

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

EFL Teachers' Cognition and Practice of Assessment for Learning in Teaching Speaking Skills

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate EFL teachers' cognition and practices of Assessment for Learning (AfL) in teaching speaking skills in some selected secondary schools found in four zones of the Amhara Region. It employed a mixed-methods sequential explanatory research design. A self-reported questionnaire was used to collect quantitative data from 368 EFL teachers whereas; a semi-structured interview and classroom observations were used for the qualitative data, which were gathered from 15 teachers. Descriptive statistics and Interpretative Phenomenological data Analysis (IPA) methods were used to analyse both data types. The findings of the study show that EFL teachers' awareness, beliefs, and practices of AfL were with mean scores of 3.64, 2.87, and 2.46 respectively which was largely moderate to low. Qualitative findings suggested that many teachers associated continuous testing with AfL, perceiving it primarily as a grading tool rather than a formative procedure for improving speaking skills through feedback and reflection. As a result, AfL techniques were rarely used in the classroom. It was also found that there was a conceptual and practical lack of alignment between assessment tasks and instructional objectives. It was concluded that although teachers demonstrated a moderate level of awareness, their practices and beliefs were constrained. Context-specific professional development activities and lesson studies were recommended to improve EFL teachers' awareness, beliefs, and practices of AfL.

Keywords: awareness, beliefs, practices, cognition, speaking skills, Assessment for Learning

Introduction

Effective classroom assessment evaluates students' performance and determines what students have learned or how they actually learn. Assessment, when used together with instruction, is able to determine students' learning needs and provide feedback to improve performance (Zou, Yuan, Mo & Mustakim, 2024). Although assessment for learning has

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.20372/erjssh.v13.i2.9>

great potential, in practice, it is implemented inconsistently and sometimes used only nominally in classrooms (Black, 2006).

The effectiveness of AfL in language classrooms is determined by teacher cognition. Based on Borg's (2003) conceptualization of "what teachers think, know, believe, and do," this study used the term language teachers' cognition to refer to teachers' awareness, beliefs, and practices of AfL in speaking skills classes.

The acquisition of oral English skills is a big challenge for Ethiopian secondary school students. The majority of them are not confident or fluent English speakers. In line with this, Belayneh and Seleshi (2020) noted that the traditional teacher-centered speaking instruction in Ethiopia emphasizes developing grammatical competence over communicative competence. Similarly, Dawit (2022) reported that only 3 to 5% of secondary school students were relatively fluent and accurate in speaking English.

The Ethiopian government acknowledges the importance of AfL in improving the quality of education. The documents addressing the need for evidence-based assessment practices in education and promoting their adoption at all levels are: The Ethiopian Education and Training Policy (1994); The Ethiopian Curriculum Framework from pre-primary to Grade 12 (2010); and the Ethiopian Education Development Roadmap (MoE, 2018).

Despite these commitments, it appears that little attention has been paid to implementing AfL practices in speaking classes. Although the three documents mention the importance of using evidence-based assessment practices to improve learning outcomes, they do not explicitly specify how this can be achieved in language classrooms. Various contextual factors such as class size, time constraints, and high-stakes exams hinder the effective use of AfL practices (Richardson, 1996; EEDR, 2018).

Studies conducted elsewhere reveal that AfL has a great potential to improve students' performance, but there is limited evidence on how it is used to promote language learning. Ökten (2009) found that formative assessment helped students to improve their language proficiency and increased their interest in language learning in Turkey. Similarly, Arrafii et al. (2018) revealed that the majority of secondary school EFL teachers had limited knowledge of formative assessment. Defianty (2018) also found that Indonesian teachers' understanding of formative assessment was vague; however, they recognized its potential to support language learning. Despite the positive role of AfL in language learning, the researchers mentioned above focused only on general language skills and not on speaking performance.

Studies conducted in Ethiopia also address the use of continuous or formative assessment. However, like those conducted abroad, they do not focus on AfL in speaking classes. Getnet's (2016) study on the effect of formative assessment on EFL writing performance at the University of Gondar revealed that formative assessment training had a positive effect on students' writing performance and self-efficacy. Dagne's (2009) study on the

implementation of continuous assessment in EFL speaking classes at Jimma Teacher's College found that the majority of EFL teachers were not practicing continuous assessment due to large class sizes, lack of training, and time constraints. Abiy and Alemayehu's (2015) study on Ethiopian secondary school teachers' perceptions of continuous assessment found that teachers' understanding of continuous assessment was inconsistent. Their classrooms practices were not aligned to the principles of continuous assessment.

