

Alternative Assessment in the Moroccan EFL Classrooms Teachers' Conceptions and Practices

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Abstract

This study aimed at examining the status of various alternative assessment techniques within the Moroccan EFL public high school classrooms. It is governed by three main objectives: eliciting the Moroccan EFL teachers' conceptions and practices of alternative assessment, identifying the major problems that inhibit the implementation of alternative assessment and, accordingly, suggesting some possible solutions. Additionally, issues related to training, assessment guidelines, as well as the curriculum were all touched upon. Data were collected from 73 EFL public high school teachers from Inzegane-AitMelloul and Agadir-Ida-outanane delegations using a questionnaire and focus group interviews. The results revealed that the practice of alternative assessment is slowly evolving within the Moroccan EFL context in spite of the very positive attitudes expressed towards it. The practice of traditional assessment, on the other hand, seems to be taking the lead in the teachers' practices up to date. The results also indicate that teachers face different sorts of challenges including mainly time constraints, class size, and lack of training. Accordingly, it is recommended that policy makers should address these problems through providing the necessary facilities and the required training on how to cope with them more successfully for a better implementation of the assessment changes.

Key words: Alternative assessment; Traditional assessment; Teachers' conceptions /attitudes; Assessment practices

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INTRODUCTION

The introduction of the new alternative assessment techniques within the Moroccan EFL context in light of the recent educational reform has generated a wide range of reactions among ELT professionals and practitioners, ranging from very positive attitudes and support of these assessment alterations in some cases to other conservative, less optimistic, and sometimes non-positive perceptions in others. Assessment in the Moroccan educational system has often been restricted to its very summative functions, aiming first and foremost at appraising and grading students' performance based on the last minute assessments. This has resulted in poor students' achievement, unsatisfactory levels of students' engagement and weak connection between the educational practices and the real-life demands.

With such deficiencies in mind, several pedagogical innovations have been undertaken with regard to ELT in light of the recent educational reforms in Morocco, aiming at bringing about some fundamental changes to the forms and functions of assessment. This includes the development of new language curricula, the adoption of new instructional methodologies and the call for the integration of new assessment methods to ensure that the desired learning outcomes are accomplished in the most appropriate and plausible manners. The most relevant changes to be cited in this respect remain the adoption of the Content Based Approach and the Standard Based Approach as the main reference for TEFL and the call for the integration of performance assessment, referred to here

more generically as alternative assessment, as the most suitable approach for assessing students' performance in different skills (Pedagogical Guidelines for TEFL, 2007; Ministerial Circular N°142- 07).

In this light, it is worth to highlight that the English Language Guidelines devoted a detailed chapter to define key aspects related to performance-based assessment. This includes a step by step description of the main stages that the teacher should go through while assessing the four skills; namely reading, writing, listening, and speaking, along with vocabulary, functions, and structures. Additionally, the guidelines outlined five sample alternative assessment strategies that can be used for assessing students' performance including journal assessment, portfolio assessment, project work, self-assessment, and peer assessment (Pedagogical Guidelines for TEFL, 2007). However, in spite of the high emphasis placed upon these new assessment activities as an essential part of the day-to-day assessment practices, a number of EFL teachers and practitioners in Morocco are still doubtful about putting them into practice due to various reasons. Hence, the present study is hoped to provide very insightful details from the Moroccan EFL teachers' conceptions and practices of these new assessment changes, including the major challenges they face while trying to put them into practice along with some suggestions on how to overcome them.

Studies of various types and scales have clearly underscored the strong interconnection between teachers' conceptions and /or their efficacy levels and their teaching and assessment practices; (Bandura, 1997; Black & Wiliam, 1998; Yang, 2008; Serkan & Nilgrum, 2011; Torrance & Pryor, 1998), though they do comparatively agree that teachers' actual teaching and assessment practices might not always mirror their own beliefs (Banda, 2002; Oren et al., 2011; Ak & Guvendi, 2010; Pfannkuch, 2002; Nasri, Roslan, Sekuan, Abu Bakar, & Nor Puteh, 2010). Still, there exists a general consensus that teachers' beliefs and attitudes do affect their teaching and assessment practices in one manner or another. In an examination of the relationship between the two dichotomies, teachers' perceptions and practices, Yang (2008), in a survey of 425 Taiwanese elementary school EFL teachers, confirmed that the perceived assessment competency, teachers' beliefs about the pedagogical benefits of assessment, and their education are significantly positively correlated with their assessment practices, while teachers' beliefs about the difficulty of implementing assessment is negatively correlated with their assessment practices.

In this regard, Majid (2011) posits that "more often than not attempts at change fail" (p.1) and this as Hiebert (1991) asserts is due to system and teacher factors, he states "curriculum innovation has failed to take root in the classroom because of system and teacher factors"

(Cited in Pfannkuch, 2001, p.185). Majid (2011) shares the same view point stating "...the most important part in the implementation of any plan, is the teachers. However good the plan, it will be of no use if the teachers do not implement it well" (p.3). Following this premise, it is deemed necessary to carefully examine what teachers think and do with regards to the new assessment changes in Morocco and see whether this change is desirable or not and whether the educational system is ready and able to take on the burden of implementation (Wall, 2000, p.506).

