

Assessment Literacy in Language Teaching: Enhancing Pre/in-service EFL Teachers' Performance in Algeria

محو أمية التقييم و التقويم أثناء تعليم اللغة: تحسين أداء أساتذة اللغة الانجليزية في الجزائر قبل و أثناء الخدمة

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Abstract:

Whatever the relationship between the teacher and the learner is built upon a total awareness of what is happening in terms of achievement by the student, the teacher remains in constant need to conduct formal and informal assessments or tests to check academic development. Yet, are teachers in Algeria (especially English language teachers) properly trained and sufficiently literate to apply assessment and examination methods alongside the teaching and learning process? Then, this research paper, which was supported by a questionnaire addressed to 24 English language teachers, is realised following a quantitative qualitative approach. The data obtained showed that the majority of EFL teachers suffer from a severe lack of knowledge related to appropriate methods and strategies of assessing/evaluating and testing learners, which calls for immediate response from decision-makers in the country.

Keywords:

Assessment- literacy- teachers- strategies- learning

ملخص:

مهما كانت العلاقة بين المعلم والمتعلم مبنية على دراية واسعة بما يحدث من تحصيل من قبل الطالب، يبقى المعلم في حاجة دائمة الى اجراء عمليات تقييم وامتحانات رسمية وغير رسمية لمساعدة المتعلمين على تعلم و استدراك ما لم يتم هضمه من المعارف و تحسين الاداء ورفع مستوى التحصيل الدراسي؛ رفع تقارير دورية للهيئات الوصية عن نسب التحصيل من اجل تحديث، تكييف، او حتى تغيير البرامج الدراسية و وسائل التعليم والتعلم بغيره بجماعة اكبر. لكن، هل المعلمون في الجزائر (خاصة معلمو اللغة الانجليزية) تم او يتم تكوينهم ومحو اميتهم بالشكل اللائق للسماح لهم بتطبيق أساليب التقييم والامتحان جنبا الى جنب مع عملية التعليم والتعلم؟

للحصول على أجوبة، جاءت هذه الورقة البحثية التي تم دعمها باستبيان وجه الى حوالي 24 استاذ لغة انجليزية وفق النهج الكمي النوعي. البيانات المحصل عليها اظهرت ان غالبية الاساتذة يعانون من نقص فادح في المعارف المتعلقة بطرق واساليب تقييم واختبار المتعلمين من أجل مساعدتهم على التعلم والتحصيل الدراسي. هذا الضعف لدى الأساتذة يستدعي التحرك الفوري من قبل المختصين، الخبراء وكذا صناع القرار في البلاد ل إيجاد حلول نهائية قبل تعقّد الأمور.

الكلمات المفتاحية:

التقييم، محو الأمية، الأساتذة، استراتيجيات، التعلم

1.Introduction:

Although the role of *assessment* as an evidence of *learning* seems less obvious whenever *teaching* occurs, the relationship between the three remains non-discussable. In this vein, Garies & Grant (2015) believe that if teaching leads automatically to learning, then, what proof teachers have got to know if their students learned. Certainly, teachers require some ways of seeing whether their input is comprehensible or not through a process known as assessment, which is integrally related to our learning. Hence, evaluating and assessing learners are considered two important and inevitable procedures in the teaching-learning operation in which schools around the world are continuously doing so in order to watch over their educational progress. They can, also, be used by governmental committees to evaluate, weigh, and measure the quality/performance of their schooling system.

Yet, many countries around the globe have marginalized or even ignored assessment in initial language teacher-training (Navarete et al., 1990 ; Fulcher & Davidson, 2007). In Algeria, most Universities -if not all- and even the Teachers Training Colleges (in Algiers, Constantine, Mostaganem, and Oran) do not clearly programme modules specialised in testing and assessment; these colleges are normally meant to prepare future Primary, Fundamental, and Secondary School teachers. Taylor (2009, p.23) points out:

Language education programs at graduate level typically devote little time or attention to assessment theory and practice, perhaps just a short (often optional) module; and although there is no shortage of books on language testing and assessment available today, many of these are perceived to be (and often are) highly technical or too specialized for language educators seeking to understand basic principles and practice in assessment.

