

LANGUAGE TESTING AND ASSESSMENT LITERACY FOR PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS: BETWEEN REALITY AND EXPECTATIONS

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Abstract

The training that EFL pre-service teachers receive within the teacher-education programs in Algeria includes numerous aspects such as lesson planning, materials design, educational psychology, TEFL, and pedagogy. While they take in-depth training on items like lesson planning and the teaching of the macro-skills, components like assessment and evaluation remain remarkably missing from their curriculum. For observation, no module is specifically designated to assessment and evaluation along the five or four years of the training they undergo. EFL pre-service teachers are expected to graduate with adequate academic knowledge of the assessment and evaluation process; nevertheless, the reality can reveal to be contrasting. Hence, this study seeks to investigate the current situation of EFL pre-service teachers' assessment skills which partially disclose the level of their language assessment literacy (LAL). For this, an online survey with multiple items is posted to a sample of senior EFL students at the Teacher Training College, Bouzareah (ENSB), with the purpose of collecting their reflections and analyses about different dimensions of LAL. The findings indicate that there is a glaring incongruity between the status quo of student-teachers' assessment knowledge and the stakeholders' aspirations from the training. This discrepancy, which is due to not receiving sufficient practicum on how to assess, demonstrates that pre-service teachers are slightly knowledgeable about items like designing different types of tests, marking, giving feedback, assessing language skills, using assessment to motivate learners, and knowing what the latter feel about assessment, as well as other critical assessment parameters.

Keywords: Assessment; EFL; language assessment literacy (LAL); pre-service teachers; testing

1. Introduction

Assessment and evaluation are two chief operations within the pedagogical process. The latter remains incomplete without them and is often deficient when they are done inappropriately. Teaching language and evaluating the progress of the course go hand in hand. Wongwanich and Yamtim (2014) put assessment next to teachers, students, resources and context when counting the five major elements that determine the quality of instruction. This is what makes teachers' language assessment literacy (LAL) a vital skill to build. Stiggins (1995) defines assessment literacy as the skills and knowledge needed in the practice of assessment and testing. What is also often stated is that LAL implicates varied stakeholders (Harding & Pill, 2013; Taylor, 2013), among whom are language teachers.

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Scarino (2013) maintains that assessment is part and parcel of language learning and teaching curriculums and processes. Thereby, training teachers on how to assess and evaluate is probably as important as training them on how to teach. Novice teachers graduating from teacher training institutes are expected to be assessment literate, although the reality may be incompatible. Subsequently, the in-hand study accentuates the urgent need for training on assessment skills in order to meet expectations and reduce the inconsistency that may exist between the reality of teacher training on LAL and what is expected from its EFL graduates. The paper attempts to find out whether EFL pre-service teachers receive training on assessment and testing, whether they feel ready and skilled to assess, and how much knowledgeable they are in various aspects of LAL. In accordance with this rationale, the main research questions are:

RQ1: Do EFL pre-service teachers at ENSB receive training for LAL?

RQ2: Are ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers skilled in testing and assessment?

RQ3: How much do ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers know about different assessment areas and aspects?

The following hypotheses are provided as potential answers to the previous research questions:

RH1: EFL pre-service teachers at ENSB receive training to build and improve their Language Assessment Literacy.

RH2: By the end of the training, ENSB EFL pre-service teachers are skilled enough in testing and assessment.

RH3: ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers are moderately to quite knowledgeable about different assessment areas and aspects.

These hypotheses are going to be tested through a case study. By answering the aforementioned questions, we hope to discover whether the reality of teacher training on assessment meets with what is awaited from it. Notably, there is an evident lack of research on the place of LAL in Algerian EFL teacher training programs, its components, and the latter's development. This lack is considered as a serious research gap. Therefore, our paper seeks to address this gap by starting an examination of the status quo of training on assessment as well as the LAL skills of EFL senior pre-service teachers who are to become novice teachers.

