

Teachers' Experiences with Performance-Based Assessment: Challenges and Strategies in an EFL Context

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Abstract

This study examines how Tanzanian secondary school EFL teachers implemented performance-based assessment (PBA) following a short professional development intervention. Although PBA has gained global traction as a means of promoting communicative competence, little is known about how teachers in resource-constrained settings adapt such practices to their local realities. Data were collected from 16 secondary school teachers through surveys and focus group discussions after they piloted PBA tasks in their classrooms. Data were thematically analyzed using group and interpretive coding. Findings revealed that teachers perceived PBA as beneficial in enhancing students' spoken English skills, particularly through increased participation, peer collaboration, and learner autonomy. However, they also identified significant challenges, including large class sizes, limited time, uneven student proficiency, and a lack of materials and institutional support. Despite these barriers, teachers developed creative strategies to localize assessment practices, often drawing on collaborative techniques and translanguaging as scaffolds. The study highlights the need for context-sensitive PBA frameworks and sustained professional support that values teachers as adaptive practitioners. These findings contribute to the growing literature on assessment in under-resourced EFL contexts and offer insights into how grassroots innovations can inform broader pedagogical reforms.

Keywords: Performance-based assessment (PBA); English as a foreign language; promoting speaking skills

In recent decades, there has been a growing emphasis on communicative competence as a core outcome of additional language education worldwide (Salam & Luksfinanto, 2024). Communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately and effectively to accomplish communicative goals (Bachman & Palmer, 2010). This shift from grammatical accuracy to communicative effectiveness has

prompted increased interest in performance-based assessment (PBA), particularly in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL), where the goal is no longer simply mastery of grammatical structures but the ability to use language meaningfully in real-world contexts (e.g., Yen & Thao, 2024). PBA is designed to evaluate learners' communicative ability through tasks that simulate authentic use of language, such as oral presentations, debates, or collaborative projects (Norris, 2016). Proponents argue that such assessments provide more valid and motivating alternatives to traditional pen-and-paper tests, especially for speaking and listening skills (Butler & Zeng, 2014; Inbar-Lourie, 2008).

Despite its pedagogical potential, a central tension exists between the promise of PBA and the realities of its implementation in many resource-constrained environments. In numerous EFL contexts across the Global South, including Tanzania, systemic constraints such as large class sizes, rigid examination-driven curricula, and limited access to instructional materials shape daily teaching practices (Adamson, 2016). Tanzania presents a particularly relevant case for examining these tensions. Although English is the official medium of instruction from secondary school onward, the majority of students enter secondary education with limited exposure to spoken English. This challenge is compounded by a widespread reliance on high-stakes written examinations that de-emphasize oral proficiency in favor of rote memorization.

Within this complex educational landscape, the interactive and individualized nature of PBA, typically regarded as its strength, often becomes a logistical burden for teachers.

This context reveals a critical blind spot in the broader scholarly conversation on PBA. The literature remains heavily concentrated in high-income and East Asian countries, where well-resourced school systems shape implementation models. Consequently, what remains largely unexamined are the ways in which teachers in under-resourced, multilingual settings exercise their professional agency to adopt and adapt innovative assessment practices. This study addresses this blind spot by examining how secondary school EFL teachers in Tanzania engaged with PBA following a short online professional development intervention. By centering the voices and practices of these teachers, this study contributes a context-sensitive perspective on the implementation of PBA, with implications for teacher education, curriculum reform, and language policy in similarly under-resourced environments.

Literature Review

The Theoretical Promise: PBA as a Catalyst for Communicative Learning

The global shift toward communicative competence as the primary goal of language learning has prompted a widespread reconsideration of traditional assessment practices. Communicative competence encompasses not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately and effectively to accomplish communicative goals (Bachman & Palmer, 2010; Canale & Swain, 1980). Performance-Based Assessment (PBA) has emerged as a key alternative to traditional language testing, referring to the use of tasks that require learners to actively demonstrate their language abilities in real or simulated communicative contexts. Fundamentally, PBA is grounded in sociocultural theories of language learning, which posit that acquiring a new language is a socially mediated process driven by interaction and collaboration. As Lantolf and Thorne (2006) argue, human mental activity is organized through culturally constructed artifacts and social relationships, making mediation central to learning. From this sociocultural perspective, learners can reach higher levels of performance when supported by teachers and peers, a principle reflected in the collaborative design of PBA.

