

INVESTIGATING UNIVERSITY TEACHERS' BEHAVIOR: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF STATE AND AZAD TEACHERS' EVALUATION STANDARDS; GRADING PRACTICES IN FOCUS

INVESTIGANDO O COMPORTAMENTO
DOS PROFESSORES UNIVERSITÁRIOS:
UM ESTUDO COMPARATIVO DOS
PADRÕES DE AVALIAÇÃO DOS
PROFESSORES ESTADUAIS E DO AZAD;
PRÁTICAS DE CLASSIFICAÇÃO EM FOCO

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Abstract: The current study was set up to investigate to what extent Iranian EFL university teachers considered various non-achievement factors (i.e. effort, behavior and ability) in assigning final grades. In addition, it explored whether the teachers in Iranian State and Azad universities differed in their grading practices. To this end, a total number of 50 Iranian EFL university teachers of both genders in public (N=25) and private universities (N=25) in Mashhad, Iran were selected based on convenience random sampling. The main instrument of the study was an adapted version of the questionnaire used by McMillan (2001). The findings revealed that most Iranian university teachers maintained that behavior of the testers was among the non-achievement factors in assigning final grades. In addition, the findings showed that there was a significant difference between Iranian State and Azad university teachers in terms of grading practices.

Keywords: University Teachers' Behavior; Iranian State and Azad Universities; Teachers' Evaluation Standards; Grading Practices.

Resumo: O presente estudo foi criado para investigar em que medida os professores universitários do EFL iraniano consideraram vários fatores de não realização (ou seja, esforço, comportamento e habilidade) na atribuição de notas finais. Além disso, explorou se os professores do Estado iraniano e das universidades de Azad diferiam em suas práticas de classificação. Para este fim, um número total de 50 professores universitários iranianos de ambos os sexos em universidades públicas (N = 25) e privadas (N = 25) em Mashhad, Irã foram selecionados com base em amostragem aleatória por conveniência. O principal instrumento do estudo foi uma versão adaptada do questionário utilizado por McMillan (2001). As descobertas revelaram que a maioria dos professores universitários iranianos afirmou que o comportamento dos testadores estava entre os fatores de não realização na atribuição de notas finais. Além disso, os resultados mostraram que houve uma diferença significativa entre o Estado iraniano e os professores universitários de Azad em termos de práticas de classificação.

Palavras-chave: comportamento dos professores universitários; Estado iraniano e universidades de Azad; Padrões de avaliação dos professores; Práticas de classificação.

Introduction

Grading is the process of making decisions through which teachers have to make value judgments about students learning and attainment from what has been taught during a course (Sun & Cheng, 2014). More specifically, grading is defined as “the reporting of a student achievement or progress for a report card period or a term” (Brookhart, 1994, as cited in Zulaiha, 2017, p. 16). According to Frisbie and Waltman (1992), grading is considered as a symbol of the students’ achievement of what has been taught in a teaching and learning program. It is proposed that the primary goal of the use of grades is to present feedback to students and parents of the success of students and the process of learning (O’Connor, 2007; Zulaiha, 2017).

Grading plays an important role in education. Grading can have a great influence on students’ attitudes, motivation, and their perceptions of themselves and even on some aspects of their future life in both short and long-term (Alm & Colnerud, 2015). Thus because of the impact of grades, teachers’ grading practices and what a grade represents are under increasing scrutiny (Sun & Cheng, 2014)

In recent years issues surrounding teachers’ grading practices have attracted much research attention. The primary question in many of the studies has been about what a grade should be comprised of (Zulaiha, 2017). In some cases, it is proposed that a grade should only be a judgment of academic achievement, indicating that grades should not include non-achievement factors, or achievement enablers, including effort and study habit (McMillan, 2008). Some studies have uncovered discrepancies between what assessment scholars believe and what teachers do in the process of grading (Dyrness & Dyrness, 2008; Guskey, 2011; McMillan, 2008; Merwin, 1989; O’Connor, 2007; Randall & Engelhard, 2009; Wormeli, 2006; Yesbeck, 2011, cited in Randall & Engelhard, 2009). Even when teachers follow the same grading scales under the same grading policy, the assigned grades by teachers differ considerably (McMillan, 2008). Such discrepancies are the results of different influencing factors categorized as internal and external factors. Teachers’ attitudes toward teaching and learning are examples of the former and the influence of high stakes tests, parents’ pressure, and mandated policies are external factors (McMillan & Nash, 2000). In other words, these influencing factors lead to various grading practices through which teachers consider achievement and non-achievement factors while assigning grades to students.