2. Literature Review

Language assessment (LA), and specifically EFL assessment, has been more and more required in significant and tactful domains like immigration, diplomacy, citizenship and naturalisation, education, recruitment, as well as for other elemental certification decisions (Harding & Kremmel, 2020). For this, EFL teachers and testers are required to be “conversant and competent in the principles and practice of language assessment” (Harding & Kremmel, 2016, p. 415). The notion of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) brings together three main classes of knowledge: theoretical and procedural, practical, and socio-historical or principled knowledge, knowing that the practical knowledge is the core of LAL (Fulcher, 2012). Similar to Fulcher, Giraldo and Murcia (2018) think that: “language assessment literacy (henceforth LAL) refers to the knowledge, skills, and principles for contextualizing, planning, developing, executing, evaluating, and interpreting language assessments”.

Summative, formative, and diagnostic assessments are the three most known methods of language assessment. They are often taught within teacher education. Notwithstanding, there is much more that can be added to them in terms of LA knowledge. For instance, Brindley (2001)

suggested that training on assessment can incorporate the following three main modules about: the objectives of assessment (why), the manners of language assessment (how), and the significance of the assessment outcomes about language ability (what). This has resonance in the field, because it has been proved that testing and assessment training within professional development and/or teacher induction has “positive impact on participants” as it makes them aware of the why, how, and what of assessment (Giraldo & Murcia, 2018). LA knowledge, as traced by researchers, can include several dimensions. In general, Davies (2008), like Fulcher (2012) and Giraldo and Murcia (2018), sees that LAL encapsulates three main competences: knowledge, skills, and principles. Stiggins (1999) enumerates seven assessment sub-competences: (1) relating assessment to well-defined objectives, (2) making achievement expectations clear, (3) using appropriate assessment tools, (4) building good assessment activities and marking yardsticks, (5) avoiding bias and unfairness in assessment, (6) communicating student outcomes meritoriously, last but not least (7) applying assessment as an instructional means. On her side, Taylor (2013) proposes eight of them: “(1) knowledge of theory, (2) technical skills, (3) principles and concepts, (4) language pedagogy, (5) sociocultural values, (6) local practices, (7) personal beliefs/attitudes, and (8) scores and decision making” (as cited in Coombe et al., 2020). Ethical considerations, such as fairness, bias, and transparency, are also encapsulated within the competences of LAL. Furthermore, modern paradigms in the field embrace Web-Based Testing (WBT), which is, relatively, a newcomer to the collection of LA skills. This makes technological skills and mastery of some statistical appliances substantial in the map of assessment knowledge.

In contradiction with how much teachers need to learn about it, LA is scarce in pre-service teacher training. Novice teachers come into the domain with not much knowledge of LA, as argues Popham (2009), who also contemplates that, in general, teachers have little understanding of educational assessment. He points out that some of them see that exam or “test is a four-letter word, both literally and figuratively” (Ibid., p. 5). They think of examination and testing as simple operations, while they are complex and multi-layered.

In synopsis, it is inevitable to notice that the inclusion and design of a language assessment course within language teacher education programs is a necessity. Herrera Mosquera and Macías (2015), alongside Bernal and López (2009), substantiate that both pre-service and in-service teachers need to receive training on assessment. Likewise, Giraldo (2018) stresses the amelioration of language teachers’ LAL as they are a fundamental stakeholder group in the language assessment process.

3. Methodology

3.1 Context and Setting

The study employs a quantitative approach in order to investigate EFL pre-service teachers’ language assessment literacy (LAL). The study seeks mainly to find out the reality of teacher training on assessment and testing. Thus, the setting consists of an Algerian EFL teacher training program, that of the Teacher Training School, Bouzareah (ENSB). Briefly, the study is an exploratory analysis of EFL pre-service teachers’ knowledge of assessment and their LAL skills.

3.2 Participants

The sample was involved through a convenience sampling technique. It was selected based on availability and accessibility. 36 female students at Ecole Normale Supérieure, Bouzareah, took place in the study. A population of 160 students was invited to participate, but only 36 of them replied to the research tool. Our focus is ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers, that is, fourth- and fifth-year students. This population was chosen because it is expected to

have received most of the training at ENSB, and is a few months away from starting to teach officially. They are expected to know how to test and assess, just as they are expected to be ready to teach. Their knowledge of assessment is supposed to be enough to begin teaching. Table 1 shows more details about the participants in relation to their age range, year of study, and level of English.

