



Implementing Performance Assessments in University English Departments in the Kurdistan Region: Viable Solutions to the Practice and Technical Difficulties

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Abstract

Nowadays, language performance is likely to be the most predominant factor on which assessment primarily focuses for estimating students' success. Hancock (1994) concludes that assessment is a continuous strategy and interactive process by which both teachers and students collaborate to monitor student learning and make decisions about their performances. Due to the difficulties highlighted in Ismael 2017 and 2018 respectively, there was a limited implementation of performance assessments in the English departments of Kurdistan Region universities. This current study, therefore, looked into some viable solutions to the contextual difficulties of implementing performance assessments in terms of practice and technicality in the English departments of Kurdistan Region universities from the perspectives of university EFL teachers. Following performance assessment practices, as this study generally revealed, is tremendously beneficial for the processes of teaching, learning, and assessment of English language but it is not effortless for both teachers and students with the latter bearing a considerable portion of the burden. This study arrived at some feasible solutions and procedures to follow and to cope with these difficulties based on the analyses of the lengthy discussions of the interviews and the focus group interview. According to the findings, the difficulties of implementing performance assessments can be significantly minimized by decreasing the number of students to 25 per class, allocating equal marks for performance assessments and main traditional tests, holding seminars for students to inform them about the types of assessments and tests they are expected to complete, providing training courses for teachers on conducting performance assessments, stating objectives and mentioning outcomes in the curriculum about those assessments, and most significantly reforming the assessment system as a whole gradually by piloting performance assessments. The major implications of this study could be informing senior **administrators in the** English departments that the implementation of performance assessments in their departments is insufficient, and that their assessment system requires significant reforms and improvements in several aspects in order to obtain an up-to-date language assessment system, which could subsequently improve university EFL students' learning of English.

Keywords: Assessment, Performance assessment, Assessment system, Practice difficulties, Technical difficulties, EFL teacher, EFL student

Recieved: 19/12/2022

Accepted: 9/1/2023



1. Introduction

In assessment, there is a strong emphasis on performance, such as in the case of language assessment, where language performance is likely a crucial and decisive element on which assessment primarily focuses. The researchers' definitions and explanations of assessment have made this evident. Hancock (1994) stated that assessment is typically an ongoing strategy that not only monitors student learning but also involves students as well in decisions about the extent to which their performances match their abilities and their potential. Assessment as a continuous process has some effective functions nowadays such as setting appropriate criteria and high standards for learning quality, explaining and publishing expectations, systematically collecting evidence and then analyzing and interpreting it to determine how well performances meet expectations and standards. It also accomplishes understanding and improving student learning and using the information collected to document, explain, and improve their learning in general and their performances in particular (Dinesh, nd). This demonstrates that all assessment functions are ultimately aimed at enhancing student performance. Because of such emphasis on the performances of students, performance assessment was developed in order to require students to accomplish approximately real-life authentic tasks that can be assessed by qualified assessors (Brown and Hudson, 1998, cited in Tran, 2012). Brown and Hudson (1998) also classified performance assessment practices under their broad category of constructed response assessments. Constructing responses requires performance from the side of learners, and their performances possibly entails a variety of other sorts of assessment techniques demonstrating and emphasizing the essentiality of student performance in teaching, learning, and assessment.

Assessment practices can have considerable advantages but they can also have drawbacks, disadvantages, difficulties, or various issues in some circumstances. According to Wolf et al. (2008), Ataç (2012), Earl and Katz (2006), Arter (2001), Ghahremani (2013), Ross (2005), Dunn and Mulvenon (2009), assessment generally enhances students' learning. However, as mentioned in Brown and Hudson (1998), Bruton (1999), Tsagari (2004), Law and Eckes (2007), Baker (2010), Wach (2012), and Yu (2013), there are undoubtedly some difficulties of conducting performance assessment practices and other assessments, which might hinder their successful implementation, and, as a result, I believe they are unable to adequately promote students' learning. In the context of Kurdistan Region universities, there were some shortcomings and difficulties of following performance assessments (Ismael, 2017 and 2018 respectively). For this reason, the current study investigated certain solutions for those assessment difficulties. The teacher participants' opinions and beliefs expressed in their interviews of this study allowed me to contextualize the difficulties and then some solutions came up after data analysis. To further reflect on the solutions and make decisions about them, I discussed them with the participants again in the focus group interview.