1. RATIONALE OF THE STUDY

Although the new alternative assessment techniques provided a prominent place in the new Assessment Guidelines and other similar ministerial documents, to the researcher's knowledge there is no parallel empirical research or evidence to accompany these alterations. Though teachers play a pivotal role in bringing about highly ambitious assessment transformations, relatively little is actually known about their attitudes and concerns. Issues of time, training and other contextual factors are reported to have a strong impact on the teachers' choices of any assessment strategy especially in measurement driven contexts like the Moroccan one. Hence, the present study is hoped to provide very useful data on how Moroccan EFL teachers view the new alternative assessment techniques and the extent to which they actually put them into practice within and under the confines of the present educational framework. Additionally, it is expected that the study would tap the major challenges that refrain teachers from integrating the desired assessment alterations along with their own suggestions on how to overcome them.

2. SYNOPTIC LITERATURE REVIEW

The current system of examining students' learning, referred to as the traditional approach, dates back to 1800s, when Horace Mann advocated tests to monitor the quality of instruction, allowing for comparisons among teachers and schools (Atta-Alla, 2012). Since then, traditional tests have taken the lead as the primary and the most preferable assessment techniques used in various educational contexts. Research in different disciplines has shown that the vast majority of teachers reported using these techniques at least once a month (e.g., Oren, Ormanci, & Evrekl, 2011; Akbulut & Akbulut, 2011; Majid, 2011; Ak & Guvendi, 2010; Watt, 2005). One of the major advantages of these traditional techniques is their reliability and practicality. They are often used to minimize time and effort on the part of test designer and test taker as they can be easily created, administered and interpreted (Brown, 2004), therefore, requiring little preparation on the part of the teacher and the learner.

Additionally, standardized forms of assessment allow a large number of people to be tested at the same time, under very similar conditions, which increase their reliability and practicality.

The relevant literature, however, cautions that the over-reliance on these techniques as the primary and the only measure for assessing students' learning results in many problems and challenges (Sternberg, 1997; Gardner, 2000; Kohn, 2000, cited in Brown, 2004; O'Malley & Pierce, 1992; Gardner, 1993; Torrance & Pryor, 1998). The first and probably the most valid criticism of these techniques in the present era is that they are often incongruent with the current second/foreign language classroom practices (Tzagari, 2004). While the contemporary pedagogical practices stress a more formative, ongoing view toward the assessment practices, traditional assessment techniques can only be used as a means of summarizing rather than guiding the learning process. As put by Genesee & Hamayan (1994), "... tests are not particularly useful for collecting information about students' attitudes, motivation, interests, and learning strategies" (p.229). Additionally, traditional tests often fail to tap the students' full range of abilities and tend to focus on testing very superficial skills acquired through memorization and practice while neglecting the students' needs and individual differences and focus only on testing single-individual items that are often far removed from real world (Brown, 2004). Owing to such factors, a growing number of EFL teachers and practitioners realized the importance of shifting attention toward less formal, more innovative, and multiple, alternative means of assessment.

The available literature suggests the appropriateness and the choice of using alternative assessment strategies as a means for assessing and monitoring students' progress whenever possible. Unlike the traditional tests which are usually administered at the end of the instructional process, under very restricted conditions, alternative assessment provides students with ample opportunities where they can show what they can do with language through multiple innovative manners. "Students are evaluated on what they integrate and produce rather than on what they are able to recall and reproduce" (Huerta-Macias, 1995, p.339). By means of alternative assessment strategies, students are also engaged in a set of self-reflection processes, by means of which they come to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, develop their critical thinking skills, responsibility of learning, and ownership of their products (Brown, 2004). Last but not least, the new alternative assessment strategies are based on an entirely different set of philosophical beliefs and theoretical assumptions (Bintz, 1991, cited in Anderson 1998), at the very heart of which, the centeredness, the activeness, and the highly independence of the learner which are all crucial to the current teaching and learning practices.

Brown and Hudson (1998) summarized the benefits of alternative assessment procedures, pointing out that they:

- a) Require students to perform, create, produce, or to actively participate;
- b) Use real-world contexts or simulations;
- c) Are non-intrusive in that they extend the day-to-day classroom activities;
- d) Allow students to be assessed on what they normally do in class every day;
- e) Use tasks that represent meaningful instructional activities;
- f) Focus on processes as well as products;
- g) Tap into higher level thinking and problem-solving skills;
- h) Provide information about both the strengths and weaknesses of students;
- i) Are multiculturally sensitive when properly administered;
- j) Ensure that people, not machines, do the scoring, using human judgment;
- k) Encourage open disclosure of standards and rating criteria; and call upon teachers to perform new instructional and assessment roles (p.65).

However, in spite of the high interest in these new assessment strategies as the most suitable approach for surmounting the pitfalls associated with the current examination practices, research has also indicated a number of unresolved theoretical and implementation concerns that undermine their overall application in different disciplines.

