



Understanding the Challenges in Assessing Young Learners: Insights from Iranian EFL Teachers

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Abstract:

Assessing young learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) has gained increasing attention due to their unique developmental needs, such as evolving cognitive, linguistic, and socio-emotional capacities, which differ significantly from those of adult learners. This study explored the challenges faced by Iranian EFL teachers in assessing young learners and identified potential solutions to mitigate these problems. Using a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 32 experienced EFL teachers who specialize in teaching young learners. Thematic analysis of the data revealed six major challenges: diverse proficiency levels, limited attention spans, time constraints, class sizes, parental interference, and students' stress and anxiety. These findings highlight the complexities of assessment in contexts where traditional practices dominate and where teachers face significant sociocultural pressures, including resistance to progressive pedagogies and the challenges posed by cultural norms to implementing equitable, developmentally appropriate assessment strategies. In response to the identified barriers, participants proposed solutions such as employing games and hands-on activities, diversifying assessment techniques, fostering communication with parents, collaborating with colleagues, creating low-stress environments, and tailoring assessments to the developmental characteristics of young learners. The result of the present research can provide insights into the specific challenges and strategies relevant to assessing young EFL learners in Iran. The findings underscore the need for systemic changes, including enhanced teacher training, the development of culturally appropriate assessment tools, and greater institutional support. By addressing these challenges, educators can foster more effective and equitable assessment practices for young learners, ultimately improving their language learning experiences.

Keywords: Assessment; Challenges; EFL teachers; Solutions; Young learners

Introduction

Teaching English to non-native speakers presents significant challenges because of their unfamiliarity (Pinter (2012), as cited in Chou (2019)). Learners often find English daunting because it is not part of their everyday communication. As a result, many countries where English is not the primary language have begun to incorporate English instruction from the early stages of education. Today, the extensive global prevalence of the English language has prompted educators, especially those focused on English as a Foreign Language (EFL), to seek more effective teaching methodologies and assessment techniques. Consequently, as Taylor (2013)

noted, “the role of language assessment in particular has expanded in education and wider society,” placing greater demands on teachers and their instructional methods within the classroom.

On the other hand, “Primary language teaching is a unique and dynamic ongoing learning experience, not only for children but for the teacher as well. The very first years of language learning have an enormous influence on the following years; it has an impact on the motivation and general approach of language learners to learning the particular foreign language” (Puskás, 2016). Consequently, teaching and assessing young learners involves great responsibility

and important challenges and paying attention to teachers' perceptions and challenges that they face during assessing young learners is highly important.

Classroom-based assessment (CBA) plays a crucial role in integrating assessment into the teaching process to enhance student learning (Cizek, 2019). This approach is especially vital for young language learners (YLLs), typically defined as children aged 6 to 12 who are acquiring a foreign or second language (Britton, 2021). Evaluating Young Language Learners (YLLs) requires significant consideration due to their distinct age-related factors (McKay, 2006). For instance, they typically exhibit a limited attention span, prefer physical activities, and are in the process of developing social awareness and self-esteem. This necessitates that educators carefully choose or design suitable assessment tasks (Patekar, 2021). Additionally, unlike older or adult learners, YLLs are still honing their literacy skills in their native language while simultaneously acquiring a foreign language, which can create both challenges and opportunities for their literacy development in the new language (Butler, 2016). Furthermore, young language learners are especially sensitive to the feedback they receive from adults regarding their assessment results. Their assessment experiences can significantly influence their motivation to learn, confidence, and overall educational outcomes (Butler, 2019).

Assessing Young Language Learners is a relatively new area of study (Hasselgreen, 2012), and several aspects remain insufficiently explored, particularly the implementation of classroom-based assessment (CBA) for YLLs. Existing research indicates that assessing young learners in the classroom presents significant challenges. For instance, educators often do not clarify assessment criteria (Hild and Nikolov, 2010), tend to rely on conventional assessment techniques such as objective tests (Prošić-Santovac and Savić, 2020), predominantly offer evaluative feedback (like grades) (Brumen, 2011), and primarily utilize assessment for summative purposes (Rixon, 2016). Furthermore, various factors can hinder the effective application of assessment by teachers, including limited assessment literacy (Vogt and Tsagari, 2014), insufficient training in assessment practices (Lee et al., 2020; Patekar, 2021), a rigid curriculum (Mak, 2014), and a culture focused on examinations (Kaur et al., 2021).

