EFL Students' Perception of Classroom Assessment Environment in Translation Courses

Fahad Saad Alsahli[1]

[1] Department of English, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia

Correspondence: Fahad Saad Alsahli, Department of English, College of Science and Humanities, Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University, Saudi Arabia. E-mail: f.alsahli@psau.edu.sa

Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore the students' perceptions on classroom assessment environment in translation courses. The sample of this study was made of 341 participants studying at an English language department in a Saudi university. Data were collected using self-reported questionnaire which was designed based on Alkharusi's (2011) scale. Factor analysis was computed and the results revealed the presence of Alkharusi's two original factors: perceived learning-oriented, and perceived performance-oriented classroom assessment environments. T-test was employed to explore the differences in perceptions between male and female students, but no significance was found between them. Implications and recommendations for classroom assessment as well as for future research have also been discussed. The practical implication of the research is that student outcomes might be improved by establishing classrooms that match those educational environments which have been shown to be associated with students' learning. A limitation of most classroom learning environment instruments is that they measure an individual student's perceptions of a whole class, as distinct from students' perceptions of their own roles in the classroom. It is likely that future classroom and school environment research will be enhanced if personal as well as group assessments are adopted.

Keywords: classroom assessment, classroom assessment environment, EFL, Saudi Arabia, students' perceptions, translation, translation assessment

1. Introduction

Classroom assessment is remarkably seen as a method of reporting students' achievements by following a set of strategies, techniques and procedures. Teachers use it as a tool to collect information about their students' progress and academic development. As a key component of any educational program, teaching and learning activities are linked to learning outcomes through classroom assessment. This link is under wide critical attention since a few researchers argue that what influences students most in the learning process is assessment and not teaching (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004). Assessment tasks consume a considerable amount of the learning process in general, and the classroom time in particular (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Mertler, 2003). Brookhart (1997) also explored the role played by classroom assessment in motivating student achievement and proposed a theoretical framework for that role. Entwistle (2002) claimed that there are differences in practices between different disciplines which means that there is more than one way to define best practices.

Many educators have also argued to examine the classroom assessment environments more from students' perception rather than a teacher's viewpoint. Black and Williams (1998) identifies three principal purposes of assessment: first, it assists in confirming students' achievement for academic promotions and certification to march to next step; second, it provides trust and accountability to public stakeholders, and finally, it helps to improve students' knowledge. A few other objectives of assessment include motivating students (Earl, 2003) and preparing students for future (Irons, 2007). Several other studies though have emphasized upon classroom environments as shared perceptions of both teachers and students. Several measurement scales, often referred to as high and low inference measures, have been constructed to analyze and measure the impact of classroom environments on students'' learning. These scales also often act as perceptual scales to suggest the extent to which the classroom environment has enriched students' learning. A high or low inference measure is determined by the number of questions asked by students in a certain classroom environment. These are

perceptual measures that are also later used to assess the variance in learning outcomes and to determine the causation behind the variance.

It is also argued that learning outcomes could be improved by establishing such classrooms that meet students' expectations or are consistent with their perception. Such classroom learning environments need to be created. However, a great limitation faced in building such classroom learning environment through assessment or students' perception when it seems that the teacher measures a single student's perceptions of the whole class and ignores the contribution of other students' perceptions in making that classroom assessment. There should be a distinction between the idiosyncratic or biased perception and a more generalized perception in order to make a true assessment of the classroom environment and what role it plays in accomplishment of learning outcomes (Fraser, 1998).

In the Saudi context, there are very few studies about assessment in general or students' perceptions on them in particular. In fact, Darandari and Murphy (2013) have complained about difficulties of finding studies and analysis on this issue (Darandari & Murphy, 2013). Therefore, one of the aims of this study was to explore the perception of students in the Saudi context and fill this research gap on classroom assessment environment by contributing to this critical domain. This research follows the tradition of research known as students learning research (SLR) where students' perceptions of their learning experience is investigated (Beaty et al., 2005; Biggs, 1987, 2003; Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983; Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1984, 2005; Marton & Säljö, 1976, 2005).

