

Distributive Fairness in EFL Assessments: Understanding the Role of Equity in Non-Formal Educational Settings

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

assessment fairness;
EFL assessment;
non-formal education;
student perception;
educational equity

Article history:

Received 2026-04-16
Revised 2026-05-28
Accepted 2026-09-14

ABSTRACT

Fairness in assessment is essential for promoting students' trust, engagement, and perceptions of educational equity. However, limited research has examined assessment fairness in non-formal English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, where assessment practices are often more flexible and less standardized. This study investigated students' perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness and examined differences between Elementary- and Intermediate-level learners. A descriptive cross-sectional quantitative design was employed involving 50 students at the International English Course (IEC) Parepare, comprising 25 Elementary and 25 Intermediate learners. Data were collected using a 15-item five-point Likert-scale questionnaire covering the three dimensions of assessment fairness. Descriptive statistics and the Mann-Whitney U test were used to analyze the data. Students reported positive perceptions across all fairness dimensions. Procedural fairness received the highest mean score ($M = 4.49$), followed by interactional fairness ($M = 4.33$) and distributive fairness ($M = 4.21$). The Mann-Whitney U test showed no statistically significant difference in overall fairness perceptions between Elementary and Intermediate learners ($p = 0.259$). The findings indicate that students perceived assessment procedures, outcomes, and teacher-student interactions positively in this non-formal EFL setting. The comparatively high rating of procedural fairness highlights the importance of clear, consistent, and transparent assessment practices. These findings support the relevance of multidimensional fairness frameworks in non-formal EFL education.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment plays a crucial role in shaping students' learning experiences, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context, where it influences not only achievement but also motivation and engagement. This aligns with previous research highlighting that instructional practices and teacher perceptions significantly influence students' learning experiences and engagement in EFL contexts, particularly in Indonesian educational settings (Surahmat et al., 2023). In this regard, fairness in assessment has become an essential concern, as it affects students' perceptions of equity, trust, and educational quality. In educational contexts, particularly measuring academic performance but also as mechanisms that influence students' motivation, engagement, and overall trust in the learning process (Nazim et al., 2023). Fair assessments are perceived to ensure transparency, equal opportunity, and inclusivity, which can enhance students' learning experiences and their perceptions of educational justice (Tai et al., 2022). Locally, however, educational institutions, particularly in non-formal settings like the International English Course (IEC) in Parepare, face significant challenges in ensuring consistent and fair assessment practices due to the absence of standardized evaluation systems. These discrepancies often leave the perception of fairness largely in the hands of individual educators, further influencing students' engagement and academic outcomes.

Assessment fairness is commonly conceptualized into three dimensions: distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and interactional fairness (Asamoah et al., 2024; Azizi, 2022). Distributive fairness relates to the perceived fairness of outcomes, procedural fairness refers to the transparency and consistency of assessment processes, and interactional fairness concerns the quality of communication and interpersonal treatment during assessment. Procedural fairness involves the transparency, consistency, and reliability of assessment procedures, emphasizing the importance of clear guidelines and equitable treatment in grading (Goke et al., 2021). Interactional fairness focuses on the respect and clarity with which teachers communicate their expectations, feedback, and interactions with students during assessments.

Previous studies have explored assessment fairness predominantly in formal educational settings, highlighting the importance of transparent criteria, consistent grading, and respectful teacher-student interactions. These studies demonstrate that fairness perceptions are influenced by assessment methods and communication practices (Liu et al., 2024). The importance of clear communication and equitable treatment in fostering fairness, especially in virtual environments (Eltahir et al., 2023). These findings underscore that students' perceptions of fairness are strongly influenced by the methods of assessment and the interactions they have with their instructors. On the other hand, Yangambi, 2024 focused on eliminating bias in assessment practices, advocating for the integration of cultural sensitivity and fairness in the assessment tools and processes used in diverse educational setting. Their work reinforces the notion that fairness in assessment is not only about the process itself but also about ensuring that the assessments are accessible and just for all learners, irrespective of their background.