Exploring performance assessment difficulties while taking into account all of the factors involved and developing educational solutions to them through the cognitions of the participants of this research was quite justifiable. That was because, based on my extensive literature search and to the best of my knowledge, there were numerous empirical studies on performance assessment practices concerning a variety of aspects in various contexts. However, there were relatively few studies concerning the teachers' cognitions about the difficulties of implementing these assessments. Additionally, the urgency of this study stems from the fact that in the context of Kurdistan Region universities, there were a few studies about assessment (Ismael, 2016, Salih & Chaqmaqchee, 2021, & Ahmad, 2022), a few explored assessment difficulties partially (Ismael, 2017, Ismael 2018, & Mahmood, 2022), while almost none investigated the solutions for those difficulties.



2. Conceptualization of performance assessment

Generally speaking, in second language assessment, performance assessment is frequently related to the performance of a particular set of situated functions. That is why second language performance assessment is typically implemented in languages for specific purposes programs (Bailey, 1998). McMillan (2001, cited in Grabin, 2009) defines performance assessment as “one in which the teacher observes and makes a judgment about the student’s demonstration of a skill or competency in creating a product, constructing a response, or making a presentation” (p. 196). Similarly, as it is presented in Brown (2004), performance assessment practices are productive and observable skills like content-valid writing and speaking tasks. Such observable skills as performances usually accompany a sort of authenticity, that is, real world tasks that learners have had sufficient time to develop (Brown, 2004). As such, performance assessments can be characterized by the proximity to the actual language use, which is based on activities with authentic communicative functions, that is, real performance in authentic contexts (Hamayan, 1995). Authentic generally means that the nature of the task and its context are relevant and represent aspects of real life (Chirimbu, 2013). That is why, the paramount concerns in designing performance assessment practices are in order to establish the authenticity of the stimulus material and the task posed to students (Bailey, 1998).

In language testing and educational measurement, performance assessment tasks typically demand students to utilize language to process topical content, engaging both their content knowledge and language proficiency (Bachman, 2002). That is why performance assessment practices are assumed to transform educational assessments into useful educational experiences serving to motivate, inspire, and direct learning since students are required to show their understanding (Messick, 1994: 17 as cited in Grabin, 2009). The explanations of Bachman and Messick demonstrated the substantial educational benefit of performance assessment practices. Therefore, there are essentially two vital aspects that teachers should be aware of, comprehend, and be able to employ. First, teachers should be aware of the distinctions between performance assessments and other types of assessments. Second, they must be familiar with and capable of using a variety of performance-based assessments in their classrooms to inform instruction (Thibeault et al., 2010).

What also displays the effectiveness of performance assessment is its characteristics. According to O’malley and Valdez Pierce (1996, cited in Brown, 2004), in performance assessment, “1. Students make a constructed response, 2. They engage in higher-order thinking, with open-ended tasks, 3. Tasks are meaningful, engaging, and authentic, 4. Tasks call for the integration of language skills, and 5. Both process and product are assessed” (p. 255). The efficacy of education and the significant characteristics of performance assessment are both part of a broader educational reform movement, in which there are strong objections to the use of standardized testing as the only assessment measures of learners’ competencies. The argument is that standardized testing cannot elicit actual performance of test-takers (Brown, 2004); that is why it has to be urgently incorporated with performance assessments for achieving a comprehensive assessment of students.

3. Theoretical Background of Performance Assessment

As can be seen from the preceding section’s conceptualization of performance assessment, it focuses on learners’ actual performance, which is authentic performance in real or close to real simulated contexts. The effectiveness of creating simulated contexts is that if there is no opportunity for students to use English language with native speakers (real situation), the class can be immersed in imagined or simulated experiences of real situations (Allen, 2009). Additionally, SLA theory emphasizes the learner’s participation in social activities such as talking in



the classroom or having out-of-class conversations (Hall et al., 2015). Without a doubt, such performances are concurrently monitored and assessed by teachers, who then provide feedback to students in order for them to improve future performances.

Giving feedback to learners during their performances is a type of social interaction that is closely linked to the process of mediation in the framework of socio-cultural approach's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the course of performance assessment, teachers provide predetermined or spontaneous mediation and assistance to students to support their performances (May and Hornberger, 2008). SLA researchers have therefore concentrated on students' language growth in ZPD adhering to Vygotsky's concept of individuals' accomplishing more when they work in collaboration with others versus accomplishing less when they work without collaboration (Zuengler and Miller, 2006). In Vygotskian socio-cultural approach, knowing what learners can do at present and what they can do in the future is critical and tremendously essential. Following this, a teacher can possibly find out both students' actual and potential abilities by focusing on the learner's ZPD (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Vygotsky (1978 cited in Shrestha and Coffin, 2012) defines ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86).