Specifically, none of the aforementioned studies paid attention to the role of teacher cognition on the use of AfL in EFL speaking classes. This study therefore investigates teachers' awareness and beliefs as components of cognition and how these cognitive constructs are reflected in their classroom AfL practices for developing oral proficiency. Consequently, this study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of secondary school EFL teachers toward AfL in teaching speaking skills?
2. What beliefs do EFL teachers hold about the practice of AfL in teaching speaking skills?
3. How do EFL teachers practice AfL in teaching speaking skills?

Literature Review

The Concept of Teacher Cognition

The term teacher cognition is an umbrella that involves the mental lives of teachers, including their thoughts, beliefs, knowledge, identities, and expectations. Borg (2003) defines teacher cognition in language instruction as what teachers think, know, believe, and do. This highlights the fact that teachers' mental processes are linked to their instructional behavior. This research is based on Borg's (2003) conceptualization and defines teacher cognition as an integrated system of awareness, beliefs, and practices that influences EFL teachers' choices when using AfL to teach speaking skills.

EFL Teachers' Practice of AfL in Teaching Speaking Skills

Research on Assessment for Learning has increasingly examined how formative assessment can be incorporated into speaking instruction in EFL contexts. AfL views assessment as part of the learning process rather than as an activity conducted mainly to assign grades. In speaking lessons, this involves giving students useful feedback, involving them in assessing their own and their peers' performance, and using assessment information to determine what they need to improve (Black & Wiliam, 1998).

Summative evaluation is still prevalent in many EFL classrooms, even though AfL places more emphasis on learning during the assessment process. Tests and graded exercises

are frequently used to evaluate speaking, and the outcomes are primarily intended to document students' progress. Instead than viewing assessment as an endpoint, Harlen (2005) emphasized the importance of using assessment data to facilitate additional learning.

Research on AfL has shown positive effects on speaking development. Chen (2015) found that students' motivation, confidence, and fluency increased when they engaged in peer and self-evaluation. In a parallel study, Tsagari (2017) discovered that students were more engaged and had improved communication abilities when Greek EFL teachers used formative feedback and oral reflection.

Many teachers find it difficult to regularly conduct formative assessment because of the environment in the classroom. Large class sizes, time constraints, and a lack of institutional support were among the challenges faced by Korean EFL teachers, according to Kim and Kim (2020). Gao and Zhang (2016) discovered that standardised tests had an impact on teachers' evaluation decisions. When teachers are under pressure to get pupils ready for such exams, summative evaluation may take precedence over formative activities, even when they acknowledge the value of AfL.

Teachers' training and experience are equally crucial. According to Black and Wiliam (2009), effective formative assessment requires a practical grasp of how assessment can be integrated into classroom instruction. Knowing the fundamentals of AfL is not the same as knowing how to use them in a classroom.

A comparable issue arises in the Ethiopian situation. Teachers seldom ever utilised AfL, according to Askalemariam (2015). Tests and assignments, which were usually used to determine grades, were the main techniques of assessment.

The results presented by Dashti (2019) and Pham (2022) also indicated a discrepancy between teachers' perceptions of formative assessment and their actual classroom practices. Even when they recognise the importance of formative evaluation, teachers may still rely on tried-and-true methods. This discrepancy may be partially explained by teachers' working conditions and a lack of professional development.

When considered collectively, these results indicate that teachers' knowledge alone is insufficient to comprehend the usage of AfL in speaking lessons. Teachers' attitudes, practical preparation, class size, available teaching time, test requirements, and institutional support can all have an impact on what happens in the classroom. Therefore, it is possible to gain a better understanding of how AfL is used in speaking instruction and why its application may continue to be restricted by looking at teachers' cognitive processes in conjunction with their actual assessment methods.

Methodology

Design of the Study

The design of this study was mixed-methods sequential explanatory design. Quantitative data was first collected and analyzed, and then qualitative data was used to support and elucidate the quantitative results. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2018),the design is appropriate for investigating phenomena that require both quantitative trends and in-depth qualitative insights.

Research Site, Population, Sampling Technique, and Sample Size

This study was conducted among four selected zones in the Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The required sample size for this study was 368 EFL teachers. This was determined using Yamane’s (1967) formula. Four comparatively stable, secure, and geographically accessible zones were deliberately chosen to guarantee the viability and security of data collecting due to security issues in some areas of the region. To choose participating EFL teachers, simple random sample was used at the “woreda” and school levels within the designated zones. A total of 96 secondary schools, both public and private, with 765 EFL teachers formed the target population. From this group, 368 teachers were randomly selected using the lottery method to meet the sample requirement.

