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Writing Formative Assessment for IELTS Preparation Courses: Investigating Iranian Teachers' Knowledge and Beliefs

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Abstract

IELTS preparation courses have gained significant popularity in Iran in the past decade. Although teachers in such an exam-oriented context have started to use formative assessment to improve their writing instruction, their knowledge and beliefs about assessment for learning are still a myth. This mixed-methods study investigated Iranian IELTS teachers' beliefs and knowledge about the four main aspects of formative assessment of writing in preparation courses for IELTS Writing task 2. Thirty-nine IELTS teachers provided answers to a 23-item questionnaire focusing on four areas: feedback, self-assessment, peer-assessment, and using assessment results for day-to-day classes, to illustrate how frequently they use such techniques. In the next stage, six of the teachers sat for an interview to provide their reasons for using/not using such techniques. The results showed that the teachers have good feedback literacy and make use of some self-assessment techniques such as rubric orientation while they did not value or know enough about how they can involve their students in their own learning process. The teachers seemed to overestimate their role in their students' learning process while considering the students as somewhat incapable of monitoring their own progress and achievement, which is a crucial aspect of formative assessment. These findings have implications for teacher professional development and further formative assessment programs to be conducted in Iran.

Keywords: Formative assessment, IELTS writing, Iranian teacher's knowledge and beliefs

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1. Introduction

Until recently, the focus in most writing programs in Asia in general, and in Iran in particular, was on assessment of learning (AoL), where teachers were supposed to cover extensive materials, over which they had no control, and had to cover for once-a-year tests (Birjandi & Hadidi Tamjid, 2012; Naghdipour, 2016; Rahimi, 2009). However, Assessment for Learning (AfL) has started to attract researchers' and educators' attention towards using assessment for teaching purposes, as it has played a pivotal role in creating positive changes to assessment policy, research, and practice (Lee, 2017). Valuing self and peer-assessment for daily writing classes, appropriate feedback, and adjusting content to students' current level are among the main AfL techniques (Black & William,1998; Carles, 2011; Good, 2011; Matsuno, 2009; Xiao, 2017), which are likely to improve writing education. While this shift of focus seems necessary for writing classes, its issues and challenges in most contexts, including exam preparation contexts, are under-researched (Lee & Coniam, 2013).

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This problem can even be more vital when it comes to heavily popular international language tests, such as international English language testing system (IELTS), which does not follow the old-school educational values in Iran by any means. IELTS is a multimillion-pound assessment industry which has gained popularity among tertiary education students and business people in developing countries for immigration purposes (Pearson, 2019). Many people take the test in Iran yearly, which makes its preparation courses one of the most popular test preparation ones. The test assesses the four macro skills (i.e., speaking, listening, reading, and writing) separately, and the writing part has the lowest average among the four skills, 5. 8 out of 9 for Iranian candidates[1]. This shows that the need for reformation in IELTS writing preparation courses (IWPCs) is of dire importance. However, while AfL has proved to be a key to "improvement in learning and teaching as the primary function of assessment" (Lee, 2017; p. 25), few studies so far have illustrated teachers' perspectives on AfL techniques for the exam-preparation context in tertiary education.

[1] see https://www.ielts.org/research/test-taker-performance

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The goal of this article is to investigate whether or not, and to what extent, Iranian writing teachers in IELTS writing preparation courses are familiar with AfL and use AfL techniques in their instruction. The study also aims at enquiring about the teachers' reasons for (non)use of these techniques. This mixed-method article tries to set up a clear inventory for this underexplored part of writing education and assessment. The AfL teachers' knowledge gap in Iran on the four above-mentioned components of AfL is the main focus of the quantitative phase of the study. Furthermore, through conducting interviews with Iranian IELTS teachers, the researchers tried to illustrate the reasons behind their (non)use of such techniques in this context. Through a comparison of the results obtained from the quantitative and qualitative analyses, we illustrated the first vision of knowledge and practicality of AfL approaches among IELTS writing teachers in Iran; such a vision can improve writing education programs for teachers and clarify a path for their professional development in this specific domain.

2. Literature Review

2.1. AfL Common Techniques

Traditional classroom writing assessments are dominated by a summative orientation, which values writing tasks in the

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form of tests, focusing primarily on writing performance and scores. Such a perspective can lead teachers to treat writing "as a terminal product and pay little attention to the writing and learning process" (Lee, 2017, p.1). AfL, on the other hand, uses assessment as a tool to promote learning and improve teaching. It plays several roles in teaching/assessment contexts, from providing feedback to adjusting teaching material to students' level. Based on a comprehensive review of the literature, Brink and Bartz (2017) present an operational definition for AfL:

> Formative assessment is an ongoing process that collects evidence of student learning from both informal and formal methods, and provides information to both the teacher and the student. It involves two-way communication between the student and teacher, and encourages modification of the teacher's practices to meet the needs of the student. The student uses the information to self-assess and utilize available tools to improve learning. (p.2)

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For the constructive "two-way communication" and the subsequent modification in the syllabus and the content presented in class, assessment for learning uses a number of tools. The main tool to create a scaffolded talk with which the student moves on in his zone of proximal development (ZPD) is feedback. Feedback alone is so crucial that Lee (2017) used the term "feedback literacy" to highlight its importance as a "key component of assessment literacy" (p.150). Ahmadian et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of different types of feedback (direct, indirect, and negotiated) in the writing improvement of 75 university EFL learners. Appropriate and sufficient knowledge about feedback can enable the teacher to illustrate how far the student has achieved the writing objectives, as well as to enable the student to utilize the feedback effectively to move forward (Guo & Xu, 2020; Lee, 2017; Mak & Lee, 2014).

