Learning-Oriented Assessment in Iraqi High Schools: A Mixed-Methods Exploration of EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA) has emerged as a prominent approach to classroom-based assessment, emphasizing learner engagement, feedback, and the integration of assessment with instruction. For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, adopting LOA is particularly important in exam-driven educational contexts. However, there is limited empirical research on how Iraqi EFL teachers perceive and apply LOA in practice. This mixed-methods study investigates high school EFL teachers' perceptions, practices, and perceived challenges related to LOA in Iraq. Data were collected through a researcher-developed questionnaire (n = 100) and semi-structured interviews (n = 10). Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative data were thematically coded to capture recurring patterns and themes. The findings indicate that while teachers generally hold positive views of LOA and recognize its benefits for student learning, there is a gap between their beliefs and classroom practices, with a continued reliance on traditional assessment methods such as standardized tests and summative examinations. Key challenges identified include large class sizes, limited teacher training, and low student motivation. The study highlights the need for targeted professional development to support the effective implementation of LOA in Iraqi EFL classrooms.

1. INTRODUCTION

Research on educational assessment has consistently emphasized its pivotal role in the teaching and learning process (Turner et al., 2016). Over time, this body of research has contributed to the development of Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA), which aims primarily to enhance student learning and foster academic growth (Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Wilson & Scalise, 2006). LOA builds upon formative assessment (FA) research in mainstream classrooms, highlighting the importance of assessment as a tool for continuous improvement. Black and Wiliam (1998) demonstrated that effective classroom assessment can significantly boost student achievement,

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shifting pedagogical perspectives to view assessment as a means of gathering information that supports learning.

To effectively implement FA, researchers have identified four essential activities: classroom discussions, descriptive marking, peer and self-assessment, and the formative use of summative tests (Turner et al., 2016). These activities contribute to creating a learning environment that emphasizes feedback, collaboration, and continuous improvement. While FA research has shown promising results, there are areas that need improvement(Gibbs & Simpson, 2004; Knight & Yorke, 2003). Studies have revealed issues such as an overemphasis on grading at the expense of learning, encouragement of shallow learning strategies (Ramsden, 2003), misuse of self and peer assessment, confusion regarding the distinctions between summative and formative assessments (Boud, 2000), and inadequate emphasis on using feedback to address learning gaps (Carless, 2011).

LOA emerged as a response to these limitations, prioritizing learning over measurement in the assessment process (Carless et al., 2006). This approach involves re-examining classroom assessment components, such as task selection, classroom discourse, feedback timing, questioning strategies, grading practices, and the roles of teachers and students. In addressing these issues, LOA emerged as a means to support teachers in adopting more effective assessment practices that foster deep learning and cater to individual student needs (Turner et al., 2016).

Carless (2014) proposes a three-dimensional model of LOA, which serves as the basis for the present study. The first principle involves employing LOA tasks that align with learning goals, engage students, and connect to real-world situations. These tasks are expected to be authentic and extend beyond short quizzes and exams, using a variety of methods to elicit language forms from multiple agents (Turner et al., 2016). Examples include oral presentations, written portfolios, role-plays, and collaborative projects. In the field of ELT, tasks that promote learning are often communicative and prioritize meaning over form (Nunan, 2004). The second principle emphasizes student engagement with feedback (Carless, 2014). Feedback should be clearly communicated, actionable, and used to guide subsequent learning, as inadequate communication of feedback can hinder potential learning gains. Students should be encouraged to accept feedback from assessments and act on it to enhance future learning and task performance. The third principle of LOA involves cultivating evaluative expertise among learners, which entails actively engaging learners in the assessment process to foster their ability to evaluate performance (Carless, 2014). This often includes self-assessment and peer assessment and may involve students in establishing scoring criteria. In this way, assessment becomes a collaborative effort with students, rather than a process imposed upon them. By engaging students in the assessment process and encouraging self-reflection, LOA helps learners develop essential skills in self-evaluation and critical thinking.

There is an intricate relationship between teachers' beliefs, their practices, and the contextual factors that influence them (Brown, 2004; Xu & Brown, 2016). Teachers' enactment of assessment tasks in the classroom is guided by their beliefs about assessment, which significantly influences the quality of learning that takes place (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Teachers' beliefs are reflected in their practices to varying degrees, depending on the context in which they work (Wicking, 2022). For example, teachers who value LOA may face conflicts in contexts where accountability requirements prioritize summative assessment results and standardized testing over the process-oriented, learning-focused principles of LOA. They are expected to guide and enhance learning through assessment while also objectively evaluating students' language achievement (Rea-Dickins et al., 2007). In such cases, teachers might struggle to reconcile their beliefs in the importance of promoting learning through assessment with the external demands for grading and ranking students' performance. This tension can pose challenges for teachers as they attempt to

navigate their professional responsibilities and personal beliefs within the constraints of their educational environments(Boud, 2000; Ewell, 1991). Moreover, teachers working in the same environment may have divergent beliefs about assessment, and individual teachers might even hold contradictory conceptions of assessment simultaneously (Brown & Gao, 2015). Understanding these beliefs and practices can contribute to the development of theories and policies that improve teaching effectiveness and learning outcomes.

In addition to the established principles of validity and reliability, fairness has become increasingly recognized as a fundamental criterion for assessing quality (Kunnan, 2004; Messick, 1996). Fairness emphasizes equity, transparency, and the minimization of bias, underscoring that assessment is not only about technical accuracy but also about the ethical consequences of its use (Camilli, 2013).Within classroom contexts, teachers' perceptions of fairness are particularly influential, shaping both instructional decisions and learners' motivation, engagement, and trust in the learning process (Elwood & Murphy, 2015). LOA, with its emphasis on formative feedback, active student involvement, and authentic task design, inherently aligns with core principles of fairness in educational assessment. By prioritizing transparency, responsiveness to individual learner needs, and opportunities for meaningful engagement, LOA offers a process-oriented framework through which fairness can be enacted in everyday classroom practice. This alignment becomes especially critical in exam-driven educational contexts, where institutional constraints often limit equity and restrict the adoption of learner-centered approaches. In such environments, LOA not only supports pedagogical effectiveness but also serves as a mechanism for promoting ethical assessment practices. Despite extensive research on LOA's impact on outcomes such as achievement, anxiety, and language skills(Cakmak et al., 2023; Er & Farhady, 2023; Estaji & Safari, 2023; Yang, 2020; Zeng et al., 2018), its potential to advance fairness in classroom assessment remains underexplored.