2. Problem Statement

Amidst distorted students' perceptions about classroom assessment environments, it is rather difficult to assess the accomplishment of learning outcomes. The teacher fails to assess the strengths and weaknesses of students owing to diverse students' perception about their understanding of the classroom environment reflected in opinion surveys, feedbacks and measuring scales. Moreover, the abundance of inappropriate assessments measurement scales is also a matter of great concern. However, critics have emphasized upon establishing students' perception management and creating such classroom learning environments that are compatible to students' perception. The challenge before the teacher is to make a distinction between the idiosyncratic or biased perception of a single student and a more generalized perception that represents the whole class (Fraser, 1998). Hence, this study attempted to investigate students' perceptions of their classroom environment in translation courses, where students' L1 (the Arabic language) was an advantage to both teaching and learning. In order to make it a generalized study, classroom assessment environment was examined irrespective of students' gender or academic level.

3. Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1) To examine students' perception of their classroom assessment environment in translation courses

2) To investigate the difference between perceptions of classroom assessment environment in terms of students' gender and academic level

4. Research Questions

Based on problems and objectives stated, the study has investigated the following two research questions:

1) How do students perceive their classroom assessment environment in translation courses?

2) How does the perception of classroom assessment environment differ based on student gender and academic level?

5. Literature Review

5.1 Classroom Assessment

Classroom assessment is understood in various terms—it is documentation of students' learning and their knowledge; it is a diagnosis of their strengths, weaknesses, and misunderstandings; it is much more than 'testing', as it does not only assign grades and provides feedback to students and their parents but also motivates students for higher learning and suggests an action plan about their academic and professional enhancement (Airasian & Russell, 2007). Bachman and Palmer (2010) regard classroom assessment as either explicit (required for summative decisions) or implicit (concerned with formative decisions). Gattullo's (2000) case study is a good example of formative assessment wherein teachers focused more on observation of children's performance rather than on techniques used for assessment.

Other studies too vary in their understanding of classroom assessment; for instance, Bachman (2004) and Huhta (Spolsky & Hult, 2008) associated it with collecting information about pedagogical instances and the systematic procedures such as observations, quizzes, interviews, tests and like required to assess learners. Similarly, Brown (2004) regarded assessment as a time bound, technical requirement configured according to fixed procedures, applicable on all types of assessments like proficiency or placement tests or any other tests requiring grading of students' performance. Classroom assessment thus provides information to teachers, administrators, and others with evidence about students' learning and learning outcomes, both qualitatively and quantitatively. It also helps in getting a true picture of the institution and its programs and courses and the learning environment. This information is required to design policies and take strategic decisions about various aspects including students' learning and development, and quality and effectiveness of the programs offered (Fadel, Honey, & Pasnik, 2007).

Critics and education stakeholders have emphasized that classroom assessment blends inputs and processes (mainly represented by environment) and the learning outcomes (results desired or actually achieved) both articulated in program goals and objectives. Thus, one can see a relationship between classroom assessment and the program environment, processes, goals and objectives. Classroom assessment is also required to understand students' characteristics and their various abilities among which important are their moral and ethical judgment, aptitude and reasoning skills, and critical thinking. Hence, the academia, the educationists and policy makers offer to design such programs appropriate to the individual needs of students.

There are also studies that have raised concerns about the validity of classroom assessment. Validity refers to a condition where assessment claims to be a result of only the intended learning objectives by making use of genuine assessment strategies. Hence, classroom assessment will produce results that should have valid inferences, useful to strategic decision making. In translation courses, if classroom assessment claims to have measured interpretative skills, for instance, it would be rated as valid assessment but if assessed only rote learning or memorized knowledge, it lacks validity. Validity also offer reliability to classroom assessment, as it shows the ability of classroom assessment to show consistent results even in multiple assessment instances. Reliability, as a prerequisite of validity, is also the evidence of the efficacy of the curriculum and quality of instruction, which constitute the teaching environment.

