



Lorestan University

Qualitative Inquiry as Praxis in L2 Studies

Journal homepage: <https://quipls.lu.ac.ir/>



Research Paper

## EFL Teachers' Conceptualisation of Fairness in Online Classroom Assessment of Speaking and Listening Skills: A Call for Rubric-Based Assessment and Real-world Scenarios

Zeynab Safari\*, a

<sup>a</sup>Department of English Language and Literature, Lorestan University, Khorramabad, Iran. E-mail: [znsfri@gmail.com](mailto:znsfri@gmail.com);

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article Type

Original Article

#### Article History

Received: 2025-03-11

Received in Revised

Form: 2025-04-19

Accepted: 2025-04-19

Available Online: 2025-04-19

#### Keywords:

Assessment fairness,

Language teachers,

Online classroom

assessment,

Productive skills

### ABSTRACT

To unravel the challenges and possibilities of online classroom assessment in a developing country, the present study sought to delve into Iranian language teachers' conceptualisation of assessment fairness of the productive skills of speaking and writing. Our participants consisted of 20 English language teachers, who were invited to share their conceptions through interviews. A hybrid thematic approach was used to analyze the data, in light of the re-conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness proposed by Rasooli et al. (2018), whereby classroom fairness is revisited in the intersection of teaching, learning, interaction, and assessment. Findings revealed that most of the teachers talked about a quest for equality through rubric-based assessment and referred to the importance of authentic assessment as a contextually relevant and sensitive assessment, which represents the real-world scenario and engages learners in the process of assessment. Indeed, the call for authenticity in online assessment shows the need for the consideration of the element of context in addition to the four elements mentioned above. Furthermore, the deliberate ignorance of equity due to the challenges of online assessment indicates important roles educational systems can play in assisting teachers in the process of assessment, which requires the transformation of cultural identity of educational systems.

\*Corresponding Author

Email address: [znsfri@gmail.com](mailto:znsfri@gmail.com)

How to cite this article: Safari, Z. (2025). EFL teachers' conceptualisation of fairness in online classroom assessment of speaking and listening skills: A call for rubric-based assessment and real-world scenarios. *Qualitative Inquiry as Praxis in L2 Studies*, 1(1), 50-70.

DOI: 10.22034/QUIPLS.2025.2055716.1001

## 1. Introduction

Fairness is one of the key concepts of assessment in English language education (Ahmadi Safa & Nasiri, 2025; McNamara et al., 2019; McNamara & Ryan, 2011; Zhaleh et al., 2025), which is defined as equitable assessment procedures and interpretations for all examinees (Gipps & Stobart, 2009). As Gipps and Stobart state, assessment fairness “involves both what precedes an assessment (for example, access and resources) and its consequences (for example, interpretations of results and impact) as well as aspects of the assessment design itself” (p. 105). Generally speaking, as Rasooli et al. (2018) argue, the concept of fairness in assessment has recently attracted the attention of several researchers in language education due to its growing emphasis on assessment-oriented teaching in educational contexts, although the existing studies on the conceptualisation of assessment fairness in language education, either the ones which review the relevant studies (Deygers, 2019; Xi, 2010) or those critically examining the existing frameworks and theories of fairness (Banerjee, 2016; Davies, 2010; Kane, 2010; Kunnan, 2013) are mainly conceptual in nature. Furthermore, the aforementioned studies on conceptualisation of fairness mainly focused on large-scale assessment in the sense that classroom assessment was almost ignored (Rasooli, 2021).

With regard to the current over-reliance in the literature on conceptual studies, de Backer, et al. (2019) speak of an urgent need for a shift in focus of studies on fairness from the intended test purpose towards a less instrumental view exploring individuals’ conceptions of this abstract concept in the reality of language classes to incorporate their agencies. Indeed, it is highly important to probe into language teachers’ own conceptualisation of abstract concepts, because as Kreber et al. (2010) mention, this can enrich the formal theories, which are also called explicit conceptions. They believe that taking an empirical approach to explore the way individuals interpret abstract concepts is crucial to humanity because it can result in the reformulation of the formal theories.

As mentioned above, another important gap in the studies on assessment fairness is that the relevant literature largely focused on large scale assessment. Rasooli et al. (2018) refer to the limited conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness in language education despite extensive attention given to other aspects of classroom assessment, including reliability and validity. Moreover, they assert that classroom assessment is inextricably intertwined with learning,

teaching, and classroom interaction, whereas large scale and standardised assessment is based on the distinction between assessment and other elements of language classroom practices. McMillan (2013) defines classroom assessment as all assessment techniques that are used in language classrooms in order to gather data to evaluate language learners for various purposes, such as diagnosing each individual learner's weaknesses and strengths, offering feedback to learners and their parents, and assigning scores to a group of learners after a period of instruction to assess the amount of learning they have accomplished. Accordingly, in the current study, we examined Iranian language teachers' conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness. It should be added that we specifically carried out a study on fairness of online assessment for the productive skills of speaking and writing in language classrooms, which may be challenging because of the difficulty in observing the issue of the consistency of scoring or scoring reliability as one important goal of language assessment (Vahdani Sanavi & Mohammadi, 2020). As Zhang et al. (2021) indicate, the majority of the studies in the field of language education addressed assessment techniques utilised in face-to-face classes, whereas few studies examined the nature and characteristics of assessment techniques in online classes. However, the dire need for online education across the world, especially during the coronavirus pandemic, which led to a shift towards online mode of education and assessment, raises questions about various aspects of online assessment as an integral part of the process of online education.

