# Identifying Indicators of Teacher Proficiency in Assessment for Learning (AfL) Frameworks

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## ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the key indicators of teacher proficiency within Assessment for Learning (AfL) frameworks based on the perspectives and practices of secondary school teachers in Tehran. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews with 13 purposively selected secondary teachers in Tehran who actively implement AfL practices. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analyzed using thematic analysis facilitated by NVivo software. The coding process involved open and axial coding, constant comparison, and regular team discussions to ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. Analysis revealed three overarching themes of teacher proficiency in AfL: (1) assessment planning and design, including alignment with learning objectives, variety of assessment methods, differentiation, clarity of assessment criteria, diagnostic assessment, and evidence-based design; (2) feedback and communication, encompassing timely, constructive, and student-centered feedback, clarity and accessibility, student involvement, ongoing communication, and sensitivity to individual differences; and (3) professional growth and reflective practice, characterized by self-evaluation, collaborative assessment culture, engagement in professional development, responsiveness to student data, and research-informed teaching. These indicators align with established models of assessment literacy and demonstrate the multifaceted nature of effective AfL practices in the classroom. This study highlights the complexity and multidimensionality of teacher proficiency in AfL, underscoring the interplay of technical, relational, and reflective competencies necessary for effective assessment. The findings support the need for targeted professional development, collaborative learning opportunities, and institutional support to foster AfL practices. Future research should broaden the scope and use mixed methods to triangulate perspectives and strengthen generalizability. Cultivating a reflective, evidence-based culture remains central to advancing AfL implementation and improving student learning outcomes.

**Keywords:** Assessment for Learning, teacher proficiency, formative assessment, feedback, professional development, qualitative research, secondary education, Iran.

## Introduction

In recent decades, the landscape of educational assessment has undergone a significant transformation, shifting from a predominant focus on summative evaluation to an increased emphasis on assessment for learning (AfL) practices. This shift reflects a broader pedagogical movement toward learner-centered education, where assessment is seen not merely as a means of measuring achievement, but as a dynamic and integral part of the learning process itself (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Assessment for Learning, as conceptualized by Black and Wiliam (1998), refers to any assessment activity that is used to promote students' learning, offering ongoing feedback that guides both teaching and learning activities. The effective implementation of AfL requires a set of complex competencies on the part of teachers, whose proficiency in assessment fundamentally shapes student

outcomes (Heritage, 2013; Klenowski, 2009). Despite the growing recognition of AfL's benefits, there remains a critical need to delineate the specific indicators that characterize teacher proficiency in AfL frameworks, particularly within diverse educational contexts.

The importance of AfL is underscored by an extensive body of research indicating its positive impact on student motivation, self-regulation, and academic achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Sadler, 1989). AfL practices, including formative assessment, timely feedback, peer and self-assessment, and the clarification of learning goals, have been shown to foster deeper engagement and improved learning outcomes across disciplines and educational levels (Wiliam, 2011; Bennett, 2011). However, the translation of AfL theory into effective classroom practice remains a complex endeavor. Teachers are not only required to possess sound knowledge of assessment strategies, but must also demonstrate the capacity to adapt these strategies to the specific needs of their students, align assessments with learning objectives, and create an inclusive and supportive assessment culture (Carless, 2011; Havnes et al., 2012). Consequently, the proficiency of teachers in AfL frameworks becomes a pivotal variable influencing the success of these practices.

One of the foundational dimensions of teacher proficiency in AfL is the ability to design and plan assessments that are tightly aligned with curricular goals and learning outcomes (Bennett, 2011). Research indicates that alignment ensures the validity and reliability of assessments, making it possible for teachers to accurately diagnose student needs and provide targeted instructional interventions (Brookhart, 2011). Furthermore, the use of a variety of assessment methods—including formative, summative, self, and peer assessment—allows for a more holistic understanding of student learning and supports differentiated instruction (Stiggins, 2005; Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). Effective teachers are also adept at clarifying assessment criteria, often through the use of rubrics, exemplars, and explicit performance standards, which serve to demystify expectations and empower students to take ownership of their learning (Brookhart, 2018; Sadler, 2005).

