PRE-SERVICE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS AND PREFERENCES OF ASSESSMENT PRACTICES

Dr. Shaban Al-Dabbus (a)
Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain

Dr. Hala Fawzi (b)
Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain

Dr. Hasan M. Al-Wadi (c)
Bahrain Teachers College, University of   Bahrain

ABSTRACT: *Understanding the role of assessment and the differential effects on advancing students' learning processes is still one of the most investigated areas in higher education. This study was a quantitative study which investigated the perceptions and preferences of pre-service teachers of the assessment practices. The participant students were preservice English language pre-service in English Language Education Department at Bahrain Teachers College, University of Bahrain. The findings indicated that the assessment practices used by instructors had an essential impact on students' motivation; preparation for future learning tasks, and evaluation of study progress. The findings also revealed that while peer assessment is one of the least preferred assessment methods, presentations, self-assessment and research paper were the top preferences. The study outcome relates to previous research while also providing a better understanding into the link between individual differences in summative assessment preferences and the learning strategies used by students throughout the years of specialization which might offer instructors way forward for improving their educational practices.*

KEYWORDS: pre-service, English language teachers, perceptions, preferences, assessment practices

INTRODUCTION

Assessment has always been playing an integral part in the educational process in the higher education context. Many researchers (e.g. Carless, 2007; Craddock and Mathias, 2009) state that learning is incomplete without assessment because assessment enables the instructors to collect pieces of evidence about their students' achievement, grading and explain their results in order to decide whether the learning outcomes have been achieved or that some changes and modifications are required. Hanna and Dettmer (2004) in this regard view assessment as "the process of gathering data" since the instructors will need to prove the achievement of their intended learning outcomes through the data they gather about their teaching and their students' learning. More specifically, Jones (2005) provide more specific view and mentions that assessment is represented indefinite procedures, such as testing that can be used by instructors to check the students learning progress, give feedback and provide on-going direction for improvement and adjustment in learning and instruction.

Generally, assessment is classified as either formative; such as observing students while conducting a learning task, self and peer assessment, question and answer session, application of information, a summary of main points and reflection, or summative especially when it takes place after the learning is completed and provides information and feedback that sums up the teaching and learning process. This type of assessment is usually conducted in the traditional forms, such as quizzes, midterm and final examinations. However, projects and portfolios could also be used as summative assessments (Hanna & Dettmer, 2004).

Despite this diversity in the assessment methods, it has been more emphasized that it is the teacher's responsibility to decide which assessment tool should be used to assess his/her learners' performance, particularly in the higher education context where academics nowadays are given more responsibility to design and implement diverse methods of assessment in order to fulfil two main demands, which are to increase students' motivation and to achieve quality assurance as represented in achieving the intended learning outcomes (Lynam and Cachia, 2018). Gibbs and Simpson (2004) find that students' achievement and success in higher education is highly influenced by the assessment system(s) and types that are practiced by their institutions and instructors. Meyer et al. (2010) justify for this finding in the way how assessment can affect the existence of educational institutions or its reputation as a higher education entity within the local or even the international level.

Indeed, the above trends towards how assessment policy and procedures have been considered in higher education have directly impacted the nature and design of the assessment policy. As Hattie and Timperley (2007) explain that if an assessment is well designed, effective and meaningful feedback can be obtained, which will contribute to and improve the design of the existing academic programs which will consequently affect the shape of the learning experience that students will go through during their study in the college. Paradoxically, if it is poorly designed, assessment can hinder learning by causing anxiety and low self-esteem and motivation among students who study at university or any other institutions within the higher education context (Huxham et al., 2012; Betts et al., 2009). This fact has resulted in a growing need to obtain a comprehensive understanding of students' perceptions and attitudes towards the assessment methods they are exposed to during their university study as it will assist in identifying more accurate methods and procedures to improve the overall academic programs as well as the quality of the academic practices in its both ways, instruction and learning. Struyven et al. (2005), for example, explains that establishing successful assessment policy requires determination of the students' perceptions of it because it will guide and direct to what learning environment should be experienced and achieved. In addition, exploring the learners' perceptions is seen as a solution to go over the 'assessment dilemma' as viewed by Gibbs (2003). According to him, identifying the students' views of their current assessments will lead to positively encourage them to spend more time and effort on studying as well as not overwhelming their teachers who might lack the time for excessive marking.