Different studies have investigated how teachers deal with non-achievement factors in different contexts. Randall and Engelhard (2010) found that despite the fact that teachers abided by official grading policy, in some cases they took students’ characteristics such as behavior, motivation and effort into account. In another study, Simon, Chitpin and Yahya (2010) found that students’ effort, participation and late or missed assignments were the influencing factors in the participants’ beliefs about grading.

Grades are reported as the most commonly used signs to convey students’ level of mastery of content. Grades are used to report students’ achievement to students, to parents and to other stakeholders. In other words, grades are the language through which teachers and schools talk to others about learners’ achievements and progress. Thus, according to Brookhart (1994, as cited in Zulaiha, 2017), grades should be easily interpretable; they have to convey a one-dimensional meaning. Yet it can hardly be claimed that grades, even in one school assigned by different teachers, have identical meanings (McMillan, 2001). These meanings can be derived only when all teachers follow the same standards in their grading practices. Brookhart (1994) reports that many classroom teachers do not follow recommended practices for grading. Three main reasons were mentioned for existence of discrepancies between recommended and actual practices. First, teachers disagree on the definition of best practice in grading. Secondly, sometimes recommended practices do not take some practical aspects of teaching into account. The third reason has to do with teachers’ inadequate training and expertise in principles and procedures of sound testing (Brookhart, 1994, as cited in Zulaiha, 2017).

Whatever the reasons for this haphazard practice of grading is, classroom grades have been recognized as highly unreliable because of the divergent criteria teachers take into account in assigning them (Guskey, 2006). This creates a situation wherein grades cannot be compared even across classrooms in one single school. Despite the fact that grades cannot be compared because they are assigned based on diverse sets of criteria, in reality grades are compared for making some

important decisions. In Iran, grades assigned by teachers constitute part of the score based on which students are admitted to tertiary education institutions. In addition, teachers' grades are the sole criterion in licensing students to go from one grade to the next. At tertiary level, grades enjoy the same power and importance in the undergraduate and graduate programs too. In short, for students at all levels grades can bring success or spell failure and disaster.

Similar importance is attached to grades in language education too. There is no evidence that EFL teachers are categorically different in their grading practices. On the contrary, we can argue that a set of additional challenges makes fair and valid grading even more difficult for language teachers. For instance, whereas in other subject areas, the construct of interest for grading is commonly clear and well-defined, this is not the case in language testing (Bachman, 1990). Despite decades of research, language scholars are yet to agree on what constitutes language proficiency. Add to this the same contextual factors that complicate grading in other subject areas and we would end up with a very complicated situation. As far as we are aware, the grading practices of English teachers in Iran have not been the subject of empirical research. Nor is it known how grading practices vary across various language education institutes. Given the central importance of grades in the constructing language learners' identity and the consequences grades have in building or ruining their occupational and education prospects, it comes as a surprise that they have not been on the agenda of researchers.

Because of the undeniable influence that grades exert on students' attitudes and their self-concept as well as on their learning processes and outcomes, it is imperative that grading practices be subject of more academic inquiry. However, as of yet most research on grading practices has been done in general education (see Brookhart, 1993; McMillan, 2001; Guskey, 2011; Randall & Engelhard, 2009; Yesbeck, 2011) and EFL teachers' grading practices remain understudied. In particular, little research, if any, has been done on the grading practices of Iranian EFL teachers. Nor are we aware of any studies comparing teachers' grading practices in public and Azad universities. Accordingly the intent of this study was twofold. First, it sought to examine factors that affected EFL teachers' grading practices. Secondly, it investigated whether the context of teaching, state versus Azad universities, bore on EFL teachers' practice of grades. Thus, the following research questions were posed:

RQ1. To what extent do Iranian EFL university teachers consider various non-achievement factors (i.e. effort, behavior and ability) in assigning final grades?

RQ2. Do teachers in state and Azad universities differ in their grading practices?