In exam-driven educational systems such as Iraq, where high-stakes assessments dominate educational practice, teachers' flexibility to adopt formative, student-centered approaches like LOA is significantly constrained. The dominance of national examinations in the Iraqi context shapes both assessment policy and classroom practice, exerting strong washback effects that prioritize test preparation over the development of communicative competence and critical thinking skills (Al-Mofti, 2020). These conditions not only limit pedagogical innovation but also raise concerns about fairness, as standardized testing often overlooks individual learner needs and reinforces inequities in classroom assessment. Iraq thus presents a compelling setting for investigating how teachers interpret and enact LOA, the strategies they employ, and the challenges they face in balancing fairness, personal beliefs, and institutional constraints.

Recognizing the pivotal role of teacher beliefs in shaping assessment practices—and in light of the growing recognition of LOA as a critical area of inquiry (Purpura, 2016)—this study aims to explore how Iraqi EFL teachers conceptualize and implement LOA within an exam-driven educational context. It investigates the strategies and techniques they employ, the challenges they encounter in aligning their practices with LOA principles, and how they perceive and connect fairness to their assessment decisions. By examining these dimensions, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of how LOA is interpreted and enacted in constrained environments and how fairness is negotiated within classroom assessment practices.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

LOA has gained increasing attention in recent decades as a response to the limitations of traditional assessment practices (Purpura, 2016). Early work in this field primarily sought to define the concept and establish its core principles, including formative feedback, student engagement, and

authentic task design (Carless et al., 2006). These principles position assessment not merely as a tool for measurement but as a mechanism for enhancing learning. However, despite strong theoretical support, the enactment of LOA in classroom practice remains uneven and highly context-dependent.

A growing body of research has examined teachers' beliefs as a key factor shaping the implementation of LOA. Studies consistently demonstrate that teachers' assessment beliefs strongly influence instructional decision-making and classroom practices (Borg, 2015; Brown & Gao, 2015). However, these beliefs are not formed in isolation; they are mediated by institutional policies, cultural expectations, and systemic pressures (Xu & Brown, 2016). Empirical studies across diverse educational contexts reveal that although teachers often express support for learning-oriented principles, their classroom practices frequently reflect more traditional, summative orientations. This misalignment between beliefs and practices is particularly evident in exam-driven systems, where LOA is often perceived as incompatible with dominant assessment cultures, resulting in partial or symbolic implementation.

Studies conducted across diverse educational contexts reveal considerable variation in how LOA is understood and enacted. In Saudi Arabia, Alsowat (2022) found that although EFL teachers possess a moderate level of awareness of LOA principles, their classroom practices often fall short of fully implementing these principles. Teachers frequently reported facing substantial personal, institutional, and contextual constraints, including heavy workloads, large class sizes, limited professional training, and a strongly exam-oriented educational culture. Similar challenges have been identified in higher education contexts, where instructors acknowledge the value of LOA but report insufficient preparation and institutional support to enact it effectively.

Comparable tensions have been observed in other educational systems. In Colombia, a study conducted by Munoz et al. (2012) has revealed a discrepancy between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices, suggesting a need for greater reflective engagement and professional development related to formative assessment. In Iran, Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2022) study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA, focusing on its benefits, challenges, and the professional practices that support its implementation. The findings revealed that teachers generally viewed LOA as a process-oriented and formative approach that emphasizes feedback, continuous learning, and learner development rather than outcomes. The study also highlighted several perceived benefits of LOA, such as enhanced classroom interaction, increased student engagement, and stronger integration of teaching, learning, and assessment. However, teachers identified significant challenges to its implementation, including limited time, large class sizes, and insufficient training in LOA principles.

In East Asian contexts, such as Japan and China, teachers often operate within highly exam-oriented systems yet demonstrate varying degrees of engagement with LOA. Wicking (2022) reported a discrepancy between teachers' stated beliefs and their enacted practices, noting that while Japanese teachers valued well-designed tasks, they placed less emphasis on student engagement with feedback or the development of evaluative judgment. Similarly, Yang and May's study of Chinese junior high school teachers showed that, despite working in a test-driven environment, teachers enacted LOA in context-sensitive ways by providing contingent oral feedback, encouraging learner interaction, and promoting learner autonomy. These findings suggest that even within restrictive assessment regimes, teachers may exercise pedagogical agency in enacting elements of LOA.

In Latin American contexts, research from Chile indicates that although university teachers generally hold positive attitudes toward learning-oriented assessment, many feel insufficiently prepared to implement it effectively in practice (Cardenas et al., 2024). This pattern reinforces the

argument that positive orientations toward LOA do not automatically translate into effective implementation without sustained institutional and professional support.

Despite the growing body of international research, evidence from Iraq remains extremely limited. To date, the only empirical study is that of Aouf Abdulrahman Al-Rifaie and Javad (2024), which examined gender differences in Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA and found that female teachers were more inclined to endorse its principles. However, this study did not explore how LOA is enacted in classroom practice or how broader sociopolitical and institutional conditions shape teachers' assessment decisions. Iraq's education system is characterized by centralized control, high-stakes national examinations, limited professional development opportunities, and resource constraints (Borg & Capstick, 2024). These conditions generate strong washback effects, pressuring teachers to prioritize test preparation over formative and learner-centered approaches.

Studying LOA in the Iraqi context is therefore not merely a regional concern; it offers critical insight into how assessment reform unfolds in settings marked by structural and institutional constraints. Understanding how teachers navigate these tensions can contribute to more context-sensitive models of assessment reform and inform policy and professional development initiatives.