Another critical aspect of teacher proficiency is the capacity to provide timely, actionable, and constructive feedback. Feedback is widely regarded as one of the most powerful influences on learning and achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Yet, the efficacy of feedback is contingent upon its quality, clarity, and relevance to individual learner needs (Shute, 2008; Carless & Boud, 2018). Studies highlight the importance of feedback that is specific, forward-looking, and dialogic in nature, enabling students to understand not only where they stand, but also how to move forward (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006; Winstone & Carless, 2019). Proficient teachers also engage students actively in the feedback process, encouraging self-reflection, peer assessment, and collaborative goal setting, all of which foster greater learner autonomy and metacognitive awareness (Harris & Brown, 2013; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2013).

The role of teacher reflection and professional growth cannot be overstated in the context of AfL. The implementation of effective AfL practices is predicated upon a teacher's willingness to engage in ongoing self-evaluation, collaborative inquiry, and professional development (Boud & Molloy, 2013; Smith et al., 2014). Teachers who routinely reflect on their assessment practices, participate in professional learning communities, and stay abreast of current research are better equipped to respond to the evolving needs of their students and the changing demands of educational policy (Heritage, 2007; Stiggins, 2005). Moreover, such reflective engagement contributes to the development of a robust assessment culture within schools, promoting shared understandings and collective efficacy (Klenowski, 2009; Willis et al., 2013).

Despite a robust theoretical foundation, the literature reveals considerable variability in the ways that AfL is enacted across educational systems and contexts (Schildkamp et al., 2020; Looney et al., 2018). Factors such as teacher beliefs, assessment literacy, institutional support, and cultural norms all influence the uptake and effectiveness of AfL practices (Xu & Brown, 2016; DeLuca et al., 2013). Research in non-Western contexts, including Iran, highlights unique challenges such as examination-driven cultures, high-stakes testing environments, and limited resources for professional development (Azadi et

al., 2022; Tavakoli & Baniasad-Azad, 2019). These contextual factors underscore the necessity for research that is locally grounded, exploring the indicators of teacher proficiency in AfL within the realities of particular educational settings.

Qualitative approaches have been especially valuable in uncovering the nuanced, context-dependent dimensions of teacher proficiency in AfL. By employing interviews, observations, and reflective journals, researchers have identified a range of indicators—from the technical skills of assessment design to the relational competencies of feedback and communication (Looney et al., 2018; Harris & Brown, 2013). The emphasis on teacher voice is especially important, as it provides insight into the lived experiences, challenges, and professional judgments that shape assessment practices on the ground (Willis et al., 2013). Such research not only enriches our understanding of what constitutes proficiency in AfL, but also informs the development of targeted interventions and professional learning opportunities for teachers.

Given these considerations, the current study seeks to identify and articulate the key indicators of teacher proficiency in AfL frameworks, drawing on the experiences of teachers working in Tehran. The study is informed by the need to bridge the gap between global AfL discourse and local practice, providing actionable insights that can inform teacher education, policy, and classroom implementation in the Iranian context. By foregrounding the voices of teachers, this research contributes to a growing body of evidence on the professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions required for effective AfL, with implications for both practice and policy.

The specific objectives of this study are threefold: (1) to explore how teachers conceptualize and enact AfL in their everyday practice; (2) to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that underlie proficiency in AfL; and (3) to illuminate the contextual factors that facilitate or constrain the development of these proficiencies. Through qualitative interviews and thematic analysis, the study provides a detailed map of the indicators of teacher proficiency in AfL as perceived by practitioners themselves. In doing so, it aims to inform ongoing efforts to enhance assessment literacy and promote transformative educational practices that center assessment as a tool for learning.

In sum, understanding teacher proficiency in AfL is vital not only for improving classroom assessment practices but also for fostering a broader culture of learning in schools. As educational systems worldwide grapple with the challenges of accountability, equity, and student engagement, the insights gleaned from teacher expertise in AfL offer a powerful resource for meaningful educational change (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Wiliam, 2011). By identifying the indicators of proficiency in this domain, this study seeks to contribute to the professionalization of teaching and the advancement of assessment as a formative, learner-centered endeavor.