Literature Review

There are a wide range of studies on grading practices and factors involved. Brookhart (1993) studied the meanings which teachers associated with grades and also value judgments they made when they considered grades. She also investigated the relationship between values and meanings teachers associated with grades and teachers' competencies in testing and assessment. It was found that measurement instruction affect teachers' opinion about meaning of grades but it does not change their thinking about values and social consequences.

McMillan (2001) investigated factors that teachers used to grade students, types of assessments teachers used, cognitive level of assessments and the grades assigned. He concludes that teachers used various non-achievement factors to assign grades to students. Later studies have reported similar findings (Guskey, 2011; Randall & Engelhard, 2009; Yesbeck, 2011). In Wang's study, effort was the criterion Chinese teachers most frequently used for grading, which is, according to the author, not surprising in the Chinese context because they believe that learning is the result of effort rather than ability (Wang, 2008).

Using scenarios to collect data from a large number of teachers in southern United States, Randall and Engelhard (2010) found that four factors were given consideration by teachers in assigning grades: academic achievement, ability, effort and behavior. It was even found that more weight was given to less reliable measures such as effort and behavior. The latter was given even more value, especially when they were dealing with border line cases.

Nata, Pereira and Neves (2014) did an eleven-year-study on Portugal educational system and found that independent private schools systematically suffer from more grade inflation resulting in

unfairness in access to higher education. They maintain that there is pressure for high grading in the context of educational consumerism, specifically schools which are subject to market pressures namely private fee paying schools are the ones which are motivated to inflate their students' grades.

Different influential factors on teachers grading in another study were studied. Yesbeck (2011) investigated what influence teachers' grading practices, what academic and what non-academic factors were considered and what beliefs and values were used to determine those factors and what are the gaps between teachers grading and what measurement experts have recommended. Teachers are influenced by their teacher-student experiences, their collaborations with other teachers and other factors. Some of the participants claimed that experience has the greatest influence. Some of them claim that mentors had influence on their decision making especially during their first years of teaching. While some other teachers mentioned objectives of the course and instruction influences that grading. In this study tests, projects and quizzes were all considered as academic factors by teachers yet classwork and homework were difficult to be labeled or categorized. One of the teachers listed homework or class works are effort-based and therefore should not be graded non-academic factors include students work habits, participation, behavior, effort, responsibility and organizational system. Teachers confess that they take such factors into account mostly when students are on the borderline. In sum, the existing evidence indicates that grades are not a mere reflection of students' achievements; rather, they are the composite of many other factors which are statistically not amenable to adding up.

In EFL/ESL contexts, a few studies have addressed grading in English education. For instance, Cheng and Wang (2007) surveyed 74 ESL/EFL university teachers from three different contexts (Canada, Hong Kong and China), investigating teachers' classroom assessment practices, especially in grading, feedback and the way they report students' achievement. Teachers were also asked about the type of marking criteria, analytic, holistic or rubric scoring they used and their reasons for their preferences. Reasons for choosing each criterion were classified as type of the assessment, function of the marking criteria, validity and reliability, and also context of assessment. For instance, Canadian teachers used analytic scoring to diagnose students' learning problems. Teachers in Hong Kong used analytic scoring because of its being objective and easier for standardization or being proper for examining sub-skills, whereas Chinese teachers used this type of scoring because they found it useful to focus students' attention on the accuracy of language. With the Canadian teachers preferring analytic scoring, Chinese favoring holistic scoring and Hong Kong teachers opting for rubric scoring, it was obvious that contextual factors do bear on teachers' grading practices.

Cheng and Sun (2015) investigated the effect of three teacher-related and teaching related variables including grade level, assessment training and class size on grading decision making of Chinese secondary school English language teachers. They administered a questionnaire to 350 secondary school English language teachers in China. Descriptive analyses showed that the participants considered both "achievement and non-achievement factors in grading", and put higher emphasis on "non-achievement factors, such as effort, homework, and study habits" (p. 213). It was also shown that they used various types of assessment, "including performance and project-based assessment, teacher self-developed assessment, as well as paper and pencil tests for grading" (p. 213). In addition, the inferential results indicated that "both internal and external factors, such as the grade level teachers teach, the assessment training they have received, and their class size affect different aspects of their grading decision making" (p. 213).