Another tool used by AfL is monitoring teaching and adapting the material to students' level based on classroom results. This requires the teacher to monitor for understanding, occurring through diverse class activities, with an emphasis on posing questions by students and teachers (Black & Wiliam, 1998). Yamtim and Wongwanich

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(2014) depicted that using assessment to determine levels of learning outcomes is most teachers' Achilles heel, as they do not know how to use assessment as a continuous "process that aims at achieving understanding and improving students' learning development" (p. 3003). Another aspect of AfL involves students to converse with their peers about the quality of each other's work and how it can be improved (Deneen et al., 2019), which can also be enhanced by self-reflection through collecting a writer's own work over a period of time, also known as portfolio assessment (Hamp-Lyons, 2003). In order for the meta-cognitive support to happen, teachers need to know how to involve students actively in classroom assessment, so that they monitor their own learning, achievement, and progress (Klenowski, 2002). However, not enough attention was paid to these three techniques until recently (Lee, 2017).

Although AfL literature has elaborated on teacher's knowledge on feedback as a core component in teaching and assessing writing, it has failed to show teacher's knowledge in the other mentioned areas (Beck et al., 2018). This gap is even more serious when one considers teaching and assessing writing for high-stakes exam preparation courses,

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as there is no significant study to look into teacher's knowledge about feedback, use of test results for daily classes, and peer and self-assessment.

2.2. AfL in Iran

Writing assessment adopted a product-based approach in Iran, characterized by emphasizing the final product and the dominance of the teacher, disregarding the AfL learning tools (Naghdipour, 2016; Rahimi, 2009). AoL washback effect had been so strong that attempts for major modifications in the assessment system were futile (Safarnavadeh, 2004). However, some teaching attempts have been made to shift towards formative assessment. The most conspicuous move was towards using quality feedback on writing. In different studies, e.g., Golpour et al., (2020) and Rafiei and Salehi (2016), different researchers have illustrated teacher's tendency to value feedback in writing education and assessment process; yet, due to the full dominance of AoL perspectives, these studies present maladjustment between use of feedback and beliefs among teachers. While experienced teachers' belief for conducting feedback is mainly for it to be commentary on organizational errors, less experienced teachers and other stake holders (i.e., learners

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and parents) demand full correction of all mistakes, including vocabulary ones (Abdollahzadeh, 2010).

During the years, some other AfL techniques have accumulated more significance as well, as teachers made some progress with their students using them. Azarnoosh (2013), for example, showed that peer-assessment can be just as effective as teacher feedback in the education system of Iran. By studying the writing performance of 34 freshmen in tertiary education system in Iran, Naghdipour (2016) also depicted the opportunities peers can provide for each other "to minimize their errors and problems in different areas of writing from one draft to another" (p.12). Self-assessment, on the other hand, has not been popular as students seem to "have a false understanding of their writing ability in their self-assessment (and) do not have a proper understanding of self-rating and self-assessment scales" (Alemi, 2015, p.160).

Notwithstanding this recent shift of focus, the English teachers in Iran are still under the influence of prevalent AoL, somewhat due to apprenticeship of observation; that is, their own school years were AoL oriented (Karaca & Uysal, 2021). Teachers have not been lucky to master the AfL process and tools, as Mellat and Khademi (2018) believe

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"there are still some deficiencies in classroom assessment knowledge among Iranian EFL teachers." (p.14). In other words, while policy makers and the education system in general demand assessment for learning reform movements, teachers' perceptions are incompatible with the AfL requirements (Firoozi et al., 2019), highlighting the profound need for understanding the current status of teacher's knowledge, which can assist in making more professional development programs.

2.3. IELTS Writing Instruction and Formative Assessment

IELTS is probably the most popular immigration test in the world, which requires meticulous training courses, since the students need to be aware of different aspects of the test and the evaluation process to score well in it (Pearson, 2019). The writing Task 2 section, which is the focus of this research, gives the examinee 40 minutes to write 250 words minimum on an argumentative topic. The examinee receives separate scores (out of 9) on the four evaluation criteria, namely, Task Response, Cohesion and Coherence, Lexical Resources, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy, the average of which is the given score for the task. However,

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while the test procedure seems well-laid, the relevant preparation courses are frenetic, as the courses are very short and the sessions are usualy teacher-fronted, presenting strategies that are allegedly the key to high scores (Rezaie et al., 2016).

The research on using formative assessment in teaching writing in exam-preparation courses, IELTS in particular, is scant (Hatzipanagos & Rochon, 2010). While different scholars refer to the importance of continuous assessment and other AfL criteria for high-stakes courses, the potential for using formative assessment might dissipate, due to the nature of such courses, which tend to create an overkill on the final result (Cross & O'Loughlin, 2011). Although teachers' knowledge about feedback has received some attention in English for academic courses, their knowledge about the other main criteria of AfL, namely using assessment results for day-to-day purposes, peer and self-assessment has remained neglected in high-stakes courses (i.e., IWPCs).

The above review suggests that while writing is a critical component of IELTS test and AfL has proved profitable for such courses, there is little research on exploring teachers'

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literacy of AfL or how practically they may value such techniques for their IWPCs. The crucial importance of IELTS for Iranian immigrants and the strong backwash effect of AoL education system prevalent in Iran, which has victimized the teachers (i.e., apprenticeship of observation), have made research on perceiving AfL and its practicality for teachers indispensable. To do so, the following research questions were devised:

1. How frequently do Iranian English teachers use AfL techniques in their IELTS writing preparation courses?
2. What are the reasons for (non)use of AfL techniques by IELTS writing teachers?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted a sequential mixed-methods design through a questionnaire and interviews (Brown, 2014) to explore the knowledge and practicality of formative assessment among IELTS writing teachers in Iran. In the first step, the questionnaire was used for the quantitative part. The questionnaire was answered by 56 Iranian IELTS teachers, from whom six volunteered to take part in the semi-structured interview, which was the next stage. The mixed-

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methods design was intended to warrant the reliability of the study by providing in-depth perspectives and cohesive interpretations of the quantitative data (Brown, 2014). Data collected from interviews can provide rich and insightful perspectives on how teachers, taking part in the first part, perceived AfL's practicality in the Iranian IELTS writing context of Iran.