A further conceptual gap concerns the integration of fairness within LOA frameworks. Fairness has long been recognized as a core component of assessment quality (Kunnan, 2004) and is embedded within contemporary validity frameworks. It encompasses principles of equity, transparency, and the minimization of bias. Research has shown that perceptions of fairness positively influence student engagement, motivation, and achievement (Berti et al., 2010; Chory-Assad, 2002).

However, fairness is not a fixed construct; rather, it is shaped through teachers' beliefs and the institutional contexts in which assessment takes place (Rasooli et al., 2023). While LOA theoretically aligns with fairness through its emphasis on feedback, learner involvement, and responsiveness to individual needs, empirical research rarely examines how fairness is conceptualized and enacted within LOA frameworks—particularly in exam-driven systems such as Iraq's. Understanding teachers' interpretations of fairness is therefore essential for evaluating the ethical and pedagogical dimensions of LOA implementation.

Taken together, existing research highlights both the promise and the complexity of learning-oriented assessment. Significant gaps remain in understanding how teachers in constrained contexts conceptualize LOA, negotiate institutional pressures, and reconcile formative intentions with summative demands. Addressing these gaps is essential for developing contextually responsive models of assessment and for advancing more equitable and sustainable assessment practices. Accordingly, the present study investigates Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of learning-oriented assessment, with particular attention to the strategies they employ, the challenges they encounter, and the ways in which they conceptualize fairness within their assessment practices. The study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of learning-oriented assessment?
2. To what extent do Iraqi EFL teachers implement LOA in their professional practice, and what strategies and techniques do they use?
3. What challenges do Iraqi EFL teachers face in applying LOA in classroom settings?
4. How do Iraqi EFL teachers conceptualize the relationship between LOA and fairness in assessment practices?

3. METHOD

This study adopted a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices regarding LOA. The quantitative phase was conducted first, followed by qualitative interviews to further elaborate on the survey results. This design enabled both breadth and depth in understanding how LOA is perceived and enacted in Iraqi classrooms.

Participants

The study involved 100 Iraqi high school EFL teachers (male and female), aged 30 to 45, all native Arabic speakers, holding either a bachelor's or master's degree in English language teaching. Participants were selected through convenience sampling, based on their availability and willingness to participate. While this method facilitated access to a diverse sample within logistical constraints, it may limit the generalizability of findings. Participants were drawn from both urban and rural schools, allowing for variation in school type that may influence LOA practices. For the qualitative phase, 10 volunteers from the initial sample participated in semi-structured interviews. Although volunteer sampling may introduce bias, efforts were made to include teachers from diverse regions and school types to enhance representativeness.

Instruments

Two instruments were used: a researcher-developed questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. Both were designed to explore teachers' perceptions, practices, challenges, and conceptualizations of fairness in LOA.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was developed based on existing literature on LOA. It consisted of two subscales: perceptions (39 items) and practices (31 items). To establish content validity, the questionnaire was reviewed by two assessment experts who examined each item for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study objectives. Feedback included suggestions to reword ambiguous items and to remove overlapping items. However, the validation process was limited in scope and did not include cross-checking against standardized LOA instruments—an acknowledged limitation.

A pilot test was conducted with 10 EFL teachers to assess clarity, item relevance, and technical functionality. Feedback from this phase—such as confusion over terminology and inconsistent response formats—was used to revise the final version. Cronbach's alpha was calculated for the full questionnaire (.83), indicating strong internal consistency. Subscale reliability scores were also computed: perceptions (.81), practices (.798). The full questionnaire items are provided in Appendix A to support replicability.

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and preliminary survey findings. The protocol included six questions: initial demographic items, followed by items exploring teachers' perceptions and practices related to LOA, perceived challenges, and views on fairness. The protocol was reviewed by an expert in language assessment and piloted with two EFL teachers to ensure clarity and relevance. Minor adjustments were made to improve question

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phrasing and flow. With participants' consent, all interviews were audio-recorded to ensure transcription accuracy and data completeness. The final protocol is included in Appendix B.

Procedure

The study followed a three-phase sequential explanatory design, integrating quantitative and qualitative methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA.

Phase 1: Questionnaire Administration

In the first phase, the questionnaire was distributed electronically via Google Forms to 100 EFL high school teachers across Iraq. Convenience sampling was used, targeting teachers who were available and willing to participate. Responses were analyzed using descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and standard deviations) in SPSS (version 25). This phase provided a broad overview of teachers' beliefs and practices related to LOA.

Phase 2: Interview Development and Data Collection

Informed by the survey findings, the interview questions were refined and piloted with two teachers to ensure clarity and relevance. Subsequently, ten teachers from the survey group volunteered to participate in semi-structured interviews. While volunteer sampling may introduce bias, participants were selected to represent variation in gender and region. The interviews were conducted in Arabic, audio-recorded with participant consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Phase 3: Thematic Analysis and Data Integration

Interview transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) six-phase framework for thematic analysis. Coding was conducted manually and inductively, with themes derived from both the interview data and survey findings. To ensure analytical rigor in the qualitative phase, intercoder reliability was established by having a second researcher independently code 20% of the interview transcripts. Discrepancies in coding were discussed and resolved through consensus, enhancing the consistency and credibility of the thematic analysis. In addition, researcher triangulation was applied: two researchers collaboratively reviewed the emerging themes to minimize interpretive bias and ensure that the findings were not shaped by a single perspective. This dual strategy—technical consistency through intercoder reliability and interpretive depth through triangulation—strengthened the trustworthiness of the analysis and supported the validity of the reported themes. Finally, integration of quantitative and qualitative findings was achieved through a process of comparing, contrasting, and merging results. A joint display matrix was developed to map areas of convergence and divergence. For example, whereas the survey indicated general support for LOA, the interviews revealed deeper tensions related to institutional constraints and fairness. This integration enabled the qualitative findings to both extend and problematize the quantitative results, strengthening the mixed-methods design.

