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Assessing Middle School Learners in English: Perceptions and Challenges

تقدير متعلمي التعليم المتوسط في مادة اللغة الإنجليزية: التصورات والتحديات

Évaluer en anglais au cycle moyen : perceptions et défis

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Introduction

The dynamic nature of the teaching and learning process is mainly related to modern changes and technological advancements. In this respect, ongoing innovative teaching strategies, more effective teaching methods, and contemporary methods and procedures of assessment are constantly introduced to improve teaching and sustain satisfactory learning performance and outcomes.

Teachers continuously administer direct and indirect classroom assessments to determine learners' abilities and performance after a period of learning. Assessment procedures help teachers collect information about learners' mastered competencies and achievements (Brookhart & McMillan, 2020).

Until recently, researchers have attempted to investigate why teachers assess learners by exploring and identifying both teachers' and learners' perceptions of the so-called "nightmare" of assessment. It is widely accepted that teachers and learners are core elements of the teaching-learning process. In this regard, it is worth exploring teachers' and learners' beliefs about the assessment process as well as the challenges they encounter during the assessment procedure. A substantial body of research has investigated teachers' assessment methods and practices, and little emphasis has been placed on the importance of students' roles and voices in the assessment procedure (Andrade & Brookhart, 2019).

Therefore, it is vital to view assessment from different angles, such as learners' task preferences, their attitudes, their feelings, and their readiness to take summative exams. Furthermore, the effects of any assessment on students' learning are mediated by their own perceptions of that assessment (Struyven et al., 2005). For instance, students' perceptions may positively or negatively influence their learning and outcomes.

Assessment and evaluation are important components that occur continuously throughout the teaching–learning process. In this respect, methods of assessment and evaluation are not static; they are continually adjusted. In the middle-school context, policymakers have introduced new, dynamic testing and assessment guidelines over the past twenty years to support teachers in selecting appropriate tests and exams.

Historically, the cycle of assessment has been reformed and enriched with the introduction of the Competency-Based Approach in the Algerian educational system. More recently, Algeria became one of the countries that attempted to reform the assessment and evaluation processes and approaches. Innovative and dynamic methods of evaluation and assessment have swept across all levels of education—primary, middle, and secondary schools as well as higher education—since 2002.

Tests and exams are highly anxiety-provoking for learners in general and for foreign-language beginners in middle schools in particular. This phenomenon is due to factors such as learners' preferences for some tasks over others, the extent of students' preparation and readiness for exams, and fear of failure and feelings of demotivation. Conversely, teachers are part of the assessment process; they witness the assessment procedure on the ground and are partly responsible for students' failure or success. Similarly, instructors may face different challenges during the assessment cycle.

The objectives of the study are to explore middle-school teachers' and learners' perceptions of summative assessment in the English course and to recognize the challenges they face during the assessment process. Based on the research objectives, the following questions are addressed:

1. What are teachers' perceptions of assessment and evaluation?
2. What are learners' perceptions of assessment?
3. What are the challenges teachers and learners encounter during the assessment protocol?

1. Literature Review

Classroom assessment is part of the teaching and learning process. Teachers constantly and systematically assign effective assessment tools to reflect on their teaching practices and learners performance and acquisition. As a results, teachers reflect on their teaching practices and determine their teaching methods and strategies to provide improvements in the teaching quality and the learning performance.

1.1. Types of assessment

Middle school instructors regularly gather data about learners' way of learning and reflect on their teaching practices by designing diagnostic, formative and summative assessments. The diagnostic test aims at collecting data about learners' pre-requisites before starting a new phase of learning to find out students' strengths and remedy their weaknesses throughout the teaching and learning process. Formative assessment refers to the most recent types of assessment whereas summative assessment refers to the traditional type of assessment based on paper and pencil (Yao, 2015)

Formative assessment is an ongoing process provided during the teaching process and includes tasks and assignments designed during the lessons. Formative Assessment or assessment for learning is a method used by teachers to gauge learners acquisition and learning during the instructional courses to monitor learners progress and performance (Dixon & Worrell, 2016). The summative assessment is a graded test or exam usually designed at the end of a term or a phase of learning. It aims at designing grades and evaluating learners performance and achievement (Harlen & Deakin 2003, Dixon & Worrell 2016, Koenka et al 2019).

