



RESEARCH PAPER

Reading Assessment Awareness: A Comparative Analysis of Public and Private School ESL Teachers in Pakistan

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DOI

[http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021\(5-I\)1.2](http://doi.org/10.47205/plhr.2021(5-I)1.2)

PAPER INFO

Received:

February 11, 2021

Accepted:

June 15, 2021

Online:

June 20, 2021

Keywords:

Pakistan
Public and
Private Teachers,
Reading
Assessment
Awareness

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ABSTRACT

Assessment literacy is of key importance to ensure quality education and meaningful learning process. Teaching is a conscious and clever business and the teachers who know what they are doing and why they are doing it are arguably better than those who know not. This quantitative study investigates the reading assessment awareness level of public and private ESL school teachers in Pakistan and the differences between the awareness levels of the two. For this purpose, the valid and reliable Language Assessment Knowledge Scale (henceforth LAKS) (Ozturk and Aydin, 2019) was adapted and run on 62 public and private ESL teachers using MS Forms. A descriptive and statistical analysis was run to measure the knowledge and differences between the awareness levels of public and private ESL teachers. The results of this study showed that the overall awareness level of public and private teachers was satisfactory; however, the private teachers were found to have a better awareness level about reading assessment. The findings of this study may be useful for teachers to re-evaluate their perceptions of themselves in terms of reading assessment competence to improve their classroom practices.

Introduction

Reading skill is as important as other three skills of English Language. There is no exaggeration in stating that reading and writing are generally believed to be preferred to listening and speaking in Pakistan. Therefore, reading assessment is of great importance as it aims at improving the reading skill of learners crucial to their overall learning and teacher's knowledge and efficacy in teaching reading skill. Designing an effective and useful assessment requires assessment literate teachers.

The improvement of teaching and learning depends on reliable and valid assessment developmental procedures, administration, interpretation and its application which ultimately helps in making sound decisions to improve teaching and learning processes. Stiggins (1999) has considered that the quality of teaching depends on the use of quality of assessment. A teacher has a role to play in the process of developing, administering and interpreting the results of an assessment to improve teaching and learning. Popham (2009) states that the lack of knowledge and ability regarding assessment on the teachers' part can make the quality of education ineffective. So to have a sound assessment, teachers need to have knowledge of assessment. Jannati (2015) states that most of the educational systems are considering re-engineering and upgrading their assessment procedures to accommodate new approaches and techniques. Thus, the role of teachers in the assessment process is very crucial as they spend about 50% of their instruction time on assessment (Plake, 1993).

According to Black and William (1998) assessment refers to the practice of all those activities undertaken by teachers and their students in assessing themselves to improve teaching and learning with the help of assessment feedback. Green (2014) has defined language assessment as the process of getting information about a person's knowledge, skills and abilities related to language and making decisions on how to improve teaching and learning. Assessment literacy is generally defined as the knowledge of assessment. Popham (2004) has defined assessment literacy as the knowledge about the principles of a sound assessment. A teacher who has knowledge about the assessment is considered assessment literate. An assessment literate teacher can contribute to learning and teaching effectively than a teacher who is unaware of the assessment literacy.

Teachers' awareness of assessment-related knowledge can produce a sound learning and teaching atmosphere. Reading assessment literacy is more important in the context of Pakistan as the language assessments are heavily loaded with reading and writing tasks compared to listening and speaking (Alam & Bashiruddin, 2013). Teachers' lack of knowledge and skill about assessment can make the quality of education less effective (Popham, 2009). So, well-equipped reading assessment literate teachers are the requirement to enhance students' reading skills. To solve this problem, it may be a good idea, as a point of departure, to measure ESL public and private school teachers' reading assessment literacy

Most of the international studies in language assessment literacy have been focusing on: assessment practices (Mertler, 1998), teachers' classroom assessment skills (Alkharusi, 2011), teachers' assessment literacy and student outcomes, perceptions, assessment courses, teachers' knowledge, perceptions and beliefs and practices, training needs and professional development (King, 2010, Hailaya, 2014, Zolfaghari & Ashraf, 2015, Jannati, 2015). Some of the important recent studies have come from Lam (2015), who focuses on the investigation of overall language

assessment training, Tsagari and Vogt (2017) on language assessment literacy and found teachers lack of knowledge regarding assessment.