Methodology

Participants

A total number of 50 Iranian EFL university teachers of both genders in public (N=25) and private universities (N=25) in Mashhad, Iran were selected based on convenience random sampling. In addition, twenty teachers comprised the pilot study participants. In fact, they were all selected on a convenience basis given that it was beyond the researcher's resources to secure a random sample. They ranged between 32 to 48 years old. Gender of the participants was not considered as a variable in the present study.

Instrument

The instrument used to collect data in this study, was an adapted version of the questionnaire used by McMillan (2001). This questionnaire was the only available questionnaire to capture the teachers' classroom assessment and grading practices (Appendix A). The following steps were taken to make sure the inferences made based on the collected data were defensible. First, as a decentering procedure (Chapman & Carter, 1979), the questionnaire was examined for content that might not have cultural equivalents in the context of the present study. Secondly, the questionnaire was translated into Persian and back translated to English and the equivalence of the original English and the back-translated versions are assessed. Afterwards, its internal consistency was examined using Cronbach's alpha procedure. Finally, the structural fidelity of the questionnaire was studied using confirmatory factor analysis (CFA).

The questionnaire consisted of 41 items divided into two parts. The first part asked the participants' level and course they were teaching (7 items). The second part sought to find out the participants' grading practices (34 items).

Procedure

For the state and Azad universities, the questionnaires were delivered to the participants in person in their workplaces with prior arrangements with the offices. In addition, some of the questionnaires were sent via email or in person. At first, the participants were assured that participation in the study was voluntary, that their answers remained confidential, and that the collected data were used for research purposes only. After explaining the nature and objectives of the study to the participants, they were instructed on how to fill the questionnaire in the presence of the researcher. Given the number of items, it was estimated that it did not take participants longer than a half an hour to complete the questionnaire.

Results

To answer the first research question, descriptive statistics including measures of frequency, central tendency and variance were used. To answer the second research question, first the normality of the data was examined. Then, if the assumption was met, the independent-samples t-tests were used to compare state and Azad university teachers' grading practices. To do so, a sum score based on all the items in the questionnaire was computed for each participant teacher and the mean scores were compared. In addition, the two groups were also compared regarding their scores on each subscale of the questionnaire, too. Table 1 represents the descriptive statistics of both groups.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of Two Groups

G	N	Min.	Max.	M	SD
State	25	2.42	4.89	3.65	0.637
Azad	25	2.07	3.62	2.84	0.528
Total	50	2.24	4.25	3.24	0.582

Now, to examine to what extent Iranian EFL university teachers considered various non-achievement factors (i.e. effort, behavior and ability) in assigning final grades, each section was assessed based on the participants' responses. Table 2 displays the frequency and percentage of results.

Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Non-achievement Factors

Factors	Freq.	Percentage
Effort	31	25.3

Behavior	48	45.9
Ability	14	28.8
Total	93	100

According to Table 2, the participants believed that behavior of the testers had the highest frequency as the main non-achievement factors in assigning final grades in contrast to other factors, namely, effort and ability. Moreover, an independent samples t-test was run to compare state and Azad university teachers' grading practices. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-Test

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig.(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	0.25	0.615	-2.69	49	0.009	-2.900	1.076	-5.054	-0.745
Equal variances not assumed			-2.69	57.6	0.009	-2.900	1.076	-5.054	-0.745

As Tables 3 illustrates, there was a significant difference between the university teachers in Azad universities (M =13.43, SD=4.32) and State universities (M=16.33, SD =4.01) ($t = 2.69, p = .009, df = 49$).

Discussion & Conclusion

The current study was set up to investigate to what extent Iranian EFL university teachers considered various non-achievement factors (i.e. effort, behavior and ability) in assigning final grades. In addition, it explored whether the teachers in Iranian State and Azad universities differed in their grading practices. The findings revealed that most Iranian university teachers maintained that behavior of the testers was among the non-achievement factors in assigning final grades. In addition, the findings showed that there was a significant difference between Iranian State and Azad university teachers in terms of grading practices.

According to Cheng and Wang (2007), the grading practices for most teachers are considered to be important to do appropriately because students need to know their real ability in order to be able to make progress in learning. Moreover, the results also showed that teachers have varied responses on the factors that influence their grading practices. The teachers experienced difficulty in avoiding factors which may affect their grading. Those factors varied in their forms including internal and external factors (Dyrness & Dyrness, 2008). In conclusion, Iranian EFL university teachers tended to employ their own assessment and grading practices based on their belief, knowledge, education background, experiences, school policy, norms and assessment principles. The teachers also preferred conducting their own assessment policy rather than national policy.