As a result, when it comes to assessment, teachers generally graduate illiterate, in which they lack appropriate ways and/or understandings on what to assess, how to assess, when to assess learners learning, and then to use these assessment data to guide their practices. Mertler (2004, as cited in Dawn, 2014, p.3) sees that teacher-education programs are also at fault for not making sure teachers are adequately trained before entering the classroom .Such defect is referred by Stiggins “to poor communication on the part of specialists in assessment and weaknesses in teacher training.” (Aksit, 2018, p. 2)

This research paper comes to shed light on the importance of sparing more time and space to the so-called “Teachers’ Assessment Literacy Enhancement”. Indeed, an urgent call to develop a better language assessment training infrastructure for teachers across the country is recommended to help them improve their assessment procedures *for learning* firstly, and *about learning* later on. It has long been argued that assessment for learning in some guise is an essential component of classroom practice

(Black & Wiliam, 1998, cited in Fulcher, 2012, p. 114), which led to an increased focus on assessment in language programs and its role in enhancing learning.

2. Background

2.1. General Overview

The term, assessment literacy was first introduced by Rick Stiggins in 1991 to refer to a general failing on the part of teachers and the wider public in the USA to interpret assessment information. There is an increasing need for the language testing profession to consider more precisely what it means by “assessment literacy” and to articulate its role in the creation of new pedagogic materials and programs in language testing and assessment to meet the changing needs of teachers, learners and other stakeholders for a new age.

Fulcher & Davidson (2007) and Aksit (2018) think that, unlike the past, assessment and evaluation are no longer considered the responsibility of governments and decision makers, testing agencies, and examination boards as a task to be proceeded through norm-referenced testing. The purpose, of course, is to measure how much of the input given to the learners has been digested/mastered and can be performed under exam conditions. Currently, the understanding in the field of language teaching has changed, since language testing is about doing, assessment is seen as an integral part of the teaching-learning process where the emphasis is on the outcome rather than the input. Similarly, Lambert & Lines (2001, p. 1) believe that “making sense of the standards and developing professionally depends on the capacity among trainees to think clearly about assessment and to make connections between this and their wider function as teachers”. That means more responsibilities are assigned to the teacher and the learner in the planning and application of assessment since we cannot discuss assessment in a sensible way without relating it to other aspects of teaching and learning.

2.2. Definitions

In this piece of work, two significant key terms need to be clearly defined to much the interest of the researcher and establish a point of agreement: *literacy* and *assessment*.

Based on Oxford and Cambridge online dictionaries, a common shared definition is given to both terms:

a- **Literacy** (*noun*) /'lɪtərəsi/ : the ability to read and write;

b- **Assessment** (*noun*) /ə'sesmənt/ it is an opinion or a judgement about somebody/something that has been thought about (very) carefully.

Taylor (2009) defines the term **literacy** as “the condition or quality of being knowledgeable in a particular subject or field: cultural literacy; academic literacy”. “The latter is the ability to read and write within the academic context with independence, understanding and a level of engagement with learning.” (pp. 4-5)

By combining the two terms ‘Assessment Literacy’, based on the US Department of Education, refers to the knowledge, skills, and processes associated with designing, selecting, implementing, scoring, and/or using high-quality assessments to improve student learning” (IDOE, n.d.). And it vacillates between three big ideas including *knowledge*, *beliefs*, and *achievements*. In other words,

- what a teacher knows about assessment;
- what a teacher believes about assessment; and
- what s/he can do with assessment.

As a consequence, when students (as future teachers) at universities, institutions, and colleges are appropriately equipped with flexible assessment/evaluation techniques and procedures, we are actually preparing an assessment literate individual who is fully

- aware of the types and purposes of assessment;
- convinced that assessment is an essential part of teaching-learning process;
- ready for using data to drive informed decision-making for the success of every learner;
- able to connect student assessment to the learning and teaching process.