Table 1.*Research Site, Population, and Sample Size of the Study*

Research Site	Number of teachers	Selected Samples	Percentage
Gondar Town Admin Zone	101	49	48.5%
Central Gondar Zone	423	203	48.0%
West Gondar Zone	50	24	48.0%
North Gondar Zone	191	92	48.1%
Total	765	368	48.1%

For the qualitative phase of the study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 EFL teachers selected from eight schools through convenience sampling due to limited accessibility to some schools. Due to scheduling and logistical challenges, only 11 of these participants were observed in their classrooms to examine their implementation of AfL in teaching speaking skills.

Data Gathering Instruments

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Quantitative data were obtained through a questionnaire, while qualitative data were collected using open-ended questionnaire items, semi-structured interviews, and unstructured classroom observations. A brief description of each instrument is presented below.

Self-Reported Questionnaire

A self-reported questionnaire, which consisted of 86 closed-ended items and 5 open-ended questions, was developed for the present study. The questionnaire included five sections on EFL teachers' awareness, beliefs about AfL and on EFL teachers' practice of AfL in speaking skills lessons.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The researcher developed interview guide questions based on the questionnaire items and a comprehensive review of the related literature. The interview consisted of 15 items focusing on awareness, beliefs, and practices. These questions addressed EFL teachers' level of awareness of AfL, beliefs about AfL and its practice in teaching speaking skills.

Classroom Observations

The researcher employed a non-participant, overt, and unstructured observation method to collect detailed data on the practices of AfL in teaching speaking skills. The observation items were adapted from reputable sources (as cited in 3.4 below) and were aligned with the study's objectives, which were established through a comprehensive review of relevant literature. Eleven classroom observations were conducted. Each teacher was observed once, as further observations were not possible because of the participants' scheduling constraints. During each observation, the researcher took detailed field notes and audio-recorded the sessions with the informed consent of the EFL teachers.

Validity and Reliability

The study used various procedures to validate the instruments, namely the questionnaire, interview guide, and classroom observation checklist. These instruments underwent several stages of validation, including face and content validity; construct validity, and concurrent validity. The Formative Assessment Literacy Scale (FALS; Yan & Pastore, 2022), Izci et al. (2024), and Askalemariam (2015) are only a few of the reputable and validated sources from which all of the questionnaire items were modified. Then, all the three instruments were reviewed by five UoG research experts, who provided constructive feedback with a focus on item clarity, content relevance, and contextual appropriateness. Several components were explained, integrated to remove redundancy, and altered to better fit the EFL classroom context in response to their feedback. Third, to check the instruments' validity and reliability, a pilot research was carried out. The reliability of the

questionnaire was confirmed by Cronbach's alpha (α) ratings of 0.88 for the EFL teachers' awareness subscale, 0.93 for the beliefs about AfL subscale, and 0.77 for all practice subscales, which showed a high level of internal consistency across the subscales. Together, these methods improved the study's reliability and rigor.

Data Collection Procedures

Data for this study were collected with ethical clearance obtained from the institutional review board (IRERC). Permission was also requested from school authorities, and informed consent was obtained from all EFL teachers. Participants were provided with orientations regarding the purpose of the study, the procedures involved, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time. Data collection occurred in two phases.

In the first phase, quantitative data were collected using the questionnaire to examine teachers' awareness, beliefs, and practices of AfL in teaching speaking skills. Questionnaires were personally distributed to the selected participants and collected upon completion.

In the second phase, qualitative data were collected. Semi-structured interviews and classroom observations were conducted with the participants. During classroom observations, field notes were recorded to capture the implementation of AfL strategies in speaking lessons. Interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent. All data were handled confidentially and used solely for research purposes.

Method of Data Analysis

IBM SPSS Statistics version 27 was used to enter and statistically analyze the quantitative data collected from the questionnaire. To characterize the sociodemographic traits of the respondents, frequencies and percentages were calculated. Descriptive statistics, such as mean and standard deviation, were also computed to give a general picture of EFL teachers' awareness, attitudes, and methods regarding the use of AfL in speaking instruction. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was used to examine the qualitative data gathered from interviews and classroom observations. In order to interpret the findings in connection to the quantitative results, the analytical procedure comprised the following steps: transcription of the data, thorough initial reading and familiarization, identification of relevant statements, formulation of themes, clustering of related themes, and integration of themes.

Ethical Consideration

This work has received Ethical approval from the University of Gondar's Institutional Review Board (IRB). We received various letters of cooperation from DELL and CSSH. To get permission to meet with English teachers, the directors of the participating secondary schools were then approached. A written informed consent form was then filled out.