Despite these contributions, limited research has examined assessment fairness in non-formal EFL contexts, where assessment practices are often less standardized and more reliant on individual teacher judgments. Moreover, prior research has rarely compared multiple fairness dimensions across different proficiency levels within such flexible learning environments.

Non-formal institutions, such as private language courses, operate under different conditions from formal education systems, characterized by greater flexibility, teacher autonomy, and the absence of uniform assessment standards. These features may lead to variability in how fairness is implemented and perceived, making this context important yet underexplored.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate students' perceptions of distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness in assessment practices at the International English Course (IEC) Parepare. It also examines differences in perceptions between Elementary and Intermediate learners. By addressing these aspects, this study contributes to extending fairness theory into non-formal EFL settings and offers practical insights for improving equitable assessment practices.

2. METHODS

2.1 Research Approach

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design using a survey approach. The design was selected because the study aimed to examine and quantify students' perceptions of fairness in EFL assessment practices across predefined dimensions (distributive, procedural, and interactional fairness). A quantitative approach was considered the most appropriate because it allows for systematic measurement, comparison, and statistical analysis of perception data across groups. A cross-sectional approach was used because the data were collected at one point in time through a structured questionnaire. According to Deckert & Wilson, (2023), descriptive quantitative designs are particularly suitable for studies that seek to describe characteristics or perceptions of a population without manipulating variables. In the context of educational fairness, adopting a cross-sectional survey allows researchers to capture students' immediate perceptions of assessment equity and identify patterns in distributive fairness across different levels of proficiency (Lünich et al., 2023).

2.2 Research Setting

The research was conducted at International English Course (IEC) Parepare, a non-formal English learning institution in South Sulawesi. This setting was chosen because non-formal EFL institutions often apply flexible and teacher-dependent assessment practices, making them relevant contexts for investigating fairness, especially distributive fairness in assessment outcomes. IEC Parepare was also identified in the draft as a relevant site for examining fairness in assessment practices.

2.3 Subjects of the Study

The participants of this study were 50 students enrolled in the EFL program at IEC Parepare, consisting of 25 Elementary-level students and 25 Intermediate-level students. A stratified purposive sampling technique was employed to ensure equal representation from each proficiency level.

The sample size of 50 participants was considered adequate for descriptive quantitative analysis and non-parametric statistical testing, particularly for the Mann–Whitney U test, which is suitable for small to moderate sample sizes and does not require normal distribution. The inclusion criteria were: (1) students actively enrolled at IEC Parepare, (2) students who had experienced at least one assessment session, and (3) students who voluntarily agreed to participate.

2.4 Material/Instrument

The primary instrument used in this study was a structured questionnaire designed to measure students' perceptions of assessment fairness across three dimensions: distributive fairness, procedural fairness, and interactional fairness. The instrument consisted of 15 items, with 5 items allocated to each dimension.

The questionnaire employed a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Sample items included:

- "The scores I receive reflect my effort and performance" (distributive fairness),
- "Assessment procedures are applied consistently to all students" (procedural fairness), and
- "The teacher communicates assessment results clearly and respectfully" (interactional fairness).

The instrument was adapted from previous studies on assessment fairness (e.g., Tai et al., 2022; Asamoah et al., 2024) and modified to fit the non-formal EFL context.

2.5 Validity and Reliability

Content validity was established through expert judgment. Two experts in language assessment and educational measurement reviewed the questionnaire to evaluate the relevance, clarity, and

representativeness of each item. Revisions were made based on their feedback to ensure alignment with the constructs of fairness.

A pilot test was conducted with a small group of students ($n = 15$) who were not included in the main sample. Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's Alpha. The results indicated good internal consistency for each dimension: distributive fairness ($\alpha = 0.82$), procedural fairness ($\alpha = 0.85$), and interactional fairness ($\alpha = 0.83$), all exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70.