Finally, investigating the learners' perceptions of their assessment methods can positively impact the emotionality of these learners as well as the workload of their instructors. Craddock and

Mathias (2009) assert this finding and explains that constant survey of the students' attitudes towards their assessment will lead to more liberal learning in which students are given an opportunity to decide on the choice of assessment method they prefer to have during their learning. Craddock and Mathias (2009) and Gibbs (2006) consider this the transformational target point which should occur to assessment in the higher education context.

In the target context of the current study, the assessment policy at the Bahrain Teachers College (BTC) is shaped into both; formative and summative assessments, with a preference to the former, in which assessment methods are shaped in providing feedback during the teaching and learning process to consistently evaluate students' progress and decide who are qualified to be transferred to the following level. The justification behind the preference of using formative assessments is that it allows instructors to form a more detailed understanding of the student's abilities, which can be used to inform remediation, re-teaching, and instructional strategy, particularly in the context of teacher education preparation programs (Gibbs, 2006). Consequently, and in order for assessment to achieve the goal of advancing student learning, academics in this regard need to understand students' perceptions of assessment as this will allow to establishing an accurate view of any interventions that might be done to the current assessment policy and procedures which will eventually have several differential effects on students' learning processes (Lynam & Cachia, 2018, Lizzio & Wilson, 2013).

Research aims
This study aims to identify common types of assessment used to assess English teacher candidates during their study at BTC, explore English teacher candidates' perceptions of those assessment methods, find out the impact of the current assessments on learning form the students' point of view and to suggest alternatives for improving assessment policy for English teacher candidates at BTC.

Research questions
There are three main research questions that were attempted to answer in this study, which are:
1.   How do BTC pre-service English language teachers perceive assessment methods used by their instructors?
2.   To what extent such assessment methods influence their learning?
3.   What assessment methods are preferred by BTC English   specialty students, and why?

Significance of the research
The significance of this study can be shown in its attempt to initiate collaboration between instructors and students to agree on specific assessment methods to assess the progress and development of students at BTC. As well, the study can inform policy regarding what assessment methods should be more reinforced for teaching and preparing English teacher candidates at BTC in specific and any other teacher preparation programs that share same contextual features.

METHODOLOGY

The research design used to answer the set of research questions was a quantitative approach. A questionnaire with closed ended question format developed by the researchers was utilised in collecting the data. It consists of 21 statements divided into 3 categories as follows: practices of assessments, impact of assessments on learning and assessment preferences. A five-point Likert type scale ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree was used. The content validity of the questionnaire was checked by some experts in the BTC, based on their comments a few modifications were conducted. The questionnaire was chosen as a collection tool in this study as it suits the purpose of the survey and the type of data required.

The total number of participants took part in the study is 80 students, studying in the English Language Education Department, at the BTC during the academic year 2019/2020. They are of different levels: 30 second year students, 30 third year students and 20 fourth year students. They were selected randomly and all of them were willing to take part in the study.

Data Analysis

This is a quantitative study that aims to explore the students' perceptions, preferences of the assessment methods used by their instructors at the BTC, and the impact of those methods on their learning. The data were collected and analyzed as illustrated in the tables below (1 - 8), which show some descriptive statistics mainly percentages.

RESULTS

Table#1 demonstrates the responses of the participants regarding their perception towards the practices of assessments given by their instructors. It shows that 30% of the participants agree that the assessment methods used by their teachers are relevant to their study, whereas, 39% believe that the assessment methods were to some extant relevant. On the other hand, only 1% was strongly disagree. Concerning to the second statement, the findings indicate that 41% agree that the assessment methods examine what they know and 43% of the participants think that the assessment methods to some extent examine what they do in class.