Results of Quantitative Data Analysis

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Table 2 below lists some of the respondents' important demographic traits that were pertinent to the research. With more than three-fourths of teachers (77.2%) being male, the gender distribution of participants shows an uneven percentage. First-degree holders and second-degree holders made up the two groups of respondents, with the majority (84%) having a first degree. About one-third of teachers had been teaching for one to ten years, while a sizable portion (40.8%) claimed having more than twenty years of experience. Furthermore, a weekly teaching load of 11–15, 40-minute periods was reported by more than three-fourths of teachers.

Table 2: *Distribution of Respondents*

Variable	Value label	Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	284	77.2
	Female	84	22.8
Educational Background	Bachelor's Degree	309	84.0
	Master's Degree	59	16.0
Teaching Experience	1 to 10 years	128	34.8
	From 11 to 20 years	90	24.5
	More than 20 years	150	40.8
Average Class Size	Less or equal to 40	2	.5
	41- 65	69	18.8
	More than 65	297	80.7
Total periods per week	1 to 10 Periods	28	7.6
	11 to 15 Periods	286	77.7
	More than 16 periods	54	14.7
	Total	368	100.0

Results of Data Analysis on Study Variables

Table 3 below shows, the use of competency-based AfL activities ($M = 1.92$ on a 5-point Likert scale) seems to be the variable with the lowest rating, followed by the use of speaking rubrics as assessment criteria ($M = 2.25$). On the other hand, teachers' awareness of AfL in teaching speaking skills had a comparatively higher mean score ($M = 3.65$). These findings imply that while teachers in the study sample usually had a moderate awareness of AfL, their actual use in speaking lessons was comparatively poor. Specifically, the low mean scores for competency-based AfL tasks and the use of rubrics indicate that these activities were rarely applied, whereas other practice dimensions, such as using criteria to interpret assessment results ($M = 3.51$), appear to have been implemented to a moderate extent.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics on the study variables

	Variables	Min.	Max	Mean	Standard Dev.
1	EFL teachers' Awareness of AfL	2.33	4.67	3.64	.57
2	EFL teachers' Belief in AfL	1.65	4.15	2.87	.87
3	3.1 General practice of AfL strategies	1.10	4.70	2.43	.80
	3.2 Using criteria to interpret assessment results	1.50	4.75	3.50	.95
	3.3 Extent of using assessment results in speaking	1.20	4.60	3.01	.94
	3.4 Integration of assessment and instruction	1.00	5.00	2.99	1.40
	3.5 Competency-Based AfL Tasks in Speaking Lessons	1.33	4.58	1.91	.71
	3.6 Use of rubrics as a criteria in AfL Speaking	1.11	4.44	2.24	.68
	All Practice Items total	1.93	4.09	2.46	.39

Overall, while teachers demonstrated moderate awareness and negative beliefs about AfL, their practice of key AfL strategies in speaking lessons was limited, particularly regarding competency-based tasks and the use of rubrics as assessment criteria. These findings represent EFL teachers from the selected secondary schools in the study zones of the Amhara region.

Findings of Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative findings are organized thematically and are supported with evidence as follows:

Findings on EFL Teachers' Cognition of AfL in Teaching Speaking Skills

Except one participant, all interviewees demonstrated low level of knowledge of the concept of AfL. Here is an exemplary excerpt from an interview of one of the participants:

...,I'm not completely sure what AfL is. Of course, I've heard of it, but I've always just thought of an assessment which can be given at the end ... like a mid-term exam, or final exam. I recognize I should be assessing my students in many ways, like giving them tests, but I'm not certain how that fits into AfL specifically. I mean, I try to give them some feedback during the lesson, but I don't think about it as an AfL, just... feedback for improvement (T1 of School 1).

The respondent was still uncertain of how his experience of assessment fits into the larger concept of AfL. This implies that although feedback is being provided, it is not seen as a purposeful, ongoing process connected to the development of students' learning, which is

a crucial component of AfL.

EFL teachers were also interviewed on whether or not they believe that AfL practices can make a difference in improving students learning of speaking skills. Most teachers lack strong belief on the issue. This is indicated by a typical response given by one of the respondents concerning the importance of AfL.

I'm not sure. I mean, yes, I suppose it could work, but I'm in doubt. We've tried to use continuous tests before, but honestly, the students didn't seem to benefit much from it. It is not seriously taken. It is only done without much attention to its importance. I simply done for the sake of completing the requirement by the pressure of the department heads and directors, but there's no real change. I feel like just teaching the speaking skills and having them practice them is more effective than anything else. (Participant 7 of school 7).