2.6 Research Procedure

The research procedure was conducted in several stages:

- a. Preparation Stage
The researcher identified the research problem, reviewed relevant literature on assessment fairness and distributive fairness, and developed the research instrument.
- b. Instrument Development Stage
The questionnaire items were constructed based on the concept of distributive fairness and the principle of equity in assessment outcomes.
- c. Validation and Try-Out Stage
The instrument was reviewed and tested to ensure validity and reliability.
- d. Data Collection Stage
The questionnaire was distributed to the selected participants after obtaining permission from the institution.
- e. Data Processing Stage
The responses were tabulated, coded, and prepared for statistical analysis.
- f. Interpretation Stage
The findings were interpreted to explain how students perceive distributive fairness in non-formal EFL assessment practices.

The entire procedure was carried out systematically to ensure the accuracy, reliability, and validity of the data, providing a solid foundation for subsequent analysis and interpretation of students' perceptions of fairness in non-formal EFL assessment contexts.

2.7 Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire administered in both printed and online formats. Participants were instructed to respond based on their actual assessment experiences. Ethical considerations were ensured by informing participants of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Completed responses were coded and prepared for statistical analysis.

Data collection focused on students who had already experienced the assessment practices at IEC Parepare, thereby ensuring that responses were grounded in actual experiences rather than hypothetical scenarios. Each completed questionnaire was carefully tabulated, coded, and checked for completeness and consistency to prepare for statistical analysis. This systematic approach ensured the reliability and validity of the dataset, forming a strong basis for descriptive and inferential analyses of students' perceptions.

Overall, the data collection process combined structured instruments, flexible administration methods, and ethical safeguards to generate accurate, reliable, and representative data. These measures allowed the study to provide a meaningful understanding of how students perceive equity in non-formal EFL assessment practices, ensuring that subsequent analyses and interpretations were well-supported by authentic, high-quality data.

2.8 Data Analysis Techniques

The data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were used to summarize students' perceptions of fairness across the three dimensions.

To examine differences between Elementary and Intermediate students, the Mann–Whitney U test was employed. This non-parametric test was chosen because the data were ordinal in nature (Likert scale) and did not assume normal distribution. It is particularly appropriate for comparing two independent groups with relatively small sample sizes.

In addition to statistical significance (p-value), effect size was calculated using the formula $r = Z/\sqrt{N}$ to determine the magnitude of differences between groups. This provided a more comprehensive interpretation of the results beyond significance testing.

2.8 Interpretation of Scores

To interpret the results, the mean scores may be categorized into perception levels such as:

Table 1. Interpretation of Mean Scores for Perceived Fairness Levels

Mean Score Range	Perception Category
1.00 – 1.80	Very Unfair
1.81 – 2.60	Unfair
2.61 – 3.40	Fair Enough
3.41 – 4.20	Fair
4.21 – 5.00	Very Fair

By establishing these defined thresholds, the analysis could identify trends, detect areas of strength, and highlight specific aspects of the assessment process that may require improvement. Moreover, this approach facilitated comparisons between student groups, such as Elementary and Intermediate learners, allowing for a nuanced understanding of how perceptions may vary across proficiency levels. The categorical interpretation of mean scores also supports a clear and communicable presentation of the findings, making it easier to translate numerical results into actionable insights. Through this method, the study was able to provide a detailed assessment of students' experiences, offering evidence-based guidance for educators and program designers aiming to enhance equity and transparency in non-formal EFL assessment practices. Overall, the adoption of this structured interpretation framework strengthens the analytical rigor of the study, ensuring that both quantitative results and their educational implications are articulated clearly and meaningfully for research, policy, and practice.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The results obtained from the research have to be supported by sufficient data. The research results and the discovery must be the answers, or the research hypothesis stated previously in the introduction part.

