Exploring the Impact of Teaching Experience on Pakistani ESL Teachers' Language Assessment Beliefs: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examines how teaching experience shapes ESL lecturers' beliefs about language assessment in Pakistani higher education. Thirty lecturers from private universities in Karachi participated, categorized as novice, experienced, or expert. Using metaphorical descriptions and semi-structured focus group interviews, the study explored how participants conceptualized assessment and how their views differed across experience levels. Thematic analysis revealed four central perspectives: assessment as a summative tool, a formative tool, a mechanism for generating washback effects, and a reflection of teachers' self-efficacy. Findings indicate that novice lecturers tended to emphasize assessment as a summative process, while more experienced participants viewed it as a formative practice and a means of influencing teaching and learning. The study underscores the role of teaching experience in shaping assessment beliefs and highlights implications for professional development programs aimed at fostering more balanced and reflective assessment practices among ESL lecturers in Pakistan's private universities.

Keywords: Language Assessment; Esl Teachers; Teaching Experience; Assessment Beliefs; Metaphor Analysis

Introduction
Language assessment is a central component of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, shaping instructional practices, monitoring student progress, and informing curriculum development. While extensive research has examined assessment methods and policies, comparatively less attention has been paid to teachers' beliefs about assessment and how these beliefs shift with professional experience (Shohamy, 2001; Stiggins, 2002). Such beliefs are crucial, as they influence how assessments are designed, interpreted, and implemented, ultimately affecting learning outcomes (Zaman, Jawad, & Buriro, 2025).

Assessment is not merely a technical process but a socially situated practice that reflects teachers' perceptions, professional trajectories, and institutional expectations (Davison, 2004). Novice, experienced, and expert teachers often conceptualize assessment differently, which in turn shapes their approaches to summative testing, formative feedback, and classroom evaluation strategies (Remesal, 2011). A clearer understanding of these variations is vital, as professional development programs may overlook teachers' specific needs if experience-based differences are ignored (Mertler, 2004). With growing emphasis on assessment literacy in higher education policy frameworks (Assessment Reform Group, 2002), it becomes essential to explore how teaching experience influences assessment beliefs.

In Pakistan, particularly within the ESL context of private sector universities, lecturers play a pivotal role in preparing students for academic and professional communication. However, the extent to which their assessment beliefs evolve with teaching experience remains underexplored. Given recent educational reforms that highlight the dual role of assessment in grading and supporting learning (Leahy et al., 2005), understanding these beliefs is critical for designing effective teacher education programs.

This study addresses this gap by examining the metaphors used by novice, experienced, and expert lecturers in Karachi's private universities to conceptualize assessment. By analyzing these metaphors alongside focus group discussions, the study highlights how teaching experience shapes assessment beliefs and what this implies for teacher training and professional growth.

Problem Statement
Language assessment is a critical component of ESL education, directly influencing instructional decisions, student learning outcomes, and curriculum development. Despite its importance, limited research has examined how teachers' beliefs about language assessment are shaped by their teaching experience, particularly in the context of Pakistani private universities. Novice, experienced, and expert teachers may hold differing conceptions of assessment, affecting how they design, implement, and interpret evaluation practices. While novice teachers may rely more on standardized testing due to limited classroom exposure, experienced teachers often adopt more flexible, reflective, and formative approaches. These variations in assessment beliefs can lead to inconsistencies in evaluation, potential inequities in student feedback, and gaps in instructional effectiveness. Understanding how metaphorical conceptions of teachers' roles influence their assessment practices is therefore essential for identifying experience-based patterns, informing professional development programs, and enhancing assessment literacy among ESL instructors.

Research Objectives
The study aims to:
Explore how novice, experienced, and expert ESL teachers in Pakistani private universities conceptualize language assessment using metaphorical frameworks.
Examine differences in language assessment beliefs across varying levels of teaching experience.
Investigate the influence of teaching experience on ESL teachers' decision-making, classroom assessment practices, and overall approaches to language assessment.
Provide insights to inform targeted professional development programs that address teachers' assessment literacy needs at different career stages.

Research Questions
How do novice, experienced, and expert ESL teachers in private universities conceptualize language assessment through metaphors?
In what ways do beliefs about language assessment differ based on the teachers' levels of experience?
How does teaching experience shape ESL teachers' overall beliefs, classroom practices, and decision-making in language assessment?
What implications do these experience-based beliefs have for designing professional development and assessment literacy programs in the Pakistani ESL university context?