5.2 Classroom Assessment Environment

Stiggins and Conklin (1992) have portrayed a complete profile of classroom assessment environment. Their profile consists of eight elements, which includes the purpose and the methodology of the assessment, and the teachers as assessors and their perceptions of the students (Stiggins & Conklin, 1992; Brookhart & DeVoge, 1999). Students develop meaning from the different tasks they are expected to perform in the class which constitutes as classroom assessment environment. Since the components of the assessment environment include different elements unique to each situation, researchers such as Brookhart and others emphasize upon the students' perception about classroom assessment environment (Brookhart, 2004; Brookhart & Bronowicz, 2003). Stiggins and Chappuis (2005) set forth a few conditions for developing a positive perception of assessment environment such as: clear purposes of classroom assessment; accurate reflections of achievement; frequent descriptive feedback to help improve students; and involving students in assessment processes (Stiggins & Chappuis, 2005). Different studies in different contexts have shown that since students differ in their perceptions of classroom assessment environment it also affects their motivation levels as well as their achievement-related outcomes (Alkharusi, 2008, 2010, 2011).

McMillan and Workman (1998) adopted the Brookhart's conceptual framework and identified assessment practices unique to students' perception and useful to learning tasks. These practices are: clarity of evaluation, providing students with immediate and specific feedback, the use of mistakes as a tool to improve learning, the use of moderately difficult assessment, the use of many assessments tasks instead of few major ones, the use of authentic assessment tasks, the use of pre-established criteria for evaluation, the use of incremental feedback on assessment, and giving students the scoring criteria before the assessment takes place (McMillan & Workman, 1998).

In another study of Chinese EFL university students, Wang and Cheng (2010) examined the linkages between students' perceptions of classroom assessment environment and goal orientations. The study discussed learning-oriented, test-oriented, and praise-oriented as three types of classroom assessment environment as perceived by students: The first two types were predictive in influencing students' goal orientation, while the praise-oriented classroom assessment environment was not predictive. Cheng, Rogers and Wang (2008) and Wang and Cheng (2010) explored the relationship between classroom environment as perceived by students and their goals

adoptions. They found the students' perception of classroom environment positively related to accomplishment of learning objectives and was learning oriented, while the perception of the assessment environment was test oriented and focused on achievement of grades and positively related to the attainment of performance goals.

Gender too played an important role in this issue. Wang (2004) for example, have found that attainment of learning objectives focused on both learning and grades and was positively related to students' perceptions of classroom assessment environment more for male students than the female students. On the contrary Alkharusi et al. (2014) found statistically significant difference favoring the female students in their perceptions of assessment tasks and classroom environment (Alkharusi et al., 2014).

5.3 Classroom Assessment in EFL Context.

Marton, Cheung and Chan (2019)) have recently conducted a study adopting the formative assessment design and found the assessment to be making a significant effect on learners' motivation and performance. Researchers have recommended formative assessment designs in ESL/EFL situations (Bachman, 1990; Gattullo, 2000; Rea-Dickins & Gardner, 2000; Nguyen, 2019; Nurul Asri, 2019). Nasr et al. (2018) have reiterated the use of formative assessments and defined classroom assessment in the context of teaching and learning. Their study was carried out upon Iranian EFL learning environment to investigate Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of using scaffolding and monitoring practices in a classroom environment. The results indicated that classroom assessment practices were useful and beneficial and effective for learning. This study also recommended promotion of "assessment for learning" culture in an EFL environment keeping in view both the teachers and students.

Fulcher and Davidson (2007), however, had different opinion a decade ago, though they agreed that formative assessment must be conducted in a classroom context, but according to their observations, classroom assessment was not always in favor of forming students' learning or formative in nature. This was consistent with Brown (2004) who asserted that classroom assessment should have both diagnostic and achievement purposes through measuring proficiency levels of students. Likewise, in another study on classroom assessment, Cheng, Rogers, and Hu (2004) surveyed EFL/ESL in three different environments, Canada, Beijing, and Hong Kong. Their findings suggested that though not much surfaced about classroom assessment as far as EFL/ESL teachers were concerned but strong evidence was found about the impact of learning and teaching processes used in classroom assessment which included factors like classroom physical environment, nature of courses, teaching strategies, students' motivation and like. In another study, Ke (2006) studied language skills of Chinese students and used formative and task-based language assessment by adopting a criterion-referenced and skill-integrated model. This classroom assessment model was designed by taking into account curriculum objectives and task-based instruction.

