Iranian Secondary School EFL Teachers' Assessment Beliefs and Roles

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Abstract: Issues of assessment design and implementation in Iran have recently attracted the attention of researchers and educators. But teachers' beliefs about assessment as well as their assessment roles have remained unexplored. The current study delineates the findings of a qualitative study on the assessment roles and beliefs of a group of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in secondary schools in Iran. 35 Iranian EFL teachers from different secondary schools all over the country took part in this study. Based on an open-ended questionnaire, the study showed that teachers' beliefs about the nature of assessment were informed by their knowledge of the field of language teaching and learning and by contextual background and sociopolitical factors that rule their employment conditions. This study also indicated that teachers did not play a significant role in assessment because of top-down managerial approaches to assessment and education system. The participants accentuated that teachers' assessment beliefs and their key role in assessment should not be neglected.

1. Introduction

In recent decades, issues of assessment design and implementation has gained increased attention in education. However, teachers' beliefs about language assessment as well as their assessment roles has remained unexplored. Moreover, English language teaching in different countries has contributed to robust discussions on EFL teachers' English language assessment.

Assessment can be described as any method, tool or strategy that teachers use to elicit evidence of students' progress towards the stated goals (Chen, 2003; Wishon, Crabtree, & Jones, 1998). Here, the generic version of the definition refers to the way of assessing students' performance that is "the process of collecting information about a student to aid in decision making about the progress and language development of the student" (p. 363). With this practical definition, however, it is believed that assessment is an exercise of power that is caught up in an array of issues about testers' and test-takers' voices, roles, and beliefs. This critical view of assessment suggests that teachers, students, and other stakeholders "construct the assessment knowledge by trying to make sense of the knowledge in a dialogical and co-operative way" (Shohamy, 2000, p. 136).

Teachers' beliefs have a key role in implementing assessment policy reform in schools (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Mostly beliefs are shaped by a person's interactions with peers in daily life as well as his/her personal experiences and interpretations (Al-Sharafi, 1998; Hsieh, 2002).

According to Bauch (1984) beliefs are modified into attitudes that affect a person's intentions and decisions. In the context of education, beliefs refer to teachers' behaviors with some individual teaching practices reflecting teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning a foreign language (Bauch, 1984; Graves, 2000; Huang, 1997). McLeod (1992) states that:

> Beliefs are largely cognitive in nature, and are developed over a relatively long period of time. Emotions, on the other hand, may involve little cognitive appraisal and may appear and disappear rather quickly, as when the frustration of trying to solve a hard problem is followed by the joy of finding a solution. Therefore, we can think of beliefs, attitudes and emotions as representing increasing levels of affective involvement, decreasing levels of cognitive involvement, increasing levels of intensity of response, and decreasing levels of response stability (p. 579).

Recent educational policy reform movements emphasize change in teachers' roles in assessing students as well as the importance of assessment in supporting teaching and learning (Assessment Reform Group, 2002). Thus, teachers should utilize assessment information to modify their teaching based on students' needs and provide students with formative feedback that moves learning forward (Leahy, Lyon, Thompson & Wiliam, 2005). Teachers need to understand the rational for using

assessment to improve learning and should acquire knowledge and skills to put the new policy into practice. In high-stakes environments, teachers' lack of knowledge and skills or their beliefs about assessment may affect the implementation of the new policy. Thus, it is crucial to find out teachers' appreciation of assessment as well as their assessment roles.

The importance of teachers' assessment beliefs and roles is due to the fact that much of the assessment policy reform is being implemented by teachers. Brown (2008) identified four major conceptions of assessment, three of them are classified as purpose (school and student accountability; and improvement) and one as anti-purpose (assessment is not related to the work of teachers and students). There is a tention between the accountability and improvement-oriented purposes of assessment. In other words, assessment is used as a tool to inform teachers, administrators, parents and students of students' status relative to the learning targets and to determine the next step in teaching and learning.