Banda (2002) examined teachers' perceptions of classroom assessment in Mathematics in three Malawi schools and their current classroom assessments practices using a descriptive design. The results of this study suggest that teachers perceive classroom assessment as tests that teachers give to their students at specified time intervals. Furthermore, the researcher points out: "what teachers said about their teaching was not reflected during their teaching and since teachers perceived classroom assessment as tests; they showed limited ability to use different methods and tools to assess their students while teaching" (p.3).

In a similar study, Watt (2005) investigated methods of assessment used by 60 mathematics teachers from 11 secondary schools in metropolitan Sydney and their attitudes toward a range of alternative assessment methods along with reasons why they would or would not implement these. Again, the findings of this study confirm that the majority of teachers were satisfied with traditional tests as valid measures of students' ability while they showed a negative attitude toward implementing alternative assessment methods although those with the least years' teaching experience reported attitudes that are more positive.

Similar findings are also elicited by Atta-Alla (2012) who explored the place of alternative assessments among a 100 fourth year student teachers of English in the Egyptian pre-service English teacher education programs using a closed response questionnaire with thirty-two alternative assessment strategies. In this study, it was revealed that the response “never” got the highest percentage followed by “rarely”, then “sometimes” for most of the suggested alternative assessment strategies, which implies that the frequently used assessment strategies are traditional (usually paper-and-pencil achievement tests).

Numerous studies, on the other hand, have shown teachers’ high motivation and interest in integrating the new alternative ways of assessment into their classrooms. Nonetheless, most of them (e.g., Oren & Evrekli, 2011; Ak & Guvendi, 2010; Akbulut et al, 2011; Majid, 2011) do equally agree on a number of concerns these tools might pose at least from the teachers’ standpoint.

Oren et al., (2011) carried out a study of 53 sciences and technology pre-service teachers in the Faculty of Education at Celal Bayar University and they found out that most of the participants reported high self-efficacy levels about alternative assessments and evaluation approaches. Nevertheless, the results obtained from the questionnaire form and the interviews revealed that most of them believe they might experience some problems while implementing these new alternative assessment approaches. These views are in consistence with what is found by Ak and Guvendi (2010) in their study about the degree to which primary school teachers know and use alternative assessment and evaluation methods both in private and state schools. This study demonstrated that the majority of the teachers involved use performance evaluation, concept maps and portfolios of all alternative assessment and evaluation methods. Yet, the results also revealed that most of those teachers consider themselves as partially efficient on implementing alternative assessment, evaluation methods and preparing tools. The same conclusions were drawn by Akbulut et al. (2011) who set out to determine the science and technology teacher candidates’ opinions on alternative assessment at the Karadeniz Technical University. In this study, it was found out that the teacher candidates’ information about alternative assessment is insufficient.

In addition to teacher-related factors, there exist a number of other contextual constraints that influence the place of alternative assessment within any teacher’s assessment agenda. Factors like the educational system, time constraints, an increase in teachers’ work and other related restrictions are all recognized to exert tremendous impact on the teachers’ assessment choices.

Pfannkuch (2002) conducted a longitudinal study in Auckland-New Zealand and found that the secondary school teachers make use of various alternative

assessment strategies but in non-examination classes. This ultimately shows how top-down approaches to assessment and education system effect determine the actual teachers’ assessment practices. Relating to this same issue, Yan (2008) reported in his study of the factors affecting EFL teachers’ use of multiple classroom assessment practices with young learners that teachers perceive alternative assessment to be more challenging than traditional assessment practices. Unlike traditional assessment, which is by definition highly practical, alternative assessment involves numerous difficulties in terms of time, classroom management, parents’ doubts about the objectivity of grading, etc. Among these, time constraints were reported among the greatest difficulties impeding teachers’ extensive use of various alternative assessment strategies. In another study, Nasri et al. (2010) supported the same findings, stating that although teachers have positive perceptions on alternative assessment, they reported that the implementation of these new assessment techniques had very significant impact on their work, especially regarding time and the amount of the paperwork.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The present study is concerned with the adoption of alternative assessment as one of the main aspired features of ELT in Morocco. More precisely, it aims at examining the status of various suggested alternative strategies within the Moroccan EFL classrooms. In light of this, two fundamental dimensions were addressed namely; Moroccan EFL teachers’ conceptions of alternative assessment and their current assessment practices. Additionally, the study will underlie some of the major problems encountered while implementing the new alternative assessment procedures and will, accordingly, put forward some recommendations on how to overcome them.

4. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To reach out the objectives outlined above, the following research questions have been developed, the choice to use research questions instead of hypotheses has been determined by the explorative nature of the present study.

- a) What are the Moroccan EFL public high school teachers’ attitudes toward alternative assessment?
- b) To what extent do Moroccan EFL high school teachers use different alternative assessment techniques in their EFL classrooms?
- c) What are the hurdles that impede the implementation of the new suggested alternative assessment techniques in the Moroccan EFL classrooms?

- d) What are some measures that should be taken to enhance the implementation of the new alternative assessment techniques in the Moroccan EFL classrooms?