In language education, the emergence of socio-cultural approaches has influenced applied linguistics to find a new direction. Consequently, the socio-cultural dynamic views on the nature of language shifted scholars' perspectives on competence from static to interactive and dynamic (Alemi and Daftarifard, 2010). The epistemological viewpoint of the socio-cultural turn defines learning as a dynamic social activity that takes place in physical and social situations, and diffused across people, tools, and activities of skills or knowledge from the outside world (Johnson, 2006). Thus, internalized higher mental functions, according to Vygotsky (1962, as stated in Behrooznia, 2014) have necessarily passed through external social stages in their development. Humans perform cognitively unique when they engage in a variety of activities and when they are mediated by capable people around them (Behrooznia, 2014). Furthermore, socio-cultural perspectives on language and learning consider language use in real-world situations as crucial to learning (Zuengler and Miller, 2006).

Because English as a second language entails social practices - committing to the indispensability of the macro socio-cultural context of learning - the dialogical interconnection between individuals, society, and the learning contexts should be emphasised in classrooms (Ajayi, 2008). As a result, the dialogical interconnection of negotiation and meaning formation bridges the gap between the inter-psychological or social level and the intra-psychological or individual level (Behrooznia, 2014). Thus, from socio-cultural perspective, language arises through social and cultural activity and is only afterwards reconstructed as an individual and psychological phenomenon (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). To account for praxis, socio-cultural theory concludes that second language learning must take place in the context of macro-social and institutional structures of everyday practices. That includes those language theories that are grounded in contextual practices and those informed by theory, as well as teaching practices foregrounding cultural and social realities of miscellaneous language uses and language communities (Ajayi, 2008).

4. Problem and Rationale of the Study

The investigation of reasonable solutions for the difficulties of conducting performance assessments from the perspectives of university EFL teachers is perhaps one of the profound issues of teaching English in the context of Kurdistan Region universities, which could make this study significant. Understanding how performance



assessment practices are implemented in various EFL contexts necessitates different empirical studies in order to explore the advantages and difficulties of those assessments in practice. This is because teachers' assessment practices in university ESL/EFL contexts are diverse both within and across contexts (Cheng et al., 2004), among them performance assessment practices are challenging as they are relatively new (Atac, 2012). More studies are usually required in a specific context on how assessments can be developed and how all stakeholders are engaged in the process (López and Bernal, 2009 as cited in Mosquera & Castillo, 2019). In the context of the Kurdistan Region universities, some of the difficulties of performance assessments were discovered by Ismael (2017) and (2018) respectively. Since assessment is an integral part of education (Coombe et al., 2012), if these difficulties are not addressed, they would be detrimental for education in general, including teaching and learning English.

The four research questions of this study are concerned with some solutions to the difficulties of conducting performance assessment practices in the Kurdistan Region, which covers the practice, technical, motivational, curriculum, and training solution propositions. For obtaining answers, this study relies on teachers' perceptions and beliefs about performance assessments based on their observations and understanding of their students. This is because teachers' beliefs have a significant influence on shaping their classroom practices (Wang, 2011). Teachers' cognitions are also immensely important as they are one of the most influential personnel in educational systems since they constitute the front line of teaching and learning, and are heavily involved in a variety of these two educational processes (Jia, 2004). These research questions would be justifiable and pedagogically significant due to the urgency of this research which is embedded in attempting to resolve the difficulties of implementing performance assessment practices. If the research recommendations of this study are followed up, it would be effective in developing not only those assessments but also the teaching, learning, and assessment of English language subsequently. The goals of this current study are therefore, first, to investigate the difficulties of conducting performance assessments in literature and empirical studies; second, to reveal and propose some solutions to those difficulties based on the perspectives of university EFL teachers.

According to my extensive review in the literature of assessment, there are relatively fewer empirical studies on teachers' cognitions about performance assessment and much fewer in the Kurdistan Region only Ismael (2017), Ismael (2018), & Mahmood (2022). This further justifies the cognition-related research questions of this study. Finding answers to these questions as proposed solutions would be effective in conducting performance assessments more adequately, which actually provides the basic rationale for this study.

The following are the four research questions of this study:

1. Are there any technical solutions to the difficulties of implementing performance assessment practices?
2. Can motivational strategies overcome the difficulties of implementing performance assessments?
3. Would teacher training and informing students be effective factors in solving the difficulties of implementing performance assessment practices?
4. Can curriculum modification develop performance assessments and reform assessment systems by piloting those same assessment practices?

5. Methodology

This study adopted interpretivism as its research methodology. Generally, interpretivism aims to obtain "cultur-



ally derived and historically situated interpretations of the social life-world” (Crotty, 1998, p. 67). Interpretivism emerged in opposition to positivism in attempts to approach human and social reality differently (Crotty 1998). Subjectivity, according to interpretivists, is one of the key features that distinguishes humans from inanimate objects because things give different meanings to different people affected by their feelings, thoughts, beliefs (Wilson 2009), gender, culture, and context, rather than adherence to an objective reality (Pine 2009).