In the context of English as a Foreign Language in Iran, several obstacles impede the operative assessment of young learners. These barriers include the absence of standardized assessment instruments, inadequate teacher training in assessment techniques, and the prevalence of traditional teaching practices that may not correspond with modern educational strategies (Nasr et al., 2019). Additionally, socio-cultural influences like conflict between cultural background and Islamic values with aspects of Western culture present in EFL materials, as well as parental expectations such as; focus on grade and test performance, can further complicate the assessment process. These issues often result in a gap between learners' true capabilities and their evaluated performance (Farsani and Rahimi, 2023).

To address these issues, this study aims to explore the

beliefs and practices of Iranian YLL teachers regarding the challenges of assessing young English learners. This inquiry adds to the current body of literature by offering practical insights for teacher educators, language school administrators, and policymakers to improve the application of assessment practices in educational settings involving young EFL learners.

Studies indicate that numerous educators do not possess sufficient training in evaluating young language learners, which negatively impacts the quality of both assessment and teaching. Examining these issues underscores the necessity for enhanced teacher education programs that emphasize assessment literacy for young learners (Patekar, 2021). Iran, similar to numerous other educational contexts, possesses distinct cultural and educational frameworks that shape the language acquisition process for young learners, as well as the design and implementation of assessments. Examining local challenges is essential to ensure that assessment tools and practices are both culturally relevant and effective (Hild and Nikolov, 2010).

Despite global trends highlighting problems of assessing young learners, there is a notable absence of empirical research specifically examining the perceptions regarding challenges faced by Iranian teachers in the assessment of young learners (Patekar, 2021). Existing studies tend to focus on other countries or provide global perspectives without a detailed examination of Iran's unique educational, cultural, and linguistic context.

In conclusion, the primary gap lies in the lack of empirical research focused on Iranian YLLs context that examines the difficulties associated with evaluating young learners in English and other subjects. The educational system in Iran, including teacher preparation, curriculum design, and evaluation methods, contrasts with those found in Western and other Asian regions. Therefore, analyzing the challenges faced in Iran offers valuable perspectives on the influence of local policies, available resources, and cultural attitudes on the assessment of young students.

This research investigates the challenges Iranian EFL educators face in language institutes by analyzing their current assessment practices and identifying obstacles that hinder the precise evaluation of young learners' language abilities. Through an examination of teachers' perceptions and experiences, this study aims to offer insights that can guide the development of improved assessment strategies, ultimately leading to better learning outcomes for young EFL students in Iran.

Research questions

To address this gap, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

What challenges do Iranian EFL teachers of English to young learners face in assessing young learners in language Institutes?

What solutions do Iranian English teachers suggest for the challenges when assessing young learners?

Review of related literature

Teaching and assessing young learners involves specific pedagogical competencies that reflect children's unique developmental and cognitive stages. As young learners differ from adults in terms of attention span, language acquisition processes, and learning strategies, the competencies required for assessing them need to be adapted accordingly (Cameron, 2001). For example, formative assessments, including quizzes, observations, and informal assessments, help monitor learners' progress and provide feedback. Additionally, assessment in the young learner classroom needs to be continuous, providing teachers with insights into each learner's progress. Research indicates that formative assessment, through tasks like observation, checklists, and informal testing, helps teachers identify areas where learners may need additional support (McKay, 2006).

The theoretical framework of the study was informed by Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) and the theory of social constructivism developed by (Vygotsky, 1978). Developmentally Appropriate Practice is a guiding philosophy in early childhood education, emphasizing that assessment should be tailored to children's developmental stages, individual strengths, and cultural backgrounds (Bredenkamp and Copple, 2009); National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 2020).