Nevertheless, the ultimate aim of these types of evaluation is to help teachers in making decisions to modify their practices and improve their courses as well as to ensure a good quality of teaching and learning. However, the aim of the summative assessment can turn from a method of improving learners' outcomes into a frightening experience for both learners and teachers. Teachers need to develop a solid understanding of classroom assessment that they can develop a balanced approach to assessment for learning and assessment to learning. (Stiggins, 2010)

1.2. Teachers' perceptions of assessment

The current review emphasizes on teachers and learners' perceptions of assessment and evaluation. It has been viewed that many factors may influence teachers' perceptions of assessment like personal experiences and classroom practices. In fact a substantive number of researchers revealed the co-relationship between teachers beliefs and perspectives of assessment and their literacy practices of the assessment process. An interesting study was conducted by Yao (2015) to examine teachers' perceptions and understanding of classroom assessment. The researcher found it important to align teachers views and linguistic competence of assessment with their practices. Findings of the study revealed the lack of training and professional

development activities about assessment approaches as a major obstacle that hampers teachers from designing a high quality test.

Respectively, Hussain et al (2021) study about the influence of educators perspectives on their classroom assessment literacy and practices revealed that teachers face certain challenges that hinder their developing skills.

However, not only personal perceptions about assessment influence teachers practices but vice versa, teachers practices about assessment protocols may positively or negatively influence their perceptions and interpretations about the process of testing. Regarding this idea, Gardner & Galanouli (2016) confirmed that teachers engagement with assessment practices can influence their beliefs and behaviors.

1.3. Learners' perceptions of assessment

It is evident that there is a strong relationship between students perceptions about assessment and their learning approaches. In this respect, Struyven et al (2005) reviewed an amount of studies to explore the reality of education as seen from the eyes of the students. The researchers review attempted to examine assessment from students beliefs and views. The team concluded that students perceptions and perspectives about assessment have a notable influence on their learning approaches. Students recommended teachers to be fair in selecting the types of assessment questions.

Assessment can also influence students psychological and sentimental states either positively or negatively. For instance good grades may positively affect students and raises their motivation to succeed and achieve better outcomes. Whereas bad grades negatively influence their desire to take exams. Thus, students will view exams as a nightmare and a black spot in their educational life. An empirical study conducted by Trifoni & Shahini (2011) to investigate students feelings when taking a test and the impact of this test anxiety on students' learning and outcomes. The study findings revealed that most students showed a high level of stress before and during the test administration. According to the researchers, different factors influenced students' anxiety like the lack of readiness and the inappropriate test preparation, fear of failure and negative evaluation from teachers and peers, bad experiences with previous tests, time limitation and the test tasks and questions. All these challenges badly influenced learners' motivation and concentration and increased errors. Similarly, Bagana et al (2011) examined the impact of optimism and exams anxiety on students self-esteem.

The participants of the study were divided into students taking an upcoming official exam and others taking regular exams. Results of the study revealed a negative relationship between students' anxiety and their self-esteem. Results also indicated that students perceptions of their educational achievement and personality traits and behaviors is related to the test anxiety they face each time. The researchers concluded that it is high time for counselors and advisors to think of a program that reduces learners test anxiety and increases their self-esteem and motivation to persist on learning.

Following the substantive amount of the reviewed literature about the issue of assessment and evaluation, it is evident that the studies on learners and teachers' perceptions of assessment are recent studies. As an attempt to replicate and bring continuity to these studies, the current research explores perceptions about summative assessment in different areas, the time of assessment, the types of tasks used for assessment and the scoring fairness of the assessment. Furthermore, many questions present themselves in this context like: how do learners and teachers view assessment? and what factors contribute to the success or failure of a summative exam?