Concerning methods, this research employs interviews and a focus group interview following the recently emerging qualitative techniques and methods used by interpretivists such as accounts, personal constructs, questionnaires (Cohen et al. 2007), fieldwork, notes and transcripts of conversations, interviews (Wellington 2000), observations, review of documents, and focus groups (Ary et al. 2006). Among these, interview and focus group interview are two of the most successful ways that allow a complete engagement with participants for exploring their cognitions, which is the fundamental concern of interpretivism and the core issue in this research.

5.1 Data Collection

This study conducted interviews and a focus group interview with 16 teacher participants and administrators: 12 teachers and 4 administrators, 7 having PhDs and 9 having MAs in three university English departments in the Kurdistan Region. Throughout the interviews, the teacher participants’ discussions about the difficulties of following performance assessments allowed me to contextualize the difficulties of those assessments and propose solutions to them. To further reflect on the solutions and finalize making decisions about them, I reviewed the solutions with the participants again in the focus group interview as an attempt to minimize the difficulties of conducting these assessment practices in the future. Discussing educational difficulties and problems and finding solutions to them with teachers is quite normal educationally because teachers are continuously challenged with various problems they are required to solve. The three elements of problem solving are “finding the problem, finding a solution, and testing the solution” (Johnson, 2008, p. 37). Identifying the problems regarding the difficulties of implementing performance assessments was by Ismael 2017 and 2018 respectively in the context of the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities, finding solutions is the focus of this present study, and testing the solutions would be the duty of a broad and in-depth action research that I recommend conducting soon.

5.2 Data Analysis

First, I processed the collected data to be ready for analysis by transcribing the interviews and the focus group interview, and stored the written transcripts in various files and folders. Then, I used NVIVO in coding the transcripts thoroughly by segmenting the data into essential analytical components (Grabin, 2009), and then labelling them in the coding process with words and short phrases (Saldaña, 2012). After that I categorised and thematised all the codes. Following conceptualization and categorization, I organized sub-categories, categories, and themes to reach the findings concerning the research questions of this study. For organizing the sub-categories, categories, and themes, I took benefit from the 15 steps of Anderson for thematic content analysis of interviews and other research methods (Anderson, 2007). Also, generally, I followed Kvale’s seven steps of interview research, which includes designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, thematising, verifying, and reporting (Knox & Burkard, 2009).

6. Findings and Discussions



The following six findings are the outcome of the analyses of the collected data from the sixteen interviews and the focus group interview in which the solutions to the difficulties of performance assessment practices are finalized and decided on. According to the findings, the difficulties of implementing performance assessments can be significantly minimized by six solutions that comprise the main findings of this study, each presented in a subsection. The 1st subsection is about decreasing the number of students to 25 per class; the 2nd one focuses on allocating equal marks for performance assessments and main traditional tests; the 3rd is about holding seminars for students to inform them about the types of assessments and tests they are expected to complete; the 4th subsection is on providing training courses for teachers on conducting performance assessments; the 5th one is about stating clear objectives and mentioning clear outcomes in the curriculum about those assessments; and the 6th subsection is about reforming the assessment system as a whole gradually by piloting performance assessments.

6.1 Decreasing the number of students to 25 per class

In the focus group interview, the majority of participants (11 of 16) believed that decreasing the number of students to 25 per class would be an effective solution by which they could do numerous teaching, learning, and assessment practices including performance assessments. This is because small classes would be more manageable than large ones and “it helps the teachers to do all kinds of assessments in the class” (Delan). Some of the participants eagerly anticipated: “20 to 25 students will be an ideal class” (Dashne). Gasha considered it as “a good idea, radical change, 25 is better manageable”. The class size and class duration are major variables in the failure of performance assessment practices because each student’s initiatives are difficult to organize and assess (Bruton, 1999, Tsagari, 2004). This solution could be pedagogically quite reasonable because performance assessment is a development-oriented process that demonstrates students’ current abilities in order to assist them in overcoming performance problems and to realizing their potential (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). The process of mediation in the socio-cultural ZPD allows teachers to collaborate on any assessment practice more closely with students that enable teachers to move students to the next levels of their ZPDs (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Such mediation process can be adequately accomplished with 25 students in a class because mediation should be completed with each student individually that requires longer time.