3.1 Overall Students' Perceptions of Fairness

The descriptive analysis showed that students generally perceived the assessment practices at the International English Course (IEC) Parepare positively across all three dimensions of fairness. Procedural fairness received the highest mean score ($M = 4.49$), followed by interactional fairness ($M = 4.33$) and distributive fairness ($M = 4.21$). The relatively low standard deviations across the three dimensions indicate that students' responses were generally consistent.

These results suggest that students perceived assessment fairness not only in terms of the outcomes they received, but also in relation to how assessment procedures were implemented and how teachers interacted with them during the assessment process. The higher score for procedural fairness indicates that students responded particularly positively to the clarity, consistency, and transparency of assessment procedures. Interactional fairness was also rated highly, suggesting that respectful communication and constructive teacher–student interaction were important features of students’ assessment experiences. Although distributive fairness received the lowest mean among the three dimensions, its score still reflected a positive perception of the fairness of assessment outcomes.

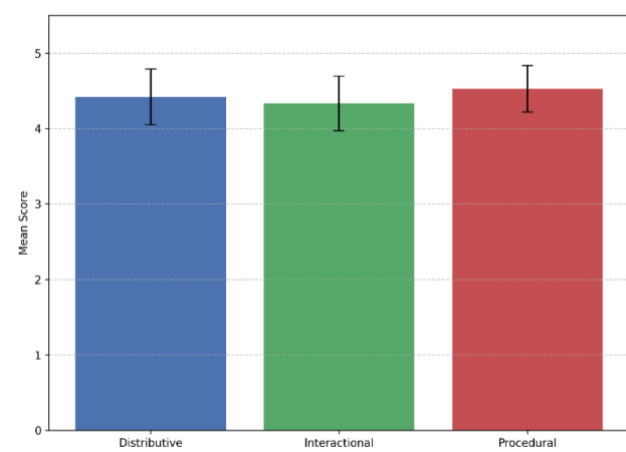


Figure I. Overall Students’ Perception of Fairness by Dimension

The pattern supports the multidimensional view of assessment fairness, in which students evaluate fairness through different but related aspects of the assessment experience. From an organizational justice perspective, distributive fairness concerns the fairness of outcomes, procedural fairness concerns the fairness of the processes used to determine those outcomes, and interactional fairness concerns the quality of interpersonal treatment and communication during the process (Colquitt, 2001). In the present study, all three dimensions were positively perceived, suggesting that fairness in non-formal EFL assessment cannot be understood solely in terms of grades or scores.

The comparatively high rating of procedural fairness is particularly relevant in a non-formal educational setting, where assessment practices may be less standardized than those used in formal institutions. Clear procedures, explicit expectations, and consistent application of assessment criteria may therefore serve as important indicators of fairness for learners. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies emphasizing the role of procedural clarity and transparency in shaping students’ perceptions of assessment fairness (Sun et al., 2022; Rasooli et al., 2023).

3.2 Distributive Fairness

Distributive fairness received a mean score of 4.21 (SD = 0.38), making it the lowest-rated of the three fairness dimensions. Nevertheless, the score still indicates that students generally perceived assessment outcomes as fair.

Distributive fairness refers specifically to students’ perceptions of whether the outcomes of assessment, such as scores or grades, appropriately reflect their effort, performance, and achievement. In this study, the relatively lower score for distributive fairness suggests that students may have perceived slightly greater variability in the fairness of assessment outcomes than in the fairness of procedures or interpersonal treatment.

One possible explanation is that judgments about assessment outcomes in language learning may involve a degree of subjectivity, particularly when teachers evaluate productive skills such as speaking

and writing. In non-formal educational contexts, where instructors may have greater autonomy and assessment procedures may be less standardized, students may perceive some variation in how their performance is translated into scores. Consequently, even when the overall assessment process is regarded as fair, individual students may differ in the extent to which they believe that their final scores accurately reflect their effort or performance.