Fairness as an important aspect of online assessment, which is indispensable to fair and valid evaluation of learners, is the main concern of the current study considering this fact that the impact of a shift towards online education and assessment after the coronavirus pandemic can be long-lasting. We aimed to explore and examine Iranian language teachers' own conceptualisation of online classroom assessment fairness through the lens of the re-conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness proposed by Rasooli et al. (2018), whereby they revisited classroom fairness in the intersection of four elements of classroom practices, that is, teaching, learning, interaction, and assessment. In this regard, using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis, the present study sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do Iranian English language teachers conceptualise fairness of online classroom assessment of the productive language skills?

- 2) How can their conceptualisation be discussed in light of the four elements of classroom practices.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1.Relevant Studies on Online Language Assessment**

Reviewing the existing literature on online language assessment, especially the studies published in the two top-tier journals of *Language Testing* and *Language Assessment Quarterly*, indicates that the recent studies mostly focused on English language university admission and placement tests as high-stakes language tests (Clark et al., 2021; Green & Lung, 2021; Isbell & Kremmel, 2020; Ockey, 2021; Wagner & Krylova, 2021). Most of the above-mentioned studies addressed large-scale assessment, while classroom-level assessment procedures and narrations have not received enough attention. However, as Rasooli (2021) points out, examining classroom assessment techniques through the lens of the existing theories on fairness can offer a new space to gain a deeper understanding of assessment in the reality of classrooms.

With regard to the empirical studies carried out on fairness in classroom assessment, the existing literature is confined to a few studies. Conducting a research study in Ontario's publicly funded educational system, Tierney (2010) probed into experienced English teachers' perceptions of fairness of classroom assessment of writing skills. Analysing the data collected via a vignette questionnaire and an individualised interview, he explicated that the participants of his research study defined fairness as the process whereby teachers share the criteria for assessment with their learners and offer relevant opportunities to their learners in order to show the amount of learning they have accomplished. Moreover, he acknowledged that maintaining a constructive environment, through which information about strengths and weaknesses of learners are provided in a balanced and timely way, can lead to fair assessment. Alavi et al. (2020) conducted a qualitative study on 24 English language teachers working at an Iranian language center to explore their perceptions of classroom assessment fairness. The findings of their study revealed that the teacher participants defined classroom assessment fairness in terms of teachers' commitment, a constructive environment, and the existence of relevant opportunities given to learners to demonstrate their learning.

Similar to the above-mentioned studies, the present research sought to examine language teachers' own conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness. However, this study specifically examined fairness in the online mode of classroom assessment. Actually, on the one hand, we specifically focused on assessment fairness because of economic or resource differences among learners, which can dramatically affect the way they receive the digital instruction at home during online assessment (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020). On the other hand, our main concern was assessment of the productive skills because "scoring a constructed response test such as writing, or speaking is a formidable task" (Vahdani Sanavi & Mohammadi, 2020, p. 92) and this point may be intensified considering the challenges or limitations of online assessment.

## **2.2. Conceptual framework**

Classroom assessment fairness revisited by Rasooli et al. (2018) guided the present research process in formulating interview questions and interpreting participants' narrations. In their re-conceptualisation of classroom assessment fairness, Rasooli et al. define fairness in light of the intersection of the two overlapping domains, namely assessment domain and non-assessment domain, which construct four aspects of classroom practices, that is, teaching, learning, interaction, and assessment. Regarding fairness in the assessment domain, they refer to various factors, including a) opportunities for learning and access to demonstrate learning, b) transparency, consistency, and justification, c) accommodation, d) a constructive learning environment, e) avoidance of score pollution, and f) group work and peer assessment.