2. Methodology

To address the study's research questions, we adopted an exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional design suited to documenting teachers' and learners' perceptions of summative assessment under everyday classroom conditions. The section below details the setting, participants, instruments, procedures, data handling, and ethical safeguards.

- **Design.** The study employed an exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional survey to document classroom assessment perceptions under routine conditions.
- **Setting.** Data were collected in one public middle school (El Emir Abdelkader Middle School, Blida).
- **Participants and sampling.** The sample comprised 100 fourth-year students and 4 English teachers. Participation was voluntary and based on availability (convenience sampling) with institutional permission.
- **Limitations.** This single-site, convenience sample and the use of a three-point response scale limit external validity and restrict variance, which may attenuate effect sizes. In addition, the small teacher subsample ($N = 4$) limits the precision of estimates and precludes robust inferential analyses.

- Instruments. Two self-report questionnaires were administered: (a) a Student Perceptions of Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ, adapted to the local context) and (b) a Teacher Perceptions Questionnaire. Items used three-point Likert-type response options (Disagree/Neutral/Agree) targeting exam preparation, transparency of expectations, perceived fairness, feedback, and test anxiety.
- Procedures. Questionnaires were completed during regular class hours under standardised instructions. Responses were anonymous.
- Data management. Responses were screened for completeness; analyses were performed on available cases. No imputation was undertaken.
- Data analysis. Data were summarised with descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means) using SPSS (version 26). No inferential significance testing was conducted.
- Ethics. Administrative approval was granted by the school leadership and inspectorate. Written parental/guardian consent and student assent were obtained for minors; teacher participants provided informed consent. Participation was voluntary with the option to withdraw at any time. No identifying information was collected; responses were anonymised and stored securely in line with institutional research-ethics standards and applicable regulations.

This descriptive design is appropriate for mapping prevalent perceptions and practical challenges and for generating hypotheses for future analytical work. Reliability indices (Cronbach's α) for SPAQ subscales, where available, are reported in Annex A to document measurement consistency.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Based on the insights drawn from the data collection, it is necessary to formulate solutions and draw conclusions from the research findings to generate the hypotheses about the assessment process in the Algerian middle schools. Data from both the students and teachers questionnaire were summarized descriptively using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 26.

3.1. Student Questionnaire

A Student Perceptions Assessment Questionnaire (SPAQ) was administered to 100 students of the fourth level of learning English as a foreign language from El Emir Abdelkader middle school. Students

questionnaire consisted of 23 items with three Likert-scale response options. Consequently, different issues emerged from this questionnaire. Two themes related to the summative assessment that are its suitability and congruence with learning as well as its transparency and authenticity. The other two themes were related to learners consultation, readiness and feelings about the assessment. The items of the emerging themes were categorized and classified in the following table.

Table 1. assessment emergent themes

Theme	Item	Item number
Suitability and congruence with learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The exam encourages me to improve my English - The exam encourages me to prepare well for any test - The exam encourages me to study well in the English course - The results of the exam show me if I was studying hard enough - The exam usually identifies my strengths and weaknesses in English - The exam has a positive impact on my attention during class - Tasks instructions refer to what I learnt 	Q1 Q2 Q3 Q4 Q5 Q6 Q10
Theme	Item	Item number
Transparency and authenticity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I understand most of the texts used in exams - Texts are interesting - Tasks are easy and interesting 	Q7 Q8 Q9
Students consultation and readiness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The time of the exam is sufficient enough - I never cheat in exams - I need luck to get high grades - I know the texts type included in the exam - I know the tasks type included in the exam 	Q11 Q12 Q13 Q21 Q22
Students feelings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I experience negative emotions in exams (tired, ill) - I experience positive emotions in exams (happy, proud) - I feel confident in exams - I like exams - Exams are a nightmare for me - Exams make me anxious - I am always afraid of the exams results 	Q14 Q15 Q16 Q17 Q18 Q19 Q20

Note. N = 100 (students); N = 4 (teachers) for teacher tables; % = percentage of

respondents.