This approach generates a positive “washback effect,” where the nature of the assessment beneficially influences classroom instruction by making authentic communication the object of learning itself. By intentionally blurring the traditional boundaries between teaching, learning, and assessment (Van Gorp, 2021), PBA aims to foster not just language skills but also learner autonomy, motivation, and critical thinking. However, the successful application of PBA hinges on a teacher's assessment literacy, the knowledge and skills required to design, interpret, and act on assessments that align with communicative goals. This literacy is increasingly viewed as a dynamic and evolving competence that is deeply influenced by the “assessment cultures” and institutional norms in which teachers operate (Fulcher, 2012; Xu & Brown, 2016). As Inbar-Lourie (2008) argues, assessment literacy is not merely a technical skill but a reflective practice, deeply shaped by teachers’ professional identities and their moment-to-moment classroom decision-making. This places the teacher at the center of any meaningful assessment reform, yet realizing PBA's potential is complex. Studies from diverse contexts, such as Indonesia (Hamid & Susanto, 2022; Makmuroh et al., 2022; Salma & Prastikawati, 2021) and Vietnam (Yen & Thao, 2024), reveal the significant challenges teachers face in translating this theoretical promise into classroom practice. As Banegas and Consoli (2020) emphasize, overcoming these systemic barriers requires a collaborative and ecological approach, where teachers and researchers work as co-agents to generate contextually appropriate pedagogies that are sustainable within their specific social practices.

The Implementation Divide: Promise vs. Reality in High- and Low-Resource Contexts

While the pedagogical promise of PBA is widely acknowledged, its implementation creates a significant divide between different educational contexts. Scholars have consistently raised practical concerns about scoring reliability and the substantial time and expertise required for effective implementation. In high-resource environments, such as the U.S., where professional organizations like ACTFL provide implementation guidance, structures for teacher training and institutional support often exist to mitigate these issues.

This promise, however, stands in stark contrast to the realities of many under-resourced settings across the Global South, where these same challenges are exacerbated by significant systemic barriers. Teachers contend with overcrowded classrooms, limited materials, and curricula driven by summative testing. Indeed, similar struggles to implement communicative assessment amidst large classes and material scarcity have been documented in diverse contexts such as Indonesia (Hamid & Susanto, 2022; Makmuroh et al., 2022; Salma & Prastikawati, 2021). These systemic barriers are not unique to one country, appearing in various forms across different resource-constrained contexts. As Banegas and Consoli (2020) argue, such environments are often shaped by a lack of access to resources and a lack of institutional support, which can make the local context less conducive to teacher-led research and change. In Indonesia, for instance, research on PBA implementation found that while teachers recognize its pedagogical value, they face persistent washback from national exams and practical constraints such as the time-intensive nature of designing and evaluating tasks for large student populations (Salma & Prastikawati, 2021). In rural Indonesia, research has further shown that while PBA can successfully boost students' analytical skills, teachers often lack the institutional support and time needed to create their own materials (Hamid & Susanto, 2022; Makmuroh et al., 2022). These studies highlight the cultural politics of education reform, where pedagogical ideals often clash with structural realities (Vavrus, 2009). Tanzania presents a particularly compelling context for examining these tensions. The country's educational system reflects a complex linguistic landscape where the transition from Kiswahili-

medium primary education to English-medium secondary education creates significant proficiency gaps and pedagogical friction (Swilla, 2009). These challenges are compounded by overcrowded classrooms that hinder participation and a deep-seated reliance on high-stakes written examinations. As Ross (2005) notes, such systemic assessment structures exert a powerful washback effect, often dictating the curriculum and limiting teachers' ability to implement innovative, communicative methodologies. In the Tanzanian context, these examinations, which do not test speaking skills, foster a grammar-focused pedagogy that can stifle communicative confidence (Mtallo, 2015). Consequently, while teachers may recognize the theoretical value of PBA, they must navigate a “bottom-up” struggle to reconcile its demands with the rigid institutional and linguistic realities of their classrooms (Banegas & Consoli, 2020; Swilla, 2009).

The “Blind Spot”: Centering Teacher Agency and Adaptation

This gap between the promise of PBA and the constraints of its practice reveals a critical blind spot in the literature: the active, agentic role of teachers in navigating systemic barriers. While targeted professional development has shown promise in improving teachers' confidence with PBA, these interventions are often quite intensive. For instance, while many studies in the Global South have documented how intensive, multi-week professional development programs can improve teachers' assessment literacy, the focus of such research is often on the effectiveness of the training itself rather than the grassroots innovations triggered by the participants. Building on this, the present study explores how a targeted, four-hour professional development program can similarly catalyze teacher adaptation. What remains largely unexamined are the context-sensitive adaptations and pedagogical shifts that can be unleashed by much briefer, more focused interventions. Following Banegas and Consoli (2020), we argue that teachers must be viewed as “reflective insiders” and agents of change who possess the unique ability to generate contextually appropriate pedagogies within their immediate classroom life. By framing these grassroots innovations as a form of social and symbolic mediation (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), this study addresses a critical gap: it examines how a limited yet strategic training session empowered teachers to navigate systemic constraints and innovate within their specific resource-constrained classrooms

To address this gap, the present study uses a brief, hands-on PD intervention as a catalyst to explore this very process of teacher adaptation. By centering the voices and adaptive practices of these Tanzanian teachers, our work seeks to contribute a vital perspective from the Global South, advocating for reforms that recognize and build upon local strengths and teacher agency. To this end, this study was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: What challenges do Tanzanian secondary EFL teachers face in implementing PBA in their classrooms?