In order to reduce the number of students in each class to 25, more qualified teachers are required, as well as better-equipped classrooms. Currently, each stage at the English departments have around 90 students, often divided into two groups of about 45 students. Therefore, we must divide the 90 students into 4 groups to create classrooms that hold nearly 25 students. Most participants (9 of 16) thought that decreasing the number of students to 25 is not easy at present as they believed in the unaffordability of providing more qualified teachers and equipped classrooms in the current state of economic crisis. This is despite the fact that these issues are major barriers to the effective implementation of performance assessment practices. Those nine participants agreed with me that one practical solution for this shortcoming could be that teachers and students should stay longer at university in a few days. This would allow them to use the equipped classrooms for more sessions until the end of the day as Nali totally agreed: “We can divide the time and the subjects more accurately in a day, why not.”

Also for resolving the difficulties of conducting performance assessments in large classes, Nali suggested that some types of performance assessment practices that would be appropriate in classrooms with high numbers of students could be applied by teachers. Adding to this, I highlighted the use of technology in large classes for implementing performance assessments, and all the focus group participants agreed with us. This is because computers can virtually replace humans in raising students’ consciousness (Shabani, 2012) by administering



computer-based assessments (Poehner and Lantolf, 2013), thereby wikis and email exchanges as forms of teacher mediation are provided (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Even from the Vygotskian socio-cultural perspective, human activities such as higher mental functions can be mediated by objects such as computers and psychological tools like texts or another person (Kozulin, 2003, Wertsch, 2007 as cited in Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Computer mediation is effective in promoting knowledge internalization, which also increases students' potential growth (Teo, 2012).

6.2 Providing equal marks for performance assessment practices and traditional tests

Mediation is an interaction between teachers and students that allows for the provision of developmental support for students as well as closer collaboration between teachers and students on assessment assignments by which teachers can move forward to the next ZPD level of their students (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Such mediation-based cooperation facilitates a valid and accurate assessment of students' performances; hence, it requires significantly more marks for scoring them according to specific criteria. Currently, performance assessments have little value in the assessment system of the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities where the majority of marks are assigned for traditional tests (between 80-90% of the marks), perpetuating the focus on knowledge rather than English proficiency and performance (Ismael, 2017). If performance assessment practices carry higher scores, students will be more motivated to complete them, which will advance their English language learning as well.

Most of the teacher participants (11 of 16) preferred to assign 50% of the marks for performance assessment practices, arguing that if the students are given 50% of the marks for these continuous assessments, they cannot afford to ignore them. As a result, they could be compelled to complete them in some way along with other tests, as Akam stated: "They can have both a test, a presentation, prepare short reports, etc. So, we need to re-divide the marks." The participants' agreement in allocating %50 of the marks to performance assessments is in accordance with Atac's (2012) conclusion that it will be pedagogically useful to attach more significance to performance assessment practices in the curriculum and educational programs of language teaching. Additionally, the teachers who took part in the study of Troudi et al. (2009) acknowledged the value of traditional testing while also emphasizing the effectiveness of classroom-based performance assessments; they also stressed that students should benefit from various assessment practices.

Regarding assigning more marks to performance assessments and implementing them more frequently than before, some participants (6 out of 16) expressed some skepticism about this solution. These participants preferred assigning 50% of the marks to performance assessments but only under the condition that teachers should assess students objectively. They believed that performance assessments must be conducted along with teacher monitoring and supervision. That is why for the performance assessment to be successful, they urged inviting some scholars, experts, academics, and professionals in order to train teachers to mark performance assessment practices objectively according to specific criteria. The teachers' scepticism about teachers' subjectivity was pedagogically justified and the requirement for teacher training programs as well as seminars for students is inevitable for following such assessments (see the next two sections).

6.3 Pre-course seminars for EFL university students about assessment practices

Because of the necessity of following performance assessment practices, and because the load is primarily on students to accomplish during the implementation of those assessments, they need some seminars before the



start of the courses about what they are expected to do when they join the English departments. Due to the influence of socio-cultural theories of learning on these assessments, which make them more performance-based and require students to use their knowledge and skills in their performances, teachers also have a heavy burden during the implementation of performance assessment practices. This is because teachers should observe and provide feedback during each performance that demonstrates a student's current abilities in order to assist them overcome performance barriers as well as to realize their potential in the framework of ZPD (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006: 79 as cited in Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Therefore, it is necessary to inform teachers and students in advance about those assessments and train them on how to do them.

Concerning providing seminars to EFL students before the start of their studies in the English departments, most participants (10 of 16) supported the idea of holding seminars for students to inform them about what kinds of assessments and tests they should take. In this regard, Aram said: "It is very good at the beginning of the year to have seminars for two days for the students to tell them exactly this is the way that we will assess you." "They have to know what is assessment, what is testing, and what are the kinds of assessments (Dalia). Actually, it is imperative to inform all students (especially those in minority communities) about the most recent advancements in assessment (Baker, 2010).