5. RESEARCH DESIGN & METHODOLOGY

In order to address the previously raised enquiries, both quantitative and qualitative methods of research were employed according to two main distinctive but complementary phases, which, as many researchers claim, represents a good way of approaching research as it enables the researcher to counteract the weaknesses in both qualitative and quantitative research (Creswell, 2005; Dawson, 2007). First, questionnaires were used as a primary instrument to collect quantitative data from the participants. Then, in order to get a deeper insight about the issues under investigation, qualitative data was collected by means of interviews. The quantitative data consisted of self-completed questionnaires that were primarily relied on for getting specific scores and numbers that can be analyzed statistically in an attempt to measure the research questions at hand. Yet, it is thought that the qualitative data and the respondents' actual words are also highly required to extend, elaborate, or explain the provided data, knowing that most included questionnaire items were closed response-Likert scale type. Accordingly, voluntary participants were chosen to participate in a follow up interview that addressed the same concerns but in a more open-ended manner.

Table 1
Moroccan EFL High School Teachers' Attitudes Toward Alternative Assessment

| Statements | SA | A | UN | D | SD |
|--|------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| 1. Alternative assessment goes hand in hand with the principles of the new language teaching methodologies adopted in the Moroccan EFL classrooms. | 22 30% | 26 36% | 14 19% | 9 12% | 0 0% |
| 2. Alternative assessment best matches the purposes of the curriculum. | 13 18% | 29 40% | 21 29% | 7 10% | 0 0% |
| 3. Alternative assessment can be used effectively with the current textbooks. | 11 15% | 24 33% | 21 29% | 13 18% | 3 4% |
| 4. The results of Alternative assessment helps teachers to improve their teaching. | 27 37% | 30 41% | 4 5% | 0 0% | 1 1% |
| 5. Alternative assessment is more useful for students learning than traditional assessment tools. | 24 33% | 24 33% | 8 11% | 4 5% | 0 0% |
| 6. Alternative assessment helps students to be more motivated and active during the lesson. | 30% 41% | 28 38% | 9 12% | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| 7. Alternative assessment requires that learners demonstrate specific competencies and apply them in simulated real-life situations to specific standards. | 30 41% | 30 41% | 2 3% | 0 0% | 0 0% |
| 8. Alternative assessment is more useful for assessing speaking and listening skills, besides reading and writing skills. | 18 25% | 33 45% | 10 14% | 2 3% | 1 1% |
| 9. Alternative assessment helps in measuring students' higher order thinking skills. | 23 32% | 31 42% | 9 12% | 0 0% | 0 0% |

To be continued

The participants in this study consisted of 73 male and female high school teachers teaching in the delegations of Inzegane-Aitmelloul and Agadir-Ida-outanane, in the south of Morocco. Moreover, the participants in this study were selected according to two main phases. For the first phase, where the questionnaires were handed out to the teachers, a convenience non-random sampling method was used. Then, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the quantitative data put forward by questionnaires, 6 teachers were chosen to take part in focus group interviews. The selection of the interviewees in this phase was chiefly based on their own willingness to participate in the study and provide any further details regarding the issues under investigation.

Generally, the participants' age ranges between 23 and 40 years old. 66% of them had 10 years of teaching experience or less, 22% had between 10 to 20 years of teaching experience while only 12% of them had a teaching experience that exceeds 30 years. The vast majority had the opportunity to teach using different textbooks in use including *Gateway to English*, *Ticket*, *Insight to English*, *Visa to The world*, etc. throughout their teaching experiences.

The data obtained via means of questionnaires were analyzed and summarized in a visual form in tables to serve a clear vision of the issue under investigation.

6. RESULTS & DISCUSSION

6.1 Teachers' Conceptions of Alternative Assessment

Continued

| Statements | SA | A | UN | D | SD |
|--|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| 10. Applying alternative assessment in the classroom makes the coverage of the syllabus very difficult. | 16 21% | 25 34% | 12 16% | 12 16% | 2 3% |
| 11. Alternative assessment is more valid than conventional assessment. | 20 27% | 17 23% | 26 36% | 6 8% | 0 0% |
| 12. A combination of both traditional assessment and alternative assessment techniques provides a more realistic picture of students' achievement. | 23 32% | 28 38% | 8 11% | 1 1% | 0 0% |

Although alternative assessment is still relatively new to many teachers in the Moroccan EFL context, the great majority of the respondents seems to hold a very positive attitude toward it. A closer look at the figures in Table 1. above indicates higher degrees of agreement with most questionnaire items cited in this regard. In fact, the majority of the respondents agree with the suitability of alternative assessment to the current language teaching methodologies (66%) and the present textbooks in use in the Moroccan EFL classrooms (68%). The findings also suggest that the majority of teachers do believe in the effectiveness of alternative assessment as a means for improving both the teaching (79%) as well as the learning processes (69%). The respondents acknowledged that alternative assessment procedures are particularly effective for motivating students during instruction (79%), demonstrating their real life skills (82%) and higher order thinking skills (74%). Additionally, 70% of the respondents agree that alternative assessment is more useful for assessing both receptive and productive skills.