Teachers' beliefs become conformist when teachers are aware of the views of authorities to whom students and schools are accountable. Simplistically, school authorities and parents in Iran believe that good schools are schools that generate high grades on standardized tests. Since teachers are aware that their students' outcome is an indicator of the quality of their work, accountability purposes of assessment might dominate teachers' assessment beliefs.

This qualitative study aims at investigating Iranian secondary school EFL teachers' assessment beliefs and roles. Data from this study would contribute to the current understanding of teachers' assessment beliefs and roles in secondary schools in Iran, and that would provide information for both EFL instructors and EFL students about the nature of English language assessment. Specifically this study aims:

a) To find out secondary school EFL teachers' assessment beliefs;
b) To examine secondary school EFL teachers' roles in students' assessment in Iran.

2. Literature Review
2.1. An overview of ELT in Iranian Context

The present and dominant trend in ELT (English language teaching) context in Iran as Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2001) state is towards language teaching. Generally speaking, primary school, junior, and senior high school are three levels of schooling in Iran. English as a compulsory course is being taught at junior and senior high school levels.

Of course, the private sector has already started introducing English at lower levels such as primary school and kindergarten (Aliakbari, 2004). This shows that along with other developing countries English is smoothly finding its course into the hub of Iranian society.

ELT in Iran has received such striking attention that in some cases it functions as a criterion in determining the quality of the instruction in private and public schools and institutions. Based on the context and the function of a language, say English, different terms are used to represent the status of that language in that context. The commonest terms are EFL (English as a foreign language), ESL (English as a second language), and EIL (English as an international language) (Smith, 1978). English language teaching in Iran has been regarded as an EFL model (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2001). However, a comparative evaluation makes it clear that ELT in Iran has the characteristics of EIL rather than ESL or EFL (Ibid.).

In order to determine which model (ESL/EFL/EIL) is prevalent in Iranian context it seems necessary to have brief definition of each model. Smith (1978) notes that EFL model is a situation where English is taught as a mere school subject to be used in several ways including reading literature and technical works, listening to the radio, and understanding dialogues in a movie. Stern (1992) believes that English in an EFL setting is only used for educational purposes. However, ESL refers to a situation where English is used as the medium of instruction in schools or a lingua franca (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2001).

The last model to be discussed here is EIL. Smith (1981) notes that the focus of EIL is on teaching non-native speakers to be able to communicate with native speakers. The emphasis is usually placed on the interaction between native and non-native speakers. ELT in Iran seems to be neither a foreign nor a second language (Talebinezhad & Aliakbari, 2001). In Iranian context English is not a mere school subject or a language through which people communicate with each other. Iranians as Smith (1981) says "….are witnessing a rapid increase in the use of English as a language of wider communication"(p.7).

Although Talebinezhad and Aliakbari (2001) believe that ELT in Iran is slowly converted from EFL to EIL, there seem no considerable changes in the course books to conform to this process at different levels especially pre-university level. Since the main objective of language teaching is reading, course books are designed in such a way to help the students acquire this skill. Each lesson consists of three activities: pre-reading, while reading, and post

reading activities.

To sum up, whether we accept that English is a mere school subject or a means of communication with other native or non-native speakers, it seems impossible for the teachers to incorporate all communicative skills into their instructional programs. Therefore, it is urgent for teachers to train their students in such a way that they become somehow independent individuals equipped with strategies helping them deal with various learning and communicative situations.

2.2. Language Assessment in Iran

As Farhady and Hedayati (2009) put forth, since research-based data are lacking, little if any, studies have been conducted on language teaching and assessment policy in Iran. After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the education system in Iran experienced a massive reform. The aim was to apply Islamic values in the education system. These changes influenced teaching and assessment of foreign languages. In the new education system, English is taught at 6 unit credits at high school. However, the quality of teaching English in Iranian public schools is not desirable. Based on the English syllabus "the aim of English as a foreign language (EFL) at high school is to use at least one foreign language to communicate with others at a survival level" (Secretariat of the Higher Council of Education, 2006, p. 43).