3.2. Context of the Study

This study targets the private sector of tertiary education in Iran. IELTS education in such context is supposedly run by teachers who have already gathered some experience in English for general purposes classes. The IELTS preparation courses in private language schools are usually held in two ways. Some students prefer to have all the test skills covered in one long course, around 20 to 40 sessions, each taking 90 minutes, for each band score, while some other institutes teach each skill independently. To prepare students for the test, the teachers offer tutoring as well at some points based on the weaknesses in students' performance.

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3.3. Participants

As data collection for this research occurred during the Covid-19 outbreak, all the participants were reached through online social media groups that are prevalent in the context of the study (Telegram or WhatsApp groups for IELTS teachers in Iran). Collectively, there were over 6000 members in these groups, most of whom were native speakers of Persian. However, most of these members were students or general English teachers who were aiming at improving their English proficiency by sharing information in the said groups. Although the exact number of IELTS teachers were not clear in these groups, 200 members from these groups were determined as IELTS teachers through inquiring the group owners or administrators about a list of active IELTS teachers in their groups. It seemed like teaching IELTS writing was a niche task that only a small proportion of teachers embarked upon at the time of the study. The questionnaire was subsequently sent out to all those teachers ensued by a letter of instructions. Out of the 200 questionnaires sent, only 56 IELTS teachers from four very common IELTS Telegram groups took part in the study. The first researcher sent the Google Forms link of the questionnaire with a brief explanation of the aim of the

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questions and research to all the 200 teachers. Every individual recruited in this study (i.e., decided to respond the questionnaire and submitted their answer) was Iranian and teaching IELTS at the time of the study. Almost two-thirds of the participants (31) obtained an IELTS teaching certificate from Idp Australia, a co-founder of IELTS which holds regular IELTS teacher training courses in Iran. Forty-two of the participants held M.A or PhD in English (either Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages or Literature major) from different universities. Finally, over 80 percent of participants (46) were English teachers for more than five years, with 33.9% (19 teachers) being in the business for over a decade. The last inquiry in the questionnaire was about teacher's willingness to be in the interview section of the study.

Fifteen participants marked the last question box as to show willingness for taking part in the next stage, out of whom six replied our emails and agreed to schedule a 30-minute interview via Skype. Two of the interviewees had less than five years of experience teaching IELTS (semi-experienced), while the others had five years and above, with an average of seven years (experienced teachers). Their ELT

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teaching experience ranged from 7 to 16 years. Five teachers had masters of English teaching or literature; only one had a PhD in Applied Linguistics. Table 1 shows the details of the participants. Each participant was assigned a code to assure anonymity.

Table 1. *IELTS writing teachers' demographics in interviews*

Teachers	**Degree**	**Years of experience in IELTS**	**Overall experience in ELT**	**Gender**
Teacher 1	Masters in TEFL	3	7	Male
Teacher 2	Masters in TEFL	5	15	Male
Teacher 3	Masters in English Translation Studies	8	10	Female
Teacher 4	Masters in TEFL	3	15	Male
Teacher 5	PhD in Applied Linguistics	7	10	Female
Teacher 6	Masters in TEFL	8	16	Male

3.4. Instruments and Data Collection Procedure

In the first phase, a questionnaire was chosen to collect the data. The questionnaire was meant to explore IELTS teachers' knowledge about formative assessment use for WT2 instruction. Informed by Birjandi and Hadidi Tamjid

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(2012), Cross and O'Loughlin (2011), Guo and Xu (2020), and Lee (2017), a questionnaire (23 items, Likert-scale) was built with four themes, namely:

1. Knowledge of peer-assessment (3 questions)
2. Knowledge of self-assessment (6 questions)
3. Knowledge of using assessment results for day-to-day activities (7 questions)
4. Knowledge of feedback (7 questions)

Each of the themes above is a taxonomy of formative assessment. The first two focus on teachers' knowledge about students' role in their own learning; for example, the teacher gives students opportunities to check each other's writings in small groups and gives students time to reflect on their own writing. Next one (i.e., using assessment for day-to-day activities) values the teacher's role in conducting assessment for learning purposes (e.g. I can use multiple methods of assessment for task 2 instruction). The last item, feedback, had goal setting as its subcategory. The main key phrases in this taxonomy were providing meaningful feedback, sensitivity to giving corrections in public, feedback focus on the rubric (writing task 2 band descriptors), and student's awareness on goal setting. The recruited

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participants were supposed to react to each question on a 5-Likert scale measurement ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always).

The questionnaire was initially validated by an expert in language assessment in terms of the information the questions elicit and provide. Having considered all the points mentioned by the expert and removing any ambiguities through providing simplicity or examples, the researchers asked another expert to value the content validity of the questionnaire. The study further evaluated the internal reliability of the questionnaire by asking 20 writing teachers similar to the population to answer the questionnaire. They were mostly university and language school English writing teachers, who had a few years of experience teaching in Iran. The internal reliability rate was .78, which is above the benchmark .70, indicating a good internal reliability (Brown, 2014). Once the researchers had made sure of validity and reliability of the questionnaire, its Google Form was designed and uploaded in relevant IELTS Telegram groups or other known social networks for teachers to answer.

Using SPSS 22, An exploratory factor analysis of the 56 responses was conducted to ensure the construct validity

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which found a four-factor solution. Having removed the questions with factor loadings lower than 0.4 (Brown, 2015), the researchers finalized the questionnaire with 23 items. The four factors were labelled peer-assessment (PA), Self-assessment (SA), using assessment for day-to-day purposes (UA) and Feedback (F) (see the appendix). A high Cronbach's Alpha was then obtained for the finalized questionnaire as a whole (0.88) and for the factors PA (0.78), SA (0.79), UA (0.80) and F (0.82). Bartlett' s test of sphericity was found to be significant (c2 (565) = 3497.386, p =.000), indicating the appropriacy of factor analysis on this set of data. Likewise, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) measure of sampling adequacy indicated that the strength of the relationships among variables was high (KMO =.716), indicating that it was acceptable to continue the analysis.

