Alternative Assessment in L2 Writing Classes: Tunisian EFL Teachers’ Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract: The present study investigated the perceptions and practices of a group of Tunisian EFL writing teachers regarding alternative assessment. The objectives of the research were twofold. It first sought to explore the teachers’ conception and implementation of alternative assessment techniques. Furthermore, it attempted to identify major obstacles impeding the adoption of alternative assessment as well as propose some potential solutions to the perceived issues. In total, sixteen EFL teachers from four different universities in Tunisia took part in this research. Two data collection instruments, namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, were used to elicit teachers’ perceptions and practices. The findings suggest that teachers exhibited favorable attitudes towards alternative assessment. Yet despite their enthusiasm towards it, the practice of alternative assessment is fairly limited compared to traditional assessment. Various obstacles were identified by the teachers including restrictive curriculum, insufficient training time constraints, class size, and students’ attitudes. Teachers highlighted the importance of adequate training and the provision of the necessary resources for better and more efficient integration of alternative assessment methods in L2 writing classes.

Key words: Alternative assessment, Teachers’ perceptions, Alternative Assessment practices, Challenges

1. Introduction

Assessment is an integral part in virtually any learning journey (Singh et al., 2022). Assessment in language teaching is identified as the systematic and substantially grounded process of collecting and analyzing data with the intention to measure their progress and language development (Brown, 2004). According to Brown and Green (2006), this process is key as it informs decision-making and shapes educational practices. Commonly confounded with testing which occurs at a predetermined date/time and is designed to assess a specific portion of knowledge at a given time, assessment is an ongoing process that is wider in scope (Brown, 2004).

Various forms of assessment are discerned in the literature. These broadly fit into two categories: traditional and alternative assessment (Nasab, 2015). Traditional assessment is summative in nature and primarily focuses on appraising and grading students’ performance using tools such as multiple-choice tests, C-tests, true-false tests, short-answer tests, and fill-in tests (Ghaicha and Omarkaly, 2018).

Such assessment is generally criticized for failing to tap the students’ full range of abilities and provides no “information about students’ attitudes, motivation, interests, and learning strategies” (Genesee & Hamayan 1994, p.229). Additionally, traditional tests are found to promote limited memorization and repetition and in Bailey’s (1998) view, they are “one-shot”, inauthentic, and indirect (p. 205).

Due to their limitations, traditional forms of assessment have lately been complemented by alternative assessment methods that depart from standardized and normative tests and are more congruent with communicative student-centered teaching approaches (Fitriyah et al., 2022). The term alternative assessment according to Alderson and Banerjee (2001) encompasses an array of
assessments strategies that are “less formal than traditional ones, with “formative function, low-stake consequences and beneficial washback” (p. 228). Such assessment forms provide students with ample opportunities to be “evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce” (Huerta-Macias, 1995, p.339). Additionally, alternative assessment forms promote the application of high-order thinking skills in real life situations and authentic context (Al Ruqeishi, 2015). Unlike traditional assessment that heavily relies on tests and scores, alternative assessment draws upon various sources including self-assessments, portfolios, peer-assessments, performance assessments, diaries, reading logs, writing folders, projects, teachers’ observations, teacher-student conferences, audio-visual recordings, checklists (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018).

2. Literature Review

Numerous empirical studies of various scales and different settings have consistently attested to the benefits of alternative assessment. In language learning contexts alternative assessment has been found to promote learners’ proficiency (Nasri 2015), critical thinking skills (Brown, 2004), as well as motivation, active engagement and autonomy (Janisch, 2007). Research has equally underscored the strong interconnection between the above stated benefits on the one hand and teachers’ perceptions and their assessment practices on the other (Majid, 2011). Indeed, while a solid understanding and positive attitudes towards alternative assessment can usher in successful implementation, a limited conception of the principles of alternative assessment can undermine proper application (Ghaicha and Omarkaly, 2018). Among the largest scale studies investigating teachers perceptions towards alternative assessment is Stemberger and Petrusic’s (2017). This research was carried out in Slovenia and involved 855 primary school teachers. The results indicate that Teachers have a fairly limited grip of alternative assessment theoretical underpinnings and instructional strategies. This lack of knowledge had led the participants to favor traditional assessment in their practice. The researchers propose that teacher training programs should advance assessment literacy.