Significance of the Study
This study is significant as it provides critical insights into how teaching experience shapes ESL teachers' beliefs and practices regarding language assessment in Pakistani private universities. By examining metaphorical representations of assessment held by novice, experienced, and expert lecturers, the research highlights the cognitive frameworks underlying assessment decisions and instructional strategies. Understanding these experience-based differences can inform the design of targeted professional development programs, enhance assessment literacy, and promote more consistent, equitable, and reflective evaluation practices in ESL classrooms. Furthermore, the findings contribute to broader discussions on teacher cognition, assessment reform, and curriculum improvement, offering practical implications for administrators, policymakers, and teacher educators seeking to optimize assessment practices at the tertiary level.

Literature Review
Metaphor is a fundamental cognitive tool that allows individuals to understand abstract concepts through concrete experiences (Littlemore, 2019). Far from being confined to literary language, metaphors play a critical role in everyday cognition and communication. For instance, Shakespeare's famous phrase, "All the world's a stage" (Shakespeare, 1623/2007), illustrates how metaphors can reshape human understanding by mapping one domain of experience onto another. In language education, metaphors serve as powerful instruments to help students grasp teaching and learning processes (Cameron, 2003). They not only facilitate comprehension but also promote critical thinking by framing learning experiences conceptually—for example, portraying student growth as a 'journey' emphasizes the gradual and often challenging nature of language learning (Boers & Lindstromberg, 2008). Such conceptual metaphors influence how both educators and learners perceive the teaching–learning process (Zaman, Chandio, & Noor, 2025).
Teachers often employ metaphors to describe their pedagogical beliefs and approaches (Zhang & Waring, 2018). These metaphors reflect how instructors define their roles and responsibilities, which in turn shapes classroom practices (Leung, 2014). For example, an instructor who sees themselves as a "transmitter of knowledge" may adopt a teacher-centered approach, whereas one who views themselves as a "guide" tends to implement more student-centered strategies (Richards & Farrell, 2005). Understanding these metaphorical frameworks can help teachers make informed decisions regarding instructional design, professional identity, and classroom practices.
Metaphors are also central to teachers' perceptions of assessment. Traditionally,

assessment has been conceptualized as a tool for measuring student achievement,

reflecting an education system oriented toward quantifiable outcomes (Brookhart, 2013). Contemporary perspectives, however, emphasize formative assessment as a tool to support learning rather than simply evaluate it (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Teachers make continual assessment-related decisions in classrooms, highlighting the need for a nuanced understanding of assessment practices (Leung, 2014). Despite growing attention to assessment literacy, many educators feel inadequately prepared to design and implement effective assessment strategies (Xu & Brown, 2016). In Pakistan's ESL university context, this gap is particularly significant, as instructors must navigate linguistic, cultural, and educational diversity when assessing student performance (McNamara & Shohamy, 2008).

Teaching experience plays a pivotal role in shaping assessment beliefs and practices. Experienced teachers often possess greater confidence and flexibility, enabling them to balance formative and summative assessments and tailor evaluation strategies to student needs (Crawford, 2019; Liu & Xu, 2017). They are also more likely to engage with professional development programs to refine their assessment skills and align them with pedagogical goals (Black & Wiliam, 2018; Bell & Cowie, 2001). In contrast, novice instructors, although well-versed in theoretical aspects of assessment, may rely more on standardized tests and external benchmarks due to limited practical experience, viewing assessment primarily as a tool for grading rather than facilitating learning (Smith & Sato, 2018). This distinction underscores the importance of accounting for teaching experience when exploring ESL teachers' assessment beliefs, particularly in private university contexts where instructors' decisions directly influence students' academic outcomes and language proficiency development.

Research Method
This study employs a qualitative exploratory design to investigate the assessment beliefs of ESL lecturers teaching in the BS English program at a private university preparatory program in Pakistan. Anchored in the interpretivist paradigm, the research emphasizes an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives within their specific social and professional contexts (Creswell, 2013). Metaphor analysis serves as the primary methodological tool, as metaphors provide valuable insights into educators' conceptual and cognitive frameworks, revealing implicit beliefs and attitudes toward assessment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Saban et al., 2006). Complementing this, focus group discussions offer a platform for participants to articulate and elaborate on their views, thereby enriching the interpretation of metaphorical data (Krueger & Casey, 2015). The combination of these methods enhances the credibility, depth, and comprehensiveness of the findings, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how teaching experience shapes ESL lecturers' assessment practices in the BS English program.