However, according to Yu et al., (2003), questionnaire responses are prone to be affected by central tendency bias which means the two ends of the continuum (always and never) are not chosen by some of the respondents as they tend to choose more central options. Moreover, the teachers do not have a voice to clearly show their beliefs about why some of the techniques are more popular than the others. To

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cross-validate the findings from the quantitative analysis and give a more detailed explanation of the data, an interview was designed based on the same themes as the questionnaire.

Based on the four main factors of the questionnaire, four interview questions were designed to complete the explanatory sequential process. Table 2 shows the questions under each theme.

Table 2: *Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

Question	**Categories Intended to Explore**
1.Why and how do you use peer-assessment and/or feedback for your writing classes?	Peer-assessment
2.Do you practice valuing students' self-esteem and reflection on their own writings during instruction? If so how; If not why?	Self-assessment
3.Do you use quizzes (such as grammar or vocabulary quizzes) to improve writing task 2 grammar or/and vocabulary? How about when you want to assess TR and/or CC? How and why?	Using assessment results for day-to-day classes
4.How and why do you use your feedback during instruction or assessment?	Feedback

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The interviews were conducted by the first researcher. To conduct the interview, the interviewees were fully informed about the aims of research, and they were assured that the data would remain confidential by using pseudonyms for the participants' names. Upon their consent, a 30-miniute session was arranged via Skype. The interview sessions started with a little icebreaker to make the teachers comfortable. Once the teacher felt ready, the first researcher started audio or video recording the session (based on the teacher's preference) and asked the questions. The teachers could switch back to their mother tongue (Persian) if they wanted to; however, most of them kept English as the medium of communication. Most of the time the researcher asked the teachers to elaborate on their ideas as to how to conduct an activity in class or test session; for example, how they group students when they are at different levels. Throughout the interview, the ethical issues were observed; the interviewee was free to leave the meeting at any time they wanted.

3.5. Qualitative Data Analysis

The researchers applied thematic analysis to the data collected from the interviews. Braun and Clarke (2006) defined thematic analysis as "a method for identifying,

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analyzing and reporting patterns within data" (p. 79). The guideline they provided consists of six phases, four of which were used in this research: a) familiarizing with data, b) searching for themes (the four areas of AfL), c) reviewing themes, and d) producing the report (p. 88).

The first researcher did the initial transcription and coded the data based on the four main themes introduced earlier. The coding happened manually through highlighting the relevant parts in similar colors. Some of the data needed rewording and paraphrasing (better choice of vocabulary or merging two sentences). Some other parts needed translation, as the teachers shifted to mother tongue (Persian) to clarify their thoughts more accurately. The researcher tried to retain as much of the flavor and intention of the interviewees' language as possible in the translated and paraphrased parts.

In order to address the researcher bias problem, an Iranian EFL researcher (PhD candidate in TEFL) was invited to review the transcribing and coding of the interview data. The initial inter-coder reliability was 70%; where there were differences of opinion, the researcher reviewed the parts in question with the external reviewer and resolved the disagreements.

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4. RESULTS

4.1. Teachers' Knowledge of AfL Techniques

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics of the software analysis program SPSS. Table 3, below, shows the differences between the frequency of practicing AfL techniques among IELTS writing teachers.

Table 3: *Frequency of AfL techniques in IWPCs*

Main variables	Sub-Item	Mean		SD	Always %	Frequently%	Occasionally%	Not often %	Never %
Peer-assessment	Q1. I ask my students to check their IELTS writings in pair or in small groups.	3.05	3.76	0.848	29.7	54.1	8.1	8.1	0
	Q2. I give my students opportunities (e.g. discussions, questions, learning	3.78		1.205	32.4	35.1	18.9	5.4	8.1

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	tasks) to engage in peer monitoring while teaching writing task 2.								
	Q3. I use results of peer activities to strengthen the ongoing assessment of student learning.	3.59		1.189	27	29.7	24.3	13.5	5.4
Self-assessment	Q4. I give my students opportunities to reflect on their own writings and assess their own knowledge.	4.03	4.405	0.897	29.7	51.4	13.5	2.7	2.7
	Q5. I help my students to identify their own weaknesses and strengths through feedback instruction.	4.62		0.721	73	18.9	5.4	2.7	0
	Q6. I teach my learners to compare their current	4.19		0.908	48.6	24.3	24.3	2.7	0

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	writings with regard to their previous ones.								
	Q7. I care about self-esteem of my students (e.g. providing positive feedback and encouragement).	4.51		0.731	64.9	21.6	13.5	0	0
	Q8. I Try to evoke thoughtful reflection about writing task 2 in which most students are encouraged to take part.	4.03		1.013	40.5	32.4	16.2	10.8	0
	Q9. I familiarize my students with writing task 2 band descriptors.	4.78		0.417	78.4	21.6	0	0	0
Using assessment	Q10. I use assessment results (writing task 2 IELTS) to group students for instruction.	3.73	4.007	1.170	32.4	29.7	18.9	16.2	2.7

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Q11. I use assessment results (writing task 2 IELTS) to adjust future lesson plans for IELTS writing task 2.	4.08	0.862	29.7	56.8	8.1	2.7	2.7
Q12. My IELTS writing tests/quizzes are similar to that of the real ELTS test.	4.46	0.558	48.6	48.6	2.7	0	0
Q13. I can select multiple methods of assessment (i.e., formal tests, in-class observations, etc.) for IELTS writing task 2.	3.86	0.855	21.6	48.6	27	0	2.7
Q14. I can create a test that accommodates the needs of all my students (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, or short writing quizzes).	4.65	0.588	70.3	24.3	5.4	0	0