To achieve this goal, communicative language teaching (CLT) approach became the predominant teaching method. As summative tests were the dominant assessment method in schools, attempts were made to change the focus from testing to assessment. In other words, in the new education system, teachers are required to conduct formative assessment during instruction process. Even though, because of the popularity of discrete point tests and summative testing of students' learning, teachers still focus on summative assessment and do not have enough knowledge and skill to implement the new assessment system. That is to say, the focus is still on students' performance on exams rather than their performance in real life situation. Therefore, the washback effect of testing might hinder the adaptation of instruction to support students' learning (Safarnavadeh, 2004).

To assess English in secondary schools in Iran, teachers develop, administer, and score exams at grades 9 and 10. Grade 11 final exams are in the form of standardized tests that are developed by language testing specialists and administered under the supervision of Centre for Evaluation and Monitoring (CEM). The result of these high-stakes tests has more contribution to the students' overall grade than the result of formative assessment carried out by the teacher during the school year. It should be mentioned that, although teachers are encouraged to use formative assessment during the school year, they seldom utilize this assessment type. Also, no documented research has been conducted on the psychometric properties of standardized tests administered by CEM (Farhady & Hedayati, 2009).

2.3. Teachers' Beliefs about Assessment and their role in assessing students

According to Rea-Dickens (2004), assessment is an integrated component of classroom instruction where teachers facilitate students' learning and gather information on students' progress towards learning targets to keep track of students' learning and decide on the next step in learning and instruction. Studies have identified factors that affect teachers' decision making in assessment practices (e.g., Cheng et al., 2004; Yin, 2010). Yin (2010) found that teachers' strategic cognitions such as their beliefs about language learning as well as interactive cognitions like their conceptions about students performance, affect the way they plan and implement assessment practices.

Teachers' assessment competence is an important factor that affect their assessment practices (Cheng et al., 2004). According to Brookhart (2011) there are a set of knowledge and skills that teachers should be aware of. Particularly, teachers should be able to understand the "learning progression" in the content area. This "allows teachers to identify where a student is located in refrence to a learning intention and helps teachers interpret students' work, focus feedback, and plan steps in instruction and assessment, while moving the students towards the goal" (Brookhart, 2011, p. 7).

According to Borg (1999) teachers instructional decisions and thought processes are affected by their beliefs. These beliefs influence teachers' decisions and instructional practices like defining teaching and learning goals, planning lessons, assigning classroom activities and tasks, and assessing pupils' learning (Rios, 1996). Therefore, there is a possibility that teachers impose their instructional and learning beliefs on students (Horwitz, 1988). The results of a study conducted by Cheng (1997) showed that teachers' language learning beliefs critically influence pupils' learning due to the fact that teachers put a great emphasis on very good pronunciation, instantaneous error correction, memorizing vocabulary and grammar rules.

Studies conducted on teacher beliefs, employed different definitions, frameworks and methods (Jones & Carter, 2007). These opposing points of views have contributed to a "messy construct" that makes examining teachers' beliefs

difficult (Pajares, 1992). Nisbett and Ross (1980) conceptualized teachers' beliefs stating that "teachers theories and beliefs represent the rich store of general knowledge of objects, people, events, and their characteristic relationships that teachers have that affect their planning and their interactive thought and decision, as well as their classroom behavior " (p. 44).

Lyon (2011) used the Assessment Practices Framework to study a high school chemistry teacher designing, implementing, and learning from a chemistry lab report. The framework explored teachers' assessment beliefs, practices, and reflection. The results showed that teachers' assessment practices are aligned with their cognition, obsevation and interpretation.

Remesal (2011) conducted a qualitative study on teachers' assessment conceptions. The author interviewed fifty primary and secondary school teachers. The results showed that teachers may have various and conflicting views about the role of assessment in teaching and learning. Therefore, it is important to take into account various assessment beliefs. Because, if teachers' assessment beliefs are not aligned with effective assessment practices, beliefs may hinder restructuring and improving classroom assessment practices (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Tobin, Tippins, and Gallar (1994) viewed that "teachers' beliefs are a critical ingredient in the factors that determine what happens in classrooms" (p. 64). Therefore, since changing beliefs seems to be difficult, teachers' assessment belief is significantly important to warranty methodology to find out how teachers' beliefs relate to practice.