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Appendix A

Assessment and Grading Practices of Secondary Classroom Teachers

Thank you for taking the time to complete this short survey. It is focused on your current assessment and grading practices for one of the courses you teach within an inclusive classroom setting. In order to assure anonymity, please do not put your name or the name of your school on the survey. By completing this survey it is understood that you do so voluntarily and that you consent to the use of your responses in the study.

This survey consists of three parts:

Part 1 Background Information.

Part 2 34 selected response questions.

Please clearly indicate your response by shading the bubble completely.

Please do not use checkmarks (✓) or an (x).

Example: in responding to this survey, I am doing so for (select one):

Math Science Social Science Practical Arts

Part 3 Four open-ended questions.

PART 1 In responding to the following questions, please do so considering one level and course you are currently teaching or have taught recently.

1. In responding to this survey, I am doing so for (select one):

- Grade 9
- Grade 10
- Grade 11
- Grade 12

2. In responding to this survey, I am doing so for (select one):

- Math
- Science
- English Language Arts
- Social Sciences
- Practical Arts
- Other

3. Number of students in the class:

- less than 15
- 15 - 25
- 26 - 35
- more than 35

4. Number of students in the class with special needs (for example: LD, ESL, gifted, autistic, emotional, physical and psychological exceptionalities and any other students with needs that may or may not receive funding and/or support)

- less than 5
- 6 - 10
- 11 - 21
- more than 21

5. To what extent are you prepared to meet the challenges of teaching in an inclusive classroom?

- not at all prepared
- a little prepared
- somewhat prepared
- quite prepared
- completely prepared

6. Have you taken any additional courses in special education, other than the one required for completion of your Bachelor of Education?

- Yes
- No

7. Have you taken any university courses in classroom assessment (for example: measurement and evaluation)?

- Yes
- No

PART 2 Please select the response that best matches your grading practices, based on the level and course you identified in Part 1.

	Not at all	Very Little	Some	Quite a Bit	Extensively	Completely
A. Factors you use in determining grades						
1. Performance compared to a scale of percentage correct (eg. 86.94% = B)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
2. Specific learning objectives mastered	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
3. Academic performance as opposed to other factors	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
4. Inclusion of zeros for incomplete assignments in the determination of final percentage	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
5. Ability levels of the students	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
6. Student effort – how much the student tried to learn	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
7. Quality of completed homework (graded)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
8. Completion of homework (not graded)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
9. Degree to which the student pays attention and/or participates in class	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
10. Effort, improvement, behaviour and other "nontest" indicators for borderline cases	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
11. Improved performance since the beginning of the year	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
12. Work habits and neatness	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
13. Extra credit for academic performance	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
14. Performance compared to other students in the class	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
15. Disruptive student performance	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥

	Not at all	Very Little	Some	Quite a Bit	Extensively	Completely
16. Extra credit for nonacademic performance (eg. bringing items for the food drive)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
17. Formal or informal school or division policy of the percentage of students who may obtain A's, B's, C's, D's and F's	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
18. Performance compared to students from previous years	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
19. Grade distributions of other teachers	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
B. Types of assessments you use						
20. Assessments designed primarily by yourself	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
21. Performance quizzes	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
22. Objective assessments (eg. multiple choice, matching, short answer)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
23. Essay-type questions	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
24. Performance assessments (eg. structured teacher observations or ratings of performance such as a speech or paper)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
25. Projects completed by individual students	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
26. Major exams	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
27. Authentic assessments (eg. "real world" performance tasks)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
28. Projects completed in teams or groups of students	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
29. Assessments provided by publishers or supplied to the teacher (eg. in instructional guides or manuals)	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
30. Oral presentations	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥

	Not at all	Very Little	Some	Quite a Bit	Extensively	Completely
C. Cognitive level of assessments						
31. Assessments that measure student understanding	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
32. Assessments that measure how well students apply what they learn	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
33. Assessments that measure student reasoning	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥
34. Assessments that measure student recall knowledge	①	②	③	④	⑤	⑥

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