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	Q15. I can determine if a classroom test or quiz is aligned with the standards in IELTS writing T2 (e.g. the argumentative topic, length of the answer and appropriate instructions).	3.16		1.068	8.1	37.8	18.9	32.4	2.7
	Q16. I can develop tests with different formats (i.e., multiple-choice, fill-in-the blanks, etc.) for teaching /improving IELTS writing T2 purposes.	4.11		0.906	37.8	40.5	18.9	0	2.7
Feedback	Q17. I can provide meaningful feedback (i.e., information with which a learner can confirm, or restructure his/her	3.84	4.262	0.764	16.2	56.6	20.2	5.4	1.3

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understanding immediately).							
Q18. I give feedback which gives students guidance on strengths and weaknesses, preferably without any overall marks.	4.46	0.650	50.0	37.8	8.1	2.1	2.0
Q19. I give feedback in a way that involves what is wrong and how it can be fixed.	4.57	0.555	59.4	30.1	6.2	1.8	2.4
Q20. I am sensitive to giving corrections in public.	4.22	0.917	43.2	43.2	8.1	2.7	2.7
Q21. My feedback to individuals is about the content and organization of the work.	4.32	0.818	48.6	37.1	5.4	5.4	3.1

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Q22. My feedback is based on IELTS writing band descriptors rather than common errors in class or the ones from previous writings.	4.27	0.732	40.5	45.1	8.1	2.7	3.5
Q23. I Make students aware of the learning goals and targets.	4.16	0.958	45.9	32.4	11.7	8.1	1.8

Overall, IELTS writing teachers showed great interest towards using self-assessment (mean=4.405) and feedback techniques (mean=4.262). They also preferred using assessment in their day-to-day teaching (overall mean of 4.007), while peer-assessment was the least popular, with the mean of 3.760.

Every teacher familiarizes their students with the writing rubric, 78% of them do it always and the remaining (22%), frequently (Q9). Eighty-two percent of teachers were very careful about their students' self-esteem, through positive feedback and encouragement (Q7). Seventy-three

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percent of the teachers claimed to always, and another 18.9%, frequently, use their feedback as a tool to enhance students' ability to identify their own weaknesses and strengths (Q5). However, the only item in that category that was not practiced by 5.4% of the instructors, (2.7% in not often and never categories each) was providing opportunities for students' reflection on their own writings (Q4). This minimal reluctance (or lack of knowledge) on promoting reflection in class was explored in the qualitative phase.

Feedback techniques is the second most popular group among IELTS teachers, though there is low consistency when the responses are considered. Almost 90% of the teachers could give feedback in a way that involved what was wrong and how it could be fixed (Q19), with 59.4% of them reporting that they can always do this, whereas 6.7% (not often and never groups combined) reported that they could not provide this feedback meaningfully (i.e., information with which a learner can confirm, or restructure his/her understanding immediately) (Q17). About 20%, 11 teachers, stated that they could provide meaningful feedback only on an occasional basis.

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This issue is also a main point of discussion in the qualitative part.

The third category was assessment for day-to-day classes. Almost 70 % of the sample population said they could always create tests (classroom quizzes) that accommodated to the needs of the students (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, or short writing quizzes) (Q13). The majority of the teachers (97.2 %) said that they could design tests similar to that of the real test (Q11). However, approximately 33% (18 out of 56) acquiesced that they did not have enough knowledge to be certain if their tests are aligned with writing task 2 criteria (Q14). The data from this category shows that teachers tend to design quizzes similar to that of the test and implement them almost frequently in class while unaware if their tests meet the assessment criteria. This discrepancy was further addressed in the qualitative part.

As far as peer assessment techniques are considered, teachers showed the lowest tendency to conduct them in their writing classes. Only about one third of the teachers (32.4%) conducted peer-monitoring constantly in their classes. The rate of frequency of doing small group works or using results of peer activities for teaching was even lower, indicating

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teachers' unwillingness to perform group activities in their writing classes. The reasons for this reluctance have been discussed in the interviews.

All in all, teachers seemed to be positive about familiarizing students with IELTS rubric in class, although evoking self-reflection or peer activities in general were not their favorite techniques; instead, they preferred their own feedback and rewriting some mistakes alongside giving quizzes, which are similar to the real IELTS test. The data also revealed that while some were not sure about the quality of their feedback, a considerable proportion seemed to have doubts about the validity of their classroom tests.

However, although the data from this part seem to depict AfL status in IWPCs to a fair extent, it is difficult to understand why some of these techniques are more popular. Furthermore, the average score for all the items combined is 4.1, which tends to illustrate teachers' aversion toward one end of the questionnaire responses, i.e., never. This can present the possibility of central tendency bias in the questionnaire respondents (Yu et al., 2003) and/or their social desirability bias; that is the subjects' tendency to answer questions to portray a better picture of themselves

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(Holden & Passey, 2010). So, in order to validate the quantitative data, alongside exploring why some of the techniques are more popular than others, the interview part was conducted.

4.2. Interview Results

As mentioned earlier, the reasons for conducting the interview are twofold: first, to explore the probable biases of participants in the quantitative part, and second, to explore the reasons behind (non)use of the techniques. The order of presenting analysis for each technique was based on its popularity in the quantitative part, but as teachers used similar terms to describe peer-assessment and feedback, the analysis of these two parts was presented under one category.

4.2.1. Self-assessment Techniques

The most popular technique among teachers was self-assessment in the quantitative part. The interview analysis revealed two subcategories for its popularity, namely (1) using the rubric (writing task 2 band descriptors), and (2) portfolio.

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4.2.1.1. Using The Rubric

Rubric was used to promote self-reflection by five out of the six teachers. Teacher Number 5 (TNo.5) found self-correction a better approach, basing this correction on some questions she would write on the board; she said "The questions are majorly about the assessment criteria in the band descriptors". TNo. 4 managed to have a checklist based on the band descriptors, which he frequently gave his students for self-reflection. Only TNo. 6 believed that the band descriptors are for teachers and introducing it to students might be confusing. Nonetheless, he had a simpler, self-made version of the rubric to give his high-intermediate students to familiarize them with the assessment criteria.