The data also indicate that 31% of the respondents agree with the statement "the assessment methods examine what my instructor has taught me", whereas slightly higher 32% to some extent agree with the statement. Regarding the statement that says, "the assessment methods examine my ability to apply what I know in real-life situation", the results show that 15% strongly agree, 28% agree and 29% to some extent agree whereas 16% disagree. Furthermore, the findings of the study reveal that 31% agree that "the assessment methods have been spread out over the semester". It also shows that 35% of the total participants strongly agree that their instructors inform them in advance when they would be assessed and in contrast, 0% strongly disagree. In addition, 40% agree that they were told in advance what would be assessed. However, the most striking finding revealed by the study is that 42% to some extent agree that the assessment methods are associated with clear instructions given by the instructor, whereas 28% agree. The results indicate that 35% to some extent agree that the assessment methods are attached with clear marking scheme/policy.

Similar ratio believe that the assessment types usually vary between formative and summative. 36% of the respondents reported that the assessments suit my ability whereas 38% think the assessments are challenging.

Table #1: Practices of assessments

Statement Practices of assessments	Strongly Agree	Agree	To some Extent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The assessment methods used by my instructors are relevant to my study.	24%	30%	39%	6%	1%
The assessment methods examine what I know.	11%	41%	31%	14%	3%
The assessment methods examine what I do in class.	9%	30%	43%	14%	5%
The assessment methods examine what my instructor has taught me.	21%	31%	32%	10%	5%
The assessment methods examine my ability to apply what I know in real-life situation.	15%	28%	29%	16%	11%
The assessment methods have been spread out over the semester.	18%	31%	28%	12%	12%
I'm told in advance when I would be assessed.	35%	34%	25%	6%	0%
I am told in advance on what I would be assessed.	28%	40%	26%	4%	3%
The assessment methods are associated with clear instructions given by the instructor.	20%	28%	42%	9%	1%
The assessment methods are attached with clear marking scheme/policy.	26%	31%	35%	4%	4%
The assessment types usually vary between formative and summative	16%	34%	35%	13%	1%
The assessments suit my ability.	11%	36%	33%	15%	5%
The assessments are challenging.	25%	38%	34%	1%	1%

Table #2 Impact of assessments on learning

Statement Impact of assessments on learning	Strongly Agree	Agree	To some Extent	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The assessments assist me in achieving the course outcomes	14%	37%	41%	5%	4%
The assessment methods motivate me to continue learning.	11%	22%	33%	25%	9%
The assessment methods prepare me for the next learning activities.	11%	35%	30%	18%	5%
The assessment methods enable me to evaluate my progress/improvement/growth in my study	14%	34%	33%	16%	4%

Table# 2 presents the data concerning the impact of assessments on learning. It shows that 41% of the participants to some extent agree with the statement "the assessments assist me in achieving the course outcomes" and 37% agree whereas only 4% disagree. As indicated in table 2, 25% of the total samples disagree with the statement "the assessment methods motivate me to continue learning'', and 22% agree with the same statement and very few of them strongly disagree (9%).

Of the total respondents, 35% agree that the assessment methods prepare them for the next learning activities, in contrast, only 5% disagree. Highest numbers of the respondents 34% reported that the assessment methods enable them to evaluate their progress/improvement/growth in their study, while 33% to some extent agree and only 4% strongly disagree.

