

Exploring Secondary Teachers' Perceptions of Classroom Assessment in a Tunisian Context

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Abstract

“Classroom assessment” of foreign languages is an important area of examination because it is considered as an essential process influencing both the teaching and the learning practices and beliefs (Cohen, 1994). Moreover, it seems that perceptions that teachers have on assessment are likely to influence their assessment practices. This study is set up to explore teachers' perceptions of oral assessment in order to determine their beliefs, attitudes and views that affect their assessment practices. It also seeks to determine whether there are significant differences in teachers' perceptions of oral assessment by gender. Data were collected from a questionnaire survey with 40 teachers. Teachers' perceptions of assessment were measured through a calculation of the percentage. In addition, descriptive statistics such as means and standard deviations as well as inferential statistics, t-test for independent samples were used in this study. The findings revealed that secondary teachers who participated in the study reported favorable and positive perceptions of oral assessment. Participants considered the ultimate goal of oral assessment is to make decisions on teaching and learning. The majority of the teachers also perceived that the basic role of assessment is to raise learners' concentration on their efforts in learning. Furthermore, the usefulness of oral assessment in making students confident and in enhancing their performance was maintained by a large proportion of the participants.

Keywords: Classroom assessment, oral assessment, perceptions of teachers, Assessment practices, gender differences.

1. Introduction

Since the 20th century, recent studies have advocated for classroom assessment as an important aspect and an integral component of effective teaching and learning (Bryant and Driscoll, 1998; McMillan, Myran and Workman, 2002; Stiggins, 2002). Goodrum, Hackling, and Rennie (2001) assert that “an assessment is a key component of teaching and learning process” (p. 2). Goodrum et al. (2005) maintain that effective learning occurs when correspondence exists between teaching, evaluation, and results. Therefore, due to its close relation with instruction and learning outcomes, assessment has a key role in learning. In this context, Goodrum et al. (2005) state that “assessment enhances learning, provides feedback about student progress, builds self-confidence and self-esteem, and develops skills in evaluation” (p. 2). Classroom assessment is an essential aspect in the teaching process since it informs the teacher about what students think and about how they think (Roberts, Gerace, Mestra and Leonard, 2000). Classroom assessment then helps teachers to recognize what students already know and what they need to learn. It is an important tool through which teachers can use to inform their teaching and the learning of their students. However, according to Fennema and Romberg (1999) the way teachers perceive assessment may influence the way they teach and assess their students. Thus, teachers' perceptions will build a foundation and rationale for the assessment practice they use in their classrooms. This study seeks to understand the meaningfulness of classroom assessment through teachers' lenses. It is set up to investigate teachers' perceptions of the role classroom assessment in teaching and learning.

2. Definitions of key concepts

Assessment: Assessment has been defined variously in the literature. Linn and Miller (2005) define assessment of student learning as a systematic process of collecting information about student progress towards the learning goals. They maintain that students' performance can be measured in various ways, including "traditional paper and pencil tests, extended responses (essays), performance of authentic task, teacher observation, and student self report" (Linn & Miller, 2005, p. 26). Similarly, Dhindsa et al. (2007) describe assessment as a key component of teaching and learning, "a systematic process of data gathering" about students' progress (p. 1261). Therefore, assessment can be seen as the process of collecting information purposefully using different methods/strategies and tools for the purposes of informing decision. According to M. B Huba and J. E Freed (2000), assessment is an integral part of teaching and learning which involves the process of gathering, interpreting and recording information related to student progress in learning and the effectiveness of the teaching strategies. It aims at bringing about improvement for both the teacher who is assessing and the students who are being assessed. According to Popham (2008), assessment enables teachers to gather information about the students' progress as well as the extent to which methods of instruction used are helping the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes. Through assessment teachers can explore better ways of supporting students' learning and regulating their teaching strategies. On the other hand, assessment helps the students to know the areas that they need to work hard so as to attain the desirable learning outcomes.