At the same time, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory reminds us that learning is social. According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn best when they interact with others and receive appropriate support—what he called scaffolding, within their Zone of Proximal Development. In practice, this means that assessment should not only measure what a child can do alone, but also what they can achieve with guidance and collaboration.

Additionally, the main concept of constructivism is that human learning is constructed, and that learning constructs new knowledge upon the basis of previous learning (Prawat, 1996). Research indicates that evaluating young EFL learners is intricate because of their developmental stage, restricted proficiencies, and the continuous progress in their first language literacy. Educators frequently encounter challenges in choosing suitable assessment tasks and often lack adequate training in assessment literacy tailored for young learners (Patekar, 2021). The social constructivism theory underscores the importance of comprehending teachers' views and methods concerning the difficulties of assessment.

By bringing together these two perspectives, this study seeks to reflect both aspirations and real-life experiences of teachers in Iran. This framework helps us understand not just what is ideal in theory, but also what is possible in practice, and how teachers manage to find a balance between these two worlds.

Assessment has emerged as a significant issue in contemporary language teaching and learning (Cheng and Fox, 2017). In this context, several factors must be considered when educators teach young learners. Young learners may not always have well-developed literacy skills to support their learning of English. Many children at the younger end of the 6–12 year-old spectrum may not be able to read

and write in their language, or may be starting to read and write—sometimes in a different script—in parallel with learning English. It is often the case, therefore, that children up to the age of about 9 may not be able to use reading or writing to support their learning in a foreign language. Cameron (2001) refers to this phenomenon as a 'literacy skills lag'. This means that in many young learner classrooms, talking is the main medium of input, as children may not yet have the skills to decode meaning from text.

As mentioned earlier, the intricacies of language acquisition during early childhood, along with the simultaneous development of first language (L1) competencies, require a sophisticated assessment approach specifically designed for young learners. Studies have suggested that effective assessment not only evaluates linguistic proficiency but also enhances overall educational growth and motivation (Moradi and Alavinia, 2020; Patekar, 2021).

A review of the literature highlights various age-appropriate resources and teaching strategies that encourage active involvement among young learners. Successful approaches include the use of visual aids, storybooks, songs, games, and technology integration. The study emphasizes the necessity of establishing a supportive learning environment to enhance language skills and comprehension (Islahuddin, 2023). Therefore, assessment techniques should also be age-appropriate and designed to minimize anxiety, with a focus on evaluating learners' practical use of language rather than on rote memorization of grammar rules. The TKT: YL highlights that assessment should aim to provide feedback that helps young learners self-correct and continue developing their language skills.

Several empirical studies have investigated the challenges in assessing young learners. In a study conducted by Ketabi (2015), the impact of different techniques of assessing students' reading comprehension was explored. The results of the study showed that a limited variety of reading assessment techniques was used in Iranian EFL classes, with a preference for traditional methods such as reading aloud, while alternative assessment methods like portfolios and journals were rarely used. This suggests challenges in adopting diverse and developmentally appropriate assessment strategies for young learners.

In a comparative investigation, Shamshiri et al. (2023) studied models of assessment in the classroom. The researcher concluded that using the CALL-based assessment was more beneficial than the conventional assessment for learning English. In another investigation, Rezagah (2022) studied the effect of the educational system on teachers' assessment practices. It was concluded that the educational system significantly impacts teachers' classroom assessment practices, highlighting gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills related to assessment.

Godson et al. (2023) studied the effect of parental involvement on students' academic achievement. They concluded that parental involvement significantly contributes to students' academic progress in primary schools, but factors such as poverty, parental illiteracy, and insufficient knowledge about the curriculum hinder effective parental participation in education and assessment processes.

In a recent study conducted by Whitman (2024), novice teachers' reflections on their assessment practices were studied. The findings indicated that novice teachers in the UK believed time constraints as a major obstacle to the effective implementation of reflective teaching and classroom assessment strategies. Although reflective assessment techniques offer numerous advantages, teachers frequently face challenges due to insufficient time and inadequate support, hindering their capacity to perform comprehensive assessments that cater to the varied needs of students.