To this end, the majority of the respondents (70%) believe that alternative assessment should have its own place beside the other traditional forms of assessment though 76% of them agree that the implementation of these new assessment procedures would make the coverage of the syllabus more challenging.

While referring to the same question, but in the second phase of the data collection (focus group interviews), there seems to be a substantial confidence among the interviewees concerning the usefulness of the new

suggested alternative assessment measures for addressing the present needs of the learners. This was clearly shown through numerous severe criticisms that have been levelled against the current examination system; in fact, most teachers and learners had some negative experiences with assessment, "...many are the learners who show high interest in learning, contributing to classroom discussions, role plays etc., but unfortunately fail the final examinations". "Assessment is the thing we hate most about teaching". Still, this is not to suggest that the respondents have no concerns about the introduction of alternative assessment in the Moroccan EFL classrooms. Rather, teachers in both stages of the data collection expressed some confusion about various aspects of alternative assessment (see section 7.2.9 below for further illuminations).

These results might suggest that the recent attempts by the Moroccan Ministry of Education to shift from teacher-centered approaches to learner-centered approaches have brought about some positive impacts at least in terms of changing the teachers' assessment beliefs and convictions. Yet, the question remains whether this change in beliefs and attitudes is actually reflected in the teachers' assessment practices or not. The section that follows will present a detailed analysis and discussion of the findings of the study regarding this concern.

6.2 Alternative Assessment Practices

6.2.1 Traditional Assessment versus Alternative Assessment

Table 2
Teachers' Reported Use of Traditional and Alternative Assessment

| Assessment method | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|------------------------|---------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Traditional assessment | 2 3% | 4 6% | 25 34 % | 31 42% | 11 15 % |
| Alternative assessment | 0 0% | 16 22 % | 42 57 % | 10 14 % | 5 7% |

As anticipated, the findings of the study indicate that traditional assessment tools are the main assessment methods that teachers rely on for assessing different skills though alternative assessment also appears to gain some prominence but with very less frequency. To use numbers,

traditional assessment is said to be used "sometimes" by 34% of the respondents, often by 42% them, and always by 15%. Alternative assessment, on the other hand, is said to be used "sometimes" by 57% of the respondents, often by 14% and always by 7%.

With reference to the interviewees' relevant comments regarding this enquiry, it is admitted that the traditional assessment tools stay the predominant assessment measures for assessing different skills up to date while the alternative assessment techniques remain restricted to very special occasions. "For some, alternative assessment activities such as presentations, project work etc. are still viewed as extra-activities that are held to break from the routine of the classroom and bring about some change to the learning atmosphere". Another interviewee commented: "We are forced to use some assessment tools but not the

others in the same way as we tend to focus on some skills and activities more than others". Still, the interviewees, all, confirm that some teachers do try out some new assessment techniques including presentations, project work, and peer assessment especially during process writing and while assessing students' answers during participation. The fact that is confirmed by the respondents' answers to other questions in the subsequent sections of the questionnaire as well (see Sections 6.2.2 & 6.2.7 below).

6.2.2 Teachers' Use of Various Alternative Assessment Techniques

Table 3
Teachers' Reported Use of Various Alternative Assessment Techniques

| Alternative assessment tools | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|------------------------------|------------|------------|------------|------------|-----------|
| Project work | 3 4% | 9 12% | 32 44 % | 22 30 % | 7 10 % |
| Portfolio assessment | 26 36% | 30 41% | 9 12% | 7 10% | 1 1% |
| Self-assessment | 15 21 % | 20 27 % | 23 32 % | 9 12 % | 6 8 % |
| Peer assessment | 8 11 % | 21 29 % | 25 34 % | 13 18 % | 6 8 % |
| Journal assessment | 40 55 % | 17 23 % | 8 11 % | 7 10% | 0 0% |

As Table 3, above indicates, the suggested alternative assessment techniques enjoy various degrees of frequency in the respondents' classes. The findings reveal that project work and peer assessment, are the most common techniques among the respondents with a degree of frequency that ranges between 10 % always, 30% often and 44% sometimes concerning project work and 8% always, 18% often and 34% sometimes for peer assessment. These are followed by portfolio assessment with a frequency of 1% always, 10% often and 12% and finally comes journal assessment with the lowest frequency of 0% always, 10% often and 11% sometimes.

With reference to interviewees' comments already stated in the previous section, it becomes evident that the alternative assessment techniques already mentioned in the interviewees' comments are also emphasized (project work and peer assessment besides presentations) here but the interviewees contend that they resort to such activities only when they have sufficient time which is not often the case. However, many questions might be raised regarding the way these tools are implemented and their overall impact on the students' learning and teachers' teaching, knowing that there are no explicit ministerial guidelines concerning this. Several factors might be offered to explain the reported discrepancy among the alternative assessment techniques in terms of use including, but not limited to, the teachers' familiarity with the assessment techniques, the students' level and

their own learning preferences, and lastly the feasibility of the assessment tool itself (see Sections 6.2.7 & 6.2.9).