**Methods and Materials**

*Study Design and Participants*

This study adopted a qualitative research design to explore and identify indicators of teacher proficiency within Assessment for Learning (AfL) frameworks. The qualitative approach was selected due to its capacity to capture rich, in-depth insights into teachers' experiences, perspectives, and practices related to AfL. The study focused on secondary school teachers in Tehran who have demonstrated active engagement with AfL practices in their teaching. Using purposive sampling, thirteen participants were selected to ensure a diverse representation of teaching experience, subject area, and school context. All participants provided informed consent prior to the commencement of data collection.

## Data Collection

Data were collected exclusively through semi-structured interviews, which enabled the researchers to explore the complexities of teachers' understandings and implementations of AfL. The interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed accounts of participants' approaches, beliefs, and perceived challenges related to assessment for learning. Interviews were conducted face-to-face at mutually convenient locations or via secure online platforms, depending on participant preference and availability. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participant permission to ensure accuracy of data capture. Data collection continued until theoretical saturation was achieved, with no new indicators or themes emerging in the final interviews.

## Data analysis

The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was employed to facilitate the systematic coding and organization of data. The analytic process involved multiple readings of the transcripts, open coding to identify initial concepts, and subsequent axial coding to group codes into meaningful categories and themes. Throughout the analysis, constant comparison methods were used to refine themes and ensure consistency. The research team engaged in regular discussions to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings. Member checking was also conducted by sharing preliminary themes with a subset of participants to validate the interpretations.

## Findings and Results

Theme 1: Assessment Planning and Design

Alignment with Learning Objectives

Teachers consistently emphasized the importance of aligning assessments with clear learning objectives. This involved setting explicit criteria and ensuring that every assessment was relevant to curriculum standards. As one participant noted, "I always make sure my assessments start from the learning goals—if students don't know what's expected, assessment loses its purpose." Concepts in this subtheme included clear learning targets, curriculum relevance, explicit criteria, goal-setting, and the practice of backward design.

Variety of Assessment Methods

A prominent indicator of proficiency was the use of diverse assessment methods. Teachers described employing formative assessments, self- and peer assessments, project-based tasks, quizzes, and oral questioning to capture a broad spectrum of student learning. One teacher remarked, "No single assessment tells the whole story. I use a mix, from projects to short quizzes, so everyone has a chance to show their learning."

Differentiation in Assessment

Differentiation emerged as a critical skill, with teachers adapting assessments to meet varied student needs. Practices included scaffolding, providing alternative tasks, and employing flexible grouping strategies. As reflected in the data, one teacher explained, "Some students need more scaffolding or a different format altogether. We can't assess everyone with the same tool."

Clarity of Assessment Criteria

Ensuring that students understood how they would be evaluated was another vital subcategory. Teachers provided rubrics, exemplars, and transparent performance standards. One participant shared, "When I give out rubrics and sample answers, it helps students understand what good work looks like and how to achieve it."

Use of Diagnostic Assessment

Teachers reported the frequent use of diagnostic tools such as pre-tests, learning profiles, and needs analyses to inform their instructional planning. According to one teacher, "I often start with a short diagnostic quiz or ask about prior knowledge. It helps me see where the gaps are before diving into new content."

Evidence-Based Design

Effective teachers were also characterized by their use of evidence from student work and research-informed practices to design and refine assessments. A participant noted, "I look at past assignments and current research to shape my assessment tasks, making sure they're relevant and effective."

Theme 2: Feedback and Communication

Timely Feedback

Proficiency in AfL was marked by the provision of prompt and frequent feedback. Teachers strove to respond quickly, often within a few days, so students could make timely improvements. One interviewee emphasized, "If feedback takes too long, students lose interest. I try to give it within two days so it's still fresh in their minds."

Constructive and Actionable Feedback

Participants highlighted the value of feedback that is both constructive and actionable, focusing on specific suggestions and next steps. As one teacher put it, "Feedback isn't just about pointing out mistakes—it's about giving students a way forward, helping them see what to do next."

Student Involvement in Feedback

Teachers described actively involving students in the feedback process through self-reflection prompts, peer review, and goal-setting discussions. One participant reflected, "When students participate in giving and receiving feedback, they become more invested in their own growth."