Research has explored the distinct challenges faced by EFL learners, particularly in the realm of communication skills. These challenges are influenced by various factors, which can be grouped into cultural, academic, intellectual, and psychological dimensions (Abdullah and Mohammad, 2023). Assessing young learners within the framework of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) poses specific challenges, especially in Iran, where both educational practices and cultural influences play a crucial role in shaping assessment strategies.

A recent study conducted by Forozandehfar and Manoochehrzadeh (2024) has highlighted how EFL teachers' characteristics, such as age and gender, influence their assessment practices. Notably, their study revealed a positive correlation between the use of formative assessment strategies and both the gender and age of EFL teachers, suggesting that older and female teachers tend to favor formative assessments more (Pearson correlation analysis). These findings underscore the complex interplay between demographic factors and pedagogical choices, highlighting the need for teacher training programs that consider these variables to optimize assessment methods.

In another study by Zareian et al. (2024), Iranian high school EFL teachers' perceptions of Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) were examined using a mixed-methods approach. The findings revealed that female teachers held more positive views toward LOA than male teachers. Additionally, there were significant positive relationships between teachers' age and teaching experience with their attitudes toward LOA. Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews corroborated the questionnaire results, indicating that the majority of teachers considered LOA to be advantageous and productive. However, the study specifically focused on high school teachers and did not explore the perceptions of teachers working with young learners.

Despite extensive research on assessment strategies and their implications, there remains a gap in understanding how Iranian YLEFL teachers perceive and navigate these challenges in language institutes. Given the complexity of young learner assessment and the diverse factors influencing it, further investigation is required to explore teachers'

beliefs and practices in this specific context. Understanding these perspectives can provide valuable insights into the practical constraints and potential solutions for improving assessment methods.

Methodology

Study design

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore the challenges and solutions proposed by Iranian EFL teachers in assessing young learners. Given the complex and context-dependent nature of assessment practices (Nasr et al., 2019), a qualitative approach enables a deeper understanding of teachers' perceptions, experiences, and proposed solutions. The study follows a phenomenological methodology, which aims to capture the lived experiences of participants regarding assessment in EFL classrooms.

Participants and setting

The participants of this study included 32 experienced Iranian EFL teachers specializing in young learners. They were called experienced teachers since they had at least 5 years of teaching experience (Jalali, 2022). These teachers (aged 24 – 40) were teaching young learners at different institutes in Iran. They were selected using a purposive sampling technique to ensure a range of perspectives on assessment challenges and strategies. The reason behind choosing this sampling technique was to be able to select individuals who can best address the research questions. Most of the informants were female, and their major was English language teaching. All participants had a minimum of five years of teaching experience, and most held M.A. degrees in language teaching. The study was conducted across various language institutes in Iran. The demographic information of the participants is reported in Table 1.

Data collection instrument

Semi-structured interviews were the primary method of data collection. The interview questions were designed based on existing literature and expert consultation. The interviews lasted approximately 20 minutes each and focused on the following key themes:

- The importance of assessing young learners
- Techniques used for assessment
- Challenges encountered in assessment
- Proposed solutions to these challenges

To ensure data validity, the interview questions were reviewed by five experts in the field of language teaching

Table 1. Participants' demographic information.

Gender		Major			Academic degree		Years of teaching experience		
Male	Female	TEFL	English Literature	English Translation	M.A.	B.A.	5-10	11-20	21-30
12	20	24	5	3	23	9	21	9	2

and five teacher trainers specializing in young learners. The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Some of the interview questions were as follows:

Can you describe the main challenges you encounter when assessing young learners' English proficiency in your institute?

What difficulties do you face in implementing formative or alternative assessment methods (such as portfolios, group activities, or oral tasks) with young learners?

How do you address the diverse needs and abilities of young learners during assessment?

Based on your experience, what strategies or solutions have you found effective in overcoming the challenges of assessing young learners?

How do you think language institutes could modify their policies or practices to support more effective assessment of young learners?