Table 1.
Delineation of Participants

Gender	Age Range	Year of Study	Level of English
100% Female	18-24 years old: 100%	Fifth year: 91.7% [33 participants] Fourth year: 8.3% [3 participants]	Beginner: 0% [none]
			Pre-intermediate: 5.6% [2 participants]
			Intermediate: 44.4% [16 participants]
			Upper-intermediate: 30.6% [11 participants]
			Advanced: 16.7% [6 participants]
			Proficient: 2.8% [1 participant]

3.3 Procedures and Tools

In January 2022, an online survey (Google Forms) was shared with the participants. After waiting for two weeks, 36 replies were received. The questionnaire is made up of eight (8) questions: four demographic information questions and four content ones. The content questions include two yes/no questions, one open-ended question, and the main question. The latter is an eighteen-point Likert scale with four measurement choices of knowledge: not knowledgeable, slightly knowledgeable, moderately knowledgeable, and very knowledgeable. The 18 items were adapted and/or adopted from Harding and Kremmel's LAL scale which was launched in May 2017 and published in 2020. In this empirical research, Harding and Kremmel (2020) explored the needs of multiple LAL stakeholder groups like teachers, test builders, administrators, and testing researchers, including overall 1086 respondents.

The data are processed through the descriptive analysis method. They are presented hereafter.

4. Results

In order to find out whether the EFL teacher induction program at ENSB provides training on assessment and testing, participants were asked the question demonstrated in Figure 1. The percentages are contradictory as 52.8% reported that they received training on assessment, whereas 47.2% said that they did not.

During your time at ENSB, have you received training on assessment and testing?

36 responses

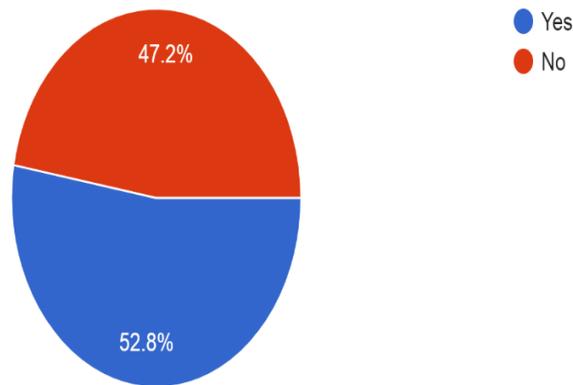


Figure 1: Percentages of Training on Assessment and Testing

Participants were then asked whether they considered themselves skilled enough to assess English learners. Based on the obtained data (Figure 2), there is fairness in choices as half of the participants, 50% ($n = 18$), deem themselves skilled, while the other half think they are not.

Do you consider yourself skilled enough to assess English learners?

36 responses

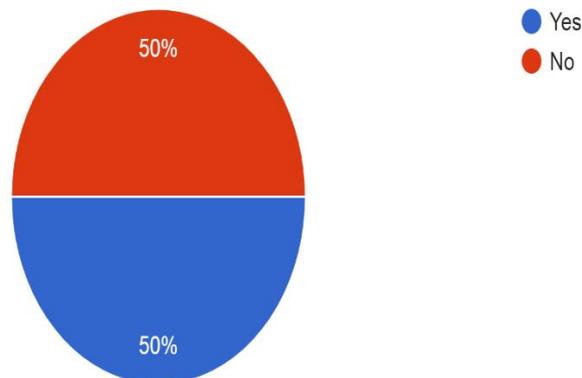


Figure 2: Are Participants Skilled in LAL?

For a deeper understanding, participants were invited to justify their choices in the previous question. As exhibited in Table 2, the replies that were inserted are classified based on the choice (skilled/not skilled). The researcher relied on the content analysis method to sort out the replies.

Table 2.