Clarity and Accessibility of Feedback

Teachers were careful to ensure feedback was clear, understandable, and actionable. This included using simple language, visual cues, and feedback templates. A teacher explained, "I use straightforward language and give examples of what improvement looks like. Students need to know exactly how to act on feedback."

Ongoing Communication with Students

A continuous, open dialogue between teachers and students was seen as crucial for effective AfL. Teachers reported practices such as regular check-ins, assessment conferences, and maintaining an open-door policy. "I encourage students to come talk to me about their progress at any time," said one interviewee.

Sensitivity to Individual Differences

Finally, teachers underscored the importance of tailoring feedback and communication to individual student backgrounds and needs. One teacher shared, "I try to give feedback that respects each student's culture and learning style. It's not just about what I say, but how I say it."

Theme 3: Professional Growth and Reflective Practice

Self-Evaluation Practices

Many teachers engaged in systematic self-evaluation, using reflection journals, self-ratings, and analyses of their own strengths and weaknesses. "After each unit, I reflect on what went well and what could be better," explained one participant, emphasizing the ongoing nature of reflective practice.

Collaborative Assessment Culture

Proficiency also involved collaboration with colleagues through department meetings, shared practices, co-assessment, and learning communities. One teacher stated, "We meet regularly to discuss assessment strategies, share resources, and sometimes even assess together. It's really helped me improve."

Professional Development

Teachers valued ongoing professional development, including workshops, AfL-focused training sessions, and engaging with relevant literature. As one teacher described, "Professional development sessions on AfL changed my entire approach to assessment—I now see it as part of learning, not just grading."

Responsiveness to Student Data

Proficient teachers routinely used student assessment data to adjust instruction, planning, and feedback. This included modifying instruction, flexible planning, and addressing misconceptions. A teacher commented, "If I see a trend in mistakes, I revisit the topic and try a different approach."

Research Engagement

Finally, many participants reported staying updated with recent research on AfL and implementing findings in their practice. Action research and continual professional reading were cited as ways to remain at the forefront of effective assessment. One participant noted, "I regularly read new studies on AfL and try out strategies in my classroom. It keeps my teaching fresh and effective."

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study set out to identify indicators of teacher proficiency within Assessment for Learning (AfL) frameworks by exploring the perspectives and practices of secondary teachers in Tehran. The qualitative analysis revealed three broad themes—assessment planning and design, feedback and communication, and professional growth and reflective practice—each comprising several nuanced subcategories and concepts that collectively characterize the proficient enactment of AfL in classroom settings.

The first theme, assessment planning and design, encompassed the alignment of assessments with learning objectives, the use of varied assessment methods, differentiation, clarity of criteria, diagnostic assessment, and evidence-based design. Participants described the necessity of crafting assessments that are explicitly linked to curricular standards and articulated clear learning goals for students. This finding strongly supports existing research underscoring the importance of alignment for ensuring validity and instructional utility (Brookhart, 2011; Bennett, 2011). Teachers' use of a diverse array of assessment tools echoes calls in the literature for varied, context-sensitive approaches that cater to the heterogeneity of student abilities, learning styles, and backgrounds (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009; Stiggins, 2005). The prominence of differentiation in assessment planning highlights teachers' commitment to equity and the recognition that one-size-fits-all approaches are inadequate—a stance echoed by Sadler (1989) and Hattie (2009), who advocate for flexible assessment strategies that adapt to learners' developmental needs.

Further, the clarity of assessment criteria emerged as a central concern for teachers, who described the provision of rubrics, exemplars, and performance standards to demystify expectations. This practice is well-aligned with recommendations from Brookhart (2018) and Sadler (2005), who emphasize that transparent criteria empower students to self-monitor and take responsibility for their learning progress. The systematic use of diagnostic assessments by teachers reflects an evidence-based orientation that supports the early identification of learning needs and the tailoring of instruction—a finding that resonates with formative assessment literature highlighting the diagnostic function of assessment in the AfL paradigm (Black & Wiliam, 2009; Heritage, 2013).