6.2.3 Teachers' Use of Alternative Assessment to Assess Various Skills

Table 4
Teachers' Reported Use of Alternative Assessment Techniques to Assess Different Skills

| Skills | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|-----------|----------|------------|------------|------------|------------|
| Reading | 6 8% | 26 36 % | 24 33 % | 15 21 % | 1 1% |
| Writing | 1 1 % | 11 15 % | 25 34 % | 30 41 % | 5 7 % |
| Speaking | 0 0 % | 9 12 % | 20 27 % | 30 41% | 13 18 % |
| Listening | 9 12% | 26 36% | 20 27% | 15 21% | 2 3% |

Even though it is given a prominent place within the Moroccan Guidelines for TEFL as the most suitable approach for assessing different skills, the results in the table above show that alternative assessment is more frequently used to assess productive rather than receptive skills. To be more specific, the frequency of using alternative assessment with the two productive skills ranges between 7% (always) and 41% (often) with a predominance of speaking skills while its' use with the two receptive skills ranges between 3% and 33% with

almost the same average frequency for both reading and listening.

By referring to the interviewees' points of view in the second stage of the data collection, it becomes possible to offer some viable interpretations, the most relevant one of which is that the assessment of various skills is highly dependent on multiple factors like time, syllabus, and the number of students besides the demands of the final examinations. Additionally, some of the respondents maintain that the productive skills (writing and speaking) lend themselves to such forms of assessment more than the receptive ones (reading and listening skills). This suggests the dire and the immediate need for guidance and training for teachers in designing and using various alternative assessment techniques for targeting diverse skills, be receptive or productive. Likewise, teachers should be provided with more practical strategies on how to address any possible sort of restrictions that any of the suggested skills or techniques might pose.

6.2.4 Teachers' Use of Alternative Assessment Techniques With Various School Levels

Table 5
Teachers' Reported Use of Alternative Assessment to Assess Different Skills by Level

| Skills | Never | Rarely | Sometimes | Often | Always |
|---------------------------|---------|-----------|-----------|-----------|----------|
| Common core | 5 7% | 9 12% | 22 30% | 26 36% | 9 12% |
| First year baccalaureate | 3 4% | 8 11% | 26 36% | 27 37% | 7 10% |
| Second year baccalaureate | 6 8% | 10 14% | 16 22% | 30 41% | 6 8% |

Table 5 shows that there exist some slight differences concerning the frequency of alternative assessment with the three high school levels. The first year baccalaureate seems to take the lead regarding the use of the new assessment activities with 36% of the respondents using it sometimes, 37% often, and 10% always. This is followed by the common core level with 30% using it sometimes, 36% often, and 12 always while the least frequency goes to second year baccalaureate level with 22% using it sometimes, 41 often, and 8% always.

First year baccalaureate and common core levels receive the *lion's share* of alternative assessment activities as explained the interviewees possibly because both levels have neither a regional nor a national exam which give teachers more time to go for these activities in the classroom. For the second year baccalaureate, however, teachers might feel restricted by the constraints of time due to the over-loaded syllabus to finish within a limited time span before the national examinations take place.

6.2.5 The Usefulness of the Pedagogical Guidelines in Carrying out Alternative Assessment

Table 6
Teachers' Views on the Usefulness of the Pedagogical Guidelines for Carrying Out Alternative Assessment

| Value label | Frequency | Percentage |
|-------------------|-----------|------------|
| Not at all | 8 | 11% |
| To a less extent | 9 | 12% |
| To some extent | 41 | 56% |
| To a large extent | 3 | 4% |

Although the results displayed in Table 6, above suggest that 60% of the respondents are to some extent satisfied with the existing Guidelines, there still seems to be a kind of confusion among many regarding the extent to which these Guidelines actually help in conducting the new alternative assessment practices. This was apparent in the respondents' qualitative answers that combined both positive and negative comments. Yet, it should be noted that the negative comments outnumbered the positive ones though the quantitative data showed the opposite. While some views asserted that the existing Guidelines are very helpful in familiarizing teachers with the new required assessment techniques and suggesting some ways by which they can put them into practice, others emphasized that the Guidelines are of very little help, considering the limitations of time, over-loaded syllabus and textbooks, which according to them, were overlooked in the Guidelines. Additionally, teachers complained that the number of traditional assessments they are obliged to carry out do not allow them to give alternative assessment its fair share. These remarks will be referred to in details in the coming sections.

6.2.6 Pre- and In-service Training of Teachers to Carry out Alternative Assessment

Table 7
Teachers' Training in Alternative Assessment

| | Frequency | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Yes | 43 | 59% |
| No | 29 | 40% |
| At a pre-service training program | 10 | 14% |
| At an in-service training program | 32 | 44% |

The findings reveal that only 59% of the teachers have already received some professional training about the implementation of alternative assessment in the classroom whereas 40% of the respondents state that they have never received any professional training before. As for the nature of training, the majority of teachers (44%) state that they received in-service training while only 14% of

the respondents indicate that they received some in pre-service training. Some interviewees, however, mentioned further training experiences they have been involved in either in the delegations they are affiliated to or work or in some private language centres they were working in.