4.2.1.2. Portfolio

This section considers how teachers motivate students to track their own learning. Only teacher No.3 explicitly mentioned the practical role of portfolio in her classes to enable the learners to "see how far they have progressed", although she said that the technique was limited to high-intermediate and advanced learners. However, the other teachers did not mention anything about helping students track their own achievements and reflect on it. This may

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show teachers' lack of trust in techniques that leave students fully responsible for their own assessment and learning progress.

The information from this part shows that teachers seem to value the writing rubric to a satisfactory level and introduce it to the class so as to enhance self-correction under teacher's monitoring. However, keeping a portfolio for the aim of improving self-assessment has yet to be considered as practical by IELTS teachers. In other words, thoughtful reflection on one's own learning process is enhanced through scaffolded activities, while prolonged monitoring of students' progress by themselves is neglected.

4.2.2. Feedback and Peer-assessment

Feedback was the second most frequent technique among the teachers, while peer-assessment enjoyed the lowest popularity in the quantitative part. However, in the qualitative part, teachers used relevant terms to describe the two. Peer-assessment was referred to by the teachers as peer-feedback and group-activities during the interview, which is relevant to teacher feedback and feedback in general. To elucidate the teachers' views on these techniques, the findings from the interviews were presented consecutively.

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The analysis of the feedback question illustrated two sub-categories: content and language related feedback, and feedback to students in a group; in a similar vein, the answers to the peer-assessment question revealed another two sub-categories, namely using peer-feedback for enhancing brainstorming, and final-draft review.

4.2.2.1. Teacher Feedback Techniques

Content and Language Related Feedback: All the teachers considered content and language related feedback as effective. The former considers task response, coherence and cohesion, while the latter addresses lexical and grammatical range and accuracy. Two of the teachers prioritized content over language. TNo.1 focused on off-topic sentences in writing before addressing language errors; similarly, TNo.4 mentioned that he would leave content feedback prior to focusing on the language of the writing. On the other hand, other teachers preferred "score gainer vocabulary" (TNo.2), "capitalization" (TNo.3), and wrong choice of vocabulary or misspelling (TNo.4) in their feedback over covering cohesive devices and task achievement.

Giving Feedback to Students in a Group: Feedback on one specific writing among a group of students seemed to

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be a common teacher task in IELTS classes, where the instructor chose one writing of all the class students for giving feedback and did it in front of them. However, to avoid any probable humiliation caused by pinpointing the mistakes in public, a friendly milieu was established in class beforehand. Self-esteem was originally a key-term in the question intended to explore self-assessment; however, it emerged once teachers were addressing their feedback strategies. All the teachers strongly believed in having a friendly relationship with the student while giving feedback, so as to avoid any stress and boost their self-esteem. TNo.3 believes:

> You have to be careful when you give students feedback because IELTS students are already nervous, and corrections in public is a gamble. If they are not comfortable with making mistakes and you judge them, it will ruin the whole process. To solve the problem, after a few weeks have passed, teach them to have expectations about making mistakes before

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> doing any correction, and show your support most of the time.

The caution raised by the teacher needs to be covered with the support she provided during the course. Lowering their expectations from their writings is a strategy mentioned by TNo.6, too. He said that he would tell his students that he makes mistakes in his writings every day and "they should too, to learn the language".

Alongside that, two of the teachers referred to private sessions where they gave individual feedback to students. This happened with the teachers who had less crowded public classes where they could ask their students (for example five or six students) to show up one by one for a 20-minute feedback session.

Overall, the analysis approves of the quantitative findings on teacher feedback as very common. The reasons for its popularity were to rectify content and language, with the tendency to take language into account more seriously. The teachers showed caution while giving feedback by considering students' self-esteem.

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4.2.2.2. Peer-assessment Techniques.

Peer-feedback on Ideas (i.e., brainstorming): TNo.5 used group activities prior to a writing activity, in the brainstorming stage, for rectifying ideas for a writing. Sometimes, the students sought evaluation through what the other student believes about their own ideas, and they tried to change their ideas into better ones, as the following quotation asserts:

> I tell them what to write in their introduction, but sometimes their mind is just too much preoccupied with things that should not be. When they see other students' ideas, that might help them to organize their own thoughts. (TNo.5)

The teacher shows that group activities can be helpful in pre-writing stages, as they help the students organize their thoughts while discussing and evaluating each other's ideas. TNo.4 strongly advocated peer-feedback in shape of group

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activities in pre-writing stages, since "students can practice their language proficiency while exchanging ideas which helps them improve their mind maps and content in writing". However, TNo.6 preferred his dominance in IELTS writing instruction, while the remaining three left peer-assessment for the final stages of writing.

Enhancing Final-draft Review via Peer-feedback: Peer-feedback was used by two of the teachers to prevent mistakes that can be avoided if students do a careful final review before submitting their writings. TNo.2 uses assessment to enhance time management in writing to have enough time for a final review:

> I use peer assessment to show students that by better focus and time management (so that they review their writings in the test session), they can avoid many of their mistakes. If students can spot some grammatical mistakes in their peer's writings (subject or verb agreement for example), it means they can do the same in their own writings, given that they review their own work before submitting.

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This final review was also led by teachers' hints. TNo.2 talked about moments where he asked his students to spot grammar mistakes that changed meaning (grammar assessment criterion at band 5 and 6). Likewise, TNo.4 emphasized the role of teachers' hints:

> Other students in the group check each other's feedback, do more correction if necessary, based on the clue the teacher gave, and give the draft to the teacher for final assessment.

While peer-assessment was mentioned as a tool by half of the teachers, two of them raised the issue that the process my not finish with peer-feedback. As TNo.3 pointed out, the students may give negative feedback by not using the appropriate language, or they may miss some of the mistakes (TNo.4). As a result, while the former requests teacher's monitoring during the peer-evaluation process, the latter finishes with his own final feedback after the students' feedback.