Table #3 preferences of assessment tools when they are used for formative assessment. 75% of year 4 participants responded to this statement.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Research Paper	Self-assessment	Peer assessment
Year 4	1st	15%	5%	0%	20%	20%	10%
	2nd	10%	25%	15%	5%	10%	15%
	3rd	5%	0%	25%	10%	25%	10%
	4th	10%	5%	10%	10%	10%	30%
	5th	5%	35%	20%	5%	10%	0%
	6th	30%	5%	5%	25%	0%	10%

Table 3 displays the participants of year 4 preferences of the different assessment methods when they are used for formative assessment. It shows that 15% of them chose presentation as their first preference whereas 30% consider it as their 6th preference. Only 5% prefer final project as their first choice and 35% consider final project as their 5th preference. None of them chose portfolio as their first preference, whereas 25% consider it as 3rd and 20% as 5th preference. Research paper was the first preference of 20% of the participants and 25% as 6th preference. Similarly, 20% chose self – assessment as their first preference and 25% as 3rd. the data indicate that 30% of year 4 participants chose peer assessment as their 4th choice and only 10% as 1st.

Table #4 preferences of assessment tools when they are used for formative assessment. 40% of year 3 participants responded to this statement.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Research Paper	Self-assessment	Peer assessment
Year 3	1st	7%	3%	0%	13%	13%	3%
	2nd	0%	10%	10%	0%	7%	13%
	3rd	10%	7%	10%	3%	3%	7%
	4th	13%	3%	7%	7%	3%	7%
	5th	3%	7%	3%	13%	3%	10%
	6th	7%	10%	10%	3%	10%	0%

Results in table 4 show that 7% of the participants prefer presentation as their first choice and 13% consider presentation as their 4th preference. The responses revealed that only 3% who prefer final project as the first preference and for 10% final project comes 6th. Moreover, the results indicate that none of the participants chose portfolio as their first preference whereas 10% consider it as their 2nd and another 10% as 3rd and 10% as 5th preference. Research paper was chosen by 13% as the first preference and the same percentage as the 6th preference. Similarly, 13% of the participants consider self-assessment as their preference and 10% as their 6th preference. Peer assessment was chosen by 13% as their 2nd preference whereas 10% as their 5th preference.

Table #5 preferences of assessment tools when they are used for formative assessment. 43% of year 2 participants responded to this statement.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Research Paper	Self-assessment	Peer assessment
Year 2	1	13%	0%	3%	10%	10%	7%
	2	10%	7%	7%	7%	13%	0%
	3	3%	10%	10%	3%	7%	10%
	4	7%	10%	3%	3%	3%	17%
	5	0%	13%	17%	3%	10%	0%
	6	10%	3%	3%	17%	0%	10%

Table 5 shows that 13% of year 2 participants prefer presentation as the first preference and 10% as their 2nd choice and another 10% as their 6th preference. The findings also reveal that none of the participants chose final project as their 1st preference but 13% consider it as their 5th choice. Portfolio was chosen by 17% as their 5th preference whereas only 3% who chose as their 1st preference. In addition, the results tell that 17% consider research paper as their 6th preference and 19% as their 1st choice. Self-assessment was considered by 13% of the participants as their 2nd choice and 10% as their 1st. Whereas 17% consider peer assessment s their 5th preference and only 7% as 1st.

Table# 6: preferences of assessment tools when they are used for summative assessment. Only 75% of year 4 participants responded to this question.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Short Quiz	Mid-term test	Final Exam
Year 4	1st	15%	10%	5%	5%	5%	35%
	2nd	15%	5%	15%	10%	30%	0%
	3rd	5%	5%	5%	30%	20%	10%
	4th	0%	20%	20%	20%	10%	5%
	5th	10%	20%	20%	10%	10%	5%
	6th	30%	15%	10%	0%	0%	20%

Table 6 confirms that 15% of the total participants chose presentation as the first preference for the summative assessment, while 30% prefer presentation as their 6th choice. The final project was chosen by 10% as the 1st preference and 20% as their 4th and 5th. Only 5% prefer portfolio to be their 1st choice as a summative assessment and another 5% as the 3rd choice whereas 20% selected it as their 4th and 5th. Similarly, 5% prefer short quiz whereas 30% consider it as their 2nd preference and 0% as 6th. participants reported that 30% consider mid-term exam as their 2nd preference and none of them consider it as their 6th. interestingly, the results revealed that 35% of the participants prefer final exam as their 1st choice and 20% as their 6th but none of them consider it the 2nd.

