' policies for evaluation. They have to assess the language learners' assessment at the end of the semester based on their performances on mid-term and final assessments. Institutes resist their teachers' innovations and autonomy in assessment

Institutes' emphasis on summative assessment Summative assessment is the preferred type of assessment in the majority of language institutes in the context in which this study was undertaken. There is an evaluation center that determines the time and place of the final evaluation. The score of each language learner consists of two major components: classroom activities and engagement (20%) and the score on the formal final examination (80%). Therefore, it is inferred that summative assessment is mostly practiced, and there is little room for other types of assessment.

Discussion

This study aimed at exploring the constraints which hinder the teachers' use of LOA in EFL classes. Interviews with 16 EFL teachers were analyzed thematically. The constraints were coded into three main categories: teacher-, student-, and institute-related constraints. Each of these categories consists of several subcategories. With regard to the teacher-related constraints, findings revealed that teachers' lack of knowledge about the foundations of LOA is the main aspect that hinders the use of LOA principles and strategies. This finding echoes Popham's (2004, 2011) on the vital role of teachers' assessment literacy in students' learning and stated that assessment literacy and assessment knowledge should include teachers' understanding of the essential issues, concepts, foundations, and procedures in an assessment that influence educational decisions. He suggested that many teachers do not know much about assessment (Popham, 2009). He also recommends that teachers need to develop a level of knowledge and practice in assessment as the suitable and correct use of assessment acts as a powerful device for students' learning (Popham, 2011).

Teachers' inability to design appropriate tasks for learning and lack of knowledge of LOA practice were reported to be the other barriers and constraints in employing LOA. This finding, in fact, confirms the results of a large number of studies on assessment literacy (e.g., Baker & Riches, 2018; Berry et al., 2019; Farhady & Tavassoli, 2017, 2018; Giraldo, 2018; Koh et al., 2018; Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Ölmezer-Öztürk & Aydın, 2018, 2019; Taylor, 2013; Yastıbaşa & Takkaç, 2018), which indicate that English language teachers do not have an adequate knowledge of language assessment issues and practices. Another commonality among the abovementioned studies as confirmed by Farhady and Tavassoli (2021) is the gap between what teachers know about assessment and what they apply in the real classroom contexts.

It was also found that teachers resist innovations in assessment. Such resistance is in line with Ketelaar et al. (2012) who noted that some teachers in the school identify themselves with innovation and changes in teaching and evaluation activities, and some rarely find the support of their colleagues who do welcome innovation. Therefore, lack of cooperation among the teachers can lead them to individual perceptions, values, and beliefs, which "contribute either to the adoption of traditions that decrease professional expectations or to innovations introduced by single teachers alone" (p.15). EFL teachers seem to be no exception, and they try to stick to traditional assessment principles and methods.

The second main constraint of the teachers' use of LOA was thematically coded as learner related such as the learners' reluctance to engage in the learning process. This finding echoes Choi (2015) who reported different reasons of his Korean students in a US graduate school for lack of engagement in class such as poor command of the English terms relevant to their discipline, face-saving, and the influence of Korean classroom mannerisms. Dawit and Deneke (2015) examined the causes of first-year students' limited participation in EFL classrooms with reference to Ethiopian public universities and concluded that different factors like learners, teachers, teaching methods, and physical environment limited students' participation in the classroom. Alshoraty (2014) found in his study that the reasons related to faculty members

played a more important role in preventing students from participating in class discussions than the reasons related to students.

With regard to the third constraint, it could be argued that this finding echoes the suggestions made by some of the researchers in the field. The first subcategory of the institute-related constraints was an institute policy. This finding is in line with Salkovsky et al. (2015), who argue that if the policymakers and administrators at the school/institute level do not support the teachers, they would face burnout and soon quit the profession. The second subcategory was classroom size which is in line with Iqbal and Khan's (2012) study on overcrowded classrooms and their effect on teachers' work. They concluded that it was impossible to teach effectively in crowded classes, and teachers would encounter instructional, discipline, physical, and evaluation constraints. In addition, the third subcategory was classroom time. Similarly, Tayfur and Celikten (2008) emphasized that when there are no rules in the classroom, it affects the learning environment, and the teachers cannot manage their time to finish their lessons in the classroom.

Concluding remarks

The present learning culture and subsequent educational movements have paved the way for some alternative assessment methods, such as self-assessment, peer assessment, conference assessment, portfolio assessment, dynamic assessment, project-based assessment, and LOA. As assessment is an integral component of the curriculum which depends on a number of issues including the policies of institutes, learners' preferences and learning strategies, and teachers' competence and cognition, coordination among the components is necessary. Lack of coordination among the components of the curriculum hinders the teachers' use of alternative assessments most importantly LOA which requires teachers' autonomy, cognition, and competence for employing LOA in their classes independently but through dynamic interactions with colleagues and other influential agents such as school educational administrators. As this study has not addressed suggestions and guidelines for fostering the use of LOA in language institutes, it is recommended that other researchers further investigate how one could overcome the abovementioned constraints through large-scale studies. It is also worth noting that the findings reported in this study are context-bound; therefore, replication of the study in other contexts through employing mixed-methods research designs might explore the hidden reasons for teachers' constraints in employing LOA in different contexts and with different student and teacher populations.

Abbreviations

EFL	English as a foreign language
LOA	Learning-oriented assessment
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
US	United States

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Authors' contributions

All authors contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and analysis were performed by both authors. The first draft of the manuscript was written by author A, and both authors commented on the manuscript. The authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Authors' information

Kaveh Jalilzadeh is a Ph.D. and Lecturer in TESOL at the University Istanbul-Cerrahpasa. His research interests are language assessment, research methodology, and teacher development, School of Foreign Languages, Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa, Türkiye

Christine Coombe is Associate Professor of TESOL at Dubai Men's College, UAE. Her main interests are testing and assessment, positive psychology, and well-being, English and General Education Department, Dubai Men's College, UAE.

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