As Rasooli et al. (2018) mention, for the purpose of fair assessment, the necessary opportunities for assessment such as competent teachers or materials related to scoring should be offered to all learners. Moreover, various opportunities should be provided with regard to learners' differences in their learning styles and abilities to enable them to demonstrate their learning. Rasooli et al. argue for transparency and maintain that assessment expectations should be clearly identified. Also, criteria used for assessment should be consistent across all learners. To justify the assessment criteria, the rationale for the learning objectives and assessment should be clarified. With respect to accommodation, it is indicated that fair assessment requires teachers to equip exceptional learners with a fair opportunity to demonstrate the learning they have accomplished. In addition, fair assessment necessitates a constructive classroom environment\_whereby learners'

voices are heard and they play a decisive role in making decisions. In a constructive classroom environment, respectful relationships are established between teachers and learners as well as peers. To assess in a fair way, teachers should avoid score pollution and exclude all construct-irrelevant factors, that is, factors that were not involved in the learning objectives regarded as the construct to be assessed in the classroom. The assessment methods, which are used in the language classrooms, whether group work or peer assessment, affect the fairness of the assessment and grades due to this fact that they influence learners' performance.

Concerning non-assessment domains, which include learning, teaching, and interaction, Rasooli et al. (2018) speak of several factors: a) sex bias, b) distributive justice, c) interactional justice, d) procedural justice, e) pedagogy, f) learners' fairness-related beliefs, and g) instructional accommodations. The way teachers evaluate their learners may be influenced by learners' gender, when they treat their female and male learners in different ways. The second important factor mentioned above is distributive justice, which involves not only distributing equal learning resources and opportunities but also recognising diversities of learners in their learning needs. Distributive justice itself includes both equality and equity. While the principle of equality suggests that learners receive the deserved outcomes and grades based on their contributions and participation under the same conditions in which they are given the same opportunities, the principle of equity states that achieving an equal outcome is possible through prioritizing learners' needs and diversities, which leads to the provision of diverse opportunities and resources.

Interactional justice, as the third factor, is composed of informational and interpersonal justice. Informational justice means that teachers provide their learners with adequate information about assessment criteria at the beginning of each instructional course. Also, in order to decrease their learners' perception of unfairness, they attentively listen to their learners to offer necessary information about their scores. Interpersonal justice involves respectful interaction in the learning atmosphere through both verbal and non-verbal acts. In such a learning atmosphere, teachers avoid verbal aggression, racist behaviors, ethnic humor, and rude behaviors. Procedural justice concerns learners' perception of the way procedures are used in making decisions about their performance so that it is largely based on the quality of learners' experiences of assessment rather than the final result of their experiences. Therefore, it can be increased by two factors: teachers' neutrality and reasonableness in decision-making. From among aforementioned factors related to non-

assessment domain, pedagogy entails teachers' knowledge of the content and subject of the study and their ability in communicating contents to their learners in detail by allocating enough time to address learners' needs and confusions. Moreover, learners' fairness-related beliefs include learners' general beliefs in a just and fair world as well as the extent to which they can exercise control over their life events. Finally, instructional accommodations refer to the changes made in the instruction, environment, and resources. That is, changes made to the way learners learn rather than what they learn.

### **3. Method**

#### **3.1. Research Design**

The present study used thematic analysis as the research method design through which the generated data were coded and analysed to extract the meaningful patterns in the data set.

#### **3.2. Participants and Setting**

In the present study, convenience sampling was used to select the participants. Considering the topic of inquiry, the participants of the present study were selected from among teachers, who had the experience of online teaching of courses, which were closely related to the productive skills of speaking and writing within the previous two semesters of the academic year 2020-2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. Our participants consisted of 15 English language teachers (seven female teachers and eight male teachers). The majority of English language teachers held a doctoral degree or were Ph.D. candidates. Three teachers held a master's degree. All teachers were teaching the English language to undergraduate English language learners at Iranian universities. According to Ahmady et al. (2020), the novel coronavirus rapidly spread throughout Iran and coronavirus cases in Iran reached 17,361 on 17 March 2020. This disease, which affected all aspects of Iranian people's lives, led to the transition to virtual education at the elementary, secondary, and tertiary levels. They stated that, at Iranian universities, online classes are conducted through mobile messenger systems or learning management systems, including VESTA and MOODLE.

### **3.3. Instruments**

#### **3.3.1. Online Focus Group Interviews**

In order to gather data, real-time online focus group interviews were used as one of the methods of data collection. Millward (2012) defines real-time focus groups as groups that “log on to the network at a set time for a set period to discuss a topic or issue” (p. 433). Furthermore, as Abrams and Gaiser (2017) state, real or synchronous focus group interviews provide the opportunity for communication just like face-to-face communication because “everyone is online at the same time in the chosen communication application (e.g., video conference platforms, chatrooms)” (p. 438). In the present study, our participants were interviewed through Google Chat or Google Hangouts.

#### **3.3.2. Online Synchronous Interviews**

The second method used for data collection involved conducting online synchronous interviews. O’Connor and Madge (2017) introduce the synchronous interviews as online interviews completely similar to conventional face-to-face interviews through which the interviewees can share their spontaneous ideas immediately. They explain that, during synchronous interviews, the interviewees cannot revise their comments or answers just to achieve social desirability because they have to answer immediately, which in turn results in the provision of more honest responses. In the current study, online interviews were carried out through WhatsApp video calls. To record the interviews, the third-party application, that is, DU recorder was downloaded.