Similar findings were elicited by Lam (2019). Set in an ESL context in Hong Kong, this study explored classroom-based writing assessment conception and practices by sixty-six secondary school teachers. a questionnaire, telephone interviews, and classroom observations were analyzed qualitatively to evaluate teachers’ assessment literacy. Self-reported findings suggest that overall, the participants in this research procure pertinent assessment knowledge and hold positive views about alternative writing assessments. The empirical data from classroom observation however revealed that some respondents had a partial understanding of assessment of learning (AoL) and assessment for learning (Afl), but not assessment as learning (AaL) (Lam, 2019, p. 78). Based on these findings, the researcher advanced that “that teachers need to enhance knowledge base and practices on AaL, and an awareness of their new roles as assessors of writing” (p. 99).

Investigating the perceptions of a group of Moroccan EFL public high school teachers, Ghaicha and Omarkaly (2018) found that the practice of traditional assessment is prevalent in spite of the positive attitudes expressed towards alternative assessment. Interview results suggest that this reluctance to use new forms of assessment does not reflect the inadequacy or lack of quality of alternative assessment methods, but rather the absence of conditions necessary for their application. Indeed, the participants in this research identified various obstacles impeding the implementation of alternative forms of assessment, including time constraints, class size, and lack of training are the (Ghaicha and Omarkaly, 2018). According to the researchers it is primordial to provide teachers with the necessary trainig and resources to overcome these issues.

Given their major significance, exploring teachers’ perceptions is therefore deemed necessary before embarking in any alternative assessment practice endeavor (Stemberger and Petrusic, 2017). Perhaps more pressing is the need to investigate L2 writing teachers perceptions in particular given the shortage of research on the matter (Lam, 2019). Exasperated by this gap in research, the present study aims to explore the perceptions of Tunisian EFL writing instructors of alternative assessment and their current assessment practices. Additionally, the study sets to identify potential challenges to the implementation of alternative assessment procedures and accordingly advance some recommendations on how to overcome them.
3. Research Questions

In line with the above stated research objectives, the following research questions have been put forth.

a) What attitudes do Tunisian EFL writing instructors have about alternative assessment and its effectiveness?

b) What alternative assessment techniques do the teachers use in their L2 writing classes?

c) What challenges do the teachers face in implementing alternative assessment techniques in their L2 writing classes?

d) What measures do the teachers suggest to enhance the implementation of the new alternative assessment techniques in their classes?

4. Research Design and Methodology

To address the research questions stated above, a mixed-method approach that combines forms of qualitative and quantitative methodologies was deemed most appropriate. Such design is believed to compensate for inherent method weaknesses, leverage inherent method strengths, and mitigate inevitable method biases (Cresswell, 2009, p18). Two primary data sources were utilized in this research namely questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. Inspired and adapted from previous research with similar focus (Krnčević Purić, 2020; Ghaicha & Omarkaly, 2018; Singh, et al, 2022), the questionnaire consisted of four sections, each addressing a separate research question. A set of closed-ended, multiple-choice and rating questions were designed to elicit quantitative data. On the other hand, the semi-structured interviews were geared towards gleaning more in-depth insights into the issue under investigation and was the main source of qualitative data (Cresswell, 2009).

The present study is set in an EFL context in Tunisia and involves the voluntary participation of sixteen Tunisian L2 writing instructors. The teachers were purposefully sampled in accordance with the research objectives (Patton, 2002). All teachers are L2 writing instructors at university and have extensive teaching experience ranging between 7 and 18 years. The sampled teachers are equally distributed according to four different universities in Tunisia, with four representatives from the universities of Jendouba, Kairouan, Sfax and Sousse respectively.

5. Results

5.1 Teachers perceptions and attitudes about Alternative Assessment

The first research question attempted to investigate teachers’ perceptions of Alternative assessment. To address this matter the respondents had to answer a cluster of questions invoking their conceptions of and attitudes towards alternative assessment. Data analysis suggests that most respondents (56%) report having a good understanding of alternative assessment methods (43% agree and 12, 5% strongly agree). 18,75% admit to lacking sufficient understanding of the term, while 4 participants strongly disagree that their knowledge of alternative assessment is good. Data gleaned from the interviews gave deeper insight into teachers’ conceptions of alternative assessment. Commenting on her understanding of the term a teacher states: “I believe I have a fairly good grasp of what alternative assessment is, however there is always room for me to improve my practices and update them. I would love to receive some training that can help me do this” (T3). Another candidly reported “I can judge my knowledge as somewhat restricted. I have some idea but not a detailed one of what alternative assessment is” (T13).