Brown, Lake and Matters (2011) investigated Queensland teachers' conceptions about assessment purposes using an edited version of the Teacher Conceptions of Assessment Inventory. The result of multi group analysis showed that primary school teachers believed that assessment supports learning and instruction. While secondary school teachers believed that the purpose of assessment is to make school and students accountable. The results also showed that teachers' beliefs reflect their assessment.

A study by Brown, Hui, Flora and Kennedy (2011) showed that teachers' beliefs about assessment reflect their societal and cultural differences and affect their teaching practices. This study reported the design of a self-report inventory that includes three factors of accountability, improvement and irrelevance. This model is used to investigate teachers' assessment beliefs in Southern China Hong Kong. The results showed that the teachers strongly adhere to accountability with improvement. This is aligned with the new policy of using assessment to improve the quality of teaching as well as students' learning.

Studies on teachers' beliefs about language learning are highly encouraged because teachers' beliefs are so crucial in the classroom context. In language learning context, however, little research has been conducted on teachers' beliefs about assessment practices and how these beliefs are formed by cultural and institutional contexts (Davison, 2004). Some recent studies have started investigating the role of the English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher and his/her perceptions of assessment practice. Cheng et al. (2004), for instance, argued complex roles played by university lecturers in Hong Kong, Canada and China. This large-scale comparative study showed that teachers' practices changed in three major areas including assessment purposes, methods, and procedures. These distinctions, within and across environments, were because of "varying cultural, institutional, and contextual factors; the nature of the courses; teachers' knowledge of assessment; teaching experience; students' needs; and the role of external testing on teaching and learning" (p. 378).

Davison (2004) conducted a comparative study in which 24 secondary school teachers in Hong Kong and Australia were asked about their views and interpretations of the construct being assessed, and whether or not they felt that their judgements in the classroom were legitimated and trusted in their communities. The findings of this qualitative study indicated that teachers' assessment practices and tendencies can be grouped along a continuum "from assessor as technician, to interpreter of the law, to principled yet pragmatic professional, to arbiter of 'community' values, to assessor as God" (p. 324). This diversity in interpretation of roles was also linked to the effect of assessment approaches like norm-, criterion-, or construct-referenced on teachers' perceptions.

So far, some studies have investigated teachers' assessment practices however, little if any, attention have been paid to teachers' beliefs and knowledge influencing their decision-making processes in classroom assessment (Chang, 2005; Davison, 2004). Thus far, all studies have focused on either the psychometric and quantitative elements of assessment with an emphasis on students' performance (e.g., Addamigh, 2006; Gamaroff, 2006) or on a number of factors involved in the assessment of the four language skills (e.g., Al-Busaidi, 2007; Al-Hamly & Coombe, 2005; Lanteigne, 2008). As such, this study is an attempt to investigate secondary school EFL teachers' assessment beliefs and roles in Iran.

3. Methodology
3.1. Participants
35 Iranian EFL teachers from different secondary schools all over the country took part in this study. The subjects in this study were selected using purposive sampling. Most of the teachers hold bachelor's degree in TEFL or English literature and their teaching experiences ranges from 4 to more than 20 years. It should be mentioned that fictitious names were used to protect teacher identities.

3.2. Instrument
An open-ended questionnaire designed as a guideline by the authors was used in this study (see appendix). The questions developed for this qualitative questionnaire aimed to identify assessment practices of the teachers, explain why phenomenon occurred, investigate factors behind their occurrence, and develop new perception and understanding (Richards, 2003; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The questions were explanatory, contextual and generative in nature and allowed the teachers to express their views in detail. To obtain rich data the questionnaire was translated into Persian and all the teachers responded to the questions in Persian. In order to maintain precise descriptions from teachers, two bilingual experts checked the raw data as well as the themes that emerged from the data.