RQ2: What strategies do Tanzanian secondary EFL teachers use to adapt PBA practices in their classroom context?

RQ3: How do Tanzanian secondary EFL teachers perceive the effectiveness of PBA in promoting student speaking following their implementation experiences?

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a generic qualitative design, an approach well-suited for an in-depth exploration of teachers' perceptions, experiences, and adaptive practices related to PBA (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Given that the research questions focus on understanding the nuanced challenges teachers face and the creative strategies they develop, a qualitative approach was deliberately chosen for its strength in capturing the rich, context-specific details of classroom realities. Grounded in a constructivist perspective, which assumes that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world, this design enabled us to document complex teacher narratives and diverse perspectives. Data were gathered through pre- and post-intervention surveys and semi-structured focus group discussions, which were subsequently analyzed thematically to identify patterns and key insights related to the research questions.

Participants

Participants were selected using a purposeful sampling strategy. The goal of this approach is not to generalize findings but to intentionally select “information-rich” participants who can provide deep insight into the phenomenon of study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). For this study, the selection criteria were as follows: participants had to be (a) experienced EFL teachers actively teaching in public secondary schools, (b) serving as Regional Coordinators for a national English language teachers' association, and (c) have the necessary technological access for online participation.

Sixteen EFL teachers representing 15 different regions in mainland Tanzania met these criteria and participated in this study. Being Regional Coordinators was also considered valuable due to their potential role in disseminating pedagogical practices within their respective regions. While these coordinators often work in townships within typically rural or under-resourced regions, their roles ensured a minimum level of technological access, making their participation in the online components of this study feasible. Table 1 provides an overview of the demographic information for all participants.

The study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Michigan State University (IRB Log #: STUDY00007277). Furthermore, all participants were provided with detailed information about the study's purpose and procedures, and they provided written informed consent before any data were collected.

Professional Development and Implementation Structure

The research was conducted in three distinct chronological phases: (1) a set of initial professional development workshops, (2) a classroom implementation period, and (3) a final collective reflection session. This multi-stage format was adopted due to practical considerations, primarily scheduling workshops after the teachers' regular working hours.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Participants	Gender	Age	Years of teaching	Education Level	Region
Participant 1	M	35-44	20	Bachelors	Moshi
Participant 2	M	25-34	7	Bachelors	Dar Es Salaam
Participant 3	M	25-34	7	Associate	Kondoa
Participant 4	F	25-34	5	Bachelors	Musoma
Participant 5	M	35-44	10	Bachelors	Lindi
Participant 6	F	35-44	17	Masters	Bukoba
Participant 7	M	25-34	7	Bachelors	Kigoma
Participant 8	F	25-34	5	Bachelors	Mwanza
Participant 9	M	25-34	3	Bachelors	Kilimanjaro
Participant 10	F	35-44	16	Bachelors	Mbeya
Participant 11	M	35-44	10	Bachelors	Mtwara
Participant 12	F	45-54	10	Bachelors	Kagera
Participant 13	M	25-34	13	Associate	Pwani
Participant 14	F	55-64	34	Masters	Arusha
Participant 15	F	35-44	16	Bachelors	Songea
Participant 16	F	25-34	9	Bachelors	Morogoro

Phase 1: Professional Development. The study began with two highly interactive, two-hour virtual workshops on PBA principles and practices. The sessions introduced the core concepts of PBA and its relevance in enhancing communicative skills, following principles of cognitive apprenticeship (Brown et al., 1989) by incorporating modeling of PBA tasks, guided practice, and scaffolding of new concepts. Participants were provided with sample PBA tasks, including demonstrations and practice with activity structures like “pyramid discussions” (Scrivener, 2011) and frameworks for peer presentations. They also received examples of rubrics for assessing speaking skills, illustrating both analytic and holistic formats. A significant portion of the workshop time was dedicated to collaborative discussion in breakout rooms, fostering a supportive community of practice among the teacher-coordinators.

Phase 2: Classroom Implementation. After the workshops, teachers were provided with a six-to-eight-week period to pilot these strategies in their own secondary EFL classrooms. During this implementation phase, a strong emphasis was placed on teacher agency. Participants were actively encouraged to adapt the provided tools (such as peer-assessment forms and sample rubrics) or to develop their own materials to best fit their students’ proficiency levels and specific classroom realities.