A more recent version of classroom assessment has been propagated in Nurul Asri (2019) study who strongly recommended the use of computer-based technology and 21st century assessment skills in a classroom assessment environment. For instance, the study emphasizes on "deeper learning" and requires teachers to make a shift from teaching the "content" to "learning processes" so that students' are capable to plan their own learning. In another study, Fullan and Langworthy (2014, p. 7) asserted that such "deep learning" tasks can be accomplished only through teacher-student partnership and through integration of learning activities with technological devices such as computer, laptop, smartphones, internet, and applications which makes students more technology savvy (Fullan, 2013, p. 9; Boholano, 2017; Yin, 2013). Insisted upon building a collaborative learner‐centered environment to facilitate 21st century competencies. Jati and Dewi (2018) classified technology integration into three requirements: technology for learning sources, for thinking skills, and for interactive learning.

5.4 Assessment in Translation Studies

Some researchers argue that assessment in translation studies is not so developed as it is in fields such as Linguistics and Mathematics (Angelelli & Jacobson, 2009). One of the main issues that has not been resolved in Translation Studies is that there is no agreed definition about translation competences and its components (Arango-Keeth & Koby, 2003). Therefore, it is very difficult to establish reliable test procedures since there are no clear definitions of what to be measured. Other researchers in translation studies such as Colina differentiate between evaluation, which has certain degree of subjectivity as we classify according to some criteria, and assessment which is about information collected to some goals or objectives (Colina, 2011). She argues that most of the work in translation studies is done on the evaluation rather than assessment. Shiyab (2013) also explored the same issue and claimed that sometimes translation teachers wonder if their assessment is based on personal preference rather than well-defined standards. He argues that students and teachers in translation studies

might have different assumptions about how the task should be done, which might lead to a difference between students' performances and teachers' expectations (Shiyab, 2013).

6. Method

6.1 Research Procedure

In order to achieve desirable objectives, the present study employed descriptive statistics and factor analysis methods to measure the variability among observed, correlated variables also called factors. Factor analysis is very useful in researches with latent variables as classroom assessment and students' perception in this study. These observed variables are labeled as linear combinations and measurement scales help in finding independent latent variables. Out of several categories, confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) is used to explore factors which determine the structure of a particular variable. In addition, CFA also helps to ensure the instrument's validity (Pallant & Manual, 2007). The present study employed the CFA first for determining the total number of items in the questionnaire and which are fit for factor loadings; second it was also used to confirm an item's construct validity.

6.2 Participants

A group of 341 Saudi students (172 males and 169 females) participated in this study. The sample was taken from the English language department at a Saudi Public university. They were studying at different academic level, starting from level 2 until level 8 (they start taking translation courses from level 2). Permission was requested from the relevant department to collect data from the student during their classroom time. Participants were also briefed about the objectives of the study and were made to understand that they were under no obligation to participate in the study, and that if they wished to participate then their responses would remain confidential. Self-report questionnaire was administered to students who agreed to participate in this study.

6.3 Instrument

The questionnaire with a five-point Likert scale survey was used to investigate students' perceptions toward classroom assessment. The questionnaire was based on Alkharusi's assessment environment scales (Alkharusi, 2011) which examined the effects of assessment practices on students' perceptions in a classroom assessment environment. It was chosen because of its theoretical grounding and psychometric quality and the use of multilevel linear modeling techniques. The questionnaire consisted of 16 items divided into two subscales: perceived learning-oriented assessment environment and perceived performance-oriented assessment environment. The Cronbach's alpha was .87 and .78 for the two scales respectively. The learning-oriented environment focused on classroom assessment environment that improved student learning and mastery of content materials while the performance-oriented environment focused on assessment practices that emphasized the importance of grades rather than learning (Alkharusi, 2011).