3.3. Data collection and analysis
It took one month to collect the data. Since the participants worked in different parts of Iran, it was not possible to conduct face-to-face interview with all of them. So, the researcher sent the open-ended questionnaire via e-mail to them. Follow-ups were conducted through e-mail if necessary. Content analysis was used to analyze the data. The emerging themes were categorized and codified and then compared with the whole set of data using a constant comparison method that included reading and rereading within and across the responses of the participants (Lalik & Potts, 2001). Nvivo 10 software was used to analyze the data.

4. Findings and Discussion
The participants in this study expressed a number of varied beliefs about assessment. Themes that emerged from the data are discussed in the following section.

4.1. Teachers' beliefs
4.1.1. Teachers' beliefs about fairness in assessment
Teachers in this study invoked the issue of fairness in assessment and viewed that assessment should only discriminate students on grounds of the ability being assessed. Thus, other extraneous factors like cultural differences should not affect the assessment process. One of the teachers mentioned

that teachers should attempt to make the assessment of students fair. He stated that every student should have an equal chance of getting a good assessment. Elaborating on his view, Amir stated that "Teachers assessment orientations might be affected by cultural and contextual factors, their knowledge of the students and also their own beliefs. Thus in an assessment process, teachers should take into account learners, learning context as well as assessment criteria."

This perspective confirms observations made by Davison (2004), who argued that within a student-based assessment approach, teachers consider "not only common assessment criteria and community constructs, but also the learner and the context" (p. 326).

Teachers believed that using multiple methods in assessing students ensures that tests and related products are of the highest quality and as free of bias as possible. Sahar, one of the teachers stated that:

> In Iran's education system, there are various traditional assessment methods and there is a great emphasis on standardized tests. In my opinion, authenticity has a key role in fair assessment. Students should not be tested only at the end of a program or a unit of study. Alternative assessments such as self- and peer-assessment, and portfolios are also important.

This statement means that the focus should also be on assessment for improvement purposes. Formative assessment is the best way to provide information about students' learning since they have an equal chance of getting a good assessment. One of the participants believed that "Formative assessment tests students' learning during each unit of instruction so that all students have time to take action and learn through their mistakes. Teachers provide students with feedback to improve their learning".

The above statement supports the findings of the study conducted by Irving, Harris, and Peterson (2011) on New Zealand teachers' conceptions of assessment and feedback. They argued that teachers hold different conceptions of assessment. However, improvement purposes of assessment are most preferred.

4.1.2. Teachers' beliefs about providing students with constructive feedback
One of the significant findings of this study was that most of the participants put a great emphasis on the role of feedback. One of the participants, Ahlam, mentioned that:

> Giving feedback to the students is essential. Feedback can provide students with information about strengths and weaknesses

of their responses, the quality of their performance, and the outcomes achieved. In my classes I always provide my students with feedback so that they can improve their learning.

This is in line with Sadler's (1989) view who believed that giving feedback to the students helps them understand where they are relative to the learning goals and where they should go. Feedback helps the students alter this gap. Another participant, Sara, claimed that "Assessment should help learners improve their learning. So, providing students with feedback helps students understand what is expected from them, gives them information about the quality of their work, and guides them to improve learning".

One of the teachers argued that "We have better provide students with descriptive feedback rather than just judging students' performance compared to their peers. Descriptive feedback should inform students of how their learning and performance can be improved".

Teachers in this study believed that feedback is a very important part of assessment and learning. It lets learners know if they are on the right track. As another participant viewed "I think when teachers tend to give feedback to the students, their focus should be on description rather than judgment, observation rather than the person." Shirin added that "the aim is to guide students by providing useful information, to support effective behavior and also to guide the student back on track toward successful performance".

In sum, teachers in this study believed that feedback should be used to promote students' learning. They agreed that feedback should be learning-oriented not grading-oriented. The results of this study support the findings of study on teachers' conceptions of feedback by Brown, Harris, and Hamett (2010) which revealed that feedback should provide information about students' academic performance.