To further explore teachers’ knowledge and mastery of alternative assessment, the latter had to select the criteria they think represent alternative assessment the most. Worth noting that all the features delineated in the questionnaire are applicable to alternative assessment (Brown and Hudson, 1998). The results are presented in the table below.
Table 1: Teachers’ Conception of Alternative Assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Alternative assessments features</th>
<th>NB of teachers</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. necessitate students to perform, produce, create or do something</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. use real-world contexts or simulations</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. allow students to extend the day-to-day classroom activities</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. permit students to be assessed on what they usually do in class every day</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. use tasks/activities that represent meaningful instructional activities</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. focus on process as well as products</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. tap into higher-order thinking and problem-solving skills</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. provide information about both the strengths and weaknesses of students</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. are multicultural sensitive when properly administered</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. ensure that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. encourage open disclosure of standards and rating criteria</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>31.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. call on teachers to perform new instructional and assessment roles</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>81.25%</td>
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Statistically, a majority of the teachers interviewed in this study 68.75% (Nb 11) showed a fairly good awareness of alternative assessment picking 7 out of all 12 criteria. 2 teachers selected all the features. Only 3 teachers out of the total 16 teachers picked 5 features showing a limited conception of alternative assessment. The interview explored teachers understanding of alternative assessment in further detail. Teachers highlighted key characteristics of alternative assessment including its ongoing, non-intrusive and authentic nature. A teacher for example explained: “alternative assessment has to be part of the daily class activities. It doesn’t have to look like a test. It can simply be a review game. This is a more relaxed way to evaluate students” (T12). Another comment read: “for me the idea of assessment goes hand in hand with learning, that is it should be personalized and continuous. The best alternative assessment tasks should involve functional real-life activities. For example, when teaching argumentative essays, I like to ask students to write about topics of interest to them” (T8).

Teachers’ attitude about alternative assessment were overwhelmingly favorable with 14 (87.5%) teachers strongly agreeing to the statement “alternative assessment gives a more comprehensive evaluation of students learning compared to traditional assessment”. Teachers further underscored the effectiveness of alternative assessment methods in the interview stating that “unlike end of term exams that evaluate students’ progress against predetermined learning outcomes, alternative assessment is better at showing a more detailed picture of individual students’ learning at different stages” (T 11). The interviewed teachers identified several advantages of the practice including boosting learners’ engagement and involvement in process writing. Teachers equally highlighted the benefits on students writing as well as reflective skills.

5.2 Teachers Practice of Alternative Assessment

The second research question in this study relates to teachers’ actual practice of alternative assessment methods. Most teachers acknowledged that the use alternative assessment forms in their L2 classes. The following graph shows the findings in this regard.
Graph 1: Teachers Practice of Alternative Assessment

Reporting on their assessment practice, the majority of teachers (56.25%) acknowledge embedding alternative assessment only occasionally in their L2 classes. 25% of the teachers claim using some forms of alternative assessment sometimes while none of them resorts to alternative assessment techniques on a regular basis. Equally, teachers in this study identified a variety of forms of alternative assessment. Among those are self-assessment, peer assessment, technology assisted assessment or a combination of these different forms. According to most teachers (Nb 8), using checklists and rubrics to assess writing is their most utilized form of self-assessment. 4 teachers identified using feedback forms for peer assessment purposes at different stages of writing. 3 teachers said that they sometimes use technology for students to assess their own learning using grammar and spelling checkers in Microsoft word or by using online assessment tools like Grammarly for example. One teacher said that she likes her students to maintain a writing log with all the essays.

The findings also suggest that despite the positive perception of alternative assessment methods, teachers still revert to traditional assessment forms, namely tests. Indeed, none of the respondents acknowledged relying exclusively on alternative assessment forms while all of them admitted using traditional assessment. A minority, 12.5% (Nb 2) of the teachers, claimed using a combination of both forms.