Assessment is used to improve both teaching and learning and is crucial in ensuring the quality of education offered. It can contribute to enhancing quality of education if appropriate decisions and measures are taken based on the information revealed through assessment. However, determining what to assess and how to assess effectively and establishing remedial measures required, is a complex process. Other researchers such as Agrey (2004) consider assessment as a key tool for sustaining students' engagement in learning as well as for stimulating their commitment and efforts to study. This means that students are likely to focus and concentrate in their studies if they know that they will be assessed. Their commitment tends to correlate highly with the stake associated with the decisions to be made based on assessment they undertake. For instance, when promotion to the next class depends on attaining a certain pass mark score, they will tend to take studies more seriously than they would if the scores were to be used only for reporting purposes. Assessment also has an influential role in encouraging and motivating students' learning and in formation of good study habits. According to Linn and Gronlund (2000), encouragement and reward of individual efforts would have been difficult if there was no assessment and excellence in achievement would be less demonstrable.

Classroom assessment: Classroom assessment is seen as a vital ingredient for effective teaching and learning and it involves any planned method or strategy used in the classroom to establish the level of students' difficulties or understanding of a particular concept or idea with the purpose of helping students to succeed in learning (Ainscow, 1988; Pophan 1999). Thus, it provides the students with guidance on their performance through feedback on students' progress over a period of time so that any errors or learning difficulties can be identified and corrected, as such classroom assessment contributes to enhancing the learning process. Many scholars confirm that classroom assessment is a typical benchmark of the teaching and learning process. They give evidence that significant learning gains can be achieved when classroom assessment is incorporated with classroom practices (Stiggins, 1992; Black and D. William, 1998). Due to the powerful influence of assessment on learning outcomes, researchers have advocated for the integration of assessment with teaching and learning (Stiggins, Arter, Chappuis, and Chappuis, 2006). The role of teachers in ensuring that assessment leads to effective teaching and learning cannot be over-emphasized. Teachers are expected to play a dual-role of facilitating students' learning and of implementing classroom assessment in a manner that will enhance meaningful learning outcomes. Their role in assessment encompasses the whole process of constructing and administering of assessment tasks to interpreting the results generated from assessment.

Assessment practice: It is a manner of conducting assessment. Types of assessment practices are the following:

- *Summative assessment:* According to William and Tompson (2008), Scriven (1967) and Bloom (1969) proposed the terminology "summative assessment". It facilitates the measurement of the level of achievement of learning outcomes formally through tests, assignments, projects and presentations. It also allows the teacher to evaluate and to make important judgments either about learners' achievements at certain relevant points in the learning process (e.g. end of course, project, semester, unit, and year) or about the program in use, teaching and/or unit of study effectiveness (William and Tompson, 2008).

- *Diagnostic assessment*: Black and William (2004) put emphasis on the use of assessment to support learning; however, they also acknowledge the role of assessment for certification and evaluation.

Diagnostic assessment is then usually conducting at the start of a unit of study for the sake of evaluating the skills, abilities, interests, experiences, levels of achievement or difficulties of an individual learner or a whole class. It includes formal measurements or informal measurements such as observation, discussions and questioning (Black and William, 2004). *Formative assessment*: According to William and Tompson (2008), formative assessment was first coined by Scriven (1967) and Bloom (1969). It is implemented in order to check students' ongoing progress, to give immediate and appropriate feedback and to improve the curriculum (William and Tompson, 2008). It usually occurs during day to day learning experiences and includes ongoing, informal observations throughout the term, course, semester or unit of study. Formative assessment also helps teachers to make decisions on modifying their programs or adapting their learning and teaching methods.

- *Informal assessment*: This type of assessment practice rests upon a systematic observation of learners during the learning process. It involves constantly interacting with learners to gain insights of what they know, understand and can do; this can be done through circulating the classroom and posing questions, providing guiding feedback and motivating and quizzing learners.
- *Formal assessment*: The ultimate objective of this assessment practice is to determine the degree to which students have achieved the learning outcomes. This objective is accomplished through the use of specific assessment strategies which are essays, exams, reports, projects, presentations, performances, laboratories or workshops, resource development, artwork, creative design tasks, quizzes and tests, journal writing and portfolio, individual and/or collaborative tasks that usually attract a mark.