Phase 3: Collective Reflection. The study culminated in a follow-up focus group discussion. This final session was designed for participants to reflect on their implementation experiences, share the challenges they faced, and describe the adaptive strategies they developed. Table 2 provides a summary of this three-phase process, outlining the focus, timeline, and materials for each stage of the study.

Data Collection

Data were collected chronologically across the three phases of the study. First, participants completed pre- and post-intervention surveys that included both closed and open-ended questions. These surveys (see Appendix A) aimed to capture shifts in their understanding and confidence

regarding PBA. Second, following the classroom implementation period, a semi-structured focus group interview (see Appendix B) was held online. This discussion encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences, share challenges, and describe any adjustments they made during the process.

Table 2. Procedure, Data Collection & Focus Group Interview

Phase	Timeline	Focus/Activity	Materials
1	1st Session: May 7, 2022	Webinar: Intro to Assessing speaking skills in EFL Classroom and PBA as an alternative assessment practice	A pre-workshop survey, PowerPoint, zoom chat function, and breakout rooms
	2nd Session: May 8, 2022	Webinar: Evaluating activities in textbooks and practicing using PBA tools such as group discussion and rubrics	PowerPoint, PDF of discussion activities and rubrics, samples of textbook speaking activities.
2	Pilot: May-June 2022	Piloting of PBA activities in classroom	post-piloting survey
3	3rd Session: July 4, 2022	Focus group interview; Reflections and the way forward	Voice recorder

Data Analysis

Data from open-ended survey responses and focus group discussions were analyzed thematically, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. This process aligned with the study's generic qualitative design. Coding was conducted manually and iteratively. A deductive framework based on the research questions (e.g., "effectiveness," "challenges," "adaptive strategies") guided initial coding. Through repeated readings, the first author iteratively applied and refined these codes while also identifying emergent codes inductively to capture unanticipated patterns. Codes were then reviewed, refined, and grouped into broader categories that informed the final themes. Table 3 presents the final themes with sample quotes.

Table 3. Coding Themes and Sample Quotes

Theme	Illustrative Quote
PBA Facilitates Teacher and Student Feedback	"...it is very good because it keeps the students aware of where they need to improve and gives me a way to help them clearly."
PBA Increases Student Confidence in Speaking	"Compared to before, things have changed now. Even those who used to keep quiet are trying to speak."
PBA Promotes Student Motivation	"Now I receive a number of students bringing something to prepare before the lesson... they want to be chosen to present."
PBA Perceived as an Equitable Assessment Tool	"I was talking about how much my learners were engaged, even those who usually do not do well in writing tasks felt included here."
Constraints on Time and Skills for PBA Material Creation and Evaluation	"The good thing was I could see progress, but making materials and evaluating 60 students in speaking is not something easy in a short period."

Enhancing Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of our findings, a concept in qualitative research analogous to validity and reliability, we employed multiple, overlapping strategies: triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking. Methodological triangulation was used to cross-check themes across survey and focus group data (Nowell et al., 2017). For example, the theme of “increased student motivation” was validated by examining both brief survey responses and more detailed focus group elaborations. We also engaged in peer debriefing, a process where a colleague provides an external check on the research process to enhance credibility. For this, the second author, an experienced researcher in applied linguistics, independently reviewed a subset of the coded data and themes; discrepancies were then resolved through discussion. Finally, member checking was conducted, whereby the first author emailed a summary of the preliminary themes to the participants and asked them to review it. This step was taken to confirm the accuracy and resonance of our interpretations by verifying that the findings reflected their own experiences.

Positionality Statement

The first author, who conducted the PBA training, data collection, and analysis, shared experiences with the participants as an EFL teacher in Tanzanian classrooms. This familiarity allowed him to take an insider role but also positioned him as an outsider and authority figure due to his role as a researcher and a graduate student in the US. His decision to focus on teachers rather than students stemmed from the belief, grounded in classroom experience, that educators are pivotal in shaping students’ English language development. This interest was informed by observations that inconsistent English instruction contributes to students’ academic struggles and diminished confidence. His own success with PBA in fostering oral proficiency prompted a desire to explore how other teachers perceive and adapt such strategies.

In contrast, the second author adopted an etic, outsider perspective. As the first author’s academic advisor, he contributed to the study design and participated in the interpretation of findings, offering critical distance and complementary insights.

Findings

The findings of this study are organized around three major themes that emerged from our analysis of the teachers’ experiences: first, the systemic and practical barriers teachers navigated while implementing PBA (research question 1); second, the innovative, agentic strategies they developed to adapt PBA to their local realities (research question 2); and finally, their perceptions of PBA’s impact on student engagement and confidence (research question 3). These themes reflect the diverse experiences of the sixteen participating teachers and illustrate both the potential and limitations of performance-based assessment in Tanzanian secondary EFL classrooms.