The information shows that peer-assessment techniques are not much trusted for an IELTS writing course in Iran, as

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shown in the quantitative part. While most of the teachers claim they practice peer-evaluation and peer feedback in their writing sessions, as the questionnaire results illustrated, they may limit them to brainstorming, which is a pre-writing stage and does not involve actual writing evaluation. In other words, teacher feedback seems to be a more practical aspect of formative assessment for IELTS classes, as students are thought incapable of monitoring their own learning.

4.2.3. Assessment Result used for Daily Classes Techniques

Assessment for day-to-day classes was the least popular among teachers, with four of them using it during their teaching only to a limited extent. TNo.5 believed that "writing is not something you can get a quiz out of"; similarly, TNo.6 said:

> I do not design grammar or vocabulary tests. I think they are not useful. I prefer correction. Students come to you to learn, giving students a test in an IELTS class is a waste of time.

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These comments depict lack of teachers' writing assessment literacy, unlike the results reported in the questionnaire. The mean for questions pertaining to this part was 4.007, which shows teachers' inclination toward one end of the answers, i.e., always. Yet, the analysis from this part revealed two types of quizzes, content and language quizzes.

4.2.3.1. Content and Language Quizzes

The four teachers used quizzes for learning writing, although there were disagreements on the practicality of such quizzes. For example, while TNo.2 did not believe in vocabulary quizzes, TNo.1 stated that his students had benefitted from vocabulary quizzes in form of written or oral quizzes.

Only TNo.4 managed to turn all aspects of writing assessment (content and language) into quizzes majorly through using other ready-made Cambridge test questions, i.e., First Certificate, and Certificate of Proficiency. However, no other teacher mentioned anything about using how they use the results for improving results in writing. TNo.1 specifically mentioned that he had not received enough assessment training to design such tests. Scarcity of information in this part can show lack of literacy for

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developing tests for classroom purposes, as no teacher claimed they could do so.

In sum, the teachers who responded to our survey and interview questions reported familiarity with rubric orientation and some feedback techniques, however, emphasizing on the role of students in their own exam preparation process seemed ambiguous for the teachers to some extent. Teachers seemed to use assessment results for daily classes, but when asked how they do so, they did not present enough explanation, preferring their own feedback on the writings, instead. It can be assumed that teachers valued their own role in formative assessment process more than that of students. This can be an explanation for why reflection or keeping portfolios on students' side was not enhanced. These teachers seemed not to value peer evaluation techniques in the class either, limiting its use to judging peer ideas prior or during brainstorming.

5. Discussion

Previous studies on formative assessment have highlighted the importance of feedback, using tests for daily instructions,

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and self and peer-assessment in teaching the four skills (Lee, 2011; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Shrestha & Coffin, 2012) in different parts of the world. The present study sought to expand the literature by exploring writing teachers' knowledge and beliefs in the same topics in the EFL context of teaching IELTS writing in Iran. To a large extent, it seems that the teachers in our study have general familiarity with AfL, although they may not be able to use assessment results to modify their teachings. Using self-assessment was the most common technique that teachers in the study used to improve their students' writings. However, this high frequency was limited to techniques that place a monitoring role for the teachers in self-assessment; in particular, the introduction of rubric to class, which is basically supposed to strengthen student's reflection, but used by the teachers in this study to make the teacher feedback process (the second most valued technique) more understandable. Similarly, peer-assessment, which is commonly used to encourage interaction between students, was the teachers' least favorite, making it limited to pre-writing stages for mere brainstorming of ideas. In other words, the AfL techniques which served to value teachers' role in instruction turned out

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to be more popular and practiced by the participants than those that focus on students' role in their own learning.

The most common strategy was familiarizing students with the rubric, a major technique for boosting self-assessment. However, in the Iranian educational context, where collaborative activities, or the student's role in their own learning, have not been deemed efficient, most teachers did not take a back seat to the learning process during self-assessment to let students identify their own mistakes or reflect upon their work. Instead, teachers familiarized students with the rubric to give more effective individual or class feedback on the writings. Similar results were reported by Alemi (2015) and Abdollahzadeh (2010), who suggest that students may not seem fully active in their own learning process. They are believed to lack proficiency at self-rating skills and thereby more reliant on teacher's feedback. This can explain the low popularity of peer-feedback among teachers, which is suggested by the data in this study as well. The findings from this research show that teachers limit peer-feedback to the pre-writing stage and do not involve students in actual writing evaluation processes. Azarnoosh (2013) and Naghdipour (2016) also referred to this unpopularity, since

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both teachers and students themselves were not sure about the benefits of peer-assessment; neither did teachers think of students as capable of handling their own learning or helping their peers.

According to the assessment results, designing classroom tests and modifying teaching strategies were not known or practiced by many teachers in this study. Although the teachers indicated a tendency towards use of quizzes in the questionnaire, their answers in the qualitative part showed their central tendency bias. Indeed, they raised doubts about the practicality of such quizzes during their instruction and clearly expressed no explanation as to how they may modify their teaching according to their test results. These findings were similar to that of Karaca and Uysal's (2021), who explored teachers' beliefs in a similar exam-driven educational context. They reported that the context seems to have impeded teachers from making crucial instructional decisions for the moment-to-moment and day-to-day modification of teaching based on the monitoring of student's learning and assessment results. Rampant practice of summative assessment, which has a major focus on grading and reporting the results to officials in Iranian

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educational context, has apparently left EFL writing teachers ambivalent on assessment adjustments for daily class quizzes based on previous results.

On the other hand, feedback practice turned out to be a very popular technique in this context. Unlike Lee's (2017) findings in exam-driven contexts, where AoL is valued over AfL, the teachers in the present study recognized feedback as valuable, which confirms the practicality of recent movements towards AfL in Iranian context, as reported by Rafiei and Salehi (2016). Unlike Safarnavadeh's findings (2004), teachers in the present study showed mastery over feedback by taking into account self-esteem and motivation. More interestingly, instead of paying much of their attention to language feedback, the teachers held content feedback in esteem as well. This shows teachers' high skills in conducting feedback as mirrored by Golpour et al. (2020), who indicated experienced teachers' strong focus on major errors (i.e., content, cohesion, and coherence), while less experienced teachers home in on all kinds of errors, which is believed to cause misunderstanding of the message.