4. RESULTS

Research Question 1: What are Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of Learning-Oriented Assessment (LOA)?

To address this question, data from both the questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were analyzed. Descriptive statistics (see Table 1) indicate that teachers possess a strong conceptual understanding of LOA and express overall positive perceptions of its implementation.

Table 1: Selected Questionnaire Items: Teachers' Perceptions of LOA (Highest and Lowest Means)

Item No.	Statement	Mean	SD
Q1	Assessment, learning, and teaching are interrelated	4.62	0.84
Q2	Assessment is about both learning and grading	4.61	0.86
Q3	LOA can support the process of language learning	4.57	0.83
Q5	Assessment responds to the evolving needs of the learner	4.46	0.98
Q6	Assessment addresses the identified learning objectives	4.44	0.91
Q18	Assessment tasks should engage students in learning activity	4.05	1.12
Q20	Assessment tasks should be designed deliberately to be learning tasks	4.02	1.13
Q31	Teaching programs and courses do not have provision for post-feedback	3.36	1.28
Q38	It is a waste of time to provide feedback because students will not read it	3.12	1.12
Q39	Assessment criteria should be shared with students	3.11	1.10

The highest-rated items were Q1 ("Assessment, learning, and teaching are interrelated," M = 4.62) and Q2 ("Assessment is about both learning and grading," M = 4.61), with Q3 ("LOA can support the process of language learning," M = 4.57) also scoring highly. These results reflect widespread agreement that assessment should be integrated with instruction and aligned with learning objectives.

Importantly, several negatively worded items received low mean scores, which indicate disagreement with those statements and thus support LOA principles. For example, Item 4 ("Assessment does not improve students' learning," M = 4.56) and Item 38 ("Providing feedback is a waste of time because students will not read it," M = 3.12) were strongly rejected by respondents. These results reinforce teachers' belief in the value of assessment and feedback as tools for learning.

By contrast, a notable finding is that Item 39 ("Assessment criteria should be shared with students," M = 3.11) was rated comparatively low despite being a positive LOA practice. This contrast suggests that while teachers endorse LOA conceptually, they may be less consistent in supporting practices that require transparency and learner agency.

To interpret the questionnaire data more meaningfully, responses were mapped onto Carless's three dimensions of LOA: Assessment Tasks, Learner Involvement, and Feedback.

Assessment Tasks (Items 18–21)

Teachers showed strong support for task-based learning principles. A total of 78.8% agreed or strongly agreed that assessment tasks should engage students in learning activities (Item 18). Furthermore, 74.4% endorsed the idea that tasks should mirror real-world language use (Item 19). Besides, 71.2% agreed that tasks should require higher-order learning outcomes (Item 21). These results suggest that teachers value authentic, meaningful assessment tasks that go beyond rote testing.

Learner Involvement (Items 22–26)

Responses in this dimension were more mixed. Less than half of respondents (47.5%) agreed that students should be involved in the assessment process (Item 23), reflecting moderate openness to peer and self-assessment practices. In contrast, 66.5% agreed that involving students in assessment

is a waste of time (Item 24), suggesting significant reservations persist regarding its effectiveness in practice. This indicates a significant degree of skepticism toward peer and self-assessment, despite LOA's emphasis on learner agency.

Feedback (Items 27–38)

Responses under this dimension appeared more cautious. For example, 41% agreed that students should receive sufficient and detailed feedback (Item 27), while 47.5% endorsed the idea that feedback should focus on learning rather than scores (Item 28). Negatively worded items (e.g., "Feedback is a waste of time") received low mean scores, suggesting rejection of such views. Overall, while teachers acknowledged the value of feedback, their responses indicate possible uncertainty or limited confidence regarding its practical implementation.

Interview Findings

Analysis of the interviews revealed two dominant themes regarding Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions of LOA.

Theme 1: Positive Perceptions of LOA

Most participants expressed favorable views of LOA, emphasizing its role in integrating teaching and assessment and supporting learner development. Eight out of ten interviewees highlighted the value of LOA in facilitating a more integrated and learner-centered approach. For example:

> "LOA is about integrating assessment and teaching where students are the main participants and teachers function as moderators." (Teacher 5)
> "It supports us in building better learning plans and identifying areas for improvement." (Teacher 7)
> "LOA is a systematic approach to language learning that uses formal and informal assessment to help teachers and learners plan learning more effectively and measure progress." (Teacher 1)

Theme 2: Emphasis on Student-Centered Assessment

Several teachers specifically noted the importance of involving students in the assessment process, viewing LOA as a way to engage learners actively in their own learning. As illustrated in the following extracts from the interview session, teachers mentioned strategies such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and formative feedback as central to their understanding of LOA.

> "Teachers are the only assessors, and students must learn to evaluate themselves and their peers." (Teacher 3)
> "Assessment isn't just about grades; it's about understanding progress and setting goals for improvement." (Teacher 6)

The interviews suggest that Iraqi EFL teachers hold positive perceptions of LOA, especially regarding its potential to integrate assessment and learning and to promote student engagement. At the same time, some variation exists, particularly concerning the feasibility of implementing LOA strategies in everyday classroom practice. While the findings of Research Question 1 shed light on Iraqi EFL teachers' general perceptions of LOA, it is equally important

to examine how these perceptions translate into classroom practices. Therefore, Research Question 2 focuses on investigating the ways in which teachers implement LOA in their classrooms.

Research Question 2: To what extent do Iraqi EFL teachers implement LOA in their professional practice, and what strategies and techniques do they use?

The second research question examined the extent to which Iraqi EFL teachers implement LOA principles in their classroom practices and the specific strategies they employ. Table 2 presents the frequency of 26 assessment practices, rated on a five-point Likert scale (1 = Never to 5 = Always).