Performance assessment is a development-oriented process (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012), in which students are objected to complete an amount of work they were supposed to accomplish (Bahous, 2008), which is not effortless for them and they always need personal supervision and clear guidelines; hence the need to inform them about their duties beforehand. Because of such heavy students' responsibilities, sometimes they might be resistant to performance assessments. That is why Nali believed that, "it is necessary to give knowledge to students about the importance of such assessments, and let them know that it is for their own good because students always complain on the amount of homework that you give them." Those nine participants agreed with this idea, which also goes with Kohonen (1997 as cited in Tsagari, 2004), who stated that certain students, who are accustomed to traditional language assessment, they may quite likely oppose those new performance assessment practices.

6.4 Training courses for teachers on the implementation of performance assessment practices

As performance assessment is a development-oriented process, which involves in socio-cultural ZPD and mediation, which are integral to such kind of assessment (Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). This shows complexity and multi-functionality of performance assessment that necessitates providing training courses for teachers in order to help them learn how to implement these assessments with their students adequately and successfully. Professional education and training are fundamental for any profession. This is confirmed by Borg (2003) who concludes that, by professional development through education, new information and experiences encourage teachers to reflect upon and restructure their ideas in a progressive and non-linear ways. Training courses and programs are crucial, for example in Boston, where high-quality teacher training programs are offered in the USA, it was demonstrated how those programs could have a powerful impact on students' results (Bugas et al., 2012). This is basically for the benefit of students as research shows that when educators learn, students learn more (Richards, 2009). In contrast, fewer opportunities of professional development for teachers would demotivate them (Zafar Khan, 2011:118).

Concerning professional development by training courses, almost all interviewees (13 of 16) acknowledged their need for workshops, training sessions, or other opportunities to learn about various methods of assess-



ment. They deeply sensed their need for teacher training as critical in their particular context. Therefore, they recommended that teachers receive intensive training and practice, if not those participants do not encourage any reform in assessment through implementing performance assessments. As Nali put it: “We need a lot of exercises, workshops, practices, and we need assistants, supervisors, etc. if not, I don’t recommend any change.” Supporting this, Mewan insisted on intensive training courses; Nawroz also supported them and explained their current situation saying that: “We depend only on our experiences.” Gashben sensed the seriousness of the inadequate conduction of performance assessment practices and its consequences on teaching and learning; hence, agreed with them strongly stating that “it is a serious weakness. Teachers are not competent enough to practice these. The department should hold training courses for them.” The teachers’ perceptions of their situation were pedagogically quite right. This is because according to Ismael (2017), only 8% of the teacher participants of the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities had attended English language assessment courses, while 92% had not. In the context of this study, teacher training courses are considerably more necessary than in some other countries, where roughly 25% of teachers did not receive any training (Evans, 2007). Additionally, despite having more opportunities for training courses, 50% of teachers surveyed by Evans (2007) reported that they want further professional development programs.

The demand of the participants of this study is similar to the general situation of teachers who may have strong willingness to develop their professionalism (Warrior, 2002), especially TESOL teachers who believe that educational institutions need to comply further with professional development for them (Sun, 2010). However, in spite of the support for assessment education, the number of assessment courses continues to be few, and little is known about the crucial subjects covered in pre-service assessment courses that provide teachers with the requisite assessment literacy (DeLuca and Klinger, 2010). Overall, the overwhelming need for teachers and students to get knowledge and receive training on how to conduct performance assessments, evidently, indicates a number of difficulties of these assessments that can be addressed by training. Teachers, in particular, need such professional development more urgently as they have the leading role in supervising students while they complete those assessments.

6.5 Objectives and guidelines in the curriculum about implementing performance assessments

Inevitably, any curriculum includes an explanation of assessment practices for assessing students in any subject. Designing a curriculum starts with planning the syllabus, then methodology, after that assessment of learning outcomes (Richards, 2013). Because implementing performance assessment practices is not part of the current curriculum of the English departments, Nali stated: “There will be a lot of students’ complaints about it.” That is why “students should be administered in an organized and strict way” (Ashti). Some participants (7 of 16) supported that if there are no clear objectives and rules in the curriculum of the English departments for following performance assessments, teachers and students might not follow them adequately as required. They admitted that, so far, there are no clear objectives, rules, and guidelines for conducting performance assessments in their curriculum, as Nali said: “Right now, the problem is that not even the teacher, the department itself does not have a clear objective. We do not have any guidelines about performance assessment.” Therefore, because “performance assessment is very important, for applying them, there should be strict rules and regulations to prevent any teacher ignoring them. We also need some instructions and also some constant monitoring by the administrators” (Gasha). Gasha demanded that performance assessment should be part of the curriculum of the English departments including rules, regulations, rubrics, guidelines, and monitoring on how to implement



them. After Gasha's explanation, almost all teachers in the focus group interview said something or nodded in agreement with the idea. This is in line with Atac's (2012) conclusion that it will be pedagogically useful to attach more significance to performance assessment in the curriculum.