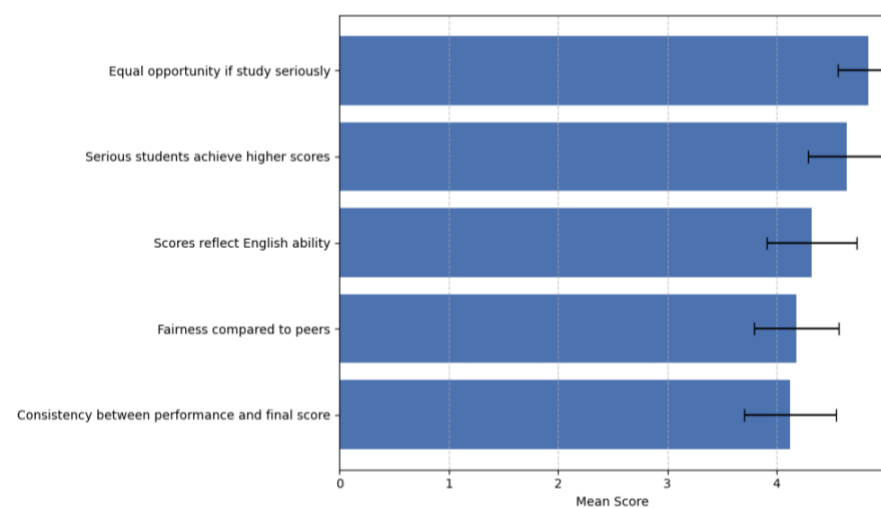


Figure 2. Item-Level Scores for Distributive Fairness

This finding highlights the importance of ensuring that assessment outcomes are clearly connected to stated criteria and observable learner performance. Students are more likely to perceive distributive fairness when they can understand how their performance leads to particular scores and when similar levels of performance are evaluated consistently. Previous studies on assessment fairness have similarly emphasized that students' acceptance of assessment outcomes is related to their perceptions of equity, consistency, and alignment between performance and resulting grades (Sonnleitner & Kovacs, 2020; Rasooli et al., 2023).

Therefore, the comparatively lower score for distributive fairness should not be interpreted as evidence that students considered the outcomes unfair. Rather, it indicates that outcome-related fairness was perceived somewhat less positively than procedural and interactional aspects. This distinction is important because distributive fairness concerns the fairness of what students receive, whereas procedural and interactional fairness concern how assessment decisions are made and communicated.

3.3 Procedural Fairness

Procedural fairness obtained the highest mean score among the three dimensions ($M = 4.49$). This finding indicates that students generally perceived the assessment procedures at IEC Parepare as clear, consistent, and appropriately implemented.

Procedural fairness concerns the processes and rules used in assessment, including the consistency of assessment procedures, clarity of expectations, transparency of grading criteria, and alignment between assessment tasks and instructional content. The high score in this dimension suggests that students generally believed that assessment procedures were applied in a predictable and understandable manner.

This result is particularly meaningful in the context of non-formal EFL education. Unlike formal educational institutions, non-formal language courses may allow greater flexibility in instructional and assessment practices. Such flexibility can be beneficial for adapting instruction to learners' needs, but it may also create uncertainty if assessment procedures are not clearly communicated. The positive

procedural fairness score in this study suggests that students generally experienced the assessment system as sufficiently transparent and consistent despite the flexible institutional context.

Previous studies have shown that procedural clarity can strengthen students' trust in assessment practices because learners are better able to understand how assessment decisions are made (Sun et al., 2022; Rasooli et al., 2023). When criteria, procedures, and expectations are made explicit, students can better anticipate how their performance will be evaluated. This may also reduce uncertainty regarding grading and help learners view assessment as a structured rather than arbitrary process.

However, the higher mean score for procedural fairness should be interpreted carefully. The present analysis shows that procedural fairness was the highest-rated dimension, but it does not demonstrate that procedural fairness caused or predicted other educational outcomes. Therefore, the finding is best understood as evidence that students expressed particularly positive perceptions of the procedural aspects of assessment.