Perceptions: Views or opinions held by an individual resulting from experience and external factors acting on the individual. The significance of the study lies on the fact that perceptions of teachers on assessment have implications on how assessment is implemented and on the use the information generated to enhance teaching and learning. In emphasizing the importance of perceptions, Danielson (2008) and Assessment Reform Group (1999) observed that although teachers are trained to develop sound and valid assessment measures, their perceptions and beliefs may affect the way they teach and assess their students and their rational may influence the way students proceed with learning and the way it is tested. It is well documented that assessment has a great influence in teaching and learning (Airasian, 2001; Stiggins and J. Chappius, 2005). The desire to ensure alignment of assessment with teaching and learning process has led to a growing interest to investigate teachers' perceptions of assessment and their assessment practices and skills. The purpose of this study is to explore perceptions of secondary school teachers in Tunisia on oral assessment. Studying teachers' perceptions of oral assessment is important due to the fact that perceptions affect behavior (Borko and Putnam, 1996; Brown, 2006). Thus the study is designed to investigate the perceptions of assessment held by secondary school teachers in Tunisia

3. Method of the study

3.1 Research Questions

This study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. How do secondary teachers perceive oral assessment?
2. Does gender affect / influence teachers' perceptions of oral assessment?

3.2 Objectives of the study

The major purpose of the study is to explore secondary school teachers' perceptions of oral assessment in Tunisia. The study intended to achieve the following objectives:

- ☒ To investigate teachers' perceptions of assessment.
- ☒ To determine whether there are significant differences in teachers' perceptions of assessment by gender.

3.3 Data Collection Instrument

Questionnaires are among the most widely used instruments in research studies. They are very useful for gathering large-scale information regarding different kinds of issues, such as language needs, communication difficulties, preferred learning styles, preferred classroom activities and attitudes, and beliefs (Cohen et al., 2007; Nunan, 1992; Oppenheim, 2000; Richards, 2001; Robson, 2002).

Data of this study were gathered by means of a questionnaire survey developed by the researcher and administered to secondary school teachers in Tunisia. The questionnaire comprised two parts: one part included items concerning the demographic information of the participants; and the other consisted of items relating to teachers' perceptions of oral assessment.

The internal consistency estimate of reliability for the questions using Cronbach's Alpha was estimated to be .82. The use of piloting in the case of a questionnaire is necessary to establish whether it is too long or too short, the wording is not ambiguous, the type of questions and general format are easy to comprehend, the questionnaire is visually adequate, the questions are not redundant and the directions are easy to follow (Cohen et al., 2007). In this study, the questionnaire was piloted with two English language teachers to check its content and written expressions. In this study, questionnaires were distributed to 40 English language teachers via email. The teachers' consent to participate in the study was sought and secured. They were assured that all the data collected were for research purposes only, and their confidentiality would be respected during the study.

3.4 Participants

Since the study is concerned with teachers' perceptions of assessment and the context is Tunisian EFL setting, the target participants are EFL teachers teaching in different regions in Tunisia. The sample included 40 secondary teachers who volunteered to take part in the study. It is to be noted that there are significantly higher number of female teachers, which is reflected in the gender profile of the participants (22 female and 18 male participants).

3.4 Data analysis

This study uses cross-sectional design to gather quantitative data on the demographic information of the participants and their perceptions of assessment. It also aims at exploring any differences in perceptions relating to gender. The questionnaire is divided into two parts: three items relating to personal information and 20 items relating to teacher's perceptions of assessment. Both descriptive statistics such as percentage, means and standard deviations as well as inferential statistics, t-test for independent samples were used in this study. Descriptive data (mean and SD) are used to identify the frequency of perceptions of the participants and t-test is used to capture any significant difference that may be reflected by gender.

4. Results and discussion

• Demographic features of the Participants

Analyzing the first part of the questionnaire which is concerned with the demographic characteristics of the participants reveals the major characteristics of secondary teachers who willingly participated in this study. The following table 1 indicates the composition of participants by gender and by teaching experience.

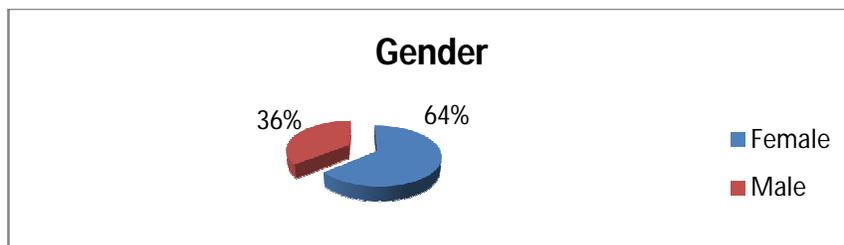
Table 1: The composition of the participants by gender.