Nevertheless, the respondents, overall all, seem unsatisfied neither with the amount nor the quality of training provided. They claimed that the official training is often too vague and theoretical and it does not account for the teachers' contemporary needs in the new areas of assessment. This is further corroborated by the teachers' responses to the subsequent questionnaire items which indicate the majority's desire to receive additional training in different areas of alternative assessment particularly in the form of workshops (83%), demo lessons (53%), and seminars (36%).

6.2.7 Teachers' Training Needs in Alternative Assessment

Table 8
Teachers' Training Needs in Various Areas of Alternative Assessment

| Training area | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Project work | 37 | 51% |
| Portfolio assessment | 53 | 73% |
| Short quizzes | 7 | 10% |
| Oral participation of students | 16 | 22% |
| Self-assessment | 26 | 37% |
| Peer assessment | 27 | 37% |
| Journal assessment | 53 | 73% |

6.2.8 Type of Training Required by Teachers in Alternative Assessment

The answers to the two previous questions indicate that the majority of the teachers have received very limited training. Therefore, the need for further training is evidently demonstrated here in all the cited areas of

Table 10
Challenges Faced While Implementing Alternative Assessment

| Statements | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Alternative assessment is less structured than the other tests. | 15 | 34 % |
| Alternative assessment is less reliable than the other tests. | 11 | 15 % |
| Alternative assessment requires a limited number of students with sufficient space and other facilities. | 44 | 60 % |
| Alternative assessment takes much more time than the other tests. | 50 | 68 % |
| Alternative assessment is unsuitable for the Moroccan EFL context. | 9 | 12% |
| Both teachers and students are not trained in alternative assessment. | 38 | 52 % |
| Alternative assessment faces syllabus constraints. | 37 | 51 % |
| Students are not interested in the tasks especially as they will be tested using the traditional tests. | 23 | 32 % |
| Alternative assessment is constrained by problems of discipline. | 18 | 25 % |

alternative assessment including journal assessment and portfolio assessment (73%), project work (51%), self and peer assessment (37%), oral participation of students (22%), and short quizzes (10%). The concern with both professional and practical issues is also explained by the desire of the majority to receive training in the form of workshops (88%) besides demo lessons (53%), seminars and intensive training (36%).

Table 9
Teachers' Preferences Concerning the Modes of Training

| Type of training | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------|-----------|------------|
| Workshops | 64 | 88% |
| Intensive training | 26 | 36% |
| Seminars | 26 | 36% |
| Demo lessons | 39 | 53% |

With these findings in mind, it becomes quite evident that very important adjustments need to be made regarding the professional support given for the teachers to bring about the new assessment changes. Most existing research recognizes that teachers' education in assessment is insufficient (Arter, 2003; McKay, 2006; Yang, 2008; Ak & Guvendi, 2010; Akbulut et al., 2011). The present study does not only emphasize the bad need for further ongoing training in the domain of alternative assessment, but it also underlines the importance of providing more useful and relevant training to teachers. More focus should be geared toward providing teachers with more practical tips and strategies needed for transferring their own teaching philosophies into positive learning experiences that would help in shaping their own understanding of the current assessment practices and addressing any possible uncertainties they might come across.

6.2.9 Reasons Against the Use of Alternative Assessment

Based on the teachers' choices, it becomes evident that the majority of the respondents face various problems. These problems vary from place to place and have various effects on the teachers' alternative assessment practices. The most cited reason why teachers would not use alternative assessments is that they regard them as time consuming (68%). This is followed by the problem of large classrooms (60%), lack of training and syllabus constraints (52%), and the unstructured nature of these techniques (34%). Other

factors include lack of interest on the part of the students and discipline problems with an average frequency of (32%) and (25%) for both respectively. Factors not perceived as impediments for these teachers are the reliability of the new alternative assessment procedures and the unsuitability of these techniques to the Moroccan EFL context with low proportion of teachers citing these as real problems.

6.2.10 Suggestions to Improve the Implementation of Alternative Assessment

Table 11
Teachers' Preferences Regarding the Measures That Should Be Taken to Enhance the Implementation of Alternative Assessment

| Statements | Frequency | Percentage |
|---|-----------|------------|
| Addressing the teachers' attitudes toward alternative assessment and sensitizing its importance. | 36 | 49% |
| Limiting the number of students in each class and providing the necessary facilities for implementing alternative assessment. | 46 | 63% |
| Increasing the number of hours/ sessions for teaching English as a foreign language. | 37 | 51% |
| Addressing the adequacy between the instructional objectives and assessment tasks. | 19 | 26% |
| The correct use of the syllabus and the distributed guidelines. | 20 | 27% |
| Reducing the amount of formal testing. | 35 | 48 % |
| Explicitly requiring teachers to implement a wide range of alternative assessment techniques. | 22 | 30% |
| Providing in-service training programmes on the use of alternative assessment. | 37 | 51% |
| Good co-operation between teachers and learners, and administrators. | 36 | 49 % |
| Implementing quality supervision. | 28 | 38 % |