Table 2 reveals the descriptive results of each theme and item. For instance, the measurement results of the suitability of the assessment with the lessons revealed that the majority of the students agree that the exam encourages them to study more and prepare better. Students perception was also positive where most of them agreed that the exam often refers to what they have learnt and identifies their weaknesses and strengths.

Transparency is an important issue of the questionnaire. Most of the students find the exams clear and fair, they are able to understand what is needed from them and can understand the instructions of the exam tasks because they are used to the exam format and the scoring rubric. The majority of the students find the topics and the tasks interesting which reveals the authenticity of the assessment.

Regarding the assessment consultation and readiness by students, students declared that they know what the test and the tasks are about and what topics they will be assessed on. Meanwhile, as far the students perception on the exam duration, 76% of them agreed that it is sufficient to complete the tasks. Moreover, a good finding is that the majority of learners do not resort to cheating and rely on their own efforts to achieve in exams. Similarly, 44% of them do not think that their grades come by chance alone. Students should feel that the exams outcomes are the result of their efforts and not based on chance. Teachers have to explicitly show the scores and rubrics of the exam to students to direct them and help them improve their performance.

Despite the results which show that most of the students feel confident when taking exams, most of the learners feel that the exam is a nightmare for them. The majority of learners feel tired and ill during exams and few of them feel happy and proud about exams period. These negative aspects traumatize them and make them hate exams. This was apparent in their responses where 54% of them do not like exams because they feel anxious and are often afraid of the exam results. Exam scores or grades constantly remind low achievers. This will decrease their self-confidence and self-esteem, a fact that aligns with Bagana et al (2011) findings.

Table 2. students perception of assessment

Theme	Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Number	Mean	Std .dev
Suitability and congruence with learning	Q1	13	19	68	100	2,55	,716
	Q2	11	15	74	100	2,63	,677
	Q3	26	19	55	100	2,29	,856
	Q4	28	17	55	100	2,27	,874
	Q5	9	13	78	100	2,69	,631
	Q6	27	22	51	100	2,24	,854
	Q10	6	11	83	100	2,77	,548
Transparency and authenticity	Q7	23	21	56	100	2,33	,829
	Q8	21	35	44	100	2,23	,777
	Q9	23	33	44	100	2,21	,795
Students consultation and readiness	Q11	14	10	76	100	2,62	,722
	Q12	13	19	68	100	2,55	,716
	Q13	44	20	36	100	1,92	,895
	Q21	33	21	46	100	2,13	,884
	Q22	24	20	56	100	2,32	,839
Students feelings	Q14	37	19	44	100	2,07	,902
	Q15	44	38	18	100	1,74	,747
	Q16	22	35	43	100	2,21	,782
	Q17	54	30	16	100	1,62	,749
	Q18	35	26	39	100	2,04	,864
	Q19	26	15	59	100	2,33	,865
	Q20	12	16	72	100	2,60	,696

Note. N = 100 (students) ; N = 4 (teachers) for teacher tables; % = percentage of respondents.

3.2. Teachers' Questionnaire

Besides learners' perceptions of assessment they regularly experience, teachers were also asked to record their perceptions about the summative assessment. The four teachers of English in El Emir Abdelkader middle school were invited to complete a teacher's questionnaire based on 9 items. Table 3 shows that the teachers recognized assessment as a tool to check learners learning. The majority of teachers were not satisfied with the students' results and found that the outcomes are not often as expected. The interplay between students and teachers' perceptions revealed that teachers

attempt to plan summative assessments according to the learning objectives. Teachers viewed that their efforts are rewarded when students perform well in tests and exams. Similarly, they reported that the time of the assessment is sufficient to complete the tasks. Unlike learners, the teachers responded that they often inform their learners about the topics and tasks of the assessment. Furthermore, some teachers were not satisfied by the Algerian assessment guide and called for more alternative assessment tasks. All the teachers reported that they receive insufficient training for evaluating and assessing their learners. In other words, there is a great need for more trainings and workshops to support teachers.