Literature review

Several studies have been conducted during the last two decades to address the issue of teachers' assessment literacy. For example, Campbell et. al., (2002) and Merlter (2005) have conducted studies on a group of undergraduate pre-service teachers and pre-service and in-service teachers respectively. Another study was conducted by Lin, & Su, (2015) to investigate Chinese Middle School in-service English teachers' assessment literacy. The study showed that the Chinese secondary school teachers had low levels of assessment literacy. This study examined English language teachers' knowledge as general, not in a specific area. The focus of most studies during this period was on the language assessment literacy of the teachers as a whole; however, there seems to be a dearth of research on skill-specific assessment literacy.

Jannati (2015) conducted a study on Iranian English Language teachers' Language assessment literacy intending to explore their assessment-related perceptions and practices. This study sampled 18 male and female teachers who were interviewed. The findings of the study revealed that teachers were familiar with the basic concepts and terminologies involved in assessment; however, their literacy was absent in their practices. The focus of this study also seems to assess teachers' literacy in general. Another similar study was conducted in 2017 by Xu and Brown on university English teachers' assessment literacy revealed that teachers had a very basic knowledge about assessment literacy with a very limited effect of demography. This study seems to focus on university teachers' assessment literacy as a whole, not on individual language skill.

Tsagari and Vogt (2017) conducted a review work on research studies, undertaken by different European countries on foreign language teachers' assumed assessment literacy and their needs for testing and assessment. It was a mixed design study, but the focus was on the qualitative aspect of the study. This study also shed light and concluded on the implications for teacher development and some directions for the research in the future.

Olmezer-Ozturk and Aydin conducted a study (2019) on EFL teachers' assessment knowledge to depict the overall condition of Turkish English language teachers by using a scale for language assessment knowledge. They explored the teachers' knowledge in all four skills and gave their findings. As far as their knowledge of reading assessment is concerned, the study found teachers lagging behind. Those who claimed to be competent in the reading assessment were far from the actual assessment scale designed by the researchers. The study also emphasized the need to provide pre-service teachers a practical training related to language assessment, professional development programs and training modules. This study also creates a gap for individual skill-based assessment literacy research as it

measured the Turkish EFL teachers' assessment knowledge in all four skills. Such types of studies are worth running in the Pakistani context as well.

A recent study by Zulaiha, Mulyono and Ambarsari (2020) on the perceptions of secondary school English teachers was conducted to know the teachers' perceptions and their practices in Indonesia. The results showed that teachers had sufficient knowledge about assessment principles and they applied their knowledge into their classes as a practice. However, the researchers like others worked on measuring teachers' assessment literacy in general not focusing on an area or skill-specific domain.

Recently, some studies related to teachers' language assessment literacy have been conducted in Pakistan also. Hussain, Kayani and Akhtar (2018) conducted a study on the assessment literacy of teachers and its relationship with prospective teachers' academic achievement. Their study revealed that the teachers had average level knowledge about assessment suggesting some in-service training and workshops. Their study, following the trend of measuring teachers' knowledge about assessment as a whole, seems less to fill the skill-specific area separately. Another study in the context of Pakistan belongs to Khan, Hussain and Imad (2019) who investigated the correlation of classroom assessment literacy and teachers' classroom practices. The findings of the study suggested moderate level assessment literacy of the teachers identifying them with traditional assessment practices. So both these studies do not seem to focus on a particular skill like reading, writing, listening or speaking.

So in the light of the given literature review, it can be seen that most of the studies done in the past are in the area of assessment literacy of the teachers in general not focusing on a specific area of language skill. This phenomenon highlights a need to focus on the literacy specified to individual skills as the world is growing professionally and area specifying. This study would explore the literacy rate of English language teachers in Pakistani public and private schools related to reading assessment and would try to provide recommendations in the light of findings to improve the reading-related assessment literacy.

Material and Methods

It is a quantitative research based on data collected through convenient sampling. Due to the closure of institutes and unavailability of teachers at schools due to Covid-19, the data was collected online through Microsoft Forms.