Hence, assessment and evaluation in (language) teaching and learning are absolutely vital parts. When assessment literate teachers used them as intended, they manage to inform action by removing “guess-work;” support curricular and instructional improvements, and more importantly accompany students learning, which leads to effective orientation.

3. Methodology

To answer the research questions raised in this paper and glean an overall teacher-furnished assessment procedures of the extent to which it is fruitfully and adequately applied to suit the various needs and expectations of the Algerian learners, we have opted for using a questionnaire administered to EFL teachers in Primary/Middle/Secondary Schools and the University. The questionnaire composition has been varied in such a way that we could gauge a wide array of facets pertaining to some defining facts of assessment/evaluation application. The latter helped us to disclose the following:

- a. What attitudes do EFL teachers have towards assessments in ELT?
- b. Do graduated EFL teachers come ready to appropriately assess/evaluate learners?
- c. To what extent can assessment literacy help teachers achieve fruitful results in English language teaching/learning?

• **Population and sampling**

In this study, 24 EFL teachers from different educational establishments (Primary/Middle/Secondary School) and the University in Algeria were targeted in which the questionnaire was either directly handed to them or sent via email/social media (Facebook). In fact, the number of participants was much bigger but only 24 informants who fully answered and re-sent the questionnaire.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

After recuperating the 24 questionnaires from the targeted population, the following data are displayed:

Question 1

How long have you been teaching (experience)?

1 to 5 years	6 to 10 years	11 to 15 years	16 to 20 years	More than 20years
5	3	8	3	5

Table 1: Teachers’ professional experience

As shown in the table above, 19 out of 24 (86.66%) of our informants have more than five years of experience, 66.66% (n=16) of the participants have got more than 10 years, and 5/24 (20,83%) spent more than 20 years in the field of teaching English. Such data is encouraging as these last two categories have normally constructed ideas about the different strategies and daily procedures to be used for evaluating and weighing the performance of their learners. Long experience means dozens of obstacles, hurdles, hindrances, and therefore problem-solving situations for teachers. In fact, experienced (EFL) teachers are key factors in all what is related to this complicated process, which is assessment and evaluation in language teaching and learning.

Question 2

Where are you currently teaching?

Primary School	Fundamental School	Secondary School	University
2	1	7	14

Table 2: Teachers’ affiliation (work place)

Table 2 indicates that more than half of our informants (14/24= 58,33%) are teaching at the University, 7/24= 29,16% in Secondary Schools, 1/24= 4,16% in Fundamental or Middle School, and two teachers (8,33%) at the Primary School.

It should be noted that the vast majority of those currently teaching at the University were having previous experience in Primary, Middle, or Secondary education. Thus, the researcher considers this a point of strength because they may well enrich the research by their multiple-facets-experience, and enable us to formulate a broad vision on assessment/evaluation procedures, defects, as well as remedies to enhance its appropriate integration in the teaching-learning process for better achievements.

Question 3

Where did you graduate from (Bachelor Degree)?

University	Teachers Training College (ENS)	Others
19	5	//

Table 3: Teachers' Bachelor Degree awarding institution

According to the data above, we can clearly see that 19/24= 79,16% of the teachers respondents graduated from the University, which used to be termed in French language as 'Licence libre'. Whereas only 5/24 (20,83%) of the teachers targeted by the questionnaire informed that they graduated from the Teachers' Training College- TTC- (l'Ecole Normale Superieur).