The interview shed some light into this flagrant discrepancy between teachers’ perceptions of alternative assessment on the one hand and their actual practices on the other. Commenting on this, a teacher explained “I understand the contradiction here, but we are constrained by the official curriculum that requires a standard test for all classes. Unfortunately, with the existing LMD system, teachers’ hands are tied” (T16). Another teacher highlighted students’ reluctance to engage in other forms of assessment and overt preference for traditional scores saying that “most students prefer grades given by their teachers. It helps to have feedback from other sources but I believe students care more about final grades” (T2). In the same vein another teacher remarked: “students don’t usually trust their own ability to reflect on and self-assess themselves let alone other students” (T11). Finally, some respondents evoked teachers’ complacency with old methods and resistance to change. One noted “while I am sure all of the teachers agree that alternative assessment is more student centered, it is more convenient to have tests to judge students’ performance. Teachers are satisfied with test that have proven efficient over the years. So why the change?” (T10). “Alternative assessment requires more commitment and creativity. Not all teachers are ready to take on that burden honestly, I am not sure what strategies to use. I am used to tests” (T15) another teacher commented.

5.3 Challenges to the Implementation of Alternative Assessment

Albeit the relatively low frequency of alternative assessment method implementation by the interviewed teachers, the latter identified several challenges impeding the practice. Among the reiterated complaints teachers expressed is the limited class time. Teachers feel inhibited by the ninety-minute-long classes that are barely enough to finish the official curriculum. One teacher mentioned that it is already hard as it is to go over all the required content in one hour and a half per week. This is very little time and this doesn’t help to do assessment regularly and in a creative way” (T14). The situation is perhaps worsened by the large number of students per class as well as their erratic
attendance. According to one participant it doesn’t make sense to assess different students each time. I never have the same students in my classes three weeks in a row at most” (T9).

Teachers equally evoked the very nature of alternative assessment being different from traditional forms. A teacher explained at the end of the day we need scores and test are the most reliable and objective ways of getting that” (T4). The same concern about the validity of alternative assessment came from another respondent doubting: alternative assessment can help individuals but is not measurable or at least I am not sure how to turn self-assessment into a score for example” (T6). Another challenge teachers face is their own ability to implement alternative assessment in the best possible way. In fact, 14 teachers (87.5%) reported needing to take some training on alternative assessment. In this respect one participant noted: while I feel that I know what alternative assessment is, I would really benefit from any training on this topic. I have tried a couple of ideas in my classes like checklists but I am willing to learn more” (T7). Another teacher admitted honestly, I have never had any formal training on assessment. I just educated myself through conferences, workshops, etc. but I have never had any feedback on my own practice and how efficient and reliable it is” (T1).

An equally important challenge teachers mentioned is the restrictive curriculum that impedes any creativity as it requires specific tasks namely writing and final scores. This obstacle was explained earlier as the main inhibitor for teachers not to implement alternative assessment. Finally, teachers mentioned students’ perceptions and attitudes towards new alternative forms of assessment which do not necessarily align with their expectations of assessment. A comment by one of the respondents read I tried using peer assessment. Most students wanted me to give them feedback and scores. Students’ attitudes can be negative and hold back any ambitious practice” (T12).

5.4 Recommendations for Alternative Assessment Implementation

A final objective of the present research was to identify possible solutions to the challenges teachers face in implementing alternative assessment. The open-ended questions in the questionnaire gave the opportunity to teachers to suggest some answers to the identified problems. Most teachers called for reforming the official curriculum to align with the shift in assessment strategies. Changes should touch upon the timing, the content and assessment criteria in their opinions. Among the numerous comments that stress the urgency of change, one reads: LMD is perhaps the worst system ever, teachers have less time to teach writing. In the past it used to be 2hours per class. Now it’s 1 hour and a half. Also we have to give final scores on a written test. The test description is abiding, we cannot avoid it… for any change to occur in assessment, the LMD needs to be get rid of or reformed “(T14). Similarly, several calls were made for providing adequate training with hands on practice of different forms of alternative assessment. A teacher said in this respect: Teachers have to have a standardized training on assessment in their training. Also professional development is very important to adjust and update skills” (T3). An equally important recommendation suggests involving students in the reforms by raising their awareness about different alternative assessment methods and their advantages. According to many teachers, Tunisian students prefer scores and tests because these are the only methods of assessment they have been introduced to. Changing their hearts to be more welcoming to other forms might require awareness raising. A teacher commented: our educational system and culture in general promotes competition. We overvalue scores at the expense of real learning. Students may find it hard to do assignments without being scored. Therefore, for their involvement it may help to inform them and train them to accept the new forms” (T10).

6. Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the present study suggest that Tunisian L2 writing instructors report having a fairly good understanding of alternative assessment and hold positive attitudes about it. Yet these favorable views are not reflected in their instructional practices. The findings with regard to teachers’ perceptions are in consistence with previous research with similar focus in other contexts (Nasri et al. 2010). For example, Letina (2014), found that teachers self-reported knowledge of alternative assessment can be at odds with their own practices. The researcher explains that it can be face threatening to teachers to admit to limited knowledge, therefore investigating teachers’ perceptions should be complimented by investigating their practices, as the latter could be more revelatory. In line with this contention, teachers in the present study identified only a few forms of alternative assessment, namely self, and
peer assessment. Teachers ignored to mention other forms like portfolios, error logs, journals, conferencing, reflections, etc. This somehow highlights the insufficient grip of the alternative assessment tools, and was therefore reflected in the teachers’ limited practice.

In addition to teacher-related factors, this study invoked a number of other contextual constraints that influence the practice alternative assessment. The teachers found the official curriculum, with its predetermined assessment modes and limited timing to be extremely inhibiting. Equally, the insufficient knowledge and lack of adequate training as well as students’ attitudes were among the identified challenges to the implementation of alternative assessment. Other research studies identified similar issues, albeit with some contextual differences. For instance, Pfannkuch (2002) blamed the top-down approaches to assessment and education system for the actual teachers’ assessment practices. In a similar vein, the study by Yan (2008) reported that teachers perceive alternative assessment to be more demanding and time consuming than traditional assessment. The issues of time constraints and lack of adequate training were supported by the findings of Ghaicha and Omarkaly (2018)’s study. The problem related to students’ expectations and preferences are context bound however and were not found in another research. Therefore, any implementation of alternative assessment should be sensitive to the general context.

Finally, teachers in this study came up with some solutions to overcome the challenges they identified. Reforming the curriculum, enhancing teacher training programs and raising students’ awareness about the benefits of alternative assessment are some of the recommendations advanced by the teachers. Similar calls for “broadening and deepening teachers’ knowledge base about alternative assessment methods and the underlying theory is critical” were advanced elsewhere in the literature (Janisch, 2007).

7. Research Implications

Several implications can be forwarded in light of the findings of the present study. First, the implementation of any alternative assessment strategies is closely tied to the educational system. While a flexible curriculum allows for more creativity in assessment methods, a traditional system inhibits teachers and restricts their options. It is therefore essential to reconsider the existing LMD system and give more room for alternative assessment methods into the writing curriculum. Furthermore, teachers training is of paramount importance to insure effective adherence to the principles and practice of alternative assessment approaches. This study suggests enhancing teacher training with alternative assessment content as well as providing continuous professional development opportunities covering the necessary knowledge, supportive environment and practical strategies. Finally, given the importance of students’ attitudes about their own learning, it seems fitting to raise their awareness about the benefits of alternative assessment in comparison with traditional tests and scores they are used to.

8. Future Research

This study attempted to investigate Tunisian EFL teachers’ perceptions and practices about alternative assessment. Notwithstanding its limited scope, the present research helped shed some light on alternative assessment strategies in an EFL context. Broadening the scope of the present research by including teachers of other subjects like literature or civilization for instance or other contexts could usher in a deeper understanding of contextual perceptions and practices. Similarly, exploring the perspectives of students and other stakeholders, such as administrators and curriculum designers, can shed some light on their perceptions about alternative assessment. Furthermore, as indicated by this study there seems to be a gap between teachers self-reported knowledge of alternative assessment and their actual practices. It would be valuable to explore this discrepancy in light of other variables including teaching experience or background for example. Exploring the influence of existing assessment policies can highlight their adherence to communicative language learning approaches promoted by the official curriculum. Additionally, designing and conducting longitudinal studies that can track the implementation of alternative assessment over time can give better insights into the long-term effects of these practices on student learning.
9. Conclusion

This study shed some light on the perceptions, attitudes and instructional practices of a group of Tunisian EFL teachers about alternative assessment. While the instructors expressed mostly favorable attitudes towards alternative assessment, their actual implementation fell short of their perceived knowledge and conceptions. This inconsistency between attitudes and practices calls for further exploration and understanding of the factors that influence teachers' instructional decisions. The study furthermore revealed that a combination of internal and contextual constraints impedes the adoption of alternative assessment. Teachers’ insufficient knowledge reflected in limited practice of Alternative assessment. Similarly, the restrictive nature of the official curriculum with its limited timing gives little opportunities for the implementation of alternative forms of assessment. The findings with regard to these challenges emphasize the importance of addressing them in order to promote the effective implementation of alternative assessment practices.

References