Following the PD workshops, all teachers began to implement PBA in their classrooms. The implementation varied depending on the teachers’ contexts and pedagogical goals. Several participants reported using structured group discussion activities, such as the “20 Items” survival task (see Appendix C), which some teachers creatively adapted to focus on literary characters or local farming scenarios. Others incorporated role-plays and dramatizations of literary texts, such as Wole Soyinka’s “The Lion and the Jewel” and the novel “Passed Like a Shadow.” Additionally, some teachers organized classroom debates and used visual prompts, such as pictures, to generate descriptive language from their students. Teachers’ implementation and adaptation of the PBA

workshop materials to their varied classroom contexts shaped the challenges they later reported as a response to Research Question 1.

“How Can You Assess 70 Students in a Week?”: Navigating Barriers to PBA Implementation

Despite their enthusiasm for PBA, teachers in this study consistently identified three significant and overlapping barriers that complicated implementation: (1) the systemic constraints of time and class size, (2) a lack of material resources, and (3) wide variations in student proficiency levels.

The most commonly reported issue was the logistical challenge of managing class sizes between 50 and 70 students, making it difficult to assess multiple speaking performances. As Participant 4 noted: “How can you assess 70 students in a week?”. This concern was often coupled with limited class periods, as most English lessons were scheduled only three times a week for 40 minutes.

These time pressures were exacerbated by resource constraints. While the professional development sessions provided templates for rubrics and sample activities, many participants lacked access to printers, textbooks, or projectors. As a result, they had to copy materials by hand or rely on verbal instructions. Additionally, some schools had no designated English teaching rooms, which meant that lessons took place in shared, noisy environments with minimal furniture or writing surfaces.

Beyond these structural issues, student proficiency gaps further complicated implementation. Several teachers expressed difficulty in conducting speaking tasks when many students had limited vocabulary or lacked confidence in expressing themselves in English. In these cases, teachers often had to simplify tasks or offer more structured sentence prompts. Table 4 summarizes these key implementation barriers reported by participants, along with illustrative quotes.

Table 4. Reported Barriers to PBA Implementation

Theme	Illustrative Quote
Constraints on Time and Skills for Material Creation and Evaluation	“The good thing was I could see progress, but making materials and evaluating 60 students in speaking is not something easy in a short period.”
Difficulties in Managing Large Classrooms for PBA	“...with exception of a few students, I could not reach everyone. Managing large classes is challenging when doing these speaking activities.”
Addressing Significant Gaps in Students' English Proficiency Levels	“The use of English language in some schools is still a challenge... some students still depend on Swahili.”

Innovating Within Constraints: Teacher Agency and Adaptive Strategies

Faced with the significant barriers of large classes and limited resources, the teachers in this study did not abandon PBA. Instead, they demonstrated considerable professional agency by developing a range of creative, context-specific strategies to make it feasible in their classrooms. In total, teachers identified seven distinct strategies, which are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Teacher-Developed Strategies for Adapting Performance-Based Assessment with Illustrative Quotes

Strategy/Adaptation Theme	Illustrative Quote
Modifying Activities to Enhance Performance Focus	“I modified the activity... reduced the number of items and gave more examples that they could relate to in their daily life.”
Cultivating a Positive and Supportive Classroom Environment	“I made them my friends. That is the first step... Once they feel comfortable, they are more willing to speak.”
Embracing Multilingualism to Encourage Student Participation	“They feel supported when we start with Swahili and then move to English. It gives them confidence.”
Piloting Activities with Small Groups to Create Models	“I began with a small group, just a few students, and then increased the number after others saw how it worked.”

A primary area of adaptation was the assessment tools themselves. One widely used strategy was modifying the assessment rubrics. Teachers developed simplified assessment criteria focusing on one or two language features, such as fluency and pronunciation, rather than attempting to assess multiple aspects at once. These simplified rubrics were often shared orally with students and used during peer feedback.

To manage large classes and build student confidence, teachers also frequently leveraged the power of peer-to-peer learning. Peer modeling emerged as a critical strategy, where teachers selected confident students to demonstrate tasks before the rest of the class attempted them. This approach not only clarified expectations but also served to lower anxiety among less confident learners. Teachers further structured group work to allow for peer support, often using mixed-ability groups to balance stronger and weaker speakers.

Recognizing the need for a feedback loop in their own practice, several participants conducted “trial tasks” with small groups before rolling out an activity to the whole class. This allowed them to refine instructions and gauge the level of difficulty. As one teacher explained, “I tested it with one group first. Then I saw what to change before giving it to everyone.” These small-scale trials gave teachers greater control over pacing and created a direct link between planning and delivery.