As indicated in Table 11 the measures on how to improve the implementation of alternative assessment are ranked according to the order of importance in the respondents' view. In relation to this, 63% of the respondents stressed limiting the number of students in each class and providing the necessary facilities. This, actually, confirms the previous section's findings, which ranked the problem of over crowdedness or large classes among the top challenges that stand against the implementation of alternative assessment in the Moroccan EFL context. In this light, 51% of the respondents reasserted that increasing the number of hours devoted to English classes and providing the necessary in-service training on how to use alternative assessment would pave the way for teachers to make a

better use of these tools. Besides this, more than 48% of the respondents suggested reducing the amount of formal testing, sensitizing teachers' and students' to the importance of alternative assessment, and encouraging collaboration among different stakeholders as key factors for enhancing the place of alternative assessment within Moroccan EFL classrooms. Other suggestions include implementing quality supervision (38%), explicitly requiring teachers to implement a wide range of alternative assessment techniques (30%), addressing the adequacy between the instructional objectives and the assessment tasks (26%), and following the syllabus and the guidelines (27%).

6.2.11 Other Measures to Improve the Implementation of Alternative Assessment

Table 12
Teachers' Suggestions to Improve the Implementation of Alternative Assessment

| Suggestions | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Designing textbooks that incorporate alternative assessment. | 2 | 6% |
| Varying the assessment measures. | 3 | 9 % |

To be Continued

Continued

| Suggestions | Frequency | Percentage |
|--|-----------|------------|
| Providing more training in alternative assessments techniques. | 8 | 24% |
| Devoting specific assessment rubrics to alternative assessment. | 2 | 6% |
| Limiting the number of students in each class. | 2 | 6% |
| Coaching students in alternative assessment. | 2 | 3% |
| Sensitizing teachers to the importance of alternative assessment. | 2 | 6% |
| Requiring alternative assessment in the official guidelines. | 1 | 3% |
| Minimizing the over-loaded syllabus. | 1 | 3% |
| Making sure the students have the required level before they pass to the next one. | 1 | 3% |
| Going back to split hours. | 1 | 3% |
| Using ICT to get students involved. | 3 | 9% |
| Involving both teachers and supervisors. | 1 | 3% |
| Being flexible and helpful. | 1 | 3% |
| Introducing alternative assessment early in primary schools. | 1 | 3% |
| Adopting alternative assessment in all school subjects. | 1 | 3% |
| Taking the level of the students into consideration. | 1 | 3% |

It is interesting to note that the highest number of the investigated teachers (24%) suggest training as the most salient way for more successful implementation of alternative assessment within the Moroccan EFL context. For the other suggestions, most of them have a frequency of 3% and they are generally related to collaboration between students, teachers and supervisors, using ICT, and sparing more space for the new alternative assessment measures within the Moroccan TEFL Guidelines and the textbooks in use.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the aforementioned state of the suggested assessment alternatives within the Moroccan EFL context, the various challenges that impede their full implementation and some of the suggestions put forward in the various stages of the data collection. The study raises a number of pedagogical implications that would hopefully contribute to a deeper reconsideration of the assessment practices in the Moroccan EFL classrooms.

First of all, it is interesting to confirm that the vast majority of the correspondents reported very positive attitudes toward the new alternative assessment procedures which go in harmony with the most prevalent theoretical assumptions that learning is to be expressed and, hence, assessed in multiple ways (Gardner, 1993). These very positive views on the new assessment tools, however, as the case is in many other EFL contexts and disciplines, are not fully reflected in the teachers' actual assessment practices as admitted by the respondents themselves. The

suggested alternative assessment techniques marked a very modest presence in contrast to the existing traditional assessment practices and to the overall orientation of the current curriculum. This might be considered quite natural given the novelty of these assessment tools on the one hand and the domination of the traditional assessment practices in the Moroccan educational system as a whole. Yet, the assessment shift and change in Morocco must be coupled with a set of parallel measures if it is to reach the educational goals it is set for.

Second, the positive shift marked in the teachers' conceptions must be exploited in ways that better foster their practices as well. This might be achieved through providing further pre- and in-service training for teachers and equip them with the necessary skills and the tools needed to address the specific challenges posed by the new assessment alternatives. As raised previously, the present study does not only emphasize the urgent need for further ongoing training in the domain of alternative assessment, but it does also stress the vitality of providing relevant training in the most appropriate methodology (see Sections 6.2.6, 6.2.7 & 6.2.8).

Third, although alternative assessment is highly encouraged to be implemented as an essential part of the assessment practices, there actually is no, unlike the traditional tests, imperative for teachers to do so. Hence, they remain optional alternatives that teachers may or may not resort to depending on several considerations. Indeed, some of the new assessment tasks are still viewed only as extracurricular activities that are held to break from the routine and bring some change to the classroom.

While this should no longer be the case, the concerned authorities have to sincerely reconsider the place and the status of these alternatives in the relevant official documents and provide clear and explicit guidelines in regards to their implementation. Similarly, textbook designers should work on developing textbooks that openly and fairly represent various alternative assessment tasks so as to ease the job of the teachers and learners.

Finally, if official documents, textbooks in use, training, and cooperation between all the parts involved are operational, the alternative assessment alterations in the Moroccan EFL context will be given a fairer place among the existing assessment practices and will certainly contribute to better teaching and learning.

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