Table 2: EFL Teachers' Assessment Practices (Questionnaire Results)

No.	Assessment Practice	1 (%)	2 (%)	3 (%)	4 (%)	5 (%)	M	SD
1	End-of-unit test	6.2	5.4	5.4	14.6	74.4	4.66	1.20
2	Observations	13.0	27.2	28.5	12.2	15.1	3.70	1.05
3	Reflective journal writing	7.3	64.7	9.1	11.0	7.9	3.15	1.29
4	Mid-term exam	8.3	8.3	12.0	23.2	48.2	4.74	1.27
5	Teacher–student conference	30.1	34.2	25.5	4.2	4.0	3.33	1.06
6	Debates	32.8	29.1	22.1	6.9	9.1	3.21	1.24
7	Self-assessment	48.9	23.7	19.1	4.0	4.2	3.28	1.10
8	Peer assessment	48.4	24.8	17.5	4.9	4.2	3.31	1.11
9	Individual projects	25.5	53.3	18.0	4.5	5.4	3.05	1.12
10	Group projects	45.5	19.1	14.1	11.2	10.1	3.65	1.47
11	Journals/blogs	4.7	35.9	32.0	20.1	7.4	3.13	1.42
12	Writing reports	3.7	5.8	30.0	36.9	19.2	3.48	1.39
13	Portfolio	10.4	48.5	13.8	16.5	10.9	3.15	1.47
14	Performance assessment	14.7	35.9	32.0	7.1	10.4	3.63	1.42
15	Quizzes	2.8	3.1	2.7	24.1	67.3	4.78	1.02
16	Essay exams	4.7	4.2	5.7	21.8	63.7	4.66	1.12
17	Multiple-choice exams	5.8	5.7	2.9	20.0	65.5	4.74	1.19
18	Fill in the blanks	2.8	3.1	19.7	24.1	50.3	4.36	1.02
19	Selection of exam formats	8.1	8.5	5.0	24.1	54.2	4.34	1.27
20	True–false	4.9	6.6	7.1	26.6	54.7	4.68	1.16
21	Matching	4.9	3.3	11.8	39.4	39.6	4.51	1.24
22	Detailed comments on assignments	4.4	3.5	5.8	21.5	65.9	4.62	1.47
23	Grading without feedback	3.2	2.3	9.1	16.2	69.3	4.47	0.98
24	Learning games	21.9	22.2	11.0	20.1	24.8	3.14	0.91
25	Homework	4.3	4.9	8.0	35.1	42.9	4.76	1.28
26	Hands-on activities	27.0	18.2	19.4	10.6	24.8	3.18	1.29

Scale: 1 = Never, 2 = Rarely, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Always

To facilitate meaningful interpretation, these practices were conceptually grouped into four clusters—Traditional Summative, Alternative/Performance, Learner-Involving, and Feedback-Rich—based on their pedagogical function and alignment with LOA principles (Table 3).

Table 3: Summary of Assessment Practices by Cluster

Cluster	Included Items	Cluster Mean
Traditional Summative	End-of-unit test, Mid-term exam, Quizzes, Essay exams, Multiple-choice, True–false, Matching, Fill-in-the-blanks, Selection of exam formats, and Homework	4.57
Alternative / Performance	Portfolios, Individual projects, Group projects, Debates, Performance assessment, and Hands-on activities	3.31
Learner-Involving	Peer assessment, Self-assessment, Teacher–student conference, and Observations	3.38
Feedback-Rich	Reflective journals, Journals/blogs, Learning games, Writing reports, Detailed comments on assignments, and Grading without feedback	3.88

Overall, the results indicate a clear dominance of traditional, exam-oriented assessment practices. The Traditional Summative cluster recorded the highest mean (M = 4.57), with teachers reporting frequent use of quizzes (M = 4.78), mid-term exams (M = 4.74), multiple-choice tests (M = 4.74), homework (M = 4.76), and end-of-unit tests (M = 4.66). These findings suggest that assessment practices in the Iraqi educational system remain largely aligned with high-stakes testing and accountability-driven requirements.

In contrast, Alternative/Performance Assessments—including portfolios, projects, debates, and performance-based tasks—were used far less frequently (M = 3.31). Similarly, Learner-Involving Practices, such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and teacher–student conferences, received relatively low ratings (M = 3.38). These results indicate limited opportunities for students to actively participate in the assessment process, reflect on their learning, or develop self-regulatory skills—key components of learning-oriented assessment.

The Feedback-Rich cluster showed a moderately higher level of use (M = 3.88). While teachers frequently reported providing detailed written comments (M = 4.62) and grades (M = 4.47), more dialogic and reflective feedback tools—such as journals, blogs, and learning games—were used much less frequently. This suggests that feedback practices tend to remain unidirectional, emphasizing teacher judgments rather than interactive feedback processes that support learner autonomy and continuous improvement.

Taken together, these findings reveal a clear mismatch between teachers' expressed support for LOA (as reported in RQ1) and their actual classroom practices. Although Iraqi EFL teachers demonstrate awareness of LOA principles, their assessment practices remain predominantly exam-oriented, with limited integration of learner-centered, formative, and performance-based strategies. This gap underscores the influence of institutional constraints, curricular demands, and assessment cultures that prioritize summative outcomes over formative learning processes. As such, while elements of LOA are present, their implementation remains partial and constrained rather than systematic and transformative.

Research Question 3: What challenges do Iraqi EFL teachers face in applying LOA in classroom settings?

Interview data revealed several practical and systemic barriers that hinder the effective implementation of LOA. Three prominent themes emerged, reflecting the complex realities of Iraqi classrooms:

Theme 1: Overcrowded Classrooms

All ten interviewees consistently cited large class sizes—often exceeding 50 students—as a major barrier to implementing LOA, particularly in providing individualized feedback or facilitating student-centered assessment practices such as conferences or portfolio reviews.

> "With so many students in each class, it's hard to go beyond giving and grading exams. There is simply not enough time to assess everyone meaningfully." (Teacher 4)
>
> "Given the large number of students in my class, I face significant time constraints, and I am compelled to use traditional methods. It's impossible to provide individualized feedback or encourage student participation." (Teacher 9)

This limitation directly affects the feasibility of core LOA strategies, such as personalized feedback and process-based assessment tasks.