A few teachers such as Ashti, Dashti, and Naze believed that the minister of higher education had the power to enact such changes. Naze has even doubted the success of providing some rules and guidelines for conducting performance assessments since "a department has been working on certain established procedures since 80s or 90s and will not change them so easily" (Naze). These teachers believed that the whole system should be reformed. The participants agreed with Nali who said: "This system is not successful; we should change it. We should have a rigorous plan for that."

A big part of any curriculum is devoted to the methods of assessment and testing. The participants are therefore pedagogically right in asking to have assessment guidelines in the curriculum of their English departments, which is part of the success of teaching and learning English. Incorporating assessment issues in a curriculum is inevitable because a curriculum is not only a list of subjects and lists of main facts and skills, i.e. the input, but also it is a map of how to achieve the outputs of desired performances of students. To this end, curriculum suggests appropriate learning activities and assessment practices in order to enable students to achieve the desired results (Wiggins and McTighe, 2006 as cited in Richards, 2013).

6.6 The responsibility of the administration to reform the assessment system of English departments

As has been clarified in the sections above, the impact of performance assessment on teaching and learning that eventually promotes students' learning, could be under the influence of socio-cultural theory, which has greatly influenced the teaching profession (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006 as cited in Shrestha and Coffin, 2012). Socio-cultural theory advocates learning and second language acquisition like semiotic processes, where participation in socially mediated activities is fundamental (Turuk, 2008). It considers instruction vital to second language development and must be adapted to ZPD, which is beyond the learners' actual development level. The theory also believes that, in a second language context, learning must be a collaborative achievement rather than an isolated individual's effort, in which students work is unassisted and unmediated (Turuk, 2008).

The extent of sociocultural theory's influence on performance assessment, subsequently on teaching and learning second languages, undoubtedly necessitates the adoption of such assessment practices in the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities. Adopting performance assessment needs some basic reforms in the English departments, particularly the assessment system. In this regard, many participants of this study (11 out of 16) strongly supported the idea of making some reforms in the English departments to facilitate introducing performance assessments as they truly understood and anticipated the implications of such assessments on teaching and learning English. They also called on the senior department administrators, deans, and presidents of universities in the Kurdistan Region to change the assessment system of their English departments to include performance assessments. The reasons behind the teachers' demand for change is briefly explained by Nali:

"The solution is that the department should take some steps to change the current situation. I am not developed; my students are lazy. I have some shortcomings because there are some issues that I do not know about them. So, students, teachers, and administrators are responsible for this backwardness."



Nali

Mewan concurred saying: “In order to have a very good evaluation system to evaluate the students in a perfect way, we have to depend on the strategies and principles of performance assessment”, clearly stating that “we are in need of a sort of change in our assessment system in order to make the students’ outcomes better.” These 11 participants firmly backed the reforms and agreed with them regarding the flaws and the needed reforms, especially Gashben, who stated that

“I am for a change in the system; performance assessment should be better integrated into our assessment system, influencing the teaching process and learning process. I think that they can produce better effects and better results. The marks given to performance assessment do not exceed 10 marks; so, now it is actually restrictive.”

The participants’ demand for performance assessments is pedagogically justifiable because the timed one-shot written exams could test only limited forms of competence. Although teachers can predict what aspects of competence should be assessed. This can be one of the primary driving forces underlying the shift in interest toward performance assessments (Resnick and Resnick 1992 as cited in Scott, 2001) that can assess valued performances directly rather than utilizing proxies such as multiple-choices (Scott, 2001). As a result, recently, a more dynamic role of assessment is assumed, by which teaching and assessment inform each other in the teaching and learning processes at every stage (Richards, 2013).

Those 11 participants explained the shortcomings and supported the reforms, while the remaining five participants did not express opposition to the idea of reforming the assessment system. Some of them actually nodded their heads in accord, and you could see agreement and eagerness in their facial expressions. The beliefs of these participants were in line with numerous studies on language assessment which revealed that the reforms in the assessment system could have a positive influence on the teaching methods and techniques as well as the learning activities that ultimately increase students’ learning (Wolf et al., 2008, Ataç, 2012, Earl and Katz, 2006, Arter, 2001, Ghahremani, 2013, Ross, 2005, Dunn and Mulvenon, 2009, and Black and Wiliam, 1998). The participants can also be pedagogically appreciated as they have a thorough awareness and understanding of their circumstances and their drawbacks in assessing their students. They also support reforms, which clearly demonstrates their readiness and eagerness for professional development as professionals in TESOL.