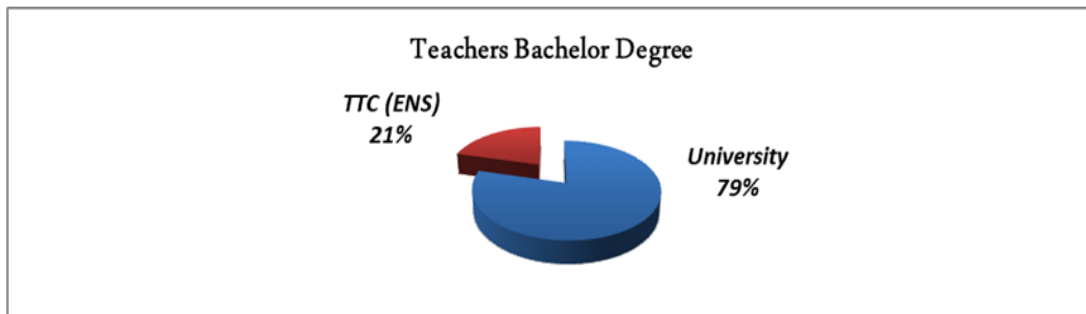


Figure 1: EFL teachers Bachelor Degree

At the university level, most students are meant to learn/focus on general English and the related topics such as Linguistics, Literature (British & American), Theatre, Civilisations, Novel analysis...etc. far from all what has connections with teaching and learning. In contrast, those students who graduate from the TTC, besides learning English, they are supposed to deal with different topics that are strongly linked to the field of Teaching (ELT). Put it simple, they tackle subjects like: Psychology, Didactics of English, Psycho-pedagogy (or Educational Psychology), and Applied Linguistics. Studying such modules help the students as future teachers to graduate with well-established skills and abilities in the field of teaching.

Question 4

When have you become familiar with *Assessment*, *Evaluation*, and *Testing*?

As a student	As a teacher	
9	Pre-service training	In-service
	3	12

Table 4: Familiarity with Assessment, Evaluation, and Testing

Concerning familiarity with terms like assessment, evaluation, and testing as an important procedures in the teaching-learning process, almost 2/3=15 (62,50%) of our sample population told us that the first time they became familiar with such jargons was in the teaching profession, i.e., as teachers. The remaining ones (9/24= 37,50%) declared that they had an idea about all this at the University as students.

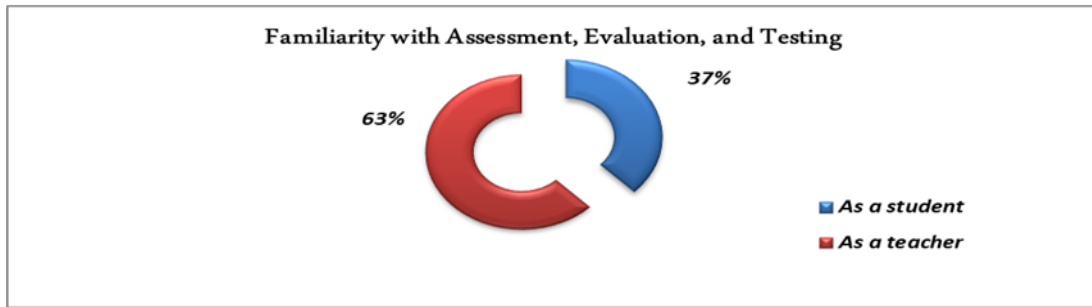


Figure 2: Teachers’ familiarity with assessment, evaluation, and testing

This question is the first step behind the rationale of choosing ‘Assessment literacy’ as a title to this piece of research. Before coming to the teaching job, teachers (as students) are supposed to have, and in depth, an idea about what assessment, evaluation, and testing really are; and how dealing with such concepts can strongly contribute to the development of both the teaching and learning processes. Further, assessments are not only required in the teaching profession, but almost every domain/sector needs this procedure(s) for improvement.

Question 5

As a student at the University/college, did you use to have a **module** typically concerned with **Assessment** and **Evaluation**?

Yes	No	Can’t remember
6	16	2

Table 5: Assessment as a module at the University

In table 5, we could read that only the minority of the informants 6/24= 25% said they studied an independent module, which was concerned with assessment and evaluation. Yet, 66,66% (16/24) of the respondents ticked the ‘No’ option to indicate that they did not use to have such module. And only two teachers out of 24 (8,33%) informed the researcher that they cannot really remember.