Gender	N	%
Female	22	55
Male	18	45

Table2: The composition of participants by teaching experience (N=40)

Teaching experience	N	%
Less than 5 years	1	2.5
6-10 years	3	7.5
11-15 years	16	40
16-20 years	11	27.5
21-25 years	6	15
More than 25 years	3	7.5

As shown in table 1, female teachers comprised of 64% percent whereas male teachers comprised of only 36% percent of the participants. The following figure1 illustrates the composition of participants by gender.

Figure 1: The composition of participants by gender.

Research question 1: How do secondary teachers perceive assessment? Teachers' Perceptions of Assessment

The second part of the questionnaire is divided into five sections:

1. The perceived purpose of oral assessment includes 5 items.
2. Teachers' views and attitudes on the role of oral assessment include 5 items.
3. The perceived timing for conducting oral assessment includes 3 items.
4. The types of activities used for conducting oral assessment include 4 items.
5. A perceived source of oral assessment includes 3 items.

Each section reflected teachers' understanding and views of oral assessment. Teachers were asked to indicate their responses to various statements that they were given regarding oral assessment.

Perceived purpose of conducting Assessment

I examined teachers' perceptions of assessment regarding to the purposes of assessment. This is important because, as Guskey (2007) pointed out that in order to make an effective assessment, which improves learning, teachers' perception about assessment and the way how teachers understand assessment results should be changed. The analysis of the teachers' responses revealed their reasons for implementing assessment.

The responses of the teachers are provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Teachers' perceived views on the purpose of oral assessment.

The purpose of oral assessment	No. of mentions	%
Make decisions on teaching and learning.	25	62.5
Assign marks to pupils.	06	15
Rank pupils at the end of each term.	04	10
Evaluate pupils' learning progress.	03	7.5
Evaluate the effectiveness of the English textbook.	02	5

Based on the statistical findings presented in table 2, a large proportion of the participants (62.5%) indicated that the primarily purpose of implementing oral assessment is to make *decisions related to teaching and learning*. This entails that those secondary school teachers perceive oral assessment as a necessary tool in guiding them in terms of "what to teach next" and "how to teach". Many researchers as Stiggins & Chappius demonstrated also that the major aim of conducting classroom assessment is to make decisions related to teaching and learning. They further argued that classroom assessment should provide feedback to modify the teaching and learning process. On the other hand, 15 % of the teachers assume that they use oral assessment for the sake of *assigning marks to the pupils* and 10 % believe that oral assessment is necessary to *rank pupils at the end of the each term*. This implies that secondary teachers were mostly concerned with the accountability function of assessment. Since they are required to generate and report marks and grades to each pupil based on his oral performance in the classroom, this shows that they put lots of emphasis on the formative type of assessment. This finding is consistent with Airasian (1994, p.283) who contended that "administratively, schools need grades to determine such things as pupil's rank in class, credits for graduation, and suitability for promotion to the next level".

Similarly, in the study in Egypt it was revealed that Egyptian teachers had the school accountability conception of assessment (Gebril.A, 2014). Furthermore, 7.5 % of the participants perceive the purpose of implementing assessment is to *evaluate learner's learning progress*. In this regard, the secondary teachers' emphasis on this particular purpose of oral assessment displays their regular consolidation and review of the learners' acquired knowledge.

They aim to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their learners through oral assessment and oral feedback. A small proportion of the participants (5%) indicates that teachers resort to oral assessment in order to *evaluate the effectiveness of used English textbooks*. Those secondary teachers can offer valuable insights about the efficiency of certain teaching practices and learning objectives since they ultimately seek to identify and criticize the elements and the parts of the textbooks that require revision, modification and change. Thus, their view is based on summative purposes.

Finally, the analysis of the teachers' responses to the first part of the questionnaire displays significant variation that is attributed to differences in assumptions regarding the purpose of oral assessment.

Teachers' Attitudes and views on the role of oral assessment

Teachers' responses concerning their attitudes and views towards the role of oral assessment are analyzed and presented in the table below.

Table3: The different attitudes and views towards oral assessment.