In this quote, the habit of using continuous tests has led the teacher to question the value of AfL, suggesting a disconnect between the concept of AfL and its perceived outcomes. Doing AfL for the sake of completing the requirement due to the pressure of the school officials, lack of student engagement in assessments, presence of insufficient guidance on how to use AfL tools were remarked.

Most of the teachers in the open-ended questionnaire believe that the current implementation of the education system i.e. the systemic pressures to prioritize curriculum coverage and the less emphasis school leaders and teachers gave to teaching English prevent them from giving enough attention to speaking skills lessons. The following excerpt illustrates this perception:

Although I know AfL is important, the school system pushes us to finish the syllabus quickly. Because of that, I often skip speaking activities or give them very little time. (Participant 81 of school 11).

Furthermore, in both the open-ended questionnaire and the interview, the majority of secondary school EFL teachers assume that they have a positive belief about the importance of AfL to improve students' speaking skills. Still, they failed to practice it technically and theoretically. An extract gained from the open-ended questionnaire from school 4 of teacher 16 also shows this:

I believe that AfL helps teachers to identify students' problems in learning in general and in speaking skills in particular, to improve every student's speaking skills performance, to empower students to study from day one, to capture students' attention and effort and to make all students to be competent speakers of English language. Therefore, students should be assessed continuously at the end of a lesson or a week or semester and record their results in the mark list for promoting students to the next grade (School 4 of teacher 16).

Here, the respondent seems to confuse the purpose of AfL because he held that results should be recorded and used for promotion.

In addition, if AfL tools are employed only at the end of a certain period or lesson, their primary purpose would be to assess students' grasp of the subject matter rather than to provide evidence for ongoing learning. This inconsistency in teachers' beliefs regarding practicing AfL in improving students' speaking skills also shows a gap in their theoretical knowledge and consistent application of AfL principles in speaking skills education.

The reasons why EFL teachers appeared to hold such levels of awareness or belief were also explored through their responses. Several participants indicated that they might not have received adequate practical training during either their pre-service or in-service education. Some teachers argued that rather than being created independently by teachers in the classroom, assessment procedures are frequently influenced by administrative requirements. Additionally, many teachers seemed to think they were already successfully using AfL, and it appeared to be misinterpreted or somewhat confused with other forms of assessment.

Findings of the Practice of AfL in Teaching Speaking Skills

The general practice of AfL strategies - It was usually noted that EFL teachers did not inform their students of the speaking lessons' assessment criteria or course objectives. Without outlining the desired learning outcomes or performance requirements, teachers usually started classes by going over the previous topic and introducing the new material for the day. Students' comprehension of expectations and how their performance will be assessed was hampered by this lack of communication.

During the interview, one teacher explained:

"Usually, I just introduce the topic for the day and begin the exercises. Since they are already aware that we are practicing speaking, I don't always explain the goals or standards."

This interviewee illustrates a widespread misperception that, in the absence of clear communication, children inherently comprehend the learning objectives. As a result, students lost out on chances to practice self-monitoring and concentrate on developing clearly defined speaking competencies. The results emphasize a discrepancy between teachers' understanding of formative assessment principles and their goal-sharing and openness practices in the classroom.

The following classroom observation extract also illustrates this point clearly:

"Let's all get ready: today we're having a speaking lesson. I know some of you may be thinking ...Why speaking today? It won't be available in the National Exam! □ But it will help you speak English better, even in interviews or university."

□ 3-13 mins: Introduction & Review of Previous Lesson

Teacher goes to the black board and cleans the black board by himself and writes the

title at the centre and underlined it “Mechanized Agriculture: Asking and Answering Questions” and the date on the top left side diagonally and say:

“Let’s start by recalling what we did last time. Talk with your partner about the listening lesson on Mechanized Agriculture. What was the main idea?”

(Students pair up and talk quietly, some reluctant at first. A few just flip through their books.)

(Classroom observation No 1, School p1, Grade 12, 2024)

As suggested by the above extract, the classroom observation appeared to indicate that the teacher did not seem to explicitly share the speaking lesson objectives (learning intentions) or success criteria with the students. Although the lesson appeared to begin with a short motivational remark and topic introduction, there seemed to be no clear communication of what students were expected to learn or how their speaking performance would be evaluated. The apparent absence of stated objectives and assessment rubrics may have limited learners’ understanding of the lesson goals and the standards of success. This could suggest a possible gap in the teacher’s application of AfL strategies, particularly in making learning more transparent and supporting students in developing awareness of learning goals and self-regulated learning skills.