Perhaps one of the most powerful adaptations involved teachers strategically embracing students' multilingualism. Language scaffolding was a key technique, where teachers often used Kiswahili during the planning or instruction phase to explain new vocabulary or clarify task objectives. As one teacher put it, “I used Swahili first, then moved to English.” This use of strategic translanguaging helped ensure that all students understood what was expected, reducing cognitive load and making it easier for them to participate.

Teachers also emphasized the role of reflection in refining their practice. After each task, many conducted short feedback sessions or encouraged students to comment on their peers' performance. Some teachers kept informal notes about what worked and what did not, which they used to adjust future lessons. These reflective practices echo principles of experiential and situated learning and indicate an emerging sense of assessment agency among participants.

“Even Those Who Used to Keep Quiet Are Trying to Speak”: Perceived Impacts on Student Engagement and Confidence

Perhaps the most significant outcome reported by teachers was the transformative impact of PBA on student engagement and confidence. Most participants reported that using PBA led to noticeable improvements in student participation, particularly in speaking tasks. Teachers observed that even students who typically remained silent during regular lessons began contributing actively when tasks were structured around real-life situations or collaborative activities. One teacher remarked, “Students really spoke up. Even the shy ones.” Another teacher mentioned, “Compared to before, things have changed now. Even those who used to keep quiet are trying to speak,” highlighting the perceived inclusive nature of PBA tasks.

Teachers attributed this increased engagement to the design of the PBA activities themselves, which they described as less intimidating and more relevant than traditional assessments. The PBA activities encouraged students to speak in pairs, small groups, or in front of the class, often using prompts related to everyday experiences or familiar cultural topics. Teachers frequently cited “pyramid discussions,” where students first shared ideas in pairs, then moved into groups before presenting to the class, as an effective way to build confidence progressively. Several also used peer presentations, in which students worked together to prepare short talks or dialogues and perform them for classmates. These tasks were perceived as less intimidating than formal oral exams and more relevant to students’ communicative needs.

Beyond individual participation, teachers also noted a palpable shift in the overall classroom dynamics, with students taking greater ownership of their learning. One teacher noted, “Now I receive a number of students bringing something to prepare before the lesson... they want to be chosen to present.” According to another participant, “When they knew they would present, they prepared better. They even helped each other to improve.” Peer learning emerged as a key feature of the engagement process, particularly in larger classes where individualized teacher feedback was limited.

Discussion

This study offers insight into how Tanzanian secondary school EFL teachers engaged with performance-based assessment following a short, targeted professional development intervention. Despite working in large classes with limited resources and exam-driven curricula, participants demonstrated remarkable adaptability and initiative. They implemented and modified PBA strategies to promote communicative competence, suggesting that localized, practical PD that fosters teacher agency and critical reflection can spark meaningful pedagogical innovation. In this section, we discuss these findings in relation to three key areas: the empowering design of the professional development, the crucial role of teacher agency in overcoming systemic barriers, and the value of collaborative community in sustaining professional growth.

An Empowering Professional Development Format

The PD was intentionally grounded in sociocultural and experiential learning theories, drawing on the first author’s insider knowledge of Tanzanian classrooms. From a sociocultural perspective, learning is mediated through social interaction and culturally situated support (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), and the workshops were therefore structured to scaffold teacher learning through input sessions, modeled PBA tasks (e.g., pyramid discussions), and collaborative breakout discussions. The PD’s design also reflected an experiential learning cycle (Kolb, 1984), combining theory with

practice. The initial workshops provided opportunities for abstract conceptualization; teachers' subsequent piloting of PBA tasks served as the concrete experience; and focus group discussions facilitated reflective observation. This cycle fostered "reflection-in-action" (e.g., Farrell, 2019), contributing to teachers' pedagogical agency and their ability to tailor PBA tools to their specific contexts. This finding is particularly noteworthy when compared to other PD models. For instance, while other studies, such as the 32-hour course in Argentina (Banegas & Consoli, 2020), have shown the effectiveness of longer-term PD, our findings demonstrate that even a much briefer, four-hour "low-input, high-impact" intervention can be a powerful catalyst for change when it is designed to empower teachers as critical and creative practitioners.

Teacher Agency and Professional Identity

A central finding of this study was the teachers' capacity to innovate within constraints. While the literature frequently documents systemic issues like large class sizes and exam pressure as major barriers (Adamson, 2016; Dikilitas & Mede, 2021), our findings demonstrate that teachers are not passive victims of these constraints. Instead, they acted as agentic professionals, developing localized strategies such as peer modeling and translanguaging to create workable solutions.