Setting and Participants
Thirty ESL lecturers teaching in the BS English program at a private university in Karachi participated in this study. Participants were selected using convenience sampling, a non-probability sampling technique in which individuals are chosen based on accessibility and willingness to participate (Dörnyei, 2007). The lecturers had teaching experience ranging from one to over twenty years and were responsible for various assessment-related tasks, including grading assignments, evaluating final examinations, and making decisions about students' progression in the program. For analytical

purposes, participants were categorized into three groups: ten novice lecturers with one to four years of teaching experience, ten experienced lecturers with six to ten years of

Experience, and ten expert lecturers with more than ten years of experience, all holding postgraduate qualifications in English Language Teaching (three with doctorates and seven with master's degrees) All thirty participants demonstrated a strong interest in language assessment, making them suitable for the study.

Instrumentation
This qualitative study explored the assessment beliefs of novice, experienced, and expert ESL lecturers in the BS English program at a private university in Karachi. Participants (n = 30) completed a written task providing demographic details and responding to the prompt: "A language assessment is like …" using a metaphor and justification, reflecting their conceptual understanding of assessment (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Emerging themes were validated by two ELT doctorate holders.

Additionally, semi-structured focus group interviews were conducted with nine lecturers from each experience group to gather deeper insights into assessment practices. This format allowed flexible discussion of beliefs, practices, and emerging ideas, complementing the metaphor analysis and strengthening the study's credibility (Bryman, 2008).

Here's a concise, journal-style version of your **Data Analysis** section:

Data Analysis
Qualitative data were analyzed using manual coding, a hands-on approach suitable for small-scale research (Cameron, 2003). Metaphors from participants' written responses were examined for meaning, grouped by similarity, and non-relevant items were excluded. Recurrent patterns were identified, and validated metaphors were clustered into themes. These themes were reviewed with two ELT experts to enhance trustworthiness.

Finally, metaphors were categorized by teaching experience (novice, experienced, expert) and organized into four overarching themes: assessment as a summative tool, assessment as a formative tool, assessment as a tool for washback effect, and assessment as a reflection of self-efficacy. Focus group interview data were integrated to explore the relationship between teaching experience and assessment beliefs, with themes defined based on recurring topics, vocabulary, activities, meanings, or proverbs (Taylor & Bogdan, 1989).

Findings
The metaphor analysis of ESL lecturers' perspectives revealed four principal themes regarding language assessment: assessment as a summative tool, assessment as a formative tool, assessment as a tool for washback effect, and assessment as a reflection of self-efficacy. These themes reflect how teachers' professional experiences, contextual factors, and institutional expectations shape their assessment beliefs. The findings highlight distinct approaches to assessment across career stages, offering insight into how novice, experienced, and expert instructors conceptualize and implement assessment practices in a university preparatory context.

Assessment as a Summative Tool
The metaphors identified under the theme assessment as a summative tool highlight high-stkes evaluations that carry significant point values and evoke a sense of challenge.

Participants likened assessment to barriers, mandatory military service, or compelling a child to eat, reflecting both the pressure of evaluation and the measurement of learning outcomes. Other metaphors emphasized the acquisition of knowledge, such as "just

enough to eat" (P3), "quick access to desired information" (P7), "play dough for shaping" (P12), or "a bracket for separation" (P18). Additionally, some metaphors represented assessment as a method of evaluating student performance against established standards, including "an umbrella of skills" (P5), "tying knots together" (P10), "using binoculars for focus" (P22), and "a measuring tape" (P28).

Among the four themes, novice teachers predominantly conceptualized assessment as a summative tool, with 11 of 30 metaphors falling into this category. This trend suggests a strong perception of assessment as an endpoint rather than an ongoing process. Such a perspective may arise from institutional and stakeholder expectations, where teachers are required to provide a comprehensive overview of student achievement and demonstrate their own effectiveness. Moreover, many novice teachers have experienced an educational culture heavily oriented toward testing throughout their academic journey, reinforcing the prominence of summative assessment.