Another important remark that emerged from the classroom observation was “*Why speaking today? It won’t be available in the National Exam!*” appears to reflect the strong influence of an exam-oriented culture on classroom practices. This seems to suggest that speaking lessons may often be neglected or given less emphasis, possibly because they are not included in the national examination system.

In order to improve students’ speaking skills, the study also looked at how EFL teachers use AfL strategies to create effective classroom discussions and activities using a variety of assessment tools. Private and state-owned secondary schools differed significantly in this regard, according to data gathered from semi-structured interviews and classroom observations.

EFL Teachers noted during interviews that the Grade 9–12 textbooks provide a variety of assessment strategies, such as activities, exercises, pair work, discussions, dialogues, presentations, debates, and monologues. A private school teacher stated, “*We frequently use pair work, dialogues, and presentations to help students practice speaking directly from the textbook.*” Such tools were actively used in private schools, where speaking exercises were routinely incorporated into courses, according to observational data. On the other hand, similar strategies were applied unevenly in the state-owned schools under observation. Instead of methodically adding a variety of speaking tasks, teachers were frequently seen depending mostly on unprompted oral questions. An extract from a classroom observation noted “*Students were asked oral questions spontaneously, but no structured discussion or presentation activity followed.*”

Additionally, the classroom observations showed that students’ speaking improvement was not supported by the use of digital aids or online resources. With the exception of sporadic pair work, peer and self-assessment these procedures were mostly lacking.

Furthermore, observational data disclosed that students were rarely encouraged to analyse their own performance and that self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques were used sparingly. Inconsistent and mostly teacher-dependent efforts were made to reduce linguistic and psychological obstacles, such as students' uneasiness or fear of making mistakes. *"Some students are shy to speak, so I just skip them and ask others,"* one participant clarified. Interview data, in which a number of teachers noted the lack of systematic instruments for assessment, further supported these conclusions. *"I have never used a rubric for speaking; I only judge by what I listen"* one respondent acknowledged. These findings often point to a discrepancy between teachers' knowledge of AfL concepts and their actual teaching methods, especially when it comes to encouraging student reflection and offering practical, criterion-based feedback.

In general, the results show that although EFL teachers were seen to put up little effort in applying AfL strategies and making use of the resources at their disposal, their practices at state-owned secondary schools were inconsistent and lacked systematic application.

Integrating Assessment with Instruction: In speaking lessons integrating AfL tasks with instruction was minimal according to the data from the classroom observation. Most teachers relied on textbook-based activities and asked one or two students to perform dialogues or any other speaking activities before concluding with, *"Practice it this way at home."* This suggested that content coverage was prioritized over formative engagement. *"Integrating assessment with instruction is very important, but the 40 minutes is not enough for us,"* an EFL teacher noted during the interview.

Another EFL teacher clarified, *"I just teach the speaking lessons continuously,"* based on the information gathered from the semi-structured interview. If there isn't enough time or the students aren't willing to talk, I occasionally move on to the next subject. To save time, I simply check my schoolwork or ask questions aloud.

Similarly, AfL strategies like communicating learning aims, giving detailed feedback, and engaging in self and peer assessment were also found to be infrequently used in classroom observations. Teachers often saw AfL as "continuous assessment" that was mostly utilized for grading, which showed a glaring discrepancy between their theoretical knowledge and real-world teaching methods. FL teachers mistook just administering regular assessments as AfL and referred to it as "continuous assessment" in a number of interview responses.

Use of Competency-Based AfL Tasks in Speaking Lessons: Use of Competency-Based AfL activities in Speaking classes: Data collected through classroom observations and semi-structured interviews demonstrated broadly similar trends in the use of competency-based AfL activities in speaking classes. Both sources consistently stated that the implementation of these duties varied according to the grade levels that teachers taught.

During classroom observations, story-telling exercises were occasionally used to improve students' oral proficiency in several secondary schools. Teachers verified this in interviews,

stating that such activities were implemented when lessons allowed for flexibility or when students demonstrated a strong interest. Similarly, teachers occasionally observed and reported information-gap tasks, which took the shape of blank-space or completion exercises, as ways to stimulate interactive communication.

Both data sets, however, indicated that these behaviours were uncommon and shallow in nature. Interview data revealed that, while teachers recognised the value of competency-based AfL exercises, time restrictions, large class sizes, and exam pressure frequently hampered consistent implementation.

Small buzz-group discussions were more prevalent in all schools. In one speaking lesson that was witnessed, the teacher quickly divided the class into tiny buzz-groups using brief question-and-answer exchanges, with instructions such as *“Form a group of four or five... be fast, we don’t have much time.” You’re seven in number, Ayele. Go and have a seat with Samrawit.* The majority of students actively participated in the groups that were rapidly formed. However, these exercises remained straightforward and teacher-led, prioritizing procedural control above real, expressive speaking opportunities.

