



# Challenges of Applying Authentic Assessment in EFL Courses---- A Descriptive Qualitative Analysis

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**Abstract.** This paper explores and discusses the challenges the EFL teachers are faced in applying authentic assessment in classroom teaching. Qualitative data were collected from three EFL teachers with the methods of interviews and classroom observation. More data were collected from the literature review. A descriptive qualitative analysis was conducted, and the research results were presented and discussed for further studies on resolutions.

**Keywords:** Authentic assessment; Challenges; Assessment type; Tasks

## 1 Introduction

Assessment plays a crucial role in language learning and teaching. It informs both learners and teachers about their progress, helps identify the strengths and weaknesses of each student, and guides the instruction accordingly. Traditional assessment methods may not always accurately reflect students' language abilities as expected. Authentic assessment, on the other hand, is an alternative assessment that emphasizes real-life language use to evaluate students' language abilities. However, researchers at all levels of education have ever expressed their concern that teachers might be faced with difficulties and challenges in the implementation of authentic assessment due to various reasons. EFL teachers are sharing some of the challenges other teachers face, and they also have some specific reasons due to the uniqueness of the discipline of EFL. These challenges need to be fully understood by both language teachers and researcher who are responsible to solve the problem, as well as the administrators and policy makers who supervise the instruction process and outcomes. This article makes an effort to generalize the challenges the language teachers are faced with when they are replacing the conventional assessment with authentic assessment in the classroom teaching of the EFL course, and this article also seeks to answer the reasons behind the challenges. Furthermore, this article aims to explain the challenges by analyzing qualitative data collected from language teachers, and provide some constructive ideas for further studies which may propose some resolutions to the challenges.

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## 2 Methodology

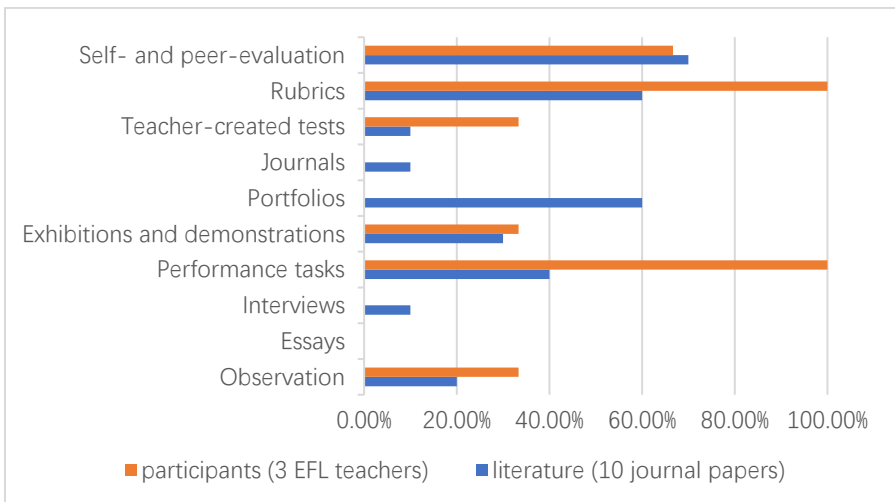
The research questions in this study were what challenges the EFL teachers were faced with in implementing authentic assessment in classroom teaching, and why did the EFL teachers encounter these challenges. The study aimed to analyze, describe, and explain these challenges the EFL teachers were faced with when they were implementing authentic assessment as an alternative assessment in classroom teaching. According to Kim et al. (2017), the qualitative description was considered the appropriate research method which was suitable for addressing specific research questions that were not sufficiently understood and gave the researcher insights into the specific problem [1]. The study utilized a qualitative research design approach. The collected qualitative data were analyzed qualitatively.

The study was conducted at a university in north Hebei. The students of this university were taking the compulsory EFL course at their freshman and sophomore years. Totally 32 EFL teachers were randomly assigned to teach the English language classes of 104 classes of 14 different specialties. Three EFL teachers who were implementing authentic assessment in teaching were selected with a purposive sampling technique. They were asked for permission of being sampled in this study and participating the study as research subjects. The instruments designed for data collection in this study included semi-structured interview outline for teachers and a classroom observation checklist. In addition, more data were collected from reviewing the literature. The research instruments were used to collect information from the teachers regarding their assessment methods, the authentic assessment tasks they designed and implemented, and their assessment literacy and holistic perception of authentic assessment. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an outline of a list of open-ended questions. As Adams (2015) stated, open-ended questions in an interview could add depth to the research methods [2]. These questions concerned the fact of EFL teachers being challenged in implementing authentic assessment, their assessment literacy, their preference of assessment forms and types, the conceptual and practical knowledge of authentic assessment, the reasons for them to use authentic assessment, etc. On the other hand, according to Spada (2019), classroom observation provided the observers with both macro and micro-level descriptions of the functioning and procedure of classroom teaching [3]. The researcher of this study designed a classroom observation checklist for observing the teachers' measures in adapting authentic assessment and the students' response and cooperation with teacher and classmates in accomplishing the assessment tasks. The observation data were used to assist the verification of the findings. The data collected in the semi-structured interviews and the classroom observation were used to corroborate each other.