Table 3. Teachers perception of assessment

Item	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Number	Mean	Std .dev
1-I am satisfied with the Algerian assessment guide	2	1	1	4	1,75	,957
2-I am happy with the students results	3	1	0	4	1,25	,500
3-I have been in situations where I didn't feel satisfied with the students results	2	1	1	4	1,75	,957
4-I think that the students scores represent their level of proficiency	3	0	1	4	1,50	1,000
5-I always plan summative assessments according to what students learned	0	0	4	4	3,00	,000
6-I inform my students on what will they be assessed on	4	0	0	4	1,00	,000
7-We have sufficient training about assessment and evaluation	3	1	0	4	1,25	,500
8-I think that the time of the exam is sufficient for students to complete all the tasks	0	0	4	4	3,00	000,
9-I call for alternative assessment tasks in the guide	0	2	2	4	2,50	577,

Note. N = 100 (students) unless otherwise indicated; N = 4 (teachers) for teacher tables; % = percentage of respondents.

To sum up, both teachers and learners encounter different challenges during the assessment process. Designing high quality summative exam questions, students' outcomes which are under the teachers expectations, the unfair exam guide questions and the lack of teacher training on testing and assessment are the most prevailing obstacles middle school teachers face. Similarly, learners' lack of preparation, the time allocated for the test, the lack of confidence and the extent of fear and anxiety hinder learners' achievement.

Several tests and exams can be viewed as inappropriate for learners. As instructors, it is highly demanding to revisit the approach to examination. Selecting appropriate, well-designed and achievable exams is a precondition for learners' achievement. Furthermore, more professional development training workshops to train teachers about the contemporary approaches and methods of assessment are needed. In addition to the need of more professional development activities to assist teachers in using the exams guides and samples.

Conclusion

The current research scope was compassed on both teachers and learners' perceptions. The research findings revealed the importance of perceptions in interpreting educational phenomena like the issue of classroom assessment. Assessing students in the middle school context where English is taught as a foreign language reveals a considerable number of challenges for both the educator and the learner.

It is necessary to turn the nightmare of examination into a simple educational event. This can be achieved by revisiting the time of the assessment, the structure of the assessment and the grading scales. Teachers need to plan alternative testing approaches for learners' success by taking into consideration students perceptions about assessment. In this respect, students perceptions should be implemented by teachers in planning any type of assessment whether formative or summative to guarantee an appropriate test paper.

In sum, perceptions reported by students and teachers highlight the importance of transparent criteria, advance communication of exam formats, and planned feedback opportunities. Future work should incorporate validated multi-item scales, reliability estimates, and inferential analyses across multiple schools.

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Abstract

Purpose: To examine how Algerian middle-school learners and their English teachers perceive summative assessment, with attention to exam transparency, preparation, fairness, and test-related anxiety.

Design/methodology/approach: A descriptive cross-sectional survey was administered to students ($N = 100$) and teachers ($N = 4$) in a public middle school. Instruments used three-point Likert items. Data were analyzed with descriptive statistics.

Findings: Students reported valuing clear expectations and timely feedback while also expressing anxiety and uncertainty about grading criteria. Teachers emphasised workload, time constraints for feedback, and the need for stronger alignment between instruction and testing. Results are descriptive and do not test statistical associations.

Practical implications: Clarifying assessment formats and rubrics in advance, combining summative exams with formative feedback, and supporting test preparation routines may mitigate anxiety and improve perceived fairness.

Limitations: Single-site, convenience sampling and self-reported perceptions reduce generalisability; three-point scales may limit variance.