### **3.4. Data Collection Procedure**

To gather information regarding teachers’ conceptualisation of fairness of online classroom assessment of the productive skills of speaking and writing, real-time online focus group interviews were initially conducted. To conduct focus group interviews with teachers, they were divided into three groups, each of which consisted of five persons. Each focus group interview lasted for 80 minutes. These interviews were mainly conducted in English. The pattern for introducing the group discussion included three stages: (1) an overview of the topic (3) ground rules, and (4) an opening question. An overview of the topic was brief and aimed at describing what the topic was and why the participants were chosen. Guidelines were used to illuminate ground rules, including time duration, the method of discussion, recording, turn-taking, breaks,

confidentiality, and refreshments. The opening question gave each participant an opportunity to start. We started focus group interviews as follows:

Thanks for taking the time to join us to talk about the fairness of online classroom assessment. Please, feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. You may be assured of complete confidentiality and can use pseudonyms.

In focus group interviews, we asked questions that made teachers reflect on the entire discussion and offer their positions or opinions on topics of central importance. They were asked to share their views about the fairness of the online classroom assessment of the productive skills of speaking and writing in light of the factors specified by the conceptual framework of our study, such as various aspects of justice, pedagogy, accommodations, the provision of learning opportunities, a constructive learning environment, sex bias, avoidance of score pollution, and so on. After focus group interviews, we conducted synchronous online interviews with each individual participant through WhatsApp video calls. During synchronous interviews, the participants were kindly invited to elaborate on their comments and opinions as expressed in focus group interviews.

Indeed, using two methods of data collection or triangulation can lead to a more comprehensive understanding of the topic of inquiry. It also improves the confirmability and dependability of the findings of a qualitative study. Thick or detailed description of the themes extracted from the qualitative data in the following section also aimed at establishing the credibility of the study.

### **3.5.Data Analysis**

As far as the analysis of the data is concerned, this research used a hybrid thematic approach. That is, we read and re-read the collected data to familiarise ourselves with the data. During this stage, we provided a set of initial codes for different aspects of our participants' accounts or narrations. It should be added that we initially prepared a codebook. To this end, we selected several transcripts (about 25% of the data set) and coded them through conversations and negotiations. The codebook involved codes and their corresponding definitions. Furthermore, the codebook was used to examine the remaining data. For the purpose of inter-coder reliability, the number of

the agreed codes in the analysis of 25% of the data set was divided by the total number of codes to identify the agreement between two researchers of this study, which was reported to be about 84%.

At the next stage, we organised codes into more meaningful and relevant categories. We chose more abstract categories to group the initial codes; these categories were chosen based on our prior knowledge and understanding of the topic of inquiry or the noteworthy issues that emerged from the data. Actually, a hybrid approach to analysis, incorporating both inductive and deductive approaches, was used. The inductive approach enabled us to develop categories from the participants’ accounts, whereas the deductive approach allowed us to extract categories from the existing literature. Finally, we highlighted parts of the texts and marked the themes to which the highlighted parts were assigned. This stage led to our further immersion into the data through which similarities and differences between the categories were clarified. It was revealed that some categories could be put into a larger category or what we call a theme. Generally, two main themes were identified, which are presented in Table 1 and are further described below.

**Table 1. *The Key Themes Extracted through a Thematic Analysis***

<i>Key themes</i>	<i>The corresponding sub-themes</i>
A quest for equality	Identical assessment content
	Identical assessment administration
	Rubric-based scoring procedures
Authenticity in assessment	Assessment tasks resembling real-world scenarios
	Context-sensitive assessment tasks
	Learners’ involvement in assessment tasks

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1. A quest for Equality**

The first theme concerning teachers’ conceptualisation of fairness was named a quest for equality and involved three sub-themes: identical assessment content, identical assessment administration, and rubric-based scoring procedures. In answering questions asked during the interview, Somayeh, a female language teacher with 12 years of experience in teaching English, explained that all

students should be assessed using the same assessment content if the aim is achieving fairness. She pointed out:

*Assessing the productive skills is really challenging, especially in online education. To remove many problems and for the purpose of fair assessment, we should assess our students based on the materials that we have covered. That is, all students should be assessed based on the same materials and contents, covered in the class.*

Likewise, Azadeh, a female teacher with seven years of teaching experience, stated:

*Assessment of the productive skills, especially in online classes through which our learners are receivers of information in their homes and under various conditions, should be completely based on the subject, tasks, and contents that were taught and worked on in classes.*

Ahmad, a male teacher with seven years of teaching experience, referred to the identical assessment administration and stated:

*In online education, students participate in classes through computers or cell phones while they are in their homes and under different conditions. So the way the assessment procedure is administered should be equal for all students in terms of the amount of time, materials, or equipment which are needed to administer a test.*