The interview Data also showed that teachers preferred these strategies due to their ease and manageability. As one teacher explained, *“...since they are easy to manage within the time I have, I usually stick to small-group discussions.”* In contrast, more demanding AfL speaking tasks such as debates, oral presentations, dialogues, monologues, interviews, and role-plays were rarely observed. Only a few teachers reported using them occasionally, often when the lesson topic explicitly appeared in the textbook. One teacher noted, *“I sometimes ask my students to participate in dialogues, but only if it goes exactly with the content of the text”*

Use of speaking rubrics as a criterion - speaking rubrics serves as valuable tools for evaluating various linguistic competencies. In this regard, EFL teachers were interviewed about their utilization of speaking rubrics in assessing students’ speaking skills. As an illustration, one teacher gave the following response:

When I give my students a speaking task, I sometimes simply give for example a dialogue without any pre-set criteria or rubrics to evaluate my students’ performance. Instead, I simply comment on them after presenting the dialogue based on what I see, like their flow of ideas (fluency) and pronunciation. I regularly focus on their grammar usage (School 5, T25).

This indicates that while some aspects of speaking rubrics, such as fluency and pronunciation, were occasionally employed in assessing students’ speaking skills, the criteria of grammatical accuracy were usually used but lacked regularity.

To conclude, the above qualitative findings disclose that there were substantial variations on how EFL teachers practiced various aspects of AfL in teaching speaking skills. Utilization of competency-based AfL tasks and the use of speaking rubrics were implemented in a

low level signifying that the areas need further attention and improvement. In contrast, teachers showed a new favourable view towards their awareness of AfL in teaching speaking skills lessons, indicating relatively a better awareness /understanding in assessing speaking practice.

Discussions

The primary objective of this research was to investigate EFL teachers' cognition and practice of AfL in teaching speaking skills lessons in selected secondary schools in Amhara region. Under this general objective the first research question was to determine the level of EFL teachers' awareness on AfL in the context of speaking lessons. The quantitative data analysis revealed that EFL teachers demonstrated a moderate level of awareness of AfL in teaching speaking skills, with an average score of 3.64 on a 5-point Likert scale (see Table 3). This result was further supported by the qualitative findings, which showed that while teachers were generally familiar with the concept of AfL, they lacked a clear and practical understanding of how to implement its strategies in speaking lessons. Many teachers appeared to equate AfL with delivering continuous assessments rather than using it as a formative approach to promote learning through feedback and reflection.

This finding was consistent with Abiy and Alemayehu's (2015) findings, which said that several Ethiopian teachers saw continuous assessment as primarily a grading tool rather than a technique for improving students' learning progress. Similarly, Defianty (2018) discovered that teachers in another scenario commonly failed to differentiate between formative and summative evaluation, indicating a poor understanding of AfL principles. Similarly, Birhanu (2013) reported that many Ethiopian teachers struggled to appropriately use formative assessment processes in the classroom.

Moreover, the continued existence of such discrepancies is consistent with the broader results of Black and Wiliam (1998), who found that teachers in a range of educational settings frequently misinterpret formative assessment and struggle to integrate information meaningfully into instruction. The similarities between the current study and previous findings suggest that deficiencies in instructors' conceptual understanding of AfL are not isolated to a single environment, but rather represent a widespread issue. Overall, these findings suggest that, while teachers in this study showed modest awareness of AfL, their conceptual and practical comprehension of its methodologies for teaching speaking skills remains limited. This could be linked to contextual issues such as poor professional training, huge class numbers, and exam-oriented procedures prevalent in the Amhara Region's designated secondary schools. As a result, continual professional development and school-based support mechanisms are critical for assisting teachers in internalising and effectively implementing AfL ideas in the classroom.

The beliefs of EFL teachers regarding the use of AfL in teaching speaking skills were investigated in relation to the second study question. The quantitative results revealed

that teachers had relatively low beliefs about the effectiveness of AfL activities, with an average score of 2.87 on a 5-point Likert scale. The qualitative data, which showed that many teachers were sceptical of AfL's capacity to enhance students' speaking abilities, supported this conclusion. They frequently brought up contextual issues such as a lack of resources, a big class size, and time limits that seemed to limit their confidence in effectively adopting AfL. This result is in line with the findings of Dashti (2019) and Abiy and Alemayehu (2015), who similarly discovered that many teachers viewed assessment as separate from the learning process and had low faith in AfL's capacity to improve student outcomes. In a similar vein, Birhanu (2013) observed that Ethiopian educators often maintained antiquated notions about assessment, viewing it primarily as a tool for measuring performance rather than fostering learning.