7. Data Collection and Analysis

After assessing the suitability of the questionnaire to the present context, the questionnaire was administered in the first semester of 2018–2019 to 400 students studying at a Saudi university. 341 students responded to the questionnaire with a response rate of 85.25 %. The data then were entered into SPSS to facilitate the analysis.

The data were first examined for any missing values. This process showed few missing values, but no case had more than 10% missing values in the questionnaire. Therefore, all 341 cases were retained for subsequent analysis. All missing values were replaced by means. Different statistical procedures were done to analyze the data. First, descriptive data analysis in terms of mean and standard deviations was done to examine students' perceptions of the classroom assessment environment. Second, exploratory factor analysis was conducted on the 16 items to detect the latent factor structure of the scales. Principal component analysis was done to extract the factors because it was used both in the validation process for the instrument and in the subsequent research using the same instrument (Alkharusi, 2011; Cheng, Wu, & Liu, 2015). The factor was rotated using the direct oblimin method to achieve a simple and more meaningful solution. To examine the differences between male and female on the perceptions of classroom assessment environment, an independent sample t-test was conducted.

8. Results and Discussion

With regard to variables, classroom assessment and students' perception, an exploratory factor analysis was performed to complete factor loadings of all 16 items and to ensure whether each item was estimating a variable. This was consistent with previous studies (Kolawole & Torimiro, 2005). All item loadings were satisfying the acceptable limit and therefore were retained. Moreover, the study also checked the Eigen value for the factor analysis, which came out to be greater than 1.

Table 1 displays the factor loadings for the two-factor model of perceived classroom assessment environment. The two components explained a total of 48.7 % of the variance, with factor one explaining 30% and factor two explaining 18.6% of the variance. The Cronbach's Alpha for the two factors was .87 and .78 respectively. The presence of the two factors was consistent with previous research using the same scales (Alkharusi, 2011; Cheng et al., 2015). The first factor consisted of 10 items and almost replicated Alkharusi's first factor which he labeled as perceived "learning-oriented" classroom assessment environment (Alkharusi, 2011). This is because all items on this scale focused on classroom assessment practices that supported mastery of learning material. The only exception here was item no.11 (In this class, the teacher compares students' performances to each other) which appeared in the second factor in Alkharusi's original research.

Table 1. Principal component analysis with direct oblimin rotation of perceived classroom assessment environment

Item No	Factor Loadings	
	learning-oriented assessment environment	performance-oriented assessment environment
1.	.73	
2.	.76	
3.	.74	
4.	.75	
5.	.60	
6.	.59	
7.	.63	
8.	.78	
9.	.68	
10.	.68	
11.		.49
12.		.71
13.		.70
14.		.69
15.		.73
16.		.57
Cronbach's Alpha	.87	.78

However, the students in this context seemed to perceive this practice as encouraging them to learn the subject material. In this perceived learning-oriented assessment environment, students believed that they could find out their strengths in translation courses. They also thought that the teacher helped them identifying the places where they needed to do more effort in the future, and they provided them with continuous feedback about their performance in translation courses. Moreover, they believed that assignments and activities were related to their every day's life and encouraged them to think. Participants of this study thought that their teachers held them responsible for their own learning, while giving them chances to correct their mistakes. Furthermore, students participating in this study believed that the teacher used variety of ways to assess their mastery of the learned subject, and returned these assessments to the relevant students in a way that kept their score private and confidential.

The second factor consisted of 6 items focusing on grading and public evaluation and replicate Alkharusi's perceived "performance-oriented" classroom assessment environment scale (Alkharusi, 2011). These results are parallel to previous studies on students' perceptions on classroom assessment environment in different context (Alkharusi, 2011; Cheng et al., 2015; Wang & Cheng, 2010). Participants of this study who showed a performance-oriented assessment environment believed that assignments are difficult and there is no match between them and the learned subject materials. They also thought the teacher gave more importance to grades than to learning and their grading system was not clear to students. They also believed that assignments and homework were not interesting and results of the assessment did not reflect the efforts put in studying the subject.