Their strategic use of translanguaging, for instance, reflects similar practices in Argentinian classrooms (Banegas & Consoli, 2020), yet in this context it often served as an essential scaffold for understanding rather than an optional support. Likewise, the low-tech ingenuity of the Tanzanian teachers stands in contrast to the more technology-reliant solutions reported in some Indonesian settings (Makmuroh et al., 2022). These adaptations align with notions of "situated professionalism" (Banegas & Consoli, 2020) and counter deficit narratives that sometimes position Global South educators as passive implementers of top-down reforms (Vavrus, 2009).

This underscores the importance of centering teacher agency in assessment reform. As Inbar-Lourie (2008) argues, assessment literacy is not merely a technical skill but a reflective practice, deeply shaped by teachers' professional identities. This places the teacher at the center of any meaningful reform, yet realizing the potential of new assessment practices is complex. As Banegas and Consoli (2020) emphasize, such transformations require teachers to act as agents who are willing to change and be changed through careful reflection on their situated social practices. As one teacher explained, PBA "allowed me to see the students' progress step-by-step and not just wait for the final mark." This reconceptualization signals a shift in professional identity and assessment literacy. However, as our findings also show, such individual agency can only thrive when implemented in a sustainable manner, which will require alignment between curriculum, assessment policy, and teacher support structures.

The Value of Collaborative Reflection and Community

Finally, the study highlights the value of collaborative reflection for the development of teachers' professional identity. The focus group, in effect, emerged as what Lave and Wenger (1991) term a "community of practice," a social learning system in which practitioners share knowledge and innovate through sustained interaction. In this shared space, teachers validated common struggles and exchanged grassroots strategies, moving from initial doubt toward active experimentation and a tangible sense of professional agency. Their accounts illustrate that significant professional growth is not solely the outcome of formal training but frequently emerges through the dynamic processes of everyday problem-solving and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Supporting such authentic professional development, therefore, requires recognizing teachers not merely as implementers of prescribed methods, but as active knowledge producers. While the challenges

reported, particularly large class sizes and exam pressure, underscore the limits of individual innovation, the collaborative community fostered in this study provided a crucial space for sustaining motivation and sharing practical wisdom. This finding offers a practical response to the challenges of teacher isolation and lack of support commonly cited as barriers to assessment reform in other contexts, such as rural Indonesia (Hamid & Susanto, 2022), demonstrating how even temporary communities of practice like the one fostered in this study can empower teachers to navigate systemic constraints.

Implications

Implications for Fostering Grassroots Assessment Reform

The findings of this study carry important implications for teacher professional development, education policy, and the global conversation around EFL assessment reform, particularly in under-resourced contexts.

Implications for Professional Development: Fostering Agency through Low-Input, High-Impact Models

Short, practical PD interventions that model practical PBA tools, facilitate peer dialogue, and stimulate critical reflection can be effective in stimulating teacher experimentation at the grassroots level. The strategies that emerged from this study, such as simplified rubrics, peer modeling, and language scaffolding, can inform similar efforts in multilingual, large-class settings across the Global South. This suggests a transferable model for PD in any resource-constrained context, whether in developing nations or in under-funded urban and rural schools within high-income countries. Low-input, high-impact formats may be especially valuable where time and funding are limited, particularly in terms of fostering the teacher agency and willingness to innovate that is essential for sustainable change.

Implications for Policy: Bridging the Gap Between Curriculum and Classroom Reality

To reduce the disconnect between curriculum intentions and classroom realities, ministries and curriculum developers should integrate performance-based components into national assessment frameworks, particularly for oral skills that are underrepresented in high-stakes exams. However, this study cautions against purely top-down policy mandates. Instead, policy should be designed to support and institutionalize the kinds of grassroots innovations seen here. Supporting the use and dissemination of teacher-developed tools can foster authentic communities of practice and ensure that reforms are grounded in the lived realities of the classroom.

A Call to Center Teacher Agency in Assessment Reform

Ultimately, the most significant implication of this study is the need to reframe assessment reform around the principle of teacher agency. Sustainable reform requires recognizing teachers not just as implementers of external policies but as autonomous and active knowledge producers. To support this kind of professional agency, education systems must move away from importing ready-made solutions and instead foster local capacity for innovation and critical adaptation. By illuminating the “blind spot” of teacher-led innovation, this study calls for a shift in perspective. In doing so, we can build more resilient and context-sensitive models of teaching and assessment that are driven by the expertise of the educators themselves.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated how Tanzanian secondary school EFL teachers, supported by a brief, localized professional development program, successfully engaged with and adapted performance-based assessment (PBA) strategies. Despite significant systemic constraints, including large class sizes and an exam-oriented culture, these teachers acted as agentic innovators, adapting PBA in ways they perceived to promote student participation and confidence.