While formative assessment remains an integral, though often less visible, component of teaching, summative assessment tends to be more conspicuous. This aligns with Sharpley and Edgar's (1986) observation that teachers' judgments of student success significantly influence classroom and school-level decisions. Although summative assessments are typically conducted at the end of instructional periods, they can also serve diagnostic purposes. Nonetheless, research indicates that educators frequently encounter challenges in interpreting and responding effectively to the data generated from summative assessments (Popham, 1999).

Assessment as a Formative Tool
The metaphors categorized under assessment as a formative tool (see Appendix 3) highlight assessment as a continuous and reflective process designed by skilled educators. Participants likened assessment to "a formula" (P2), "assembling jigsaw pieces" (P8), "starting anew" (P14), or "a guidebook" (P21), emphasizing its role in supporting ongoing learning and improvement. Other metaphors depicted formative assessment as a means of identifying strengths and weaknesses in both teaching and learning, such as "a mirror" (P4), "a collaborative effort" (P11), "learning through mistakes" (P17), "meticulous observation" (P25), and "overseeing success" (P30).

Formative assessment is widely recognized as "a systematic process to continually gather evidence about student learning" (Heritage, 2007, p.141), helping educators bridge gaps in knowledge and skill (Gallagher & Worth, 2008). Although generally embraced by teachers and policymakers, implementation challenges persist. These include the tension between formative and summative assessments, inconsistencies between evaluation and instructional practices, and concerns about the additional time and resources required for ongoing assessment.

Within this theme, metaphors provided by expert teachers surpassed those of novice and experienced educators, suggesting that less experienced teachers may perceive formative assessment as resource-intensive and time-consuming. Many educators still prioritize preparing students for summative tests due to institutional accountability pressures. Nonetheless, formative assessment offers substantial learning benefits, particularly for less experienced teachers (Martinez & Martinez, 1992). Collaboration between novice and veteran teachers can further enhance pedagogical content knowledge: novice

instructors gain insights from experienced colleagues, while expert teachers benefit from reflecting on diverse student learning experiences.

Assessment as a Washback Effect Tool

The washback effect refers to "the impact of testing on teaching and learning" (Gates, 1995). Participants used metaphors to capture this effect, including "a refill" (P3), "mathematical proofing" (P9), "a checklist" (P15), "two-way interaction" (P19), "a checkup" (P24), and "sunshine after planting" (P28), illustrating how assessments shape instructional decisions and student learning behaviors.

Analysis of the metaphors indicates that experienced teachers emphasized the washback effect more strongly than novice or expert colleagues (Figure 4). This finding suggests that seasoned educators possess a nuanced understanding of assessment systems, particularly when outcomes carry high-stakes consequences. Novice teachers, who ranked this influence second, shared during interviews that they had personally experienced the pressures of washback throughout their own education, affecting their approach to both teaching and assessment.

Fullilove (1992, p. 131) observed that "the nature and strength of this washback effect, along with its benefits or drawbacks, largely depend on the overall educational system, the nature of other stakeholders involved in developing or establishing competing curricula, and, of course, the types of examinations being considered." The metaphors generated in this study underscore how teachers at different stages of their careers interpret the washback effect, highlighting its role in shaping both instructional strategies and assessment practices.

Assessment as a Reflection of Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, defined by Bandura (1997) as "the belief in one's own abilities to plan and carry out the actions needed to achieve specific goals" (p. 3), was reflected in only a small portion of the metaphors generated by participants. Out of thirty metaphors, just four fell under this category, highlighting assessment as an indicator of teachers' confidence in their capabilities. These metaphors included "creating a best-selling film" (P2), "navigating successfully" (P12), "excelling at cooking" (P21), and "painting" (P29), each illustrating personal agency, skill application, and achievement.

Among the four themes identified in the study, self-efficacy had the fewest metaphors (Figure 5), suggesting that most teachers do not strongly associate assessment with their belief in personal capability. Gist and Mitchell (1992) argue that evaluating one's abilities involves reflecting on task demands, attributing successes or failures, and assessing how each performance impacts self-efficacy. In this context, teachers' tendency to attribute challenges or setbacks to external factors—such as curriculum demands, student motivation, or institutional policies—may explain the limited representation of self-efficacy metaphors.