Instruments

This study aims at discovering the reading assessment awareness level of public and private ESL teachers and finding out significant differences between the two if there are any. To investigate the research questions, a questionnaire comprising 15 target items and 8 demographic items was adapted from

the LAKS developed and validated by two Turkish scholars ElçinÖlmezer-Öztürk and Belgin Aydin. The range of the rating scale of the questionnaire was increased from 3 to 4, and the labels changed from 'true, false, and I don't know' to 'strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree' to know the intensity of the participants' opinions. Microsoft Forms was used to collect responses due to the closure of schools during the Covid-19 outbreak. The participants filled and submitted the questionnaire online. The problem in the online questionnaire observed was that the respondents could easily surf out some terms they might not be sure about. This practice can mar the fairness of their responses.

Participants

The participants of this study were 62 non-native ESL teachers working in different schools in Pakistan. Out of the 62, 45 teachers were from private schools, whereas the 17 from public schools (see table no.1). They varied in their teaching experiences and ranged from 1-5 years' experience to 16-20 years' experience. Among them, 35 (56.5%) of teachers had 1-5 years, 16 (25.8%) 6-10 years, 7 (11.3%) 11-15, and 4 (6.5%) teachers 16-20 years of teaching experience (table no. 2). The demographic information also showed that the majority of them (85.5%) had attended professional development programs/courses/trainings on language assessment that shows the tendency of ESL teachers in Pakistan towards their professional development (see table no.3). It was noticed that about 93.6% of teachers had the perception that they were very competent or competent in assessing reading. Only 4 participants opted that they were not very competent; however, nobody opted 'Not Competent' in the questionnaire (see table no.4).

Table 1
Where are you working now?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Public School	17	27.4	27.4	27.4
	Private School	45	72.6	72.6	100.0
	Total	62	100.0	100.0	

Table 2
Years of Experience

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	1-5 Years	35	56.5	56.5	56.5
	6-10 Years	16	25.8	25.8	82.3
	11-15 Years	7	11.3	11.3	93.5
	16-20 Years	4	6.5	6.5	100.0
	Total	62	100.0	100.0	

Table 3
Have you attended any professional development program/course/training on language assessment?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Yes	53	85.5	85.5	85.5
	No	9	14.5	14.5	100.0
	Total	62	100.0	100.0	

Table 4
Reading

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Very Competent	20	32.3	32.3	32.3
	Competent	38	61.3	61.3	93.5
	Not Very Competent	4	6.5	6.5	100.0
	Total	62	100.0	100.0	

Data Analysis

Descriptive analysis was conducted on the data collected through MS Forms and tables of frequency were developed for demographic information (see the tables 1-4 given above). Then to investigate the study question 1, to what extent the public and private ESL teachers are aware of assessing reading, mean and standard deviation of the responses submitted by the participants were analyzed in descriptive statistics (table 5). Mean score ≥ 2 shows lack of competence and ≤ 3 reflects high level of perceived competence in reading assessment literacy.

Table5
Descriptive Statistics

Statements	N	Mean	Std.
Asking learners to summarize the reading text is a way of assessing their reading skills.	62	3.40	.839
When asking several questions about a reading text, all the questions are independent of each other.	62	2.90	1.020
Cloze test is used for assessing the main idea of the text.	62	3.29	.912
In a reading exam, using a text learners have encountered before is not a problem.	62	3.18	1.033
One reading text is enough to be included in a reading	62	2.97	1.055
The language of the questions is simpler than the text itself	62	3.31	.841
Errors of spelling are penalized while scoring.	62	3.26	.922

Taking vocabulary difficulty into consideration is necessary in assessing reading skills.	62	3.44	.842
Including not stated/ doesn't say along with true/false items has advantages over true/false items.	62	3.24	.900
The more items a reading text is followed, the more	62	3.37	.834
Using the same words in the correct option as in the text is	62	2.92	1.029
Simplification of reading texts is avoided.	62	3.05	1.031
Reading texts in a reading exam include various genres	62	3.53	.740
In top-down approach, assessment is on overall comprehension of the reading text.	62	3.42	.879
Using ungrammatical distractors in multiple choice questions in a reading exam is a problem.	62	3.10	1.003
Valid N (listwise)	62		