Procedure

The overall data collection procedure lasted for about one year. First, the literature was thoroughly studied to provide insights for the researchers when preparing interview questions. Preparing the first draft of the questions, the researchers consulted with 5 experts in the field of language teaching and 5 teacher trainers running TTC courses for teaching young learners. Having come up with the final draft of the questions, the researcher started the interview sessions. 32 young EFL learners' teachers participated in the semi-structured interview sessions. At the point at which researchers reached saturation, it was concluded that data gathering should be stopped. Yang et al. (2022) stated that "in a qualitative study, a sufficient sample is the guarantee of research validity, and saturation is an indicator used to assess the adequacy of research data". Each interview session was recorded, and the participants were assured that their identities would remain confidential.

The validity and reliability of qualitative data are taken care of through different stages. First, to guarantee the validity and reliability of the research outcomes, comprehensive validation techniques were implemented, following the criteria mentioned by Guba and Lincoln (1981): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. To enhance the credibility of the data, various strategies were utilized. Participant validation, also known as member checking, involved sharing the interpreted results with participants to verify that the interpretations precisely represented their experiences and viewpoints. Furthermore, continued involvement with participants facilitated a deeper exploration of the phenomenon, fostering rapport and yielding valuable insights. Triangulation of data sources was employed by cross-referencing information from different participant groups, such as teachers and experts, to ensure consistency in the findings.

Transferability was considered by offering detailed, rich descriptions of the research context, contributors, and procedures. These comprehensive accounts enable other researchers to assess the applicability of the findings to their environments. To further bolster transferability, the research outcomes were presented to external experts in journal club

methodology, who evaluated the relevance of the findings to various settings.

The study's dependability was confirmed through meticulous documentation of the research procedure. An exhaustive audit trail, outlining every step from data collection to analysis, was maintained. To further strengthen dependability, intercoder reliability was established by having multiple coders independently analyze the data and subsequently reach a consensus on the coding framework. This approach lessened probable biases and enhanced the consistency of the interpretations.

Confirmability was achieved through peer debriefing and feedback. The research results and interpretations were scrutinized by external peers who provided critical insights into the research process and the developing theory. Moreover, the reflexivity of the researchers was preserved through the study by verifying personal biases, expectations, and reflections, confirming that the results were grounded in the data instead of the researchers' presumptions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained before conducting the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and assured of confidentiality and anonymity. Written consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews commenced. The data were securely stored, and only the research team could access the information. The ethical approval was as follows:

"I hereby declare that I voluntarily participated in this study. I let the researchers use my responses as data as long as my identity remains anonymous. In addition, the researchers guarantee that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially".

Data analysis and results

This study employed thematic analysis to examine the challenges and solutions in assessing young EFL learners in the Iranian context. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke (2006) inductive framework to identify patterns and themes that emerged organically from teachers' narratives rather than pre-existing theoretical categories. Given the context-specific nature of challenges in assessing young learners in Iranian language institutes, an inductive approach was selected. The process included a six-phase framework: (1) familiarization with data, (2) initial code generation, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. The data were analyzed using NVivo software to facilitate systematic coding and ensure reliability. An intercoder reliability check was performed with two independent researchers analyzing 20% of the transcripts, achieving a Cohen's kappa coefficient of 0.85, indicating a high level of agreement. Interviewees have been numbered 1 – 32 so that their actual identities are kept private. The interviews revealed six major challenges faced by Iranian EFL teachers when assessing young learners. The themes related to the challenges of teaching young learners and the solutions to overcome those challenges are discussed in the following sections.

Challenges in assessing Young learners

Different proficiency levels

Many teachers believed that there was no homogeneity in students' proficiency levels. Students in the same classroom often have varying levels of English proficiency, making it difficult to design assessments that are fair and effective for all. As highlighted by the interviewees:

Interviewee 12:

"Students have different levels of English so it is hard to make tests that work for everyone."

Interviewee 5:

"In a classroom, there may be learners with different levels of language proficiency, making fair and accurate assessment difficult." This variability necessitates differentiated assessment strategies, which many teachers find difficult to implement due to time and resource constraints.