Referring to the technological requirements of online assessment, Narges, a female teacher with 10 years of teaching experience, indicated:

*As you know, learners are at home when we hold our online classes. In Iran, I think, our students have not equal access to the technological opportunities. So, to assess fairly, we should take these differences into account before making a decision about the tasks or methods through which we want to assess our learners. So, the best way is using a single method of assessment that is accessible to all learners.*

The majority of teachers stated that assessment of students' productive skills, even in online education, is fair when it is based on a pre-determined scoring guide. Saeed, a male teacher with 10 years of experience in teaching English, suggested:

*To become fair in assessing my learners, especially in online education during Covid-19 outbreak, where we cannot communicate with our learners face to face, I should analyze my students' productive skills in terms of the components of those skills. Then, I can assign*

*a score to each component. The composite score will be each student's final score. This exactness leads to fairness.*

Being in agreement with Saeed, who spoke of a detailed and analytical rubric for assessment fairness, Kobra, a female English teacher with five years of teaching experience, stated:

*Fairness of assessment of productive skills, whether in online education or traditional instructions, requires the existence of pre-determined guidelines or fixed scoring procedures whereby students' performance is evaluated. This way, all students will be perceived as equal and scoring will be consistent.*

Hanieh, a female teacher with 10 years of teaching experience, also referred to the importance of a rubric for a fair assessment procedure and explained:

*Fairness for productive skills in the new atmosphere of online education brought about by the coronavirus means the existence of a rubric for assessment, which specifies everything our students should take into account to receive a particular grade.*

Moreover, Ashkan, a male teacher with four years of teaching experience, hinted at some difficulties teachers encounter in online classes, which lead them towards equality. He explained:

*We are managing online classes with a large number of students. We have a limited time for covering the main points of each academic course. More importantly, we are talking about skills by which students should produce language. We should be equipped with new facilities if the aim is observing the essential differences among learners. But we are not equipped with these facilities. So, we try to create an equal condition for evaluating our students. We have to forget the existing differences.*

As the aforementioned examples reveal, the teachers mostly believed in the use of rubric-based assessment, identical content, and identical conditions for administering an assessment procedure with respect to the required time it takes as well as the amount of equipment needed to administer it in order to treat learners equally in the process of assessment. Actually, they referred to the issues related to the way an assessment procedure will be constructed, administered, and scored.

#### 4.2. Authenticity in Assessment

The second theme extracted from the data was named authenticity in assessment and consisted of three sub-themes: resembling real-world scenarios, context-sensitive assessment tasks, and learners' involvement in assessment tasks. To convey our participants' intended meanings, we used the theme of authenticity in assessment, because, as Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014) mention, authentic assessment is a reflection of real-world experiences, which involves the culturally appropriate content and language, makes a connection between students' own context and the ideas presented in the educational context, and shifts towards engaged learning. The majority of the participating teachers believed that in online assessment of the productive skills, they preferred to ask their learners constructed-response questions, whereby they were supposed to produce language by either speaking or writing as it occurs in real-world communications. One of the most noteworthy patterns observed in teachers' conceptualisation of assessment fairness was their tendency for using assessment tasks and procedures that resembled real-world scenarios. They believed that fair assessment of the productive skills means creating the possibility of real-life scenarios where learners are able to express themselves in their speaking or writing tasks as they will express in the English-speaking communities. Somayeh explained:

*I use tasks whose performance requires students to use language accurately and appropriately through various applications or networks as if they are interacting with people in the real world. It is the true meaning of fair assessment of students' productive skills through the web.*

Also, Saeed, stated:

*The assessment of the productive skills, even in online education, can become fair when we ask our students to do things similar to what they should do in the real world. They should be required to use language, spoken or written, to convey meanings and interact through the web with the existing limitations.*

In explicating his meaning, Saeed indicated:

*Anyway, we faced the crisis of the COVID-19 outbreak. Even in our daily communication with Iranian people, we have to use computers and cell-phones. So, it is also true for language learners. They should be assessed based on their abilities to use mobile*

*applications and computer software to send messages either orally or in the written form if the aim is achieving fairness.*

Furthermore, the participating teachers stated that fairness in online assessment of the productive skills during the COVID-19 outbreak means engaging learners in the process of assessment. Some of the teachers asserted that assessment becomes fair when it is meaningful for learners and takes their context-relevant issues into account. Masoumeh, a female teacher with five years of teaching experience, explained:

*Assessment of speaking and writing skills is fair when students are really engaged in the activities and exercises we use to assess them. That is, the content and process of assessment should be relevant to their world.*

Amir Ali, a male teacher with seven years of teaching experience, also talked about students' engagement in tasks, which are used for assessing their speaking or writing. He also hinted at the value of contextually-sensitive assessment tasks:

*For fair assessment of our students' productive skills, we should design and use tasks and activities in which students are fully engaged. I think tasks and activities should be related to their needs and concerns considering the immediate context where they study and live.*

## **5. Discussion**

The participating teachers mostly spoke of equality, focusing on identical assessment content, identical administration procedures, and rubric-based scoring. As Espinoza (2007) explains, equality is defined as sameness in treating individuals. Davies (2010) states that equality involves assessing students using identical assessment methods, administration procedures, and scoring and interpretation criteria. In this regard, the great emphasis the participants put on the notion of equality in order to achieve fairness in online classroom assessment is in contrast with the findings of the studies conducted by Tierney (2010) and Alavi et al. (2020), which strongly favored equity, as provision of assessment tools or methods with regard to the learners' differences and diversities.