Theme 2: Low Student Motivation and Engagement

Six of the ten teachers expressed frustration with students' passive attitudes toward feedback and alternative assessment methods. Several noted that students were unfamiliar with or resistant to self- and peer-assessment activities.

> "Most students don't read or use the feedback. They just want to know their grade." (Teacher 6)

Similarly, Teacher 2 referred to "*students' unfamiliarity and their lower language proficiency*" as reasons for their hesitation to participate in self-assessment and peer-assessment activities.

This lack of engagement undermines one of LOA's fundamental pillars—active learner participation—and reflects the persistence of exam-oriented traditions in Iraqi classrooms.

Theme 3: Limited Professional Preparation

A recurring theme was teachers' limited training in using alternative assessment tools or in understanding LOA theory. Seven out of the 10 teachers reported that, while they supported LOA in principle, they often felt unequipped to implement it effectively.

> "We haven't been trained to use LOA methods. Most of us teach the way we were taught, which was through testing and grading." (Teacher 2)

Without targeted professional development, teachers may lack both the technical skills and confidence to transition from summative approaches to learning-oriented assessment. The barriers they face are multifaceted, arising from institutional constraints that prioritize exams and grades over learning tasks, entrenched pedagogical traditions rooted in exam-driven practices, and classroom realities such as overcrowded classes and limited instructional time. These challenges are compounded by insufficient training and professional support, which leave teachers uncertain about how to design and implement LOA strategies.

Research Question 4: How do Iraqi EFL teachers conceptualize the relationship between LOA and fairness in assessment practices?

Fairness in assessment is often associated with objectivity, transparency, and equal opportunity. This study explored whether teachers view LOA as a mechanism for promoting equitable assessment experiences and, if so, how they define and enact fairness within this framework. Five interrelated themes emerged from the interview data:

Theme 1: Equal Participation Opportunities

Four teachers emphasized that LOA enables all students, regardless of ability or background, to participate actively in assessment, particularly through peer- and self-assessment activities.

> "Learning-oriented assessment gives every student a chance to participate and show progress—not just those who score high on exams." (Teacher 3)

Theme 2: Ongoing Feedback as a Fairness Mechanism

Six participants highlighted the role of continuous, individualized feedback in promoting fairness. They viewed feedback as a way to guide improvement rather than merely evaluate performance. As highlighted by one of the teachers:

> "Giving students regular feedback helps them learn what to do better, not just what they got wrong. That's fairer than just giving a grade." (Teacher 6)

Theme 3: Transparency and Use of Rubrics

Five teachers stressed the importance of clear criteria and rubrics for consistent and unbiased grading. Some reported using "blind grading" to minimize personal bias:

> "We try to use rubrics and hide students' names when grading to make it more objective and fairer." (Teacher 8)

Theme 4: Teacher Monitoring and Support

Seven teachers described fairness as differentiated support according to students' needs, rather than treating all students identically. As reflected in the following extract, the teachers emphasized the importance of tailored assistance.

> "Fairness also means giving weaker students more support—not the same treatment for everyone, but what each one needs." (Teacher 1)

Theme 5: Student Empowerment and Self-Evaluation

Five participants viewed self-assessment as a way to democratize assessment and foster learner responsibility.

> "When students evaluate themselves, they understand what they've done and feel more responsible for their learning." (Teacher 2)

In summary, the interviews suggest that Iraqi EFL teachers largely perceive LOA as a framework that fosters fairness by enhancing transparency, inclusiveness, and learner engagement.

Their responses indicate a nuanced understanding of fairness as more than equal treatment, encompassing equitable opportunities for all students to succeed through meaningful participation and personalized feedback. However, the practical challenges identified in Research Question 3, such as overcrowded classrooms, low student engagement, and limited professional preparation, pose significant barriers to realizing these ideals in practice.

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

To synthesize insights across data sources, a joint display matrix was constructed to map areas of convergence, divergence, and expansion between the quantitative survey results and qualitative interview data. By aligning findings with Carless (2014) three-dimensional framework, assessment tasks, learner involvement, and feedback, the matrix highlights where teachers' conceptual beliefs are reinforced by practice, where tensions arise, and where qualitative data adds explanatory depth to quantitative trends (see Table 4).

Table 4: Joint Display Matrix: Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Findings

LOA Dimension	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Integration Insight
Conceptual Beliefs	High mean scores on items Q1–Q3 (M > 4.5) show strong support for LOA principles.	Teachers described LOA as learner-centered and formative; 8/10 endorsed its value.	Convergence: Teachers conceptually embrace LOA as a pedagogical ideal.
Assessment Tasks	Moderate use of authentic tasks (e.g., portfolios, debates); cluster mean = 3.31.	Teachers cited time constraints and large classes as barriers to task-based assessment.	Divergence: Beliefs support authentic tasks, but practice is limited by context.
Learner Involvement	Low usage of peer/self-assessment; cluster mean = 3.38.	Teachers expressed skepticism about student readiness and motivation.	Convergence: Both data sources show limited learner involvement in assessment.
Feedback Practices	Mixed use; detailed comments common (M = 4.62), but journals/games less frequent (M = 3.38).	Teachers value feedback but note students often ignore it; 6/10 cited low engagement.	Expansion: Quantitative data shows usage; qualitative data explains underlying issues.
Fairness	Item Q16 (LOA promotes fairness) rated positively; Q39 (criteria sharing) rated low (M = 3.11).	Teachers define fairness as transparency, support, and equal participation.	Divergence: Teachers endorse fairness in theory but struggle with institutional norms.