From a practical perspective, maintaining clear assessment guidelines, applying criteria consistently, and communicating procedures before assessment may help sustain students' positive perceptions of fairness in non-formal EFL institutions.

3.4 Interactional Fairness

Interactional fairness received a mean score of 4.33 (SD = 0.35), indicating that students generally perceived teacher-student interactions during assessments as fair and respectful.

Interactional fairness was highly rated, particularly in terms of respectful treatment, constructive feedback, and clear communication. Minor variations were observed in teacher responsiveness and approachability, indicating slight differences in interaction quality.

The data suggest strong consensus among students that interactions during assessments are generally respectful, clear, and supportive, with no extreme deviations observed in responses. This consistency reinforces the overall positive perception of interactional fairness within IEC Parepare's assessment practices.

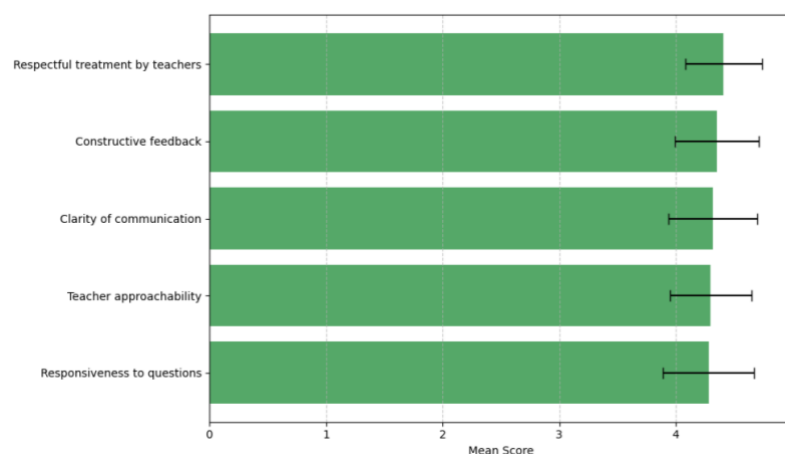


Figure 3. Item-Level Scores for Interactional Fairness

The positive score for interactional fairness suggests that students generally experienced appropriate interpersonal treatment from teachers during assessment. In an EFL context, this dimension is particularly relevant because assessment often involves direct interaction between teachers and learners, especially during speaking activities, oral feedback, classroom-based evaluation, and discussions of assessment results.

Respectful communication and constructive feedback can help students understand their performance and reduce the possibility that assessment is perceived as arbitrary or personally biased. The findings therefore suggest that teacher behavior formed an important part of students' positive

assessment experiences. This interpretation is consistent with previous studies indicating that respectful communication, constructive feedback, and supportive teacher–student interaction contribute to positive perceptions of fairness in educational assessment (Cui, 2021; Rezai, 2022).

Nevertheless, the present finding should be interpreted specifically as a positive perception of interactional fairness rather than as evidence that teacher interaction directly increased students' motivation, engagement, or achievement. Such relationships were not tested in the present study. Future research could examine whether interactional fairness is associated with these learner outcomes.

The findings therefore emphasize the importance of teachers communicating assessment expectations and results clearly, providing feedback respectfully, and remaining approachable when students require clarification about their assessment performance.

3.5 Differences Across Proficiency Levels

The Mann–Whitney U test was used to examine whether perceptions of assessment fairness differed between Elementary and Intermediate learners. The analysis indicated no statistically significant difference in overall fairness perceptions between the two proficiency groups ($p = 0.259 > 0.05$). Although Elementary students showed a slightly higher mean rank than Intermediate students, the difference was not statistically significant.

This result suggests that students from both proficiency levels generally evaluated assessment fairness in a similar way. In other words, the overall perception of fairness at IEC Parepare did not appear to vary substantially according to whether students were enrolled at the Elementary or Intermediate level.