Equality and equity are two constitutive components of distributive justice, which is viewed as one of the factors constituting fairness in classroom assessment (Rasooli et al. 2018). Accordingly, the way the participants conceptualised fairness in online classroom assessment is somewhat in line with the definition of classroom assessment fairness as was proposed by Rasooli

and his colleagues with respect to regular face-to-face classrooms. Nonetheless, equality and equity are regarded as two different sides of the same coin. Referring to Strikes (1985), Espinoza (2008) speaks of the differences between these two concepts and points out that equality aims at achieving equal results and outcomes, while equity tolerates unequal results in its strive for a fair competition based on the acknowledgement of differences. As Stromquist (2005) indicates, equality “is generally considered one of the most enduring educational issues. It is at the heart of the notion of education as a means for mobility in societies that consider themselves meritocratic” (p. 95). Moreover, Espinoza considers equality as the bedrock of functionalism in education whereby students are given equal opportunities and their achievement is based on their efforts and abilities.

Acknowledging this fact that, during online education, learners are in their homes and are different considering their access to technological opportunities, the participants of this study sought to move towards difference blindness in their attempt for making fair decisions about their learners’ performance in online classes held for teaching productive skills. As Reeves (2004) suggests, “treating students equally in all aspects of education creates a color-free, difference free environment, a level plane on which students have equal access to educational opportunity” (p. 47). Reeves argues that difference blindness as an approach to teaching the English language may result in consciously neutralising the existing differences for the purpose of re-producing the taken-for-granted hierarchies not only in the educational systems but also in societies. However, in this study, participants like Ashkan talked about factors such as time limitation or complexity of assessment of the productive skills in online classes, which lead to the tendency towards equality at the cost of equity and impede individualised instruction of learners.

Broadly speaking, the scoring of the productive skills is a challenging task even in regular face-to-face classes so that many language teachers are required to use scoring rubric (Vahdani Sanavi & Mohammadi, 2020). This point was also addressed by our participants in their comments about the rubric-based scoring procedure, which is also in agreement with concepts such as transparency and consistency because the rubric is a guide that is used to list the required criteria for scoring and determines levels of performance within a given scale (Crusan, 2015). Vahdani Sanavi and Mohammadi maintain that “the consistency of scores for productive skills of writing and speaking needs to be ensured using a rubric” (p. 79). They perceive the presence of a rubric in

assessment as an important point to be taken into account for a fair and comparable assessment of the productive skills. In addition, a rubric-based scoring procedure entails informational justice as an aspect of interactional justice whereby teachers offer their learners adequate information about assessment criteria at the beginning of each instructional course. In this regard, this finding of the present study is consistent with various aspects of the concept of fairness in classroom assessment as was re-visited by Rasooli et al. (2018). With regard to the first theme, that is, the concept of equality, our participants' conceptualisation of fairness was in line with a narrow conceptualisation of fairness. As Davies argues, this narrow definition “has to do with basic human rights and with equality of opportunity to participate fully in society” (p. 175).

Moreover, the participating teachers spoke of contextually relevant and sensitive assessment, which reflects the real-world scenario and engages learners in the process of assessment. In their interviews, they suggested that students should be required to use language in a real context instead of demonstrating their knowledge of language usage. Actually, they talked about the situational authenticity of assessment procedures, which involves the “match between the characteristics of test tasks to target language use (TLU) tasks” (Lewkowicz, 2000, p. 48). As Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, and Brown (2014) point out, such a need for the alignment of assessment with the context of performance or the use of language in the real world represents authenticity in assessment, which results in “the design and development of more meaningful assessment activity” (p. 206).

In addition, the participants stated that fairness of online assessment of the productive skills requires contextually meaningful and relevant assessment procedures, which engage learners in the process of assessment. Referring to the interaction between learners and assessment procedures, they hinted at the interactional authenticity. Bachman (1991) defines interactional authenticity as a feature in assessment procedures or tasks that involves learners in the procedures of assessment. He explains that interactional authenticity necessitates the interaction between the learners and the procedures or tasks, which are used to assess their performance. Authenticity not only involves the correspondence of assessment scenarios to the real world scenarios as it requires learners to use the target language to convey their meanings and express their arguments but also covers topics and issues that are relevant and meaningful to learners based on the context in which they live. From this perspective, it can be said that authenticity is the point of dialogue between

the target language and learners' native language. Generally, Darling-Aduana (2021) acknowledges that learners' behavioural patterns are re-formed with regard to their exposure to online materials representing various levels of authenticity. She reports higher levels of classroom engagement, which lead to higher achievement.