Teacher's attitudes and views towards the role of oral assessment.	No. of mentions	%
Assessment raises pupils' concentration, motivation and engagement in learning.	06	15
Assessment makes the pupil confident for his final examination.	03	7.5
Assessment increases the workload for teachers.	01	2.5
Assessment plays an important role in enhancing pupils' oral performance.	19	47.5
Assessment significantly contributes in the improvement of the learning and teaching practices.	11	27.5

Table 3 shows that secondary teachers have highly favorable perceptions of the role of assessment in enhancing learners' performance (47.5%), improving the learning and teaching practices (27.5%) and rising learners' concentration and engagement in learning (15%). The fact that the majority of the participants perceive oral assessment as a key tool to enhance pupils' performance and augment their concentration, motivation and engagement in the classroom setting reflects a motivational perspective. It is widely observed that students tend to focus and concentrate more on a subject matter if they already know that they will be assessed than if they know that they will not be assessed. Many scholars as Delandshere (2002) argued for the use of assessment to enhance students' performance and learning. Similarly, it is believed that the feedback motivates learners to study (Dweck, 2006). Dweck stated that, "Students are different. Some of them perform well, while others need to put a big effort to perform well. Therefore, I stimulate those students who may struggle to study by giving them feedback such as: you made a good job keep on doing it." However, some authors such as Black and William (1998) criticize this kind of feedback because it leads to increasing self-esteem of students. Instead, students should be motivated to learn in order to meet requirements of teacher. More importantly, they should know and understand their own progress. Respondents' perception on a statement that assessment makes the learner confident for his final examination was favorably high with a percentage of 7.5%. Statement that assessment increases the workload of teachers is agreed by a small proportion of teachers as reflected by 2.5%. Teachers with such views tend to consider assessment as a burden for them rather than an important tool which generates useful information for enhancing both teaching and learning.

Perceived timing of implementing oral assessment

The timing through which teachers deliver oral assessment is displayed in the following table.

Table 4: The timing of employing oral assessment.

Timing of employing oral assessment	No. of mentions	%
At the end of a module	09	22.5
At the start of a module	13	32.5
Assessment should be based on teacher convenience.	18	45

According to table 4, the analysis of the teacher's responses concerning the timing of implementing oral assessment reveals that a large proportion of the participants (45%) report that assessment should be conducted based on teacher convenience.

While 22.5% of the participants suppose that oral assessment is to be implemented at the end of a module, 32.5 % think that oral assessment should be conducted at the start of a module. Their views can be explained as such: first, the practice of not assessing at the start of a module precludes the opportunity to modify/design teaching in response to student understanding (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Secondly, the practice of not allowing students to be assessed when they feel ready for assessment i.e. at the end of the module denies that students may need differential amounts of time to achieve desired learning outcomes (Boud, 1995).

Perceived types of activities for conducting oral assessment

EFL teachers have at their disposal a variety of classroom communicative activities that can be used in order to assess learner's oral performance. Table 5 below presents teachers' choice of activities.

Table 5: Types of activities used for conducting oral assessment

Types of activities used for conducting oral assessment	No. of mentions	%
Role-plays	14	35
Oral interviews	09	22.5
Picture description or stories	12	30
Project-works	05	12.5

According to the statistics presented in table 5, the majority of teachers favor the use of 'role plays', 'picture description or stories' and 'oral interviews' as useful communicative activities designed for assessing learner's oral performance. A small percentage of respondents 12.5 favor the use of 'project-works'. The use of 'Role plays' is strongly agreed by a total of 35% and 'picture description or stories' is strongly agreed by a total of 30% and 'oral interviews' is agreed by a total of 22.5%. This shows that when carrying out oral feedback, secondary teachers tend to highly focus on interactive activities which create an authentic and dynamic learning environment. Teachers who agreed upon the use of 'picture description' hold the assumption that pictures are ideally suited for eliciting oral language from learners. For this reason, they can be included in the oral assessment of individual learners. The use of 'Project works' is also agreed by a total of 12.5 %. This implies a summative view of oral assessment. This type of activity is a great way to help pupils make real-life connections with the material, as well as increase motivation, collaboration and engagement. Hence, depending on their purposes and convictions, secondary teachers rely on diverse classroom activities for the sake of conducting oral assessment.