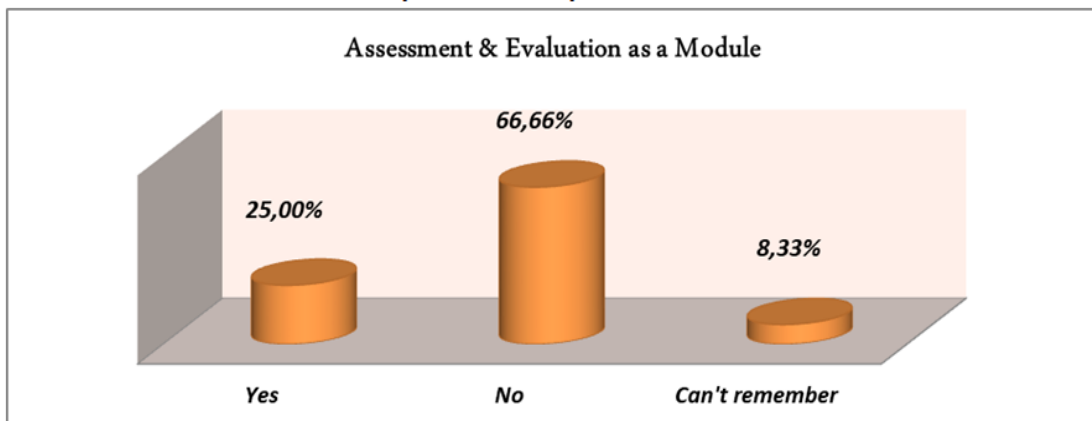


Figure 3: Teaching assessment & evaluation at the University

As expected, these findings reinforce the previous ones in the sense that Higher Education buildings are not truly giving much importance to equip students with the necessary skills and capabilities related to assessments strategies/procedures. The

latter led/is leading to the graduation of more and more *assessment illiterate teachers*, and the situation gets even worse when an important establishment such as the Teachers Training College does not clearly programme assessment/evaluation modules within the general curriculum. In all cases, this is a real problem that needs to be solved as soon as possible by the Ministry of Higher Education (MNE) and policy makers in the country.

Question 6

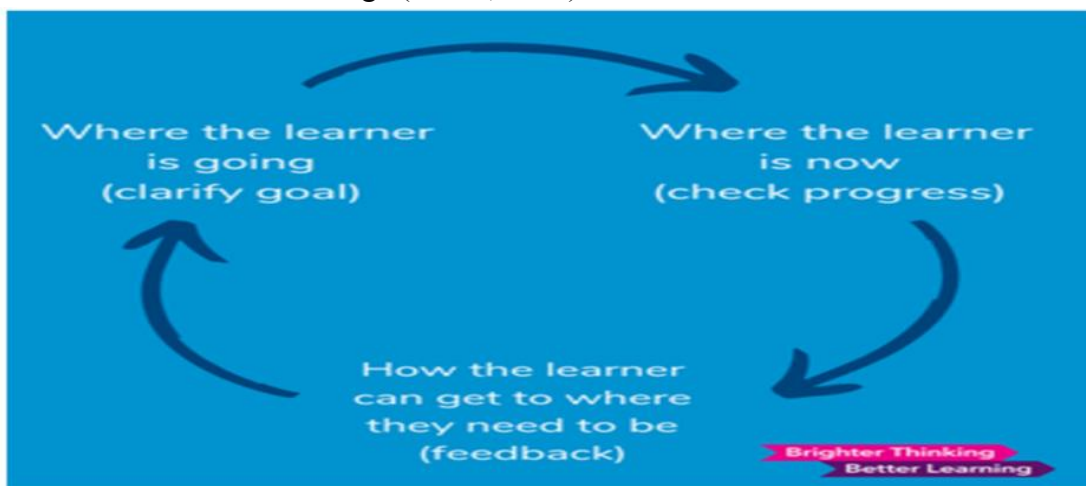
Based on your background knowledge, do we assess/evaluate

For learning	About learning	Both
12	9	3

Table 6: Assessment for/about learning

As it is shown in table 6, when our selected EFL teachers were asked whether they assess/evaluate *for learning* or *about learning*, 12/24(50%) claimed that they assess/evaluate *for learning*. In contrast, 9/24(37,50%) chose the *about learning* option and three out of 24 (12,50%) notified that, indeed, both of them are targeted.