Descriptive analysis of 16 items scale was also conducted. Inspection of the correlation matrix showed the presence of many coefficients of .3 and above (Table 2). Discriminant validity is a test to determine whether the concepts which are supposed to be unrelated are in fact found to be related. It also determines the extent of correlation among the constructs. However, if the constructs are multidimensional and unique, then they exhibit

low correlation. Resultantly, the CFA and correlation matrix can help in assessing the construct validity, in order to achieve discriminant or convergent validity of items (Aladwani & Palvia, 2002). Table 2 exhibits correlation matrix of the two environments, which are greater than 0 and hence denotes no violation while the lowest within-factor correlation must also be less than 0.50 (Doll & Torkzadeh, 1988). As no violation was found in comparison, discriminant validity was ensured for this study.

Table 2. Discriminant validity

	Classroom Assessment items (1–10)	Students' Perception Items (11–16)
learning-oriented assessment environment	0.425	
performance-oriented assessment environment	0.427	0.494

Construct validity refers to appropriateness of reasoning, which is obtained from the unobserved variable as a construct and is based on the presumed indicators or observed variables (Pallant, 2001). A few questions were considered while performing a construct validity test such as whether appropriate constructs can be chosen to give a phenomenal explanation; whether these chosen constructs were appropriately operationalized in order to represent a particular construct. It is not possible to properly address these questions, as that would not be sufficient to justify that all constructs are appropriately operationalized and are valid as well.

However, it is suggested that regardless of the above-mentioned problems, in order to ensure construct validity, a number of procedures can be performed, such as convergent validity, and discriminant validity (Clark & Watson, 1995). The construct validity is supported only when measures exhibit a high correlation among the same construct, by utilizing various methods, and when the measures exhibit low correlations for different constructs. In this context, construct validity can be determined using discriminant and convergent validity.

The convergent validity in Table 3 indicating entire factor loadings obtained through PCA are greater than 0.50 and are in line as recommended by (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000). Thus, values greater than 0.50 exhibit that convergent validity is achieved for all the items. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin was 0.87, which exceeds the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974), and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. Principal components analysis then was conducted, and oblimin rotation was performed to aid in the interpretation of the results (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). The rotated solution revealed the presence of two components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, in a simple structure with variables loading strongly on only one component. An inspection of the screen plot revealed a clear break after the second component.

Table 3. Convergent validity

	Cronbach's Alpha	Composite Reliability	Average Variance Extracted (AVE)
learning-oriented assessment environment	0.870	0.969	0.680
performance-oriented assessment environment	0.780	0.960	0.799

T-test was performed to examine the differences between male and female students on their perceptions of the classroom assessment environment. The value of Sig. (2-tailed) is 131 which indicated that there are no significance differences between male and female students on their perceptions of the assessment environment in this study. This result is unlike what Alkharusi (2011) found in his study, which might indicate a need for further studies on this issue in particular taking into consideration the similarities of the cultural background between the two studies.

9. Conclusion

This study aimed at exploring students' perception of classroom assessment environment in translation courses. Students perceptions seemed to have two different facets: learning-oriented, and performance-oriented. The practices of the assessment in the learning-oriented assessment environment seemed to encourage students to learn and master the subject materials. These practices include things such as giving student variety of assessment tasks, providing them with constructive feedback, and giving them enough time to learn and improve.

On the other hand, the practices of the assessment in the performance-oriented assessment environment seemed to focus on grades and performance in the assessment. These practices include comparing students' performance with each other, giving them very difficult tasks, and focusing on grades in the assessments rather than learning the subject materials. These results replicate what other researchers have found in different contexts such as Oman and China (Alkharusi, 2011; Cheng et al., 2015; Wang & Cheng, 2010). No significance differences have been found between male and female students on their perceptions of classroom assessment environment. However, this issue needs further research as some studies in the literature showed significance differences between them (Alkharusi, 2011). Also, this study showed the need for further exploration to the notions of classroom assessment environment in higher education, assessment in translation studies in general, and assessment in the Saudi context in particular.

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