Perceived sources of oral assessment

Teachers responses to the different sources from which oral assessment can be generated are displayed in the following table.

Table 6: Perceived sources of oral assessment

Sources of oral assessment	No. of mentions	%
Teacher assessment	26	65
Peer assessment	09	22.5
Self-assessment	05	12.5

The statistical information shows that teacher assessment is highly favored by a significant percentage of 65%. Self-assessment and Peer assessment are respectively favored by percentages of 12.5% and 22.5%. It seems that oral assessment is closely intertwined with teacher based assessment. This can be related to the roles attributes to the teacher inside the classroom as the one who has the power to guide and direct the teaching process. Even the self based assessment should be supported and encouraged by the teacher. Spiller (2012, p.7) states that "Students need coaching, practice and support in the development of self-assessment abilities." However, this disregard to the importance of peer assessment and self-assessment reflects teachers' unawareness of their benefits. In fact, peer assessment and self-assessment are important part of helping students" realize about their role in their learning and helping them participate in their learning more actively (Black & William, 1998). Self-assessment and peer-assessment helps students to know about their own progress and what else they need to do to reach desired goals of course (Dann, 2014). More importantly, self-assessment and peer-assessment helps students to be a self-directed learner (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001).

Hence, the majority of the respondents reported a high preference of teacher-assessment at the expense of peer and self- assessment. However, recent studies advocate for including students in the process of developing assessment tools because, as Falchikove (2004) states, student involvement in peer assessment adds more value to the learning process.

Research question 2: Does gender affect / influence teachers' perceptions of assessment?

In order to establish gender differences, teachers' attitudes and views toward the role of assessment (i.e. the analysis was restricted to the section of the questionnaire that aims to understand teachers' views and attitudes towards the role of assessment) was first analyzed. The mean scores for male and female teachers were computed to determine whether there were gender differences in their perceptions.

Table 8: Secondary teachers' perceptions by gender.

Gender	N	Mean	S.D
Female	22	4.4	4.159
Male	18	3.6	3.209

In order to establish whether the observed differences in the mean perception score for male and female was statistically significant, an independent sample t-test was performed. The results of the t-test are presented in Table 9.

Table 9: Gender differences in teachers' perceptions.

t-test	df	Mean. difference	Std. mean error	Sig. level
0.686	39	0.8	1.165	0.5

Results display that there is no statistical difference in secondary teachers' perception of assessment by gender. It is demonstrated by t -test $0.686 < \text{sig level } 0.5$ which indicates that the difference is not large enough to say that the teachers' perceptions are related to gender. Hence, the hypothesis that gender influences teachers' perceptions of assessment is rejected. Both female teachers and their male counterparts had favorable perceptions towards the role of assessment. In terms of classroom practices, the finding suggests that both female and male teachers tend to use oral assessment to facilitate and support teaching and learning. It is interesting to link this result to the three important reasons: first, it seems that both male and female teachers had the same training programs that focus on the role of classroom assessment. Second, they use the same English textbook in class and they have to abide by the same principles mentioned in the official Tunisian syllabus. And finally, both male and female teachers are supposed to adhere to the Communicative language teaching methodology.

6. Conclusion

Results of this study point out that, generally, secondary teachers who participated in the study have highly favorable perceptions of assessment and they hold highly the motivational function of assessment. They also strongly agreed to the usefulness of oral assessment in improving the learning and teaching practices and in enhancing students' performance. Although most of the participants reported favorable perceptions of oral assessment and they acknowledge its importance, they seem to be facing a problem in employing effective oral assessment in their classrooms. Some respondents deem oral assessment as a supplementary load to their work in class and consider it necessary only for reporting purposes. They are unlikely to use oral assessment to design remedial measures for students because for them using oral assessment for reporting purpose is more important than using it in facilitating teaching and learning. To conclude with, this study advocates that training programs should focus on equipping secondary teachers with necessary skills for assessing their pupils and also encouraging them to appreciate the role of oral assessment rather than considering it as an additional workload.

7. Limitations of the study

This study was limited by the fact that it has relied exclusively on the reported perceptions of teachers. It is likely that there is mismatch between what is being reported and what is actually practiced. Future studies could establish a relationship between perceptions and assessment practices. It could also be important to explore challenges that teachers are facing in implementing classroom assessment.

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