Table# 7: preferences of assessment tools when they are used for summative assessment. Only 40% of year 3 participants responded to this question.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Short Quiz	Mid-term test	Final Exam
Year 3	1st	3%	10%	3%	7%	3%	13%
	2nd	17%	0%	3%	3%	13%	3%
	3rd	7%	7%	13%	13%	0%	0%
	4th	3%	3%	13%	10%	7%	3%
	5th	3%	13%	0%	7%	13%	3%
	6th	7%	7%	7%	0%	3%	17%

As illustrated in table 7, 17% of third year students chose presentation as the 2nd choice as a summative assessment and 3% as their 1st preference. Final project considered by 13% as their 5th choice but none of them consider it as the 2nd. The findings of the study indicated that only 3% chose portfolio as their first preference and 13% prefer portfolio as the 3rd and 4th choice. The responses of year 3 revealed that 7% prefer short quiz as the 1st choice and 13% as the 3rd. Moreover, 13% of the participants consider mid-term exam as the 2nd preference and the same percentage chose it as the 5th preference. Final exam was chosen by 17% as the 6th preference and 13% as the 1st choice.

Table# 8: preferences of assessment tools when they are used for summative assessment. Only 40% 0f year 2 participants responded to this question.

Students' level	Order of preferences	Presentation	Final Project	Portfolio	Short Quiz	Mid-term test	Final Exam
Year 2	1st	13%	3%	7%	10%	0%	10%
	2nd	3%	7%	3%	10%	13%	3%
	3rd	7%	7%	3%	7%	13%	3%
	4th	3%	7%	7%	13%	3%	3%
	5th	7%	13%	10%	0%	10%	0%
	6th	7%	3%	10%	0%	0%	20%

Table 8 demonstrates that 13% of year 2 students selected presentation as their 1st preference but none of them chose mid-term exam as the 1st choice. Final project was chosen by only 3% to be their 1st preference and 7% consider portfolio as their 1st choice. Short quiz and final exam were considered by 10% for each as the 1st preference. The data also revealed that the least preferable summative assessments for year 2 students are portfolio with 10% and final exam with 20%.

DISCUSSION

The main goal of the current study was to determine the pre-service teachers' perceptions of the assessment methods used by their instructors at the BTC, and to what extent such assessments influence their learning. The results of this study reveal several aspects that reflect the perception of the English language pre-service teachers towards the assessment methods used by their instructors at BTC. The findings agree with research in the literature (Gibbs, 2006, Birenbaum, 1997) in the importance of examining students' assessment preferences at a higher education context to give students more opportunities to decide on the assessment method preferred to have during their learning. Most importantly, the findings align with Lynam & Cachia (2018); Lizzio & Wilson (2013), who highlighted the point that, eventually, students' preferences of the assessment methods "have several differential effects on students' learning processes."

Throughout the analyzed data the emerged results, one major issue is notably emphasized which is that the assessment methods need to be less challenging, more associated with clear instructions, and further spread out over the semester. Despite agreeing that the practices of assessment used by their instructors were relevant; examined what was taught and learned and suited their abilities, however, most of the pre-service teachers were still uncertain about neither the assessment practices' ability to examine what they do in class and/nor apply what they know in real-life situations. This finding is unmistakably stressing the need for instructors to create straightforward assessment methods, with clear in-advance instructions that lead to influence the effort students put into further learning tasks that align with students' performance, not only the learning outcomes. If students' perceptions of the assessment practices are considered essential intervening variables in student learning (Watering, 2008), students' perceptions, experiences and opinions might offer instructors way forward for improving the educational practices. This result answers the first question of the study, which questions the perceptions of pre-service teachers of their instructors' assessment practices.