Teachers regarded feedback as information about students' learning. Although they valued feedback for improvement, they maintained that in Iranian education system some feedback is provided because of education stakeholders and parents' expectations and their comments alongside grade are not valued. This is because the focus is mostly on students' final grade. Sara, one of the teachers, stated that "I am clear about giving descriptive feedback to students during formative assessment. However, the problem is giving comments on summative assessment as the focus is only on grade".

Most of the teachers in this study suggested that education stakeholders and teachers should put a great emphasis on formative feedback which promotes students' resilience and engagement in classroom activities.

4.1.3. Pedagogical beliefs

The majority of teachers focused on the pedagogical and practical side of the assessment. One of the participants emphasized the monitoring purpose of assessment. In his opinion learners' errors are very important and students should actively participate in self-assessment and correction of their mistakes. He believed that "through self-reflection, students can learn from their mistakes. If the students do not correct their mistakes, no learning happens, and they would never know what they have done."

Teachers in this study believed in the importance of assessment as a tool that helps pupils to take the responsibility over their own learning. So, teachers' focus on continuous daily assessment is of utmost importance. One of the participating teachers, Aref, added that:

Assessment has to be done on a daily basis, I mean what the learners do day by day should be assessed by the teacher, so we can find out if the learners have reflected on what their teacher taught them.

Teachers were also concerned about the accountability purpose of assessment to communicate with students and parents and make students responsible for their own learning process. As one of the teachers describes:

Teachers should communicate students' performance to both students and their parents. Students should express their ideas and also be aware of their parents' and teacher's views. This is mainly due to the fact that usually parents are not aware of the purpose of assessment and might push their children to get good grades. So, teachers, students and parents should work as a team to improve students' performance.

According to Leung & Mohan (2004), tests should be a motivating factor for learners. Thus, a test must be designed to be a learning as well as assessment experience. In this study, it was clear that teachers' beliefs and their interest in the educational experience of their students often clashes with some of the assessment practices put in place by the Ministry of Education (MOE). As expressed by Emad:

Test should be designed in such a way that the format does not prevent students from showing their real abilities. Considering that, students should get familiar with the test format. In addition, the test must reflect the planned curriculum as well as learners' needs.

A forty year old teacher with 17 years of teaching experience believed that assessment has the

potential to affect daily teaching practices. He mentioned that "In my opinion, grading is not the only purpose of assessment. Teachers should observe students continuously to see where they are relative to the learning goals and adjust their instruction based on students' needs".

As opposed to Rea-Dickins' (2004) report saying that teachers give priority to formal assessment procedures; teachers in this study were cognizant of the limitations of the current formal assessment procedures.

4.1.4. Societal beliefs

Societal beliefs refer to the impact of assessment on teaching, learning, and teachers' and students' accountability. In one of the teacher's viewpoint, assessment is only a reference point to establish students' level of achievement. He added that "Society considers assessment as marks or grades. It is difficult to assess students in secondary school, because only marks are important, so if a student gets a good grade, everyone suppose that this student is eligible to enter university".

Therefore, society considers assessment as a tool to communicate with students and their parents. This teacher added that "I rarely care about the marks that I give to my students. But students and their families always need to see the results and it is important to them".

Another teacher believed in the importance of assessment as an instrument for recognizing students' learning needs.

I think assessment is a useful tool to see if students need more support in their learning. Maybe some students need more help and they cannot accomplish tasks on their own. So, the role of formative assessment is very important.

Some teachers believed that assessment is not useful. In the word of one teacher "to me assessment is not useful; teachers should only focus on their teaching. Assessment is only good for students to study hard because they fear of getting bad grades."

As can be seen in the above statement, this teacher believed that assessment is not a part of her teaching duties. She perceived that the only usefulness of assessment relies on extrinsically motivating learners and make them study hard.

She mentioned that "it is important for families and student themselves to receive grades and see the results, but for me it is useless." This teacher believed that assessment is only a tool to communicate with parents who are interested in final grades only.

The results indicated the complexity of school assessment. Teachers in this research believed that assessment should monitor and improve learning otherwise it would be useless. As Shohamy (2001) states, teachers' attention and concern should be about the quality of the pupils' performance.