Since the study was conducted in one university, the research sample was limited to the population of the EFL teaching staff of the university, which led to the concern that the data might be biased. To avoid the bias, the researcher kept reading to find more support from the literature. As a resolution, the analysis of literature data provided wider perspectives in analyzing and interpreting the collected data, and it also brought forward the possibility of cross-checking and corroborating research findings with literature findings.

### 3 Findings

In its assessment guide description, George Lucas Educational Foundation defined the principal types of authentic assessment, which are observation, essay, interview, performance tasks, exhibitions and demonstrations, portfolios, journals, teacher-created tests, rubrics, self- and peer-evaluation, and simulations [4]. The collected data revealed that some of the authentic assessment types were preferable to the teachers, while in classroom teaching, there was a difference of the practically adopted types from the reportedly preferred ones. It's obvious that the teachers supported the adoption of more types of authentic assessment than they practically applied to their classroom teaching. The difference was seen in the comparison of the following two figures. The data collected in this study were used to demonstrate the comparison between the principal types of authentic assessment reportedly preferred by the teachers in classroom teaching and the corresponding data from literature (Figure 1), and the different types of authentic assessment practically adopted by teachers in classroom teaching (Figure 2). Interview data were analyzed qualitatively to explain the difference between the claimed types and adopted types of authentic assessment among the participating EFL teachers.

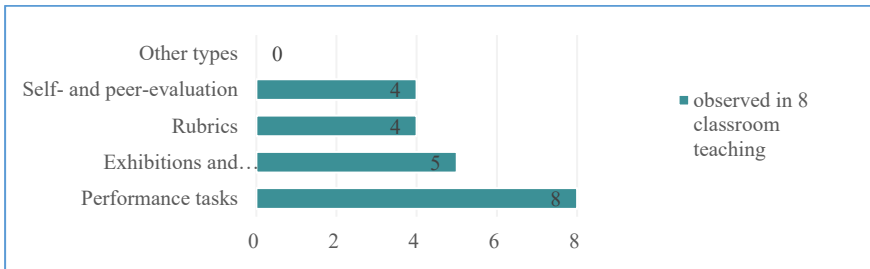


**Fig. 1.** Claimed authentic assessment types

Figure 1 was based on the interview data of the EFL teachers and the literature. The teacher reported that they preferred these types of authentic assessment if they were required to make a selection among others. The reviewed literature had more authentic assessment types implemented and studied than the participants reported in this study. The reasons for journals, portfolios, and essays to have been excluded from the teachers' practical adoption, according to the interviews, included the time and labor consumption, and the lack of attractiveness to both teachers and students in classroom

teaching. Similar reasons might apply to the type of interviews. The nature of some types was considered challenging by teachers.

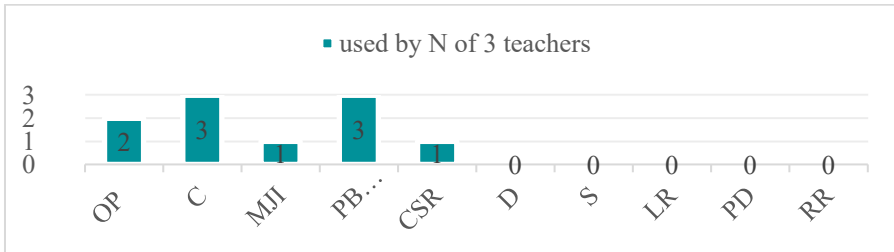
The reasons for their preference of some certain assessment types included being easy to involve students in learning, students being able to communicate and collaborate, and the controllability of the assessment. As to the ones reported in literature but denied by the interviewed teachers, they were defined by the teachers as dull, lacking freshness, tedious and hard to foresee the outcome.