The second question of this study questioned the impact of assessment practices on pre-service teachers' learning. While third of the responses ranged between 'agree' and 'strongly agree' stating the impact of the assessment practices on the pre-service teachers' motivation; preparation for future learning tasks, and evaluation of study progress and improvement, almost half of the number of the respondents were uncertain that the assessment methods used helped them in achieving the course outcomes. It is evident from these results that there are discrepancies in the responses of the participants. This inconsistency might be attributed to further reasons that appeared in the literature. For example, Birenbaum (1997) found that "individual differences in assessment preferences overshadow group differences and that differences in assessment preferences correlate to a relatively large extent with learning strategies." Indeed, some questions for further research

present themselves here. For instance, what is the impact of a particular method (s) of assessment on pre-service teachers' learning approaches? How does this influence their learning in general? How do their learning styles correlate with their preferences of assessment practices, and to what extent?

Watering et al. (2008) define assessment preference as "imagined choice between alternatives in assessment and the possibility of the rank ordering of these alternatives." In the current study, the pre-service teachers were requested to choose their preferences from various facets of assessment. On investigating the preferences of assessment tools used for formative assessment, the presentations, self-assessment and research paper came as the top preferences by Y2, Y3 and Y4, while the final project and presentations came as the pre-final and final choices respectively for Y4. On the other hand, it is quite noticeable that peer assessment is one of the least preferred assessment methods, even though the value of formative peer assessment is well recognized as a valuable assessment practice, and a learning tool, in teacher education programs (Sluijsmans and Prins, 2006). This finding indicates that peer assessment does not have a recognizable weight on the formative assessment criteria at BTC; where formative assessment is seen as the exclusive responsibility of instructors, which might explain the evident differences in preferences from Y2, Y3 and Y4. (4th for Y2, second for Y3, and 4th for Y4) In order to maximize student learning experiences, BTC instructors might consider highlighting the importance of peer assessment at the planning stage; taking into the consideration the findings of Vickermont's (2007) study. The study investigated undergraduate students' perceptions of formative peer assessment. The findings revealed that, even though peer assessment was a positive experience in enhancing students learning and development, "consideration needs to be taken to address individual learning styles, as a limited number of students found the process to be less useful."

On the other hand, the results of the data analyzed regarding the preferences of assessment tools when used for summative assessment; the portfolio was the least preferred method of assessment chosen by respondents, with a zero preference by Y3 and Y4 students. An explanation can be stated by referring to the fact that, on starting their second year of study, the pre-service teachers go through the process of writing their portfolios as part of the summative assessment in all the courses studied at BTC. Interestingly, an unexpected relationship was found between students' preferences of assessment tools when used for summative assessment and their year of study. In contrast to being the most preferred to Y4 students, the final examination was Y2 students' least preferred summative assessment tool. Additionally, midterm and short quiz came as the second and third choice of Y4 respectively. This result aligns with Traub and McRury (1990) findings in that senior students, along their years of study, become less concerned with "performance rather than process" in addition to developing positive approaches towards written exams, in comparison to research papers, projects and presentations. Another reason behind this is that Y4 students might think that these exams are more comfortable to take; hence, higher grades are relatively easier to get; although exams give only limited interpretation of what they can do.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated the perceptions of pre-service teachers at Bahrain Teachers College of the assessment methods used by their instructors. The findings revealed that preservice teachers need their instructors to create direct assessment methods, which are, not only aligned with the learning outcomes, but also provided with clear in-advance instructions. The findings showed that the assessment practices used by instructors had an impact on students' motivation; preparation for future learning tasks, and evaluation of study progress. It was also obvious that there was a relationship between students' preferences of assessment tools when used for summative assessment and their year of study. Finally, the findings of this study suggest that further research could be conducted in investigating the influence of different assessment practices on pre-service teachers' learning approaches, and how this influence if any, might correlate with their preferences and learning styles.

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