One possible interpretation is that the assessment practices experienced by the two groups were sufficiently similar in terms of procedures, outcome allocation, and teacher–student interaction. When students at different proficiency levels are exposed to comparable assessment expectations and similar standards of interpersonal treatment, their perceptions of fairness may also remain relatively consistent. This interpretation is compatible with previous findings suggesting that fairness perceptions can remain relatively stable across groups when assessment procedures are clearly communicated and consistently implemented (Aly, 2022).

However, the absence of a statistically significant difference should not be interpreted as proof that the two groups had identical perceptions. Rather, the present data did not provide sufficient evidence of a meaningful difference between Elementary and Intermediate learners. Reporting the Mann–Whitney U statistic, Z value, and effect size would provide a more complete interpretation of the magnitude of the observed difference.

3.6 Overall Interpretation and Educational Implications

Taken together, the findings indicate that students perceived all three dimensions of assessment fairness positively, although the dimensions were rated at different levels. Procedural fairness received the highest mean score, followed by interactional fairness and distributive fairness.

This pattern illustrates the multidimensional nature of fairness in assessment. Students appear to consider not only whether the final outcomes are appropriate, but also whether the procedures used to reach those outcomes are transparent and whether teachers communicate with them respectfully throughout the process. These dimensions should therefore be treated as complementary rather than interchangeable aspects of assessment fairness.

In practical terms, the findings suggest that non-formal EFL institutions should maintain clear assessment procedures, communicate grading criteria explicitly, apply assessment rules consistently, and ensure that students receive respectful and constructive feedback. Particular attention may also be given to strengthening distributive fairness by making the relationship between performance, assessment criteria, and final scores more transparent.

The findings also provide support for applying multidimensional fairness frameworks in non-formal educational contexts. However, because the present study was descriptive and comparative

rather than predictive, it cannot establish which fairness dimension has the greatest causal influence on students' trust, motivation, engagement, or academic achievement. Further studies involving larger samples, multiple institutions, and predictive or mixed-method designs would be needed to examine such relationships more directly.

4. CONCLUSION

This study investigated students' perceptions of fairness in EFL assessment practices at the International English Course (IEC) Parepare, focusing on distributive, procedural, and interactional dimensions. The findings indicate that students generally perceive assessment practices as fair, with procedural fairness emerging as the most influential dimension, followed by interactional fairness, while distributive fairness, although positive, showed comparatively lower consistency. In addition, no significant differences were found between Elementary and Intermediate learners, suggesting stable perceptions across proficiency levels.

Theoretically, this study contributes to fairness and organizational justice theory by extending its application to non-formal EFL contexts. The findings highlight that procedural fairness plays a more dominant role than distributive fairness in shaping students' perceptions in flexible learning environments, suggesting that fairness frameworks should account for contextual factors such as teacher autonomy and the absence of standardized assessment systems.

Practically, the study suggests that educators in non-formal institutions should prioritize clear and consistent assessment procedures, transparent grading practices, and constructive teacher–student interactions to enhance students' perceptions of fairness. Program designers and policymakers are encouraged to develop structured yet flexible assessment guidelines that support both equity and instructional adaptability.

Despite its contributions, this study has several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a single institution, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Second, the study relied solely on quantitative data, which may not fully capture the depth of students' perceptions. Future research is therefore recommended to include larger and more diverse samples, apply mixed-method approaches, and explore longitudinal changes in fairness perceptions to provide a more comprehensive understanding of assessment equity in non-formal EFL settings.

Acknowledgments: The authors would like to express their sincere gratitude to the staff and administration of the International English Course (IEC) Parepare for facilitating access to students and providing logistical support during data collection. Special thanks are extended to the instructors who participated in the study and contributed their time and insights, and to the students who willingly completed the questionnaires. The authors also acknowledge technical assistance provided in preparing data visualization and statistical analyses. Any materials, resources, or software used for the analysis were generously made available by the institution, which greatly contributed to the completion of this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest. All authors confirm that they have no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be perceived as having influenced the work reported in this manuscript. This declaration ensures transparency and integrity in the presentation and interpretation of the research findings.

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