The second major theme concerned feedback and communication. The study found that proficient teachers prioritized the timeliness, constructiveness, and clarity of feedback, while actively involving students in the feedback process. Teachers' commitment to providing actionable, specific, and student-centered feedback supports a wealth of research demonstrating the profound impact of high-quality feedback on student motivation, self-regulation, and achievement (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Winstone & Carless, 2019; Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The finding that teachers viewed feedback as a dialogue rather than a monologue is particularly notable, reflecting recent calls to shift from transmission-oriented to participatory feedback practices (Carless & Boud, 2018; Wiliam, 2011).

Moreover, the study identified student involvement in feedback as a critical proficiency indicator. By encouraging students to reflect on feedback, participate in peer review, and set personal learning goals, teachers fostered greater learner autonomy and metacognitive engagement. This aligns with literature on self- and peer assessment as essential components of AfL, which contribute not only to deeper learning but also to the development of assessment literacy among students themselves (Harris & Brown, 2013; Panadero & Alonso-Tapia, 2013). Sensitivity to individual differences in feedback delivery was also highlighted, demonstrating teachers' awareness of the social, emotional, and cultural contexts that mediate assessment experiences (Carless, 2011; Azadi et al., 2022).

The final theme, professional growth and reflective practice, highlighted teachers' ongoing engagement with self-evaluation, collaboration, professional development, and research-informed practice. Teachers described the use of reflective journals, participation in learning communities, and attendance at professional development workshops as integral to their evolving proficiency in AfL. This theme echoes findings by Boud and Molloy (2013) and Smith et al. (2014), who argue that continual reflection and collaborative inquiry are essential for sustaining effective assessment practice. The responsiveness of teachers to student assessment data—demonstrated by their willingness to modify instruction and feedback strategies based on evidence—also supports the literature on data-driven instruction and the centrality of adaptive expertise in teaching (Schildkamp et al., 2020; Xu & Brown, 2016).

In addition, teachers' commitment to engaging with research and integrating new findings into their classrooms highlights the professionalization of assessment practice and the importance of ongoing learning in a rapidly evolving field (Heritage, 2007; Willis et al., 2013). This capacity for critical engagement with research not only enhances teacher agency but also ensures that AfL practices remain dynamic and responsive to emerging insights.

Taken together, these findings articulate a multi-dimensional construct of teacher proficiency in AfL, characterized by technical, relational, and reflective capacities. The themes and subthemes identified in this study align closely with contemporary models of assessment literacy, which conceptualize proficiency as encompassing knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to the design, enactment, and evaluation of assessment (DeLuca et al., 2016; Klenowski, 2009). Importantly, the study extends prior research by highlighting the nuanced ways in which teachers in Tehran navigate the specific cultural, institutional, and policy contexts of Iranian education—a context where high-stakes testing and examination-oriented traditions continue to exert significant influence (Tavakoli & Baniasad-Azad, 2019; Azadi et al., 2022).

The prominence of diagnostic and differentiated assessment in teacher practice, as reported here, is particularly salient given the traditional reliance on summative and standardized testing in many Iranian schools. Teachers' adoption of formative, student-centered approaches signals an important shift toward AfL principles, despite ongoing systemic challenges. The collaborative ethos observed among participants, who frequently engaged in departmental discussions and co-assessment, further suggests the potential for building professional learning communities focused on assessment reform (Willis et al., 2013).

However, the study also points to several ongoing tensions and challenges. For example, while teachers expressed a strong commitment to timely and constructive feedback, many noted constraints such as heavy teaching loads, limited planning time,

and insufficient institutional support for AfL. These barriers are consistent with those identified in international studies and suggest the need for systemic changes to workload management, professional development provision, and policy frameworks to support sustainable AfL implementation (Schildkamp et al., 2020; Xu & Brown, 2016).

Finally, the emphasis on reflective and research-engaged practice found in this study underscores the importance of teacher agency in educational change. While top-down policies can catalyze reform, it is the expertise, creativity, and commitment of teachers that ultimately drive improvements in assessment practice (Klenowski, 2009; Looney et al., 2018).

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## Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

## Declaration of Interest

The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

## Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adheried in conducting and writing this article.

## Transparency of Data

In accordance with the principles of transparency and open research, we declare that all data and materials used in this study are available upon request.

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