As a whole, these results suggest that EFL teachers' weak beliefs about AfL may stem from a persistent culture of exam-oriented instruction and limited professional exposure to formative assessment principles. As a result, assessment continues to be treated as an endpoint of learning rather than an integral, ongoing process that informs and enhances students' speaking development.

Examining how EFL teachers practice AfL in teaching speaking skills was the third research question of this study. The quantitative data showed that EFL teachers' overall AfL practice was low (with an average score of 2.47 across a range of AfL practices). Sharing learning objectives and assessment criteria (speaking rubrics), Engineering effective classroom discussions, encouraging peer and self-assessment, providing effective actionable feedback, competency-based AfL activities, and the integration of assessment and instruction were among the areas where AfL's speaking skills practice was most lacking.

The qualitative data obtained through open-ended questionnaire items, interviews, and classroom observations substantiated the quantitative findings regarding the limited practice of AfL in speaking instruction. While some teachers were observed using assessment tools such as tests, homework, and presentations, these activities were predominantly summative in nature and not explicitly aligned with AfL strategies. Classroom observation data further revealed that feedback, a core component of AfL was largely absent or superficial.

In contrast to Ounis (2017), who emphasized the importance of authentic and reflective oral language assessment practices, the present study found that EFL teachers in the observed schools rarely used feedback to scaffold speaking development. These results show a critical gap in teachers' understanding and application of feedback as an essential AfL strategy for enhancing students' communicative competence.

The study further found that teachers had difficulty in interpreting the assessment results consistently. For instance, teachers frequently failed to match assessment tasks with the learning objectives and employing the criteria used to assess speaking skills was often unclear to them and not practiced well. This inconsistency was also noted on other research studies such as Black and Wiliam (1998), and Askalemariam, (2015) who

contended that missed chances to enhance student outcomes can arise from teachers' ineffective utilisation of assessment results. According to Hattie and Timperley (2007), feedback works best when it is targeted, in line with learning outcomes, and utilised to direct future learning.

Despite these findings, the study also noted some EFL teachers to have an awareness of AfL practices and showed a willingness to integrate it into their teaching. For instance, some teachers used oral questioning and peer feedback in speaking lessons, which are both integral components of AfL. However, these practices were often inconsistent and lacked the depth necessary to effectively support students' language development. This might be as a result of several challenges teachers face in teaching in general or speaking in particular. It is known that both teachers and students give more attention for marked written tests not for AfL. The rigid time schedule and wider content coverage, predefined assessment procedures did not permit teachers to practice AfL. On the top of these, teachers have limitations in their speaking abilities because they themselves pass on the same schooling experience.

Conclusions

The findings of this study revealed that secondary school EFL teachers were found to possess a moderate awareness of AfL, yet their beliefs and practices appear to remain partially misaligned with its formative purpose. AfL was primarily viewed as the administration of continuous tests for grading purposes, rather than as a formative process aimed at improving students' speaking skills through feedback and reflection, according to classroom observations and interviews with teachers. As a result, AfL methods were only used sporadically in speaking classes, indicating a potential gap between theoretical awareness and actual implementation.

Recommendations

The study's findings led to the following recommendations: Teacher training institutes and school directors are encouraged to provide targeted, context-specific professional development rather than identical training for all teachers. Such programs could focus on enhancing EFL teachers' grasp of AfL principles as well as their practical skills in using AfL procedures in speaking instruction. Teachers may benefit from support in fostering the regular use of feedback, connecting assessment tasks with learning objectives, and engaging students in communicative activities. Lesson study, which improves collaborative professional learning and continuous reflection, may assist in the successful integration of AfL into actual classroom practice. Future research might investigate how consistent, context-sensitive AfL-focused training influences teachers' beliefs, practices, and student outcomes in a range of settings.

Limitations of the Study

The study was conducted in selected secondary schools in four Gondar zones of the Amhara region. Because of practical constraints like the current state of security, access, and time during classroom observations and interviews, teachers were not stable to see how well they are delivering the speaking lesson. As a result, the findings should be interpreted with caution when applying them to secondary schools in other parts of Ethiopia.

Acknowledgement

We would like to convey our heartfelt gratitude to the University of Gondar for generously financing our study. We also thank the reviewers for their insightful and helpful comments, which significantly improved the paper. Our sincere gratitude is extended to the secondary school EFL teachers who gave up their time and contributed their knowledge during the data gathering process; their assistance was crucial to the study's success.

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