For the researcher, assessments methods take place to serve both purposes (for & about learning). By this question, the ending point is not to receive an answer such formative or summative assessment, but we were targeting if EFL teachers are formally/informally evaluating their learners to help them acquire and properly use the knows, i.e., just as Daisy Christodoulou thinks, teachers need to be *‘thermostats, not thermometers’* “not just taking a measurement of where a student is, but making changes depending on where they need to be. This is a great way to start thinking about assessment for learning” (Steele, 2019).



Adam Steele (2019)

Then, it seems that our population understood the intended goal where 50% believe that assessments should be proceeded as an assisting tool in the teaching-learning process. Indeed, though the lack of the appropriate evaluation procedures, EFL teachers –at least our informants- know well that, as Steele Adam claims: “assessment for learning (AfL) is a teaching approach that generates feedback students can use to improve their performance” (2019). Form their perspectives, this could be as simple as

asking questions, observing learners debates and presentations, and reviewing their achievements' progress.

Question 7

In seminars with Inspectors, do you discuss issues related to assessment procedures?

Yes	No	No idea
20	///	4

Table 7: Assessment & Seminars with Inspectors

Regarding seminars with Inspectors, most of the informants (83,33%= 20/24) drew attention to the fact that issues related to assessment procedures were/are being discussed in such important conferences. And only four teachers (16,66%) said that they have '*no idea*'.

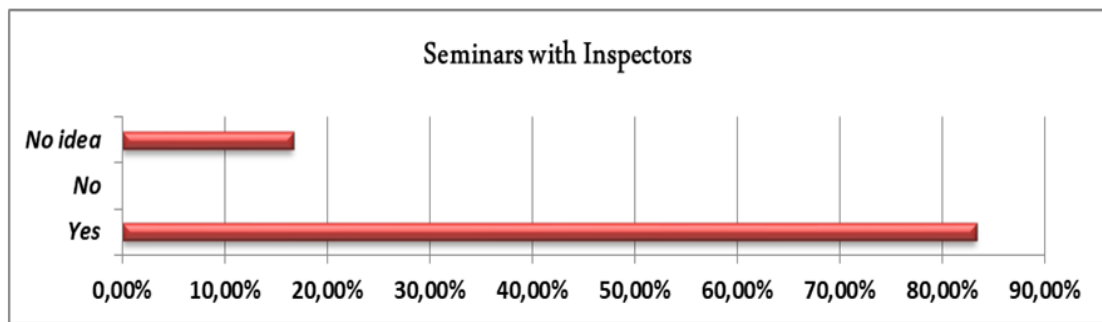


Figure 4: Discussing assessment procedures with Inspectors

It is highly significant to keep debates about assessment and evaluation in language teaching and therefore learning as Inspectors and teachers are the main influencers of the field. Most EFL teachers, as declared, did not have the opportunity, as students, to get in touch with the appropriate ways to thoroughly weigh/measure learners' learning, and then work on enhancement or/and improvements. Yet, such type of discussions should be freed from the top-down decisions towards well-furnished workshops for better and innovative ideas.

Question 8

Do you collaborate with colleagues to enhance assessments procedures?

Always	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
10	8	4	2

Table8: Collaboration among teachers to enhance assessment procedures

As displayed in the table above, and in order to enhance assessment procedures through collaboration with colleagues, ten out of 24 (41,66%) of the respondents told the researcher that they *always* do, 8/24 (33,33%) informed that they *sometimes* collaborate with colleagues, 16,66% (4/24) reported that this is *rarely* done, and 8,33% (2/24) confessed that they *never* do so.

Besides a good pre-service and in-service training at the University or with Inspectors, collaboration among teachers plays a crucial role in professional development; it is a force that positively influences the whole school community.

Hopefully most of EFL teachers 18/24 (75%), based on our findings, maintain group work and collaboration for the sake of enhancing assessments and evaluation procedures. Mora-Ruano *et al.* (2019) assert that positive effects for teachers were found in improved self-efficacy, increased teaching effectiveness, and improvement of instructional quality. It is, then, a much more conscious step to bridge the gap caused by the ill-gotten training, as students in specific and as pre/in-service teachers later on. Such type of team work according to experts will improve their quality as professionals and as teacher quality alone accounts for 30% of the variance in student performance.