## **6. Conclusion and Implications**

The present study aimed at conceptualising assessment fairness in online classes through interviews that were carried out with Iranian English language teachers. The way our participants conceptualised fairness in online classroom assessment sheds light on the way equality can be considered and examined in the future educational theories and practices with respect to language assessment in general and assessment of the productive language skills in particular. Actually, teachers focused on equality of opportunities through identical assessment content, administration, and rubrics. While they made an attempt to establish equality, they had to overlook the valuable concept of equity regarding the difficulties they encountered in online classrooms. This point can draw our attention to the important role that organisations can play in assisting teachers by offering the necessary facilities and providing appropriate agenda. As Stowell (2004) asserts, "starting from the notion that the challenge is to overcome disadvantage without denying difference, the agenda becomes one of transforming organizations to respect and respond to differences, to facilitate participation and celebrate diversity" (p. 499). At the same time, she accepts that the transformation of organisations requires essential changes in the social processes and cultural identity of each organisation rather than being the matter of access or reward systems in organisations. She points out that not only should teachers strive for diversifying their learners' intake, they should also pay deep attention to the outcomes and added values. In this regard, she explains that "comparison between the performance outcomes of students groups, for example in relation to class of degree must take account of the prior attainment of individual students, in order that the relative impact of educational process can be questioned" (p. 507).

Furthermore, the findings of the study highlighted the importance of authenticity in classroom assessment. While the feature of the alignment of the assessment procedures to the real world scenarios may be perceived as one of the factors related to the assessment domain, the engagement of learners in the process of assessment by addressing topics and issues that are

contextually sensitive and meaningful goes beyond the four domains specified by Rasooli et al. (2018), that is, assessment, teaching, learning, and the interactive learning atmosphere. In fact, the context is one of the important factors, which was addressed by our participants in their conceptualisation of fairness in online classroom assessment, which can be considered as a point to be taken into deep consideration in re-visiting the concept of classroom language assessment, especially in the online atmosphere.

## **7. Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Finally, it should be mentioned that our study was a qualitative analysis conducted in the context of Iran and we believe that there is a dire need for further studies on classroom assessment fairness in various contexts and on diverse groups of language teachers and learners. Moreover, the scope of our study was delimited to the productive skills of speaking and writing; therefore, further studies on the assessment of the receptive skills of language can enrich our understanding of the concept of fairness in online assessment.

### **Bio-data**

Zeynab Safari studies English Language and Literature at Lorestan University. Her field of interest includes qualitative research, culture and identity, and the role of technology in language learning and teaching processes.

### **Declarations**

**Funding:** There is no funding source.

**Acknowledgements:** The author thanks the participants of the study.

**Competing interests:** No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Availability of data and materials:** The data is accessible upon the request.

**Authors' contributions:** Writing-editing-data generation and analysis-conceptualization.

**Declaration of generative AI-powered tools in the process of writing:** The author indicates that she has not utilized AI-powered tools in paper writing.

## References

- Abrams, K. M., & Gaiser, T. J. (2017). Online focus groups. In N. Fielding, R. Lee, & G. Blank (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of online research methods* (pp. 435-450). Sage Publication.
- Adedoyin, O. B., & Soykan, E. (2020). Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interactive Learning Environments, 31*(2), 863-875.
- Ahmadi Safa, M., & Nasiri, B. (2025). Fairness in language classroom assessment practices: What do EFL teachers underscore? *Language Testing in Asia, 15*(1), <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-024-00336-7>.
- Ahmady, S., Shahbazi, S., & Heidari, M. (2020). Transition to virtual learning during the coronavirus disease–2019 crisis in Iran: Opportunity or challenge? *Disaster Medicine and Public Health Preparedness, 14*(3), 11-12.
- Alavi, Rasekh, and Khomeijani Farahani (2020). *Language teachers' perceptions of fairness in the EFL classroom assessment*. [Master's thesis, Tehran University]. <https://lib.ut.ac.ir/site/catalogue/1388418>.
- Ashford-Rowe, K., Herrington, J., & Brown, C. (2014). Establishing the critical elements that determine authentic assessment. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 39*(2), 205-222.
- Bachman, L. (1991). What does language testing have to offer? *TESOL Quarterly, 25*, 671-704.
- Banerjee, H. L. (2016). Test fairness in second language assessment. *Studies in Applied Linguistics and TESOL, 16*(1), 54-59.
- Clark, T., Spiby, R., & Tasviri, R. (2021). Crisis, collaboration, recovery: IELTS and COVID-19. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 18*(1), 17-25.
- Crusan, D. (2015). Editorial: Dance, ten; looks, three: Why rubrics matter. *Assessing Writing, 26*, 1-4.
- Darling-Aduana, J. (2021). Authenticity, engagement, and performance in online high school courses: Insights from micro-interactional data. *Computers & Education, 167*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2021.104175>.
- Davies, A. (2010). Test fairness: A response. *Language Testing, 27*(2), 171-176.