Their experiences underscore a crucial point: meaningful pedagogical innovation in resource-constrained contexts does not require perfect conditions or top-down overhauls. Instead, it can be catalyzed from the grassroots level when teachers are provided with practical tools, professional autonomy, and opportunities for reflection. This study centers the voices and adaptive practices of Tanzanian teachers to illuminate the critical “blind spot” in the global assessment discourse. It contributes a vital perspective from the Global South, advocating for assessment reforms that recognize and build upon local strengths and the professional agency of teachers.

Teachers’ experiences with performance-based assessment: Challenges and strategies in an EFL context

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Appendix A:

Pre- and Post- intervention surveys

Pre-intervention survey

Section 1: Multiple-choice questions

- What is your gender?
- What is your age range?
- How many years of teaching experience do you have?
- What is your educational level?
- What region/city/town are you from? [Open question]

Section 2: Open questions

- How important is teaching speaking skills in your classroom?
- How do you use pair work to support students' speaking skills in your classroom?
- What are your experiences using small group speaking activities in your classroom?
- What are your experiences using task-based assessment tools, such as interviews or presentations to assess students' speaking skills?
- Have you heard of performance-based assessment before?
- What is your understanding of performance-based assessment?

Post-intervention survey

Section 1: Open questions

- What are your attitudes towards performance-based assessment? How have they changed as a result of participating in this workshop?
- How practical do you find performance-based assessment?
- Would you like to use it in your own classroom? In what way or to what extent do you want to use it in your classroom?
- To what extent do you see students using the English language, and what are your impressions of their language use?

Section 2: Three-point scale question (Not at all, Somewhat, A great deal) for A and B

This section of this survey focuses on how prepared you feel to use PBA. Please reflect on (A) where you are now and (B) where you would like to be.

To what extent do I:

1. ...want to use assessment more effectively and frequently?
2. ...clearly define levels of students' performance?
3. ...plan scoring rubrics before using assessments?
4. ...compare students' performance with a standard?
5. ...inform students about scoring criteria before judging them?
6. ...find PBA assessments difficult to use?
7. ...feel concerned about the time required to use them?
8. ...share my assessment and teaching strategies with other teachers?
9. ...assess other's performance?
10. ...ask students to rate their own performance?
11. ...give students feedback about their performance?

Appendix B:

Focus Group Interview Guiding Questions for PBA Reflection

Please reflect on your experience with PBA by responding to these questions:

- Do you like PBA strategies? Why or why not?
- Is there any aspect of PBA (small group discussion, self/peer evaluation, teacher observation, and rubric ratings) that interested you most? Why?
- How did your students respond to these strategies? Positively/negatively? Please explain.
- How much speaking occurred in your class when employing PBA strategies?
- Do you consider continuing to use PBA strategies in your classroom? Why or why not?
- How do you want to be supported to make PBA a common strategy to assess your students' speaking skills?

Appendix C:

Sample Performance-Based Assessment Task (Group Discussion Activity - “20 Items”)

This appendix provides an illustrative example of a PBA task that was shared with and discussed by participating teachers during the professional development workshops. The “20 Items” group discussion activity requires students, in small groups, to collaboratively decide which five essential items out of a list of twenty they would take to survive on a deserted island, and to justify their choices. This task aims to promote communicative competence, critical thinking, and collaborative problem-solving skills.

20 Items: (Group Discussion and Decision-Making Task)

Objective: Students will engage in a group discussion to collaboratively make and justify a decision.

Materials: Whiteboard/chalkboard or large paper, markers/chalk.

Procedure:

1. **Present the Scenario:** Inform the students: “You and your group members are about to be stranded on a deserted island. There is enough food and water on the island, but you can only take five (5) items with you to help you survive and make your stay more comfortable.”
2. **Display the Items:** Write a list of 20 diverse items on the board.
 - *(Illustrative examples of items could include: a knife, rope, a sleeping bag, a first-aid kit, a book, a cell phone (with no signal), a cooking pot, matches, a tent, a radio, a bar of soap, a mirror, a set of tools, a fishing net, a waterproof tarp, a compass, a ball, a musical instrument, a notebook and pen, a set of warm clothes).*
3. **Group Formation:** Divide the class into small groups of four to five students.
4. **Group Discussion (Approx. 15-20 minutes recommended):** Instruct each group to:

- Discuss the 20 items.
 - Collaboratively decide which five items they will take.
 - Prepare clear reasons to justify why they chose those five items and why they left others behind.
5. **Group Reporting (Approx. 5-8 minutes per group recommended):** Each group will present their chosen five items and their justifications to the rest of the class. This can be a brief oral presentation by one or more group members.
 6. **(Optional Follow-up):** A brief whole-class discussion comparing different groups' choices and reasons.

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