**Fig. 2.** Practically adopted authentic assessment types

Among all types of authentic assessment, six were not observed in classroom teaching. According to the teachers' interviews, they were trying to have a student-centered class to create more chances for students to practice and meet the requirement set forth by administrators. The teachers expressed their concern in the interviews that some authentic assessment types were challenging, including journals, essays, and tests possibly being considered too much burden by students, interviews possibly providing incorrect data with students giving polite but not sincere answers, observation possibly requiring adequate techniques, and portfolios covering the undesired period. These challenges are a bit of a deterrent for teachers.

According to Koh et al.(2019), authentic assessment tasks are essential to promote student learning and improve professional competence [5]. Sridharan and Mustard (2016) suggested over a hundred different authentic assessment tasks in eight assessment dimensions [6]. Referring to their task recommendation, the teachers participating in this study designed their tasks preliminarily for classroom teaching. These tasks were later discussed with a joint effort among the three participating teachers and reviewed by two language professors who did not participate in the study for the validity. All the 10 designed tasks, including oral presentation, drama, mock job interview, caselets, etc. were shown in Figure 3. These tasks were designed prior to the practical teaching to be used as a cluster from which to choose during the practical teaching. These tasks were designed with an effort to avoid any factor considered too challenging for the students to accomplish. The teachers had the autonomy to select among the cluster of assessment tasks based on their own judgment or preference. In practical teaching process, not all tasks were adopted by the teachers. The following Figure 3 also revealed the tasks assigned to students by N of the three teachers and some other tasks designed but not being selected for being considered beyond the language capability and skills of students.



**Fig. 3.** Authentic assessment tasks designed and adopted in the study

Note: OP: Oral presentation; C: caselets; MJJ: mock job interview; PBMCQ: Problem-based multiple-choice questions; CSR: critical self-reflection; D: drama; S: storyboarding; LR: literature review; PD: poster display; RR: research report

The teachers participating in the study designed at least ten different tasks based on the learning content. Five tasks were witnessed being assigned and performed in class, with two tasks being used by three, one task being used by two, and two tasks being used by one of all three teachers. The other five tasks, although being designed, were abandoned in practice. Drama task was abandoned with the concern that the students were conservative and reluctant to show; storyboarding and poster display tasks were abandoned with the students' lack of interest, and tasks of literature review and research report were abandoned with the concern that most students were limited by previous backward educational background. In the interviews, the teachers expressed that the biggest challenge was to design tasks that were expected to stimulate students' interest, meet their current cognitive status, and have sufficient authenticity.

The literature review supplements the research findings. Patrick et al. (2017) stated that teachers must identify the needs of their students and redesign assessment forms and criteria that distinguish them from traditional assessment while taking into account students' autonomy and self-actualization [7]. Wang et al.(2022) stressed the lack of assessment literacy of the teachers [8]. McArthur (2023) pointed out that the teachers held contradictory conceptions of authentic assessment [9]. Most research suggested that adequate training was the direct means to help teachers understand authentic assessment and effectively use the tools of authentic assessment.

## 4 Conclusion and discussion

Based on the research findings and literature, it appears that EFL teachers often face a variety of challenges in implementing authentic assessment, which makes authentic assessment difficult and obstructive. The descriptive qualitative analysis demonstrates that there are reasons behind these challenges. However, the existence of challenges is, after all, only a symptom. A deeper understanding of the characteristics of this symptom will facilitate a deeper and broader understanding of the research questions and help researchers and teachers develop targeted measures and more appropriate tools to address challenging issues in instruction.

In this study, the phenomenon that implementing authentic assessment is challenging is the subject of analytical inquiry. The characteristics were generalized from the phenomenon. First, being limited by social perceptions. The tradition of using test scores as a measurement tool has rigidified people's perceptions of teaching and learning tools, thus creating social pressure. The teachers' assessment literacy deficits stem from the social environment to which they are attached, and their perceptions of assessment are linked to relatively rigid social perceptions. Second, being limited by cultural traditions. One influence that traditional Chinese culture brings is an introverted personality. The excessive reliance on teachers not only creates the students' inability to explore the means to solve real-life problems, but also renders them conservative and reluctant to engage in self-expressive activities. Third, being limited by educational background. The university where this study was conducted is a provincial undergraduate university that enrolls mainly in the province. According to the university's statistics, 84% of them are rural candidates who might have relatively backward educational backgrounds and insufficient advanced technology and concepts, and they more often struggle to adapt, thus making it difficult for them to naturally participate in variable teaching and learning activities. Fourth, being closely related to individual abilities. Not only do foreign language skills vary, but communication, cooperation, critical thinking, creativity, and many other skills also vary from person to person. Teaching activities of uniform form and content are difficult to obtain similar results among all students. The lack of individual ability directly affects the enthusiasm for participation and, consequently, the effectiveness of the entire teaching activity in practice.

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