Originality/value: Provides classroom-based evidence from an under-documented Algerian middle-school EFL context, highlighting actionable levers for everyday assessment practice.

Keywords

Academic achievement, assessment, challenges, learning outcomes, perceptions, summative assessment

ملخص

الغرض: دراسة تصورات تلاميذ المرحلة المتوسطة ومعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في الجزائر للتقويم الخاتمي، مع التركيز على شفافية الاختبارات، والإعداد لها، والعدالة، والقلق المرتبط بالاختبار. المنهجية/التصميم: أُجري مسح وصفي مقطعي على تلاميذ ($N = 100$) ومعلمين ($N = 4$) في متوسطة عمومية. استُخدمت بنود ليكيرت ثلاثة الاستجابة، وحُلّت البيانات باستخدام إحصاءات وصفية.

النتائج: قيم التلاميذ وضوح التوقعات وسرعة التغذية الراجعة. وفي الوقت نفسه عبروا عن قلقٍ ولا يقينٍ إزاء معايير التصحيح. وأكّد المعلمون عبء العمل وضيق الوقت المخصص للتغذية الراجعة وال الحاجة إلى مواعدة أقوى بين التدريس والاختبار. النتائج وصفية ولا تختبر الارتباطات إحصائياً.

الدلائل العملية: قد يُسهم توضيح صيغ التقويم وروبرياته مسبقاً، ودمج الاختبارات الخاتمية بتغذية راجعة تكوينية، ودعم روتينات الاستعداد للاختبار في الحد من القلق وتحسين العدالة المتصورة.

الحدود: يحدّ موقعًّا واحدًّاً وعيّنةً ملائمةً واعتمادًّا الاستجابات الذاتية من إمكانية التعميم؛
كما قد تُقلّص مقاييسُ ليكرت الثلاثية التباين.

الأصالة/القيمة: يقدم دللةً صفيّةً من سياق جزائي في المرحلة المتوسطة ضمن تعليم
الإنجليزية لغةً أجنبيةً (EFL) قليل التوثيق ويزر رفاف عمليّة قابلة للتنفيذ في الممارسة اليومية
للتقويم.

كلمات مفتاحية

التحصيل الدراسي، التقويم، التحديات، مخرجات التعلم، التصورات، التقويم الختامي

Résumé

Objectif : Examiner la manière dont les collégiens algériens et leurs enseignants d'anglais perçoivent l'évaluation sommative, en portant attention à la transparence des épreuves, à la préparation, à l'équité et à l'anxiété liée aux tests. Conception/méthodologie/approche : Enquête descriptive transversale administrée à des élèves ($N = 100$) et à des enseignants ($N = 4$) d'un collège public. Les instruments utilisaient des items de Likert à trois modalités; les données ont été analysées par statistiques descriptives.

Résultats : Les élèves valorisent des attentes claires et une rétroaction rapide, tout en exprimant de l'anxiété et une incertitude quant aux critères de notation. Les enseignants soulignent la charge de travail, les contraintes de temps pour la rétroaction et la nécessité d'un meilleur alignement entre enseignement et évaluation. Les résultats sont descriptifs et n'examinent pas d'associations statistiques.

Implications pratiques : La clarification préalable des formats et des rubriques d'évaluation, l'articulation des examens sommatifs avec une rétroaction formative, ainsi que le soutien aux routines de préparation peuvent réduire l'anxiété et améliorer l'équité perçue.

Limites : Site unique, échantillonnage de convenance et perceptions auto-rapportées, ce qui réduit la généralisabilité; des échelles en trois points peuvent limiter la variance

Originalité/valeur : Apporte des données de terrain issues d'un contexte algérien de collège en anglais langue étrangère (EFL) peu documenté, en mettant en évidence des leviers opérationnels pour la pratique quotidienne de l'évaluation.

Mots-clés

Evaluation, réussite scolaire, défis, résultats d'apprentissage, perceptions, évaluation sommative