Participants' Justifications of Whether They Are Skilled in LAL or Not

Skilled	Not Skilled
I feel myself skilled.	I am still improving my ability.
I am not sure, but from what I know, I think I will be able to assess effectively as a beginner teacher. There is yet much to learn, though.	So far, I did not have any direct contact with students in a classroom, so I will have to put myself in the situation first.
I am able to assess beginners only. I tried it with some of my family students, and they did well.	I am still learning.
I can maybe evaluate them on the obvious things.	Due to Covid, we were not able to study sufficiently, we do not feel ourselves prepared enough.
Throughout these four years of studying at ENSB, we were preparing ourselves to teach.	I do not have enough skills, patience, and good English.
I have learned many things about assessment and evaluation as a fifth-year student.	I need more training and practice in the field of teaching in order to gain experience, and till now we have just received the theoretical side.
With the help of the modules that we are studying now such as pedagogical trends and TEFL, I feel skilled enough to do it.	I am working on my skills so that I will be able to assess other learners.
I have received training to assess, but it was only for one semester and was not really enough.	I do not have any previous knowledge about it.
I think that I am skilled enough to assess English learners because I have enough knowledge about both the language and what to look for then take into consideration when assessing the students thanks to what I have studied at ENSB.	I need time and training!

/	I am also still an English learner. I do not have enough vocabulary and enough strategies.
/	I need to improve my level enough to do that.
/	My knowledge background is not enough to assess English learners. I am still working on it.
/	Lack of training on how to assess and test English learners left me without knowledge about this matter. I still do not know what kind of standards/measures are required in the process of testing and evaluating learners.
/	This is because I have never tried to assess an English learner, I did not receive any training on that, and I am not proficient in English to assess learners, but it still depends on the learners' level; I mean if he is a beginner, I can assess him/her, but in case he is in my level or higher, here I am not able to do that.
/	I have yet to know how to assess English learners since I received no training on the matter.

The last question was in regard to how much knowledgeable ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers are in 18 sub-areas of LAL. The question is a Likert scale with four measurement points. Figure 3 illustrates the details of the sample's replies.