As shown in Table 4, both quantitative data revealed strong conceptual support for LOA principles. Teachers consistently endorsed the value of formative feedback, authentic assessment, and learner engagement. However, qualitative data also revealed tensions between endorsement and enactment in Iraq, where institutional constraints, such as exam-driven policies, overcrowded classrooms, and limited professional preparation, limit the use of learner-involving and performance-based strategies. Divergence was most evident in perceptions of fairness: while teachers viewed LOA as equitable in theory, they struggled to reconcile its ideals with rigid grading norms.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study investigated Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA, the challenges they encounter in implementing it, and their views on fairness within LOA. By adopting a mixed-

methods design, the research integrated quantitative trends with qualitative insights, offering a nuanced account of teachers' conceptual and practical engagement with LOA. The findings are significant because they highlight not only the persistent gap between teachers' positive attitudes and their limited practices but also a notable understanding of fairness within LOA. These results matter both theoretically, by reinforcing and extending debates on assessment literacy, and practically, by underscoring the urgent need for systemic reform in Iraqi classrooms.

The results revealed four main findings. First, Iraqi teachers expressed generally positive attitudes toward LOA, valuing its emphasis on feedback, learner engagement, and integration of assessment with instruction. Second, despite this conceptual support, teachers' operational knowledge was limited, particularly regarding feedback processes, peer- and self-assessment, and authentic task designs. Third, classroom practices remained dominated by traditional forms of assessment such as quizzes and summative tests, with alternative methods rarely adopted. Finally, teachers associated LOA with fairness, highlighting transparency and equal opportunities for learners, yet acknowledged that contextual constraints (e.g., large class sizes, exam-driven culture) hindered the realization of equitable assessment.

Taken together, these findings underscore the misalignment between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices—a disconnect that reflects broader systemic issues in assessment literacy and institutional support. They also highlight a shift in fairness perceptions, from uniform treatment to differentiated support, which has important implications for developing learner-centered assessment cultures in Iraq. These results suggest that meaningful LOA implementation requires more than teacher commitment; it demands structural reform, targeted professional development, and a reorientation of institutional priorities.

Several findings from the current study align with prior work. The general positivity toward LOA mirrors results from studies across diverse EFL contexts, where teachers expressed appreciation for LOA's learner-centered orientation (Aouf Abdulrahman Al-Rifaie & Javad, 2024; Khalili et al., 2024; Nasr et al., 2018; Wicking, 2022). However, despite this conceptual endorsement, teachers often struggled to enact LOA effectively due to pedagogical and institutional constraints. This mismatch between belief and practice echoes findings by Al-Kamli and Almalki (2024), Wicking (2022), Derakhshan and Ghiasvand (2022), and Jalilzadeh and Coombe (2023).

The findings of this study reaffirm that teacher beliefs are closely tied to pedagogical practice, as argued by (Xu & Brown, 2016). This connection underscores the importance of aligning conceptual understanding with classroom enactment. Moreover, the results support (Popham, 2004, 2011) longstanding concern about persistent gaps in teachers' assessment knowledge, particularly in relation to formative and learner-centered approaches. Participants' emphasis on limited training in alternative assessment techniques echoes prior research pointing to low levels of assessment literacy among EFL teachers, especially regarding contemporary practices such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and portfolio-based evaluation (Muhammad & Bardakci, 2019). These gaps highlight the urgent need for both pre-service and in-service teacher education programs to strengthen assessment literacy and equip teachers with the practical tools necessary to implement LOA effectively. Without targeted professional development, teachers may continue to endorse LOA in theory while struggling to enact its principles in practice.

The present study similarly identified contextual challenges that impede LOA implementation, including limited teacher training, low student motivation, large class sizes, and insufficient institutional support. These findings are consistent with global concerns about LOA feasibility in resource-limited or exam-oriented settings(Alshoraty, 2014; Choi, 2015; Dawit & Deneke, 2015; Fazel & Ali, 2022; Salkovsky et al., 2015). Collectively, these studies suggest that meaningful reform of classroom assessment requires systemic change—reducing teacher

workload, embedding formative assessment within institutional structures, and expanding professional development opportunities that empower teachers to enact LOA principles in practice.

Another important finding of this study involves how Iraqi EFL teachers conceptualize fairness within the framework of LOA. Teachers perceived LOA as a fairer form of assessment because of its emphasis on continuous feedback, transparent criteria, and equitable participation. Importantly, fairness was not defined as identical treatment for all but as differentiated support tailored to learners' needs. This equity-oriented perspective adds a novel dimension to LOA discourse in the region. At the same time, participants acknowledged that fairness is conditional: large class sizes, time constraints, and low student motivation often limit the practical enactment of equitable practices.

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies in the Iraqi context to explore teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges related to LOA. This study contributes to the literature in three ways. First, it confirms existing findings on the persistent gap between teachers' beliefs and practices regarding LOA, thereby reinforcing theoretical claims about the central role of assessment literacy. Second, it expands the literature by documenting how fairness is conceptualized in an Iraqi EFL context, highlighting a shift toward equity-based understandings. Third, it situates teachers' struggles within broader structural and policy constraints, thereby shifting the focus from individual teacher deficiencies to systemic reform needs.

The implications can be considered at multiple levels. At the teacher level, there is a pressing need to strengthen teachers' assessment literacy. Training should integrate assessment-for-learning principles into pre-service education and provide ongoing professional development for in-service teachers. Emphasis should be placed not only on conceptual foundations but also on practical strategies, such as designing authentic tasks, giving formative feedback, and facilitating peer- and self-assessment. At the institutional and policy-making level, structural changes are required to enable LOA in practice. This includes reducing exam-driven pressures, recognizing formative assessment within accountability systems, ensuring manageable class sizes, and providing adequate instructional hours. Fairness in assessment must be enacted in context-sensitive ways that align with Iraqi realities. Institutional leaders have a pivotal role in cultivating assessment cultures that prioritize learning and innovation. At the learner level, students also need orientation and training to participate meaningfully in LOA practices. Developing students' capacity to understand assessment criteria, use feedback productively, and engage in self- and peer-assessment will enhance both their responsibility and the effectiveness of LOA.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study offers valuable insights into Iraqi EFL teachers' perceptions and practices of LOA, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small and restricted to high school teachers, which may not fully capture the diversity of EFL teaching contexts across Iraq. Second, the study relied primarily on self-reported data through questionnaires and interviews, which may be subject to social desirability bias or discrepancies between teachers' stated beliefs and their actual classroom practices. Third, the study did not incorporate student perspectives, which could have provided a more comprehensive understanding of LOA implementation and its perceived fairness.