4.2. Teachers' role in assessment process

In the word of one of the participating teachers:

Teachers are responsible for implementing day-to-day assessment. Teachers are responsible for planning, implementing and interpreting assessment. They should define learning targets so that students are clear about what is expected of them, use different techniques to elicit evidence of students' learning and use assessment data to give continuous feedback and decision making.

This is in line with Brookhart (2011) saying that teachers have a key role in identifying where students are relative to the learning targets, interpreting students' work, providing them with formative feedback and deciding on their future learning.

Most of the teachers involved in this study believed that they were not engaged in the test designing process; they mentioned that they were excluded more often and their views were not important. They pointed out that teachers are excluded from the assessment process due to the fact that they were discern not to have enough experience in this regard.

Some teachers mentioned that most of the time they are not aware of the content of the midterm or final exam until the exam date. One of the teachers, Farzin, viewed that "teachers should be given more authority in assessing their pupils to meet learners' needs".

In fact, the findings showed that assessment is centrally controlled, and only a few teachers are involved in decision making about assessment. One of the teachers concerned that there is no special training for those teachers involved in assessment decision making. They usually do not have an idea of testing. "Therefore, I think it is not that easy for them to design tests that meet all pupils' needs".

5. Conclusion

Reported practices revealed secondary school EFL teachers' beliefs about assessment and indicated that there is a gap between teachers' assessment beliefs and their practices. The data from this study support the result of previous studies (e.g., Brown et al., 2011; Remesal, 2011; and Yin, 2010). These studies argued that teachers hold various beliefs that affect their teaching and assessment practices. Therefore, teachers' beliefs and roles play an important part in improving classroom assessment

practices.

Most of the teachers involved in this study believed that standardized tests that are currently used to provide information about students' learning are highly questionable in terms of validity and content. Moreover, teachers, especially less experienced teachers, do not have enough knowledge and skill to interpret the data from these tests and help students improve their learning. Therefore, as Atkinson (2012) states "this presents a challenge to teacher education and research to support new teachers in dealing with data in productive ways that fosters their own learning and growth as well as that of their students" (p. 211).

The way classroom assessment is delivered by teachers could highly affect students' learning (Tillema, 2009). Hence, according to Popham (2010) teachers and teacher educators need to develop their knowledge and skill in assessing students to help them critically reflect on their students' test scores.

Participating teachers in this study agreed on the role of formative feedback on students' learning. They believed that supportive assessment can help students learning more than assessment based on state standards. Assessment should help students identify their strengths and weaknesses and enable them to control and assess their own learning (Tillema, 2009). However, lack of clear guidelines and goals are important problems faced by teachers and teacher educators and it provides the need for further development of clear guidelines.

Generally, due to the top-down managerial approach to assessment, teachers were not involved in assessment decision making. And most of the teachers in this study desired an influential role in the assessment process.

Having years of teaching experience, many of the experienced teachers have substantial knowledge of their students' learning. This knowledge and experience make the learning environment more conductive for teaching and learning. Although the participants of this study did not have an efficient role in the assessment process, they expressed major concerns about the nature of assessment. Teachers acknowledged the importance of standardized tests, but they also accentuated the role of classroom-based teacher assessment and believed that teachers' role in the assessment process should not be neglected.

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Appendix

Open-Ended Questionnaire

Please try to answer these questions in as much detail as you can.

1- How long have you been teaching English in secondary schools in Iran?

2- What is your educational qualification?

3- What is your personal belief about EFL assessment in Iranian secondary schools?

4- Please give me some explanations on how pupils are assessed in secondary   schools. Please provide me with some examples.

5- Please tell me about the grading system in your school.

6- What is your opinion about the current assessment practices in you school?

7- Do you have any recommendation for enhancing students' assessment in secondary school EFL context?

8- What are the teachers' assessment roles in Iran?

9- What do you think about your role in assessing students?

10- Would you please tell me about assessment challenges you might face in your classroom?

11- What strategies do you use to overcome these challenges?

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