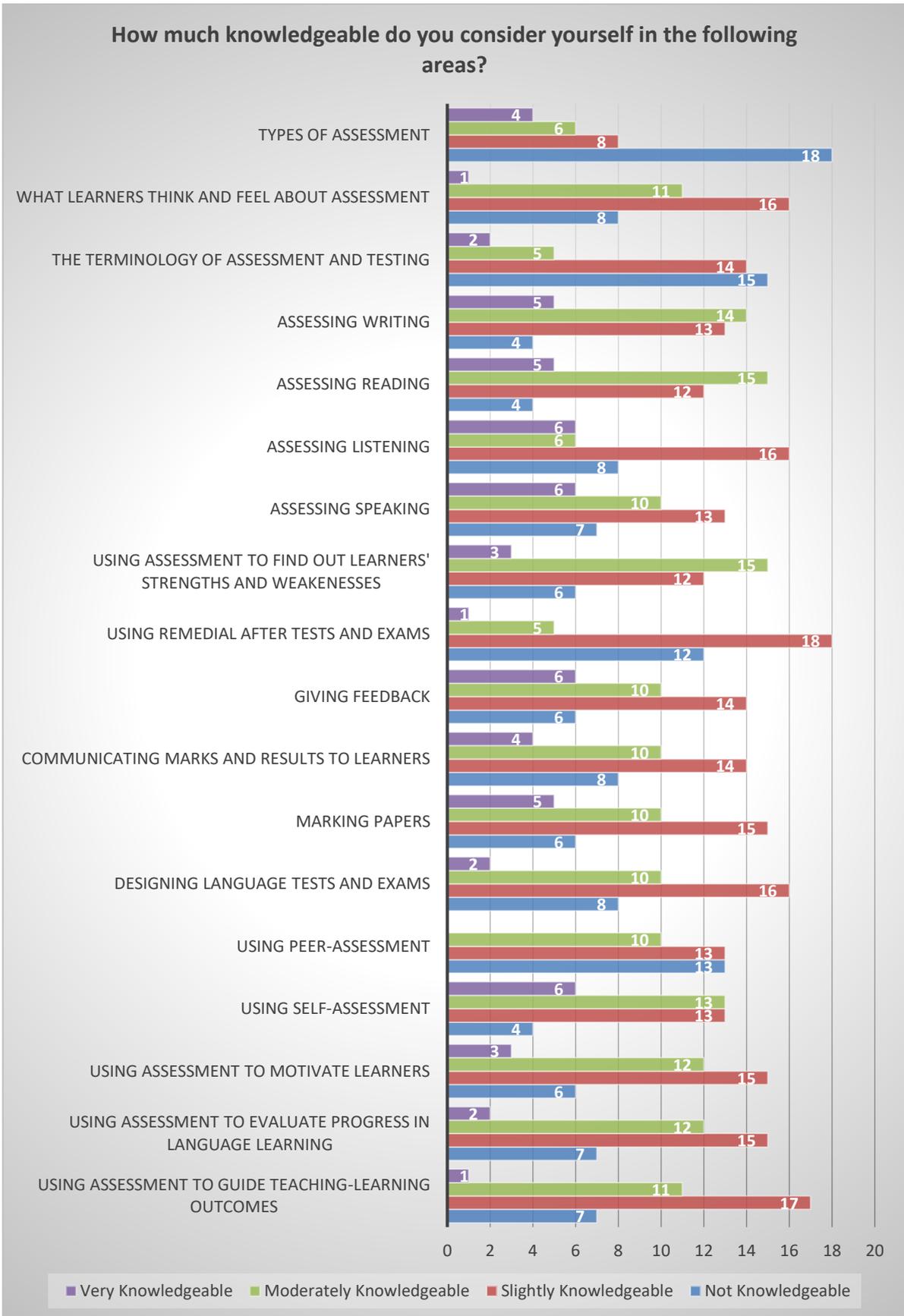


Figure 3: Participants' Knowledge of Different Aspects of Assessment

The rationale behind this question was to collect data about respondents' knowledge of 18 LAL factors. The factor analysis reveals that the majority of participants are slightly knowledgeable in eleven (11) aspects out of eighteen (18) (using assessment to guide teaching-learning outcomes; using assessment to evaluate progress in language learning; using assessment to motivate learners; designing language tests and exams; marking papers; communicating marks and results to learners; giving feedback; using remedial after tests and exams; assessing speaking; assessing listening; what learners think and feel about assessment), moderately knowledgeable in three (3) aspects (using assessment to find out students' strengths and weaknesses; assessing reading; assessing writing), and not knowledgeable in two (2) aspects (terminology of assessment and testing; types of assessment). In two factors, the same number of participants is shared between either slightly knowledgeable and moderately knowledgeable (using self-assessment, $n= 13$ of participants), or not knowledgeable and slightly knowledgeable (using peer-assessment, $n= 13$ of participants). This indicates the overall knowledge of senior EFL pre-service teachers, which can be described as slightly to moderately knowledgeable in LAL competences, but mostly slightly knowledgeable.

5. Discussion and Implications

Many practitioners and researchers reiterate that LAL is an important notion in applied linguistics. However, its working knowledge among the sample is not encouraging. In the following part, the main findings are discussed in relation to the research questions and hypotheses.

RQ1: Do EFL pre-service teachers at ENSB receive training for LAL?

The gathered data demonstrate that 52.8% of the respondents said that they received training on assessment, whereas 47.2% said that they did not. Meanwhile, our first hypothesis deemed that EFL pre-service teachers at ENSB receive training to build and improve their Language Assessment Literacy. The percentages obtained are close, yet surprisingly paradoxical and do not confirm the hypothesis. This might indicate that the offered assessment training is subtle, implicit, weak, limited, and/or inconsistent. Some teachers and trainers might have referred to it, but not enough for all participants to be sure they received training and be aware of LAL. It is weird to notice that in the same context, almost half of the participants said the opposite of what the other half attested. What this implies is that: "Assessment courses programs should be part of teachers' qualifications and requirements" (Coombe et al., 2020). It is highly recommended to classify the content about assessment and testing under one specific module that focuses only on LAL. The module can tackle the various dimensions and sub-skills of LAL with up-to-date knowledge. It can be taught in the last year of training or the last two years. It ought to be "long and sustainable enough to engage [pre-service] teachers in profound learning about assessment" (Ibid.). It also needs to involve student-teachers in practice, not just theory.