Attention span

Another frequently mentioned issue was the limited attention span of young learners, which negatively impacted their engagement with assessment tasks. Many teachers reported that students often become distracted, making it difficult to maintain focus throughout the assessment process. Some answers mentioned by the interviewees are as follows:

Interviewee 23:

"They can't sit on their chairs. They don't take English learning seriously. They don't listen to my instruction, and they are easily distracted so they can't complete their tasks"

Interviewee 9

"Young learners can become distracted and bored easily which affects their performance during the class."

Time constraints

Time limitations emerged as a critical barrier to effective assessment. Teachers reported that the demands of the curriculum often leave insufficient time for thorough and varied assessment practices. The following excerpts illustrate this issue:

Interviewee 1:

"Limited time in the classroom can hinder the ability to conduct comprehensive and accurate assessment."

Interviewee 17:

"Teachers often have limited time to conduct through assessments due to curriculum demands."

Interviewee 19:

"The time is restricted, and there is a lot to cover. Thus, I occasionally cannot even find time to ask a question."

Classroom size

Over half of the participants identified classroom size as a significant obstacle to implementing diverse assessment techniques. Limited physical space and inadequate resources further exacerbate this challenge. For instance:

Interviewee 7:

"Some techniques need more space to be done but institutes' classes do not have enough space."

Interviewee 14:

"We need large-size classes to implement different assessment techniques. Such classes should be equipped with

computers and the internet. But unfortunately, we always have problems with the out-dated computers exist in our small classes."

Parental interference

Parental expectations and interference were cited as a major challenge by nearly all participants. Many parents favor traditional assessment methods, such as paper-and-pencil tests, which can conflict with teachers' efforts to employ more formative and interactive techniques. This issue was highlighted as follows:

Interviewee 16:

"Parents may have different expectations of assessment which results in pressure on the teacher to implement traditional types of assessment."

Interviewee 23:

"Some parents think that they are responsible for their children's learning. Because they think paper and pencil tests are the only accurate way to assess their children, they force me to assess their children using this technique".

Stress and anxiety

The participants unanimously noted that young learners often experience stress and anxiety during assessments, which can negatively impact their performance. This emotional factor must be considered when designing assessment tasks. As stated by the interviewees:

Interviewee 15

"Students are sensitive to assessment. It increases their stress. We should consider this factor while assessing them."

Proposed solutions for effective assessment of Young learners

The second goal of the present study was to identify solutions for the appropriate assessment of young EFL learners. To address these challenges, participants suggested several strategies to enhance the effectiveness of assessment methods. The thematic analysis of their responses yielded six primary solutions.

Incorporating games and Hands-on activities

Many participants recommended integrating interactive and playful methods, such as games, to make assessments engaging and effective. Teachers observed that young learners (6-12-year-old EFL learners) respond positively to game-based evaluation techniques.

Interviewee 10:

"Incorporating interactive and playful assessment methods such as games can attract young learners' attention and enable you to assess them appropriately."

Interviewee 3:

"Games are good ways to assess students. While playing the teacher should monitor the students and assess them. Students show their full potential while communicating with their peers in playing games."

Establishing effective communication with parents

Several participants emphasized the importance of maintaining open communication with parents to mitigate misunderstandings about assessment approaches. They suggested

that educating parents on diverse evaluation methods could help reduce their interference.

Interviewee 21:

“Communicating with families can support using informal assessment techniques. It can also help you understand your learners better.”

Interviewee 32

“Communicating with parents and discussing the importance of using appropriate methods in assessing young learners can be beneficial since it helps parents understand assessment is not what they think.”

Collaborating with colleagues

Many participants stressed the value of professional collaboration in improving assessment practices. Sharing experiences and strategies with colleagues was seen as a way to enhance assessment skills and address common challenges. For example:

Interviewee 7:

“Collaborate with colleagues and discuss the related issues, and use other teachers experience can provide insights into appropriate assessment.”

Interviewee 27:

“Using other experiences teachers experiences can help us provide useful assessment strategies in our classes and manage the time of assessment.”