Future research could address these limitations by incorporating classroom observations to triangulate data, expanding the participant pool to include teachers across different regions and educational levels, and integrating learners' perspectives to offer a more holistic picture of LOA in practice. Longitudinal studies that trace how teachers' perceptions and practices develop after receiving LOA-focused professional development would also be valuable. Moreover, comparative

studies across rural and urban contexts could highlight contextual challenges and affordances. Finally, student-centered investigations examining learners' perceptions of LOA, their views on fairness, and its influence on motivation and engagement could deepen our understanding of how LOA shapes both teaching practices and learning outcomes.

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Appendices

Appendix A: LOA Perceptions and Practice Questionnaire

Section I: Conceptions of LOA

Instructions: Please circle the option that best reflects your level of agreement with each statement.

a. Strongly Agree   b. Agree   c. Not Sure   d. Disagree   e. Strongly Disagree

1. Assessment, learning, and teaching are interrelated.
2. Assessment serves both learning and grading purposes.
3. Learning-oriented assessment supports the process of language learning.
4. Assessment does not improve students' learning.
5. Assessment should respond to the evolving needs of learners.
6. Assessment should address identified learning objectives and help learners achieve them.
7. Learning-oriented assessment contributes to effective teaching.
8. Implementing learning-oriented assessment presents many challenges for teachers.
9. Learning-oriented assessment conflicts with our school's assessment requirements.
10. Many Iraqi teachers have internalized an objective view of assessment and are reluctant to embrace learning-oriented assessment.
11. Learning-oriented assessment is easy to implement.
12. Learning-oriented assessment provides useful evidence of students' learning that teachers can use to plan future lessons.
13. Learning-oriented assessment effectively monitors students' language progress.
14. Learning-oriented assessment is feasible in my teaching context.
15. Iraqi EFL teachers lack the necessary knowledge to implement learning-oriented assessment.
16. Learning-oriented assessment promotes fairness in assessment.
17. Learning-oriented assessment considers the needs of test-takers.
18. Assessment tasks should engage students in meaningful learning activities.
19. Assessment tasks should reflect the kinds of tasks language users perform outside the classroom.
20. Assessment tasks should be deliberately designed as learning tasks.
21. Assessment tasks should be meaningful and require higher-order learning outcomes.
22. Teachers should use multiple types of assessment tasks and techniques to accommodate student diversity.
23. Students should be involved in the assessment process.
24. Involving students in the assessment process through self- or peer-assessment is a waste of time.
25. Students do not like to assess their peers.
26. Peer and self-assessment are subjective and lack reliability.
27. Students should receive sufficient and detailed feedback.
28. Feedback should focus on learning rather than scores.
29. Feedback should relate to the purpose of the assignment and the assessment criteria.
30. Post-feedback actions by teachers should be tailored to students' specific needs.
31. Teaching programs and courses often lack provisions for post-feedback activities due to time or cost constraints.

32. Summative assessment cannot be learning-oriented because its primary purpose is grading.
33. Both summative and formative assessment are necessary for developing effective student learning processes.
34. Learners should be encouraged to be active agents in their own learning and assessment.
35. The most important feedback teachers can provide is the score.
36. Teacher feedback does not promote students' future achievement.
37. Providing feedback is a waste of time because most students only care about their scores.
38. Providing feedback is a waste of time because students do not read it.
39. Assessment criteria should be shared with students.

Section II: Practice of LOA

Instructions: Please indicate how frequently you use each of the following assessment strategies in your classroom by selecting one of the following options:

a. Never   b. Rarely   c. Sometimes   d. Often   e. Always

1. I use end-of-unit tests to assess student learning.
2. I observe students during classroom activities to inform assessment.
3. I ask students to write reflective journals about their learning.
4. I administer mid-term exams as part of my assessment routine.
5. I conduct teacher–student conferences to discuss progress.
6. I use debates as a form of performance-based assessment.
7. I encourage students to assess their own work through self-assessment.
8. I incorporate peer assessment activities in my classroom.
9. I assign individual projects to evaluate student understanding.
10. I assign group projects to assess collaborative learning.
11. I ask students to maintain journals or blogs as part of their assessment.
12. I require students to write reports to demonstrate their learning.
13. I use portfolios to assess student progress over time.
14. I use performance assessments such as presentations or role-plays.
15. I administer quizzes to check student understanding.
16. I use essay exams to evaluate higher-order thinking.
17. I use multiple-choice exams to assess factual knowledge.
18. use fill-in-the-blank questions in my assessments.
19. I vary the format of exams to suit different learning styles.
20. I use true–false questions in my assessments.
21. I use matching items in my assessments.
22. I provide detailed comments on student assignments.
23. I assign grades without providing feedback.
24. I use learning games as part of my assessment strategy.
25. I assign homework that contributes to assessment.
26. I use hands-on activities to assess practical skills.
27. When marking, I only assign grades without further input.
28. When marking, I indicate students' errors.
29. When marking, I write short comments on students' errors.
30. I give feedback on all errors students make.

31. I give feedback only on global or major errors.

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

Instructions: The following semi-structured interview questions were designed to explore teachers' perceptions, practices, and challenges related to LOA, as well as their views on fairness in assessment.

1. What is your general conception of learning-oriented assessment in the EFL classroom?
2. How can learning-oriented assessment be implemented in your teaching context?
3. What are the possible obstacles and challenges in implementing learning-oriented assessment in your context?
4. What is your conception of involving students in the assessment process through self- and peer-assessment?
5. How do you usually design assessment tasks? Should assessment tasks also serve as learning tasks?
6. How can learning-oriented assessment ensure fairness in classroom assessment?