Table 6
Group Statistics

	<i>School</i>	N	Mean	Std. Dev.
Asking learners to summarize the reading text is a way of assessing their reading skills.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.12	.857
	<i>Private</i>	45	3.11	.714
When asking several questions about a reading text, all the questions are independent of each other.	<i>Public</i>	17	2.82	.809
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.71	.626
Cloze test is used for assessing the main idea of the text.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.12	.781
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.84	.706
In a reading exam, using a text learners have encountered before is not a problem.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.06	.659
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.60	.751
One reading text is enough to be included in a reading exam.	<i>Public</i>	17	2.35	.702
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.58	.657
The language of the questions is simpler than the text itself.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.18	.728
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.98	.723
Errors of spelling are penalized while scoring.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.24	.752
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.78	.704
Taking vocabulary difficulty into consideration is necessary in assessing reading skills.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.41	.507
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.87	.694
Including not stated/doesn't say along with true/false items has advantages over true/false	<i>Public</i>	17	3.12	.697
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.73	.618
The more items a reading text is followed, the more reliable it becomes.	<i>Public</i>	17	3.29	.772
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.91	.633
Using the same words in the correct option as in the text is not a problem.	<i>Public</i>	17	2.47	.874
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.62	.684
Simplification of reading texts is avoided.	<i>Public</i>	17	2.53	.943
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.69	.633
Reading texts in a reading exam include various genres (essay, article, etc.).	<i>Public</i>	17	3.29	.470
	<i>Private</i>	45	3.04	.673
In top-down approach, assessment is on overall comprehension of the reading text.	<i>Public</i>	17	2.88	.781
	<i>Private</i>	45	2.96	.638

Using ungrammatical distracters in multiple choice questions in a reading exam is a problem.	Public	17	2.76	.903
	Private	45	2.73	.720

Subsequently, the general means were compared on the variables of public and private teachers using Independent-Samples T-Test to investigate differences in awareness level among them (study question 2). SPSS 20 software was used to analyze these processes (Table 6).

Reliability

The reliability of the responses was measured through Cronbach's Alpha analysis. Reliability analysis refers to the extent to which a scale produces consistent results. If the association in reliability analysis is high i.e. greater than 0.7, the scale yields consistent results and is therefore reliable (Waller, 2008). Based on the table no. 7, overall Cronbach's Alpha is more than 0.7. Therefore, reliability of the variables used in this study is satisfactory.

Table 7
Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.79	16

Results and Discussion

In terms of the awareness level about assessing reading in general, the study shows a mixed result. Interpreting the means against every item in table 6, it can be seen that in 8 out of 15 items i.e. items no. 1, 6, 8, 9, 10, 13, 14, and 15, the awareness level of the participants seems arguably good. However, the rest of the 7 items show comparatively a negative picture in terms of their awareness. As the Likert scale with 4 options was used, ideally the means of item no. 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, and 12 should have been ≤ 2.00 and for the rest of the items ≥ 3.00 . For instance, the mean of item no. 3, i.e. cloze test is used for assessing the main idea of the text, is 3.29 that shows the majority has agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Whereas, according to Taylor (1953), 'Cloze tests require the ability to understand context and vocabulary in order to identify the correct language or part of speech that belongs in the deleted passages'. Item no. 2 has shown a mean of 2.90 that is slightly lower than the ideal mean; 20 participants out of 62 have opted to disagree or strongly disagree instead of agree or strongly agree.

The table no. 6 shows compared means of public and private teachers in order to show the level of differences in their awareness about assessing reading. The study reveals that in 5 out of 15 items public teachers have shown slightly better awareness than the private teachers, whereas in 6 items, item no. 3, 4, 5, 7, 11, and 12, the awareness level of private teachers has been found better. Interestingly, these are the 6 items in which overall awareness level was found low that hints the public teachers might have contributed more in the low awareness level of the whole

number of participants. Moreover, the ratio of public teachers in data is 27.4%. Supposedly, on the basis of the available data it may be assumed that had the ratio been higher, the difference might have been more significant.

Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the awareness level of public and private ESL teachers in Pakistan about reading assessment and unveiling any differences in the level of awareness between the two. The study was run on the data collected from 45 private and 17 public teachers. It implies that according to the LAKS the overall awareness level of public and private teachers is 60% as the majority of them opted the correct options in 9 items out of 15. The results of the study also find that private ESL teachers are arguably more aware in terms of reading assessment than the public teachers. The analysis also highlights that the teachers' perceptions about their reading assessment skills seem mismatching when compared to their level of awareness; 93.6% teachers claimed themselves as competent or very competent in reading assessment skills. The factors that contribute to the lower awareness level of public teachers and their misperceptions about themselves need further to be investigated. Although the data set was not large enough to generalize its results yet it hints a tendency that can further be analyzed with a greater number of samples.

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