Question 9

Are you doing readings in the field of assessment & evaluation to develop and update your knowledge and procedures/strategies?

Yes	Not much	No
16	6	2

Table 9: Doing readings to update knowledge

Table 9 signals that 66,66% (16/24) of the sample population keeps *doing* readings in the field of assessment and evaluation for professional development and knowledge update. While 25% (6/24) of the informants think they do so but ‘*not much*’, two respondents (8,33%) said that they ‘*do not*’ do readings in this field.

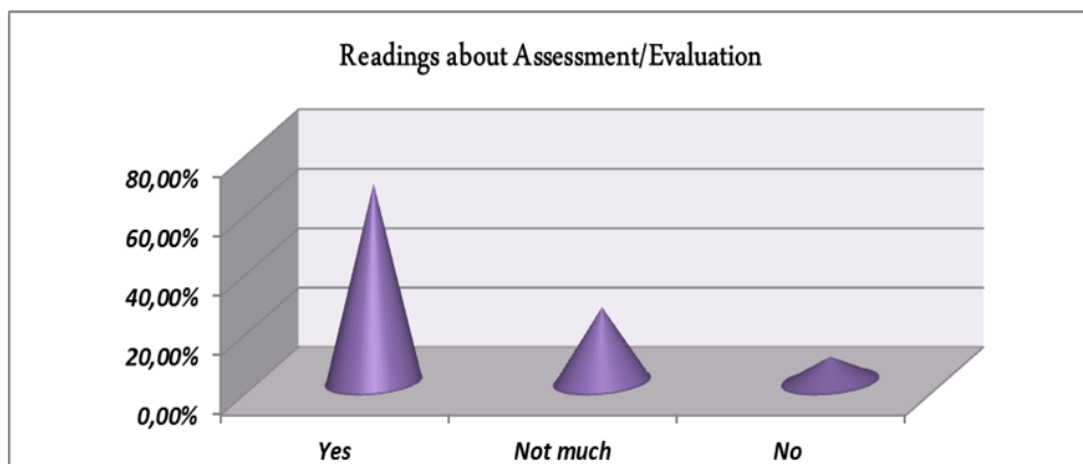


Figure 5: Teachers knowledge updates about assessment/evaluation

What makes us optimistic is that common shared belief among the vast majority of the teachers. In other words, they recognise that when personal development is ignored, we risk getting left behind. Thus, doing readings in this field, for them, becomes a must to foster assessment skills, adapt/adopt different strategies, and formulate new insights that allow them to broaden and progress their personal and professional developments, keeping them up to date and relevant within their field of interest.

Question 10

According to you, what should be done in the field of education to better assessment and evaluation procedures in Algeria?

The last question in this series is devoted to teachers' suggestions to enhance assessment/evaluation techniques and procedures in favour of the teaching-learning process. Most teachers (more than **90%**) agreed upon the necessity of all methods of evaluation, be it *summative assessment* (standardised tests & exams), which is inevitable for its importance to check mastery of the knows, or *formative* that allows learners with many opportunities to improve and succeed while learning. Yet, they kept insisting on offering much time and space for formative assessment or the so-called learning-oriented assessment to take place.

Below is a summary to the suggestions provided by our sample population (EFL teachers):

1. Redefine or reset assessment and evaluation procedures like shifting assessment from reproduction of knowledge into knowledge production in the sense students become thinkers.
2. Use a variety of different assessment methods, such as tests/exams, essays, projects, and presentations, can help provide a more comprehensive picture of students' learning and abilities. Using a variety of assessment methods can also help accommodate different learning styles and preferences.
3. Train teachers: Teachers should be trained in different assessment techniques and methodologies to ensure the *validity* and *reliability* of assessments.
4. Incorporate formative assessments, which are used throughout the learning process to provide feedback to learners, can help identify areas where they may be struggling and provide opportunities for improvement.
5. Technology can be used to support assessment and evaluation procedures, such as online testing, automated grading, and data analytics.
6. Critical thinking and creativity should be taken into account whereas memorisation questions should be limited.