Interestingly, novice teachers (P1–P10) demonstrated a stronger connection between assessment and self-efficacy than their experienced and expert counterparts. While some literature suggests a positive relationship between years of teaching experience and efficacy beliefs (Lin & Tsai, 1999), other studies indicate conflicting outcomes (Woolfolk, 1990; Gorrell & Dharmadasa, 1994), and some scholars find no significant correlation at all (Guskey, 1987). These inconsistencies highlight the complex and

context-dependent nature of teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy, emphasizing that confidence in assessment practices may not be directly determined by years of experience but also by individual beliefs, situational factors, and institutional culture.

Discussion

Consistent with previous research (Remesal, 2011; Yin, 2010; Sahinkarakas, 2012), this study confirms that EFL teachers hold diverse beliefs that significantly influence their instructional and assessment practices. The analysis of metaphors in this study revealed four primary themes: assessment as a summative tool, assessment as a formative tool, assessment as a washback effect tool, and assessment as a reflection of self-efficacy. These findings highlight how teaching experience shapes educators' perceptions and approaches to assessment.

A substantial number of novice teachers (P1–P10) conceptualized assessment primarily as a summative tool, suggesting a tendency to prioritize external expectations and provide a comprehensive overview of student achievement. This aligns with the literature that portrays summative assessment as "evaluation of learning," typically conducted at the end of a course to assign grades (Stiggins, 2002; Earl, 2003). The focus on summative assessment among novice teachers may reflect their own experiences as students in exam-oriented educational systems, as well as institutional pressures to demonstrate measurable outcomes. Experienced and expert teachers (P11–P30), however, exhibited a more balanced understanding, acknowledging summative assessment while also recognizing its potential to inform instruction and support learning development.

Formative assessment emerged as the second most prevalent metaphor, especially among experienced and expert teachers (P11–P30). These educators emphasized its role as a continuous, reflective process that guides teaching and promotes student learning. Formative assessment, often described as "assessment for learning" (Stiggins, 2002; Derrich & Ecclestone, 2006), was represented in metaphors such as "assembling jigsaw pieces" (P14) and "a guidebook" (P19), illustrating its function in identifying strengths and weaknesses and adapting instruction accordingly. Despite widespread acknowledgment of its importance, teachers across experience levels reported challenges in implementing formative assessment due to a lack of clear frameworks, limited time, and resource constraints.

The theme of assessment as a washback effect tool was particularly emphasized by experienced teachers (P16–P25), who recognized the impact of assessment on teaching practices and curriculum design. Metaphors like "checklist" (P20) and "sunshine after planting" (P23) reflected an understanding of how assessments shape instructional priorities and influence student learning outcomes. Novice teachers (P1–P10) acknowledged this effect as well, albeit less prominently, likely drawing on personal experiences of examination-driven schooling. These findings corroborate Fullilove's (1992) assertion that the nature and strength of washback depend on educational systems, stakeholder expectations, and the type of assessments used.

Finally, assessment as a reflection of self-efficacy was the least represented theme, with only a few metaphors from novice teachers (P3, P6) such as "navigating successfully" and "excelling at cooking". This suggests that teachers may generally attribute success or failure to a combination of personal, situational, and institutional factors rather than linking assessment directly to their capabilities. While research presents mixed findings regarding the relationship between teaching experience and self-efficacy (Lin & Tsai, 1999; Woolfolk, 1990; Guskey, 1987), the results indicate that novice teachers may

perceive formative and summative assessment as opportunities to develop professional confidence.

These findings emphasize the importance of enhancing teachers' assessment literacy, particularly in formative assessment, and providing clear, practical frameworks to support reflective practice. Collaboration between novice and experienced teachers can further facilitate knowledge sharing, improving pedagogical strategies and promoting learner-centered instruction.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that ESL teachers' beliefs about language assessment in Pakistani private university preparatory programs are strongly influenced by their teaching experience. Novice lecturers primarily view assessment as a summative tool, focusing on grades and meeting external expectations, whereas experienced and expert lecturers perceive assessment as both summative and formative, using it to guide student learning and provide constructive feedback. The washback effect and self-efficacy dimensions were less frequently emphasized, suggesting that these areas require greater attention in teacher training. The findings highlight the importance of professional development programs that enhance assessment literacy, particularly in formative assessment practices, and encourage collaboration between novice and experienced teachers to foster reflective and learner-centered pedagogy. Although the study is limited by its sample size and setting, it provides meaningful insights for improving ESL assessment practices, informing policy, and guiding future research in Pakistani higher education contexts.

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