In general, the teachers seem to value teacher feedback the most and possess enough literacy to conduct it

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efficiently during their teachings. The results, however, show teacher's reluctance when it comes to AfL techniques that highlight student's role, mainly due to their lack of trust with the students for their own learning process. This penchant for valuing the techniques with teachers in the center can be traced back to their previous AoL background (i.e., apprenticeship of observation). Iranian writing teachers need to practice developing their abilities for enhancing students to take part in their own learning process, carrying out fruitful strategies for student reflection, designing better tests and modifying instruction according to assessment results.

6. Conclusions

The present article investigated the potential of using assessment formatively for IELTS writing preparation classes in a test-dominated context, based on a study of how often the teachers used AfL techniques and whether they deem such techniques as practical. The findings illustrated teacher's mastery in feedback while they needed professional development in how to involve students in their own learning process. In their interviews, despite decent feedback literacy and use of rubric to familiarize students with assessment

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criteria, teachers showed the dominance of AoL mindset in their AfL practices, which could be a reason why they dissociate students from the assessment process by overlooking student reflection or portfolio assessment. Moreover, under the heavy influence of AoL, they depicted uncertainty in using the assessment results for modifying their teachings; neither did they trust students with the actual evaluation process i.e., peer-feedback. This calls for professional development programs to enhance awareness of teachers about students' role in their own learning process. The article enriches Lee's view (2017) about more training courses for AfL techniques in exam-oriented education systems while illustrating the optimization of using quality feedback in classrooms by EFL writing teachers.

To improve students' role in the eyes of EFL writing teachers, professional development courses for teachers can focus on practicality of portfolio assessment. So far, the use of journals or portfolios as assessment tasks has been rare (Guo & Xu, 2020) in many parts of Asia. The reported use of portfolio by the participants of the present study was limited to mere collection of writings, excluding the other two more important phases; namely, reflection and thoughtful selection

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of the writings into portfolio (Hamp-Lyons, 2003). The present study targets the teacher AoL background study as the problem and locate fault in the importance the teachers presume for their role while conducting assessment in classroom. This dominance can be countered by systematic guidance and instruction in mastery of strategies that approve the effectiveness of meta-cognitive engagement. Pedagogically, the professional development programs in Iran may help teachers recognize students' learning autonomy to counter their dominance in assessment process. Teacher trainers can advocate portfolio assessment to enhance self-regulated learning skills such as self-assessment (i.e., thoughtful selection of the writing into the portfolio) and self-reflection, which can increase autonomy on students' side. Once the teachers comprehend the practicality of portfolio assessment, they are likely to assist students in assuming ownership of their learning and thereby having a more efficient writing practice (Klenowski, 2002).

The limitation of the article lies in the fact that the present study failed to match teachers' beliefs with their actual practice in classroom. Further studies could attain a longitudinal perspective and collect evidence of AfL in actual

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writing instruction to test the findings of this study. It would also be interesting to further investigate the AfL issues with IELTS teacher trainers in the same context.

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Appendix one: Results of factor analysis of teachers' use of FA.

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Items	Pattern Matrix			
	Factor 1 PA	Factor 2 SA	Factor 3 UA	Factor 4 FA
Q1.I ask my students to check their IELTS writings in pair or in small groups.	.417			
Q2.I give my students opportunities (e.g. discussions, questions, learning tasks) to engage in peer monitoring while teaching writing task 2.	.435			
Q3.I use results of peer activities to strengthen ongoing assessment of student learning.	.581			
Q4.I give my students opportunities to reflect on their own writings and assess their own knowledge.		.681		
Q5.I help my students to identify their own weaknesses and strengths through feedback instruction.		.676		
Q6.I teach my learners to compare their current writings with regard to their previous		.474		

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ones.		
Q7.I care about self-esteem of my students (e.g. providing positive feedback and encouragement).	.438	
Q8.I Try to evoke thoughtful reflection about writing task 2 in which most students are encouraged to take part.	.668	
Q9.I familiarize my students with writing task 2 band descriptors	.550	
Q10.I use assessment results (writing task 2 IELTS) To group students for instruction.		.430
Q11.I use assessment results (writing task 2 IELTS) to adjust future lesson plans for IELTS writing task 2.		.554
Q12.My IELTS writing tests/quizzes are similar to that of the real ELTS test.		.469
Q13.I can select multiple methods of assessment (i.e., formal tests, in-class observations, etc) for IELTS writing task 2		.416

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Q14.I can create test that accommodates the needs of all my students (e.g. grammar, vocabulary, or short writing quizzes).	.453	
Q15.I can determine if a classroom test or quiz is aligned with standards in IELTS writing T2 (e.g. the argumentative topic, length of the answer and appropriate instructions).	.601	
Q16.I can develop tests with different formats (i.e., multiple-choice, fill-in-the blanks, etc.) for teaching /improving IELTS writing T2 purposes.	.609	
Q17.I can provide meaningful feedback (i.e., information with which a learner can confirm, or restructure his/her understanding immediately).		.576
Q18.I give feedback which gives students guidance on strengths and weaknesses preferably without any overall marks.		.488
Q19.I give feedback in a way that involves what is wrong and how it can be fixed.		.599
Q20.I am sensitive to giving corrections in		.557

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public.				
Q21.My feedback to individuals is about the content and organization of the work.				.578
Q22.My feedback is based on IELTS writing band descriptors rather than common errors in class or the ones from previous writings.				.489
Q23.I Make students aware of the learning goals and targets.				.575
Cronbach's α	0.78	0.79	0.802	0.82

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