7. Conclusions

It is generally concluded that following performance assessment practices is tremendously beneficial for the processes of teaching, learning, and assessment of English language but it is challenging for both teachers and students alike. This is because students are expected to use their knowledge and skills in their performances, which place a significant burden on them, and teachers should observe them and give them feedback continuously. Performance assessment is a process that is integrated into socio-cultural ZPD and mediation because it depends on students’ performances and teachers’ feedback to help them improve those performances; hence, it needs a special attention. However, due to some shortcomings and difficulties, there was a limited implementation of performance assessment practices in the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities. As a solution to that limited implementation, this study realized some interrelated workable solutions that can possibly address the difficulties of implementing performance assessments in the context of this study.

One effective solutions could be decreasing the number of students to 25 per class by which TESOL teachers can do a variety of teaching, learning, and assessment practices including performance assessments. The study



also realized that reducing the number of students to 25 requires more qualified teachers and more equipped classrooms, which were unaffordable to provide in the current economic crisis. However, staying longer at university to use the available equipped classrooms by the current qualified teachers for additional sessions could be a viable solution. The research also came to the conclusion that another solution was the provision of equal marks for performance assessment practices and traditional tests, i.e., a balance between the value given to both methodologies of assessment under the condition that teachers should assess their students objectively. Holding seminars for EFL students prior to the commencement of their studies in the English departments was another proposed solution to inform them about what kinds of assessments and tests they should take in order to prevent students' resistance to them. Since almost all participants acknowledged their need for workshops and training courses on assessment, promoting professional development through training courses on assessment would be another beneficial solution. If not, as teachers sensed, no reform can benefit. Because the guidelines on how to implement performance assessments were not included in the curricula of the English departments; therefore, one solution was to have objectives and rules in the curriculum for following such assessments. This study also concluded that adopting performance assessment needs several fundamental reforms in the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities, particularly the assessment system. It would be easier to implement changes by piloting performance assessment practices gradually, which would also facilitate the introducing of those assessments and could be an effective way towards better strategies of teaching and learning English.

7.1 Implications

The conclusions of this study as proposed solutions for enhancing the use of performance assessment practices such as establishing 25 student classes, utilizing equipped classrooms throughout the day, giving more value to performance assessments, providing training courses for teachers and seminars for students about expected assessments, including them in the curriculum, and reforming the assessment system, could have effective implications for teaching, learning, and assessment processes in the English departments. Those solutions would encourage the senior administrators to reconsider the assessment system of their departments and implement some procedures. If the departments do not commit to these solutions, this would most likely impede a successful implementation of performance assessment, which will consequently have an impact on the extent of success of English language teaching and learning. The changes recommended by this study could also influence the teaching staff and EFL students to rethink and reform their assessment processes, and subsequently reform their teaching and learning of English.

7.2 Recommendations

According to the findings and conclusions of this study, the following points are recommended for the English department policy makers, senior administrators, teachers, and students including the ministry of higher education and scientific research of the Kurdistan Regional Government. The recommendations are for a more successful, effective, and valid assessment, as well as more influential teaching and learning of English language:

1. Making plans for creating smaller classes of 20-30 students.
2. Utilizing the currently equipped classrooms throughout the day according to a new timetable and equipping additional classrooms in the future.
3. Giving more value to performance assessment practices by allocating more marks for them in a new assess-



ment system.

4. Providing training courses for teachers and holding seminars for students on performance assessments in order to inform them about those assessments and prepare them in advance.
5. Revising and reforming the curriculum of the English departments in order to include the goals of performance assessments as well as guidelines on how to implement them.
6. Reforming the assessment system of the English departments by piloting performance assessment practices gradually.

Committing to these recommendations will facilitate the reforming of the systems of teaching, learning, and assessment of English language in the English departments.

7.3 Suggestions for Future Research

According to my extensive research in literature and to the best of my knowledge, research on performance assessments in the English departments of the Kurdistan Region universities is limited. Therefore, it is critical for TESOL researchers in the English departments to undertake many studies about these assessments in various aspects. As a researcher, I discovered that the following gaps of research on performance assessments are urgently necessary to be investigated currently:

1. More research is needed to determine how to contextually reconcile these assessments with the nature and characteristics of EFL students in the Kurdistan Region.
2. Research is required to determine the specific difficulties that EFL students may encounter while doing performance assessments.
3. More research is necessary about how to make performance assessment an extensive and integral part of curriculum occurring along with the teaching and learning processes of English language.
4. Numerous studies on how to use certain technological devices are required in order to facilitate the implementation of performance assessments.

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