RQ2: Are ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers skilled in testing and assessment?

Earlier in this research, we postulated that ENSB EFL pre-service teachers (seniors) are skilled enough in testing and assessment, mainly by the end of the training. It is no surprise that teachers are expected to be professional in assessment (Csépes, 2021); yet, the findings display that half of the sample is not skilled in testing and assessment, which disconfirms the hypothesis (RH2). This can be due to the lack and inconsistency of training on LA, as seen above (RQ1). Some members of the sample stated it patently, as this one who wrote: "I have yet to know how to assess English learners since I received no training on the matter". Another one inserted: "Lack of training on how to assess and test English learners left me without knowledge about

this matter. I still do not know what kind of standards/measures are required in the process of testing and evaluating learners”.

In a study conducted by Popham (2004), he found that several teachers do not know enough about assessment. He argued that they know “little” about educational assessment and compared assessment illiteracy to professional suicide (Popham, 2004). Other authors claim that: “assessment has been seen almost exclusively as an act of measurement that occurs after learning has been completed, not as a fundamental part of teaching and learning itself” (Bryan & Clegg, 2006, p. xviii). Viewing assessment as such, and without considering the backwash effect, can be proof of significant LA illiteracy. These findings entail that more efforts ought to be spent on improving teachers’ and pre-service teachers’ LAL principles, perceptions, and skills.

RQ3: How much do ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers know about different assessment areas and aspects?

Because this is what is hoped for and expected, it was hypothesised that ENSB senior EFL pre-service teachers are moderately, quite knowledgeable about different assessment areas and aspects. Conversely, the findings indicate that they are slightly knowledgeable about LA in general. Some studies have shown that this is valid almost everywhere as teachers, learners, and people, in general, seem to consider assessment as “giving students tests and using scores for sometimes unfair purposes and actions such as evaluating teachers’ overall performance” (Herrera Mosquera & Macías, 2015, p. 303). Indeed, the process is often viewed as deciding who succeeds and who fails a course, “controlling discipline, or threatening students” (López, 2008, p. 56). In fact, there are teachers who, instead of using assessment to motivate learners, use it as a threat, disregarding students’ needs and proving their illiteracy of what is dubbed “affective skills for assessment” (Giraldo, 2019).

What is encouraging is that teachers’ LAL is not fixed, and can improve with time, learning, experience, and practice (Csépes, 2021). The author conceives that teachers’ identity as “assessors develops gradually as a result of complex and deep learning about assessment”, and can eventually result in alterations in their beliefs and practices about assessment (Ibid.). Hence, it is advisable for teacher training programs to provide assessment practice opportunities for pre-service teachers.

Taking all findings into consideration, we can perceive a discrepancy between the reality of student-teachers’ assessment knowledge and what is awaited from them. The stakeholders’ aspirations from the training in relation to LA are higher than its real outcomes. This disproportion is attributed to the insufficiency and/or inconsistency of training and practicum on how, what, and why to assess. It is, undeniably, extremely urgent to implement a LA course within the teacher induction program offered to EFL pre-service teachers in general, and to those at ENSB in particular.

6. Conclusion

The multi-dimensionality of LAL and its varied components and significance to relative stakeholders make it a complex variable to explore. In this study, we aimed to understand pre-service teachers’ assessment literacy; however, it seems that this construct is not singular but plural, or as Inbar-Lourie (2017) discerns, it leads us to discuss assessment *literacies* (LALs). The collected data underscore the lack of training on LA in the setting of the study, but this can be true in several other teacher training programs in Algeria and worldwide. As a baseline, there is an incompatibility between what is expected from teacher training about LA and the reality of its novice graduates’ and senior under-graduates’ LAL. The reality shows that they are slightly literate about LA, which insinuates and invites the inclusion of more training on

language assessment skills, competences, and literacies. The study and the adopted approach have limitations, namely the small sample and its non-representability. Nonetheless, the conclusions of this piece of research provide venues for further investigations on EFL novice teachers' LAL and the content of LA courses.

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