Employing diverse assessment techniques

The participants emphasized the importance of employing a variety of assessment methods to cater to different learning styles and needs. This includes formative assessments, oral presentations, and picture descriptions, among others. This issue was highlighted as follows:

Interviewee 19:

“Streamline assessment processes by integrating them in daily activities and using formative assessment strategies and use a variety of assessment techniques.”

Interviewee 28:

“Teachers should know different ways to assess students. Oral presentations, picture descriptions and so on are suggested.”

Considering young learners’ characteristics

Participants highlighted the importance of tailoring assessments to the developmental and affective characteristics of young learners. Understanding these traits can help teachers design more appropriate and effective assessments. For instance:

Interviewee 5:

“Young learners have different levels of motor, linguistic, social, and cognitive development. Their age influences the way they engage in classroom activities. As a teacher, it is essential to consider this at teaching.”

Interviewee 8:

“Young learners possess their own personal, cognitive, and affective characteristics. If we become aware of these features, it will help us assess the students appropriately and gain reliable results.”

Creating a Low-stress environment

Most participants recognized that stress negatively impacts young learners’ performance. They recommended creating a supportive and non-threatening assessment environment by integrating assessment into everyday classroom activities. As stated by the interviewees:

Interviewee 12:

“Young learners may experience anxiety to fear while being assessed. It is suggested to provide a low-stress environment by integrating assessment as a part of teaching and learning.”

Interviewee 20:

“I have repeatedly found out that the young learners experience stress when teachers assess them which may impact their performance. Therefore, I recommend that teachers provide a calm, friendly, and supportive situation to assess learners.”

The schematic representation of the obtained themes is reported in Table 2.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the difficulties Iranian EFL teachers encounter when assessing young learners in language institutes, and to gather the solutions these teachers suggest for those barriers.

The major difficulties identified by teachers were: varying proficiency levels, time constraints, limited attention spans, students’ stress and anxiety, parental interference, and large classroom size, which reflect both developmental and contextual barriers to effective assessment.

The findings of this study also highlight the multifaceted challenges faced by Iranian EFL teachers in assessing young learners. These challenges are consistent with previous research, which has identified issues such as varying proficiency levels, limited attention spans, and the impact of sociocultural factors on assessment practices (Aliakbari et al., 2023).

The diversity in proficiency levels necessitates differentiated assessment approaches, yet time constraints often confine teachers’ ability to use formative or portfolio assessment strategies. The results of the present study are also in line with the findings of Whitman (2024), who mentioned that time constraints is among the limitations teachers face while assessing learners.

One of the most significant findings is the role of parents in shaping assessment practices. Many teachers reported that parents’ expectations often pressure them to use conventional methods, such as paper-and-pencil tests, which may not accurately reflect students’ abilities. This finding aligns with the study conducted by Godson et al. (2023). To address this issue, teachers emphasized the importance of communicating with parents to explain the benefits of alternative assessment methods, such as formative assessments and hands-on activities.

The results of the present study are also in line with the findings of Whitman (2024), who mentioned that time constraints are one of the limitations teachers face while assessing learners.

Table 2. Schematic representation of the themes.

Subcategories	Properties	Frequency
Challenges	Different proficiency levels	28
	Attention span	26
	Time constraints	27
	Classroom size	21
	Parental interference	25
	Stress and anxiety	26
Solutions	Incorporating Games and Hands-on Activities	23
	Establishing Effective Communication with Parents	20
	Collaborating with colleagues	26
	Employing Diverse Assessment Techniques	24
	Considering young learners' characteristics	19
	Creating a Low-Stress Environment	24

Another critical challenge is the stress and anxiety experienced by young learners during assessments. This finding is consistent with Hasselgreen's (2012) research, which found that young learners often experience heightened anxiety during formal testing, which can adversely affect their performance. To mitigate this issue, teachers suggested creating a low-stress environment by integrating assessments into daily classroom activities and using playful methods, such as games.

Existing literature supports teachers' solutions, such as using games, collaborating with colleagues, and employing a variety of assessment techniques. For example, Butler (2019) emphasized the importance of using age-appropriate assessment methods that align with young learners' developmental stages. Similarly, Cheng and Fox (2017) highlighted the benefits of formative assessments in providing ongoing feedback and supporting students' learning processes.

Conclusion

The goal of the present study was to find out the challenges of assessing young learners in the Iranian context, besides providing solutions to lessen the challenges of assessment. Results of the interviews revealed that the major challenges of assessing young learners were: students' different proficiency levels, time constraints, attention span, students' stress and anxiety, parents' interference, and classroom size. Moreover, teachers suggested some solutions to remove or lessen those challenges. The main solutions were collaborating with colleagues, employing different assessment techniques, generating a low-stress environment, using games and hands-on activities, communicating with parents, and considering young learners' characteristics. The findings emphasize the need for systematic support to help teachers use developmentally sensitive assessment effectively.

In summary, the assessment of young learners in Iran is shaped by a complex interplay of educational, cultural, and

parental factors. While teachers try to use various assessment methods, systemic challenges and parental pressures often result in a gap between learners' actual abilities and their assessed performance. Tackling these challenges necessitates a dedicated commitment from educational institutions to enhance teacher training, create culturally appropriate assessment tools, and utilize technology efficiently. By implementing these strategies, educators can foster a more equitable and precise assessment environment for young learners.

Implications of the study

The findings of this study hold significant implications for educational stakeholders, including policymakers, curriculum developers, and teacher educators. First, there is a need for enhanced teacher training programs that focus on classroom-based assessment (CBA) strategies tailored to young learners. Professional development workshops should equip teachers with the skills to implement alternative assessment techniques effectively. Additionally, institutions should consider integrating formative assessments into standardized assessment frameworks, thereby aligning policies with contemporary educational best practices.

Another crucial implication concerns parental involvement. Given the strong influence of parental expectations on assessment practices, awareness campaigns and parental engagement programs should be introduced to educate parents about the benefits of diverse assessment techniques beyond traditional paper-based tests. This shift can foster greater acceptance of innovative assessment strategies that prioritize student development over rote memorization.

This study highlights the need to design time-efficient assessment tools that are appropriate for young learners' attention spans and developmental levels. These considerations are significant for curriculum developers.

Furthermore, school administrators, managers in lan-

guage institutes, and policymakers should advocate for smaller class sizes and provide teachers with adequate resources to implement differentiated assessment techniques. Institutions should also explore the potential of digital tools and artificial intelligence-driven platforms to facilitate individualized assessments, making evaluations more adaptable to students' varying proficiency levels.

This study has some limitations that should be taken into account when interpreting the results. Firstly, the sample consisted of only 32 teachers, which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Secondly, as the research was conducted within the context of Iran, the applicability of the results to other cultural or educational settings may be limited. Finally, it only focused on the experiences of teachers, not the perspectives of students themselves.

The delimitations of the study include its focus on Iranian teachers instructing English to children and the specific assessment challenges they encounter. It did not address other relevant factors such as teacher qualifications, curriculum design, or the availability of school resources.

Suggestions for future research

Future studies may gain valuable insights from longitudinal research that monitors the evolution of assessment practices over time, especially following professional development interventions designed to enhance teachers' assessment literacy. Conducting comparative studies between different regions of Iran or between Iran and other countries may of-

fer valuable insights into the impact of cultural differences on assessment practices and their results.

Further research is needed to investigate the effects of AI-driven tools and digital platforms on the evaluation of young learners, focusing on how these technologies can be utilized to improve educational outcomes. Additionally, exploring teachers' and students' attitudes toward technology-enhanced assessment approaches could provide guidance for policymakers in designing effective implementation strategies. Finally, studies examining the relationship between formative assessment practices and students' long-term language proficiency development could offer valuable contributions to the field.

By addressing these implications and research directions, future studies can contribute meaningfully to the progress of assessing young learners in Iran, eventually enhancing educational outcomes in this critical area.

Authors contributions

All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

Availability of data and materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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