- De Backer, F., Slembrouck, S., & Van Avermaet, P. (2019). Assessment accommodations for multilingual learners: Pupils' perceptions of fairness. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 40(9), 833-846.
- Deygers, B. (2019). Fairness and social justice in English language assessment. In X. Gao (Eds.), *Second handbook of English language teaching* (pp. 541-569). Springer.
- Espinoza, O. (2007) Solving the equity–equality conceptual dilemma: A new model for analysis of the educational process. *Educational Research*, 49(4), 343-363
- Gipps, C. & Stobart, G. (2009). Fairness in assessment. In C. Wyatt-Smith, & J. Cumming (Eds.), *Educational assessment in the 21<sup>st</sup> century* (105-118). Springer.
- Green B. A., & Lung, Y. S. M. (2021). English language placement testing at BYU-Hawaii in the time of COVID-19. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 18(1), 6-11.
- Isbell, D. R., & Kremmel, B. (2020). Test review: Current options in at-home language proficiency tests for making high-stakes decisions. *Language Testing*, 37(4), 600-619.
- Kane, M. (2010). Validity and fairness. *Language Testing*, 27(2), 177-182.
- Kreber, C., McCune, V., & Klampfleitner, M. (2010). Formal and implicit conceptions of authenticity in teaching. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 15(4), 383-397. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.493348>
- Kunnan, A. J. (2013). Fairness and justice in language assessment. In A. J. Kunnan (Eds.), *The companion to language assessment* (pp. 1098–1114). Wiley Online Library.
- Lewkowicz, J. A. (2000). Authenticity in language testing: Some outstanding questions. *Language Testing*, 17(1), 43-64.
- McNamara, T., Knoch, U., & Fan, J. (2019). *Fairness, justice, and language assessment: The role of measurement*. Oxford University Press.
- McNamara, T., & Ryan, K. (2011). Fairness versus justice in language testing: The place of English literacy in the Australian citizenship test. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 8(2), 161-178.
- McMillan, J. H. (2013). Why we need research on classroom assessment. In J. H. McMillan (Eds.). *SAGE handbook of research on classroom assessment* (pp. 3–16). Sage Publications.
- Millward, L. (2012). Focus groups. In G. Breakwell, S. Hammond, & C. Fife-Schaw (Eds.), *Research methods in psychology* (pp. 274–292). Sage Publications.

- Ockey, G. J. (2021). An overview of COVID 19's impact on English language university admissions and placement tests. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 18(1), <https://doi.org/10.1080/15434303.2020.1866576>.
- O'Connor, H., & Madge, C. (2017). Online interviewing. In N. Fielding, R. Lee, & G. Blank (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of online research methods* (pp. 416-434). Sage Publication.
- Rasooli, A. (2021). *Fairness in classroom assessment: Conceptual and empirical investigation*. Queen's University.
- Rasooli, A., Zandi, H., & DeLuca, C. (2018). Re-conceptualizing classroom assessment fairness: A systematic meta-ethnography of assessment literature and beyond. *Studies in Educational Evaluation*, 56, 164-181.
- Reeves, J. (2004). "Like everybody else": Equalizing educational opportunity for English language learners. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(1), 43-66.
- Stowell, M. (2004). Equity, justice and standards: Assessment decision making in higher education. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 29(4), 495-510.
- Stromquist, N. P. (2005). Comparative and international education: A journey toward equality and equity. *Harvard Educational Review*, 75(1), 89.
- Tierney, R. D. (2010). *Insights into fairness in classroom assessment: Experienced English teachers share their practical wisdom* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Ottawa]. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/622c3dfa-0524-4180-aa1d-98a8b5b5b523>.
- Vahdani Sanavi, R., & Mohammadi, M. (2020). Rubric-based assessment of the productive skills. In S. Hidri (Eds.), *Changing language assessment* (pp. 77-94). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
- Wagner, E., & Krylova, A. (2021). Temple University's ITA placement test in times of COVID-19. *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 18(1), 12-16.
- Xi, X. (2010). How do we go about investigating test fairness? *Language Testing*, 27(2), 147-170.
- Zhaleh, K., Estaji, M., & Chory, R. M. (2025). Justice and fairness are not the same construct: Evidence from revalidating the teacher classroom justice scale on university EFL students in Iran. *Teaching English Language*, 19(1), 41-80.
- Zhang, C., Yan, X., & Wang, J. (2021). EFL teachers' online assessment practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: Changes and mediating factors. *The Asia-Pacific Education Researcher*, 30, 499-507.