5. Discussion

In light of what has been found and analysed previously, the results collected from the questionnaire seem to be of paramount importance as they may well serve to look for alternatives and solutions to enhance assessment techniques and procedures among EFL teachers in Algeria. The results revealed that the teachers do not really feel comfortable with the current evaluation methods, which they termed as "traditional" in the sense that these methods focus on summative forms and neglect most of the time the formative side. The majority are unable to adapt with the (top-down) assessments procedures for all levels in both ministries: MNE & MHESR, because of the many obstacles and hindrances that stand against attaining fruitful results in English language learning. Throughout the questionnaire, the researcher attempted to identify

the nature of some of these obstacles and hurdles that necessitate the launching of Assessment Literacy Programs on the University level.

Though more than half of the informants (66.66%) started teaching since years, they are still encountering difficulties to help learners improve through informal types of assessment, and keep acquainted to a more formal ways of evaluation, namely standardised tests and exams. The latter is an obstacle that prevents, on the one hand learners from taking the initiative to have a hand in developing/multiplying their learning strategies, and limits, on the other hand, EFL teachers' creativity to assist and support learners needs. The reason behind these defects returns basically to their poor equipment and lack of knowledge about assessments *for learning* in specific, and/or *about learning* in general as "Assessment is not only a measure of student learning, but a means to student learning" (Garies & Grant, 2015, p. 2). As a matter of fact, 15/24 (62,50%) teachers declared their non-familiarity with assessment/evaluation procedures until they became teachers. This knowledge-gap is supposed to be firstly filled in on the University level through integrating modules related to assessments in language teaching/learning. Then, comes the role of Inspectors during the weekly/monthly meetings or seminars in which workshops are conducted to broaden the teachers' scope in this field considering both theoretical as well as practical applications. By the way, in such meetings EFL teachers (or 83,33%) claimed that they usually discuss issues related to assessment and evaluation.

Therefore, what EFL teachers need, here, is support and reinforcement trainings for more efficiency/efficacy in this area of investigation. Especially when most of those (teachers) who participated at our study attested that the training courses that they were offered during their preliminary professional training session were not practically oriented. It is no wonder, therefore, that many of the teachers (75%) keep making extra efforts by collaborating with colleagues and doing readings (66,66%) to arrive at suitable evaluation methods that help their learners achieve concrete improvements. Thence, it becomes imperative that Universities, Inspectors, syllabus designers and all those academics and professionals to take a step forward to reconsider what to incorporate into such highly crucial professional training sessions to form competent and assessment literate teachers. And thus, as Boyles (2006, cited in Dawn, 2014, p. 12), enable teachers to use the information from assessment to adjust their teaching practices, to provide evidence of learners performance, and to guide the curriculum review process.

6. Conclusion:

In order for assessment to be effective, classroom teachers need to be assessment literate and aware when to test, what to test, and how to test. In practical terms, the findings and emerging definition suggest an immediate movement and a totally new vision by experts and decision makers towards an approach to assessment literacy that integrates knowledge, skills, and principles in a procedural training that attempts to balance what will be required for both classroom and normative assessment.

Especially when discovering that the vast majority of EFL teachers, based at least on this study, are poorly equipped with assessment methods where most of them keep faithful to the formal pen-paper testing ways which belong to the summative strategies of evaluation forgetting wholly about formative procedures that encourage and boost students learning. It is never late to integrate and teach assessment methods to our students at Universities so that they could come to the field of education ready to assess *for learning* and *about learning*.

EFL teachers, though they maintain collaboration and update knowledge about assessment through readings, they still suffer from a lack of the true implementation of the “*for learning assessments strategies*,” which reveals a kind of assessment-related illiteracy among them. The latter is due mainly to the fragile formation teachers had at the University (as students) and in both pre/in-service trainings. Therefore, several steps are highly recommended to heal this important side, among which is to develop a better language assessment training infrastructure for teachers across the country, and to work on integrating assessment in initial language teacher-training.

7. List of references: