COMPETENCY-BASED ASSESSMENT: PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

التقييم القائم على الكفاءات: اعتبارات عملية

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Abstract:

   The ELT teachers' perception of assessment in Algeria seems reflecting a bleak picture since the adoption of the competency-based approach to language teaching. This study hereby, seeks a diagnostic of the in-service EFL teachers' current practices of alternative assessment to traditional testing. It is an exploration of its implementation in certain Secondary School ELT classrooms in the province of Tlemcen. The research was quantitatively designed and conducted through the use of a structured questionnaire and in which a group of EFL teachers was addressed with certain considerations such as age, educational qualification, and teaching experience. After a quantitative analysis of the data, they were discussed thoroughly and then interpreted. Results of the study results revealed an obvious misconception of EFL teachers in Algeria to the overall process of assessment, and their classroom practices to it seem to

be controversial to the assessment theoretical conception. Nonetheless, through the study, it became non doubtful that the respondent participants let a little room work for alternative assessment which grants a broad spectrum of assessment opportunities to cater for the learners' different learning styles. The research paper at hand would, hopefully, boost the EFL teachers' assessment knowledge, emerge interest in it as a beneficial measurement tool, and change their attitudes towards it, for more efficiency, practicality and flexibility in the professional context.

Key words: English Language, Competency-Based Assessment, Traditional Testing, Practicality, Independent learning.

ملخص باللغة العربية :

يبدو أن تصور معلمي تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية للتقييم في الجزائر يعكس صورة قاتمة منذ اعتماد النهج القائم على الكفاءة في تدريس اللغة. تسعى هذه الدراسة بموجب هذا إلى تشخيص الممارسات الحالية لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية أثناء الخدمة للتقييم البديل للاختبار التقليدي. وهو استكشاف لتطبيقه في بعض فصول تدريس اللغة الإنجليزية في المدرسة الثانوية في محافظة تلمسان. تم تصميم البحث وإجرائه كميًا من خلال استخدام استبيان منظم حيث تم الإسقاط على مجموعة من معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية مع اعتبارات معينة مثل العمر والمؤهلات التعليمية والخبرة التدريسية. بعد التحليل الكمي للبيانات ، تمت مناقشتها بدقة ثم تفسيرها. كشفت نتائج الدراسة عن سوء فهم واضح لمعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية في الجزائر لعملية التقييم الشاملة ، ويبدو أن ممارساتهم الصفية مثيرة للجدل بالنسبة للتصور النظري للتقييم. ومع ذلك ، من خلال الدراسة ، أصبح من غير المشكوك فيه أن المشاركون في الاستطلاع يتركون مساحة صغيرة للعمل للتقييم البديل الذي يمنح مجموعة واسعة من فرص التقييم لتلبية أنماط التعلم المختلفة للمتعلمين. من المأمول أن تعزز هذه الورقة البحثية معرفة تقييم معلمي اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ، وتبرز الاهتمام بها كأداة قياس مفيدة ، وتغير مواقفهم تجاهها ، لمزيد من الكفاءة والتطبيق العملي والمرونة في السياق المهني

الكلمات المفتاحية: اللغة الإنجليزية ، التقييم القائم على الكفاءة ، الاختبار التقليدي ، التطبيق العملي ، التعلم المستقل.

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1. Introduction:

The adoption of innovative measurement trends tends to prove that in the language classroom, learner-centeredness that goes through problem solving relies, to a great deal, on various effective strategies that consider most the learners' performance. By cause and effect, the so-called alternative assessment to traditional keystone testing is claimed to be a sine-qua non owing to the fact that it requires the learners' learning by doing even beyond the classroom. Moreover, it serves as an aid to promote language acquisition, a process and a product at once that requires the EFL teachers and learners' collaboration for the achievement of linguistic and nonlinguistic goals. Thus, this versatile innovative process is twofold, serving instruction and measurement sakes alike.

2. Statement of the Problem:

In Algeria, an approximately two decades ago educational reform, strongly called into question the evaluation process and stressed the need to implement competency-based assessment. The task was not easy that deal due to the fact that traditional testing was, and is still, governing and deeply rooting in the area of educational measurement. As far as the researcher is concerned as an EFL teacher at the secondary school, after a modest experience of more than ten years, including relentless coordination with her colleagues, she concluded that, alternative assessment represented the bugbear for language teachers, they are unconsciously and forcedly clung to measure the learners' achievements through traditional paper and pencil tests. Whereas, alternative assessment has rarely, if not never been compatible to reality in their classrooms. It was clear that the objectives of the launched educational revolution were not spelt out in their classroom practices. The researcher personally, with the group of colleagues, as it is the case of most EFL teachers in Algeria, have always felt confused between assessment and testing and what distinguishes each one. There was a clear unfamiliarity with and misunderstanding to the overall concept of alternative assessment.

2.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses:

The present research work is carried on the basis of the following research questions:

1- What are the teacher's attitudes towards competency-based assessment in the Algerian ELT classroom?

2- Are EFL teachers in Algeria knowledgeable enough about the concept of competency-based assessment?

3- How should we bring about practical and flexible competency-based assessment in the Algerian ELT classroom with regard to its current circumstances?

As an attempt to provide convincing responses to the research questions above, the researcher hypothesizes the following,

1- EFL teachers in Algeria are unfamiliar with the use of alternative assessment and feel confused and frustrated towards the use of competency-based evaluation.

2- EFL teachers are of a clear misconception to competency-based assessment in the Algerian ELT classroom.

3- Frequent approaches that embody professional development workshops, study days and colloquia, should target EFL teachers' formal training to realize effectiveness of classroom assessment practices.

2.2. Research Objective:

Clearly, Algerian ELT teachers do not perceive the reality that innovative assessment is closely tied to learning due to the fact that the ' teaching to the test ' factor exerted a prominent impact on their classroom practices, especially with regard to the decisive exams such as the 'BEM' and the 'BAC', we thought that initiating teachers to the literature of assessment would be vocational and versatile, bringing about its practicality in the language classroom, stressing the need to tackle the process of assessment as systematic and governed by a set of principles as well as theories .

Indeed, the study seeks to probe into the implementation of assessment pedagogy in the Algerian ELT context in order to contribute to highlighting the overall understanding and knowledge of this alternative to traditional testing.

The objective of this empirical research thus, is to generate a diagnosis of the pitfalls that beset the adoption of innovative assessment instruction in the Algerian educational language setting.

2.3. Research Instrument:

For the sake of concluding facts to ascertain or deny what the researcher's proposition, the study follows an experimental research design compiling quantitative data through the use of a structured questionnaire addressed to a group of about fifty EFL teachers from ten different secondary schools. The questionnaire is intended to cover three major phases, the questions in the starting phase concern the teachers' professional experience, during which they might receive educational training and along which several changes and reforms were undergone. The second phase spots light on the teacher's perception to assessment as an alternative to testing, while the third phase seeks to find out the factors that beset the effective practice of assessment in the Algerian ELT classroom to suggest possible solutions.

3. Literature Review:

3.1. Contemporary Alternative Assessment Vs Keystone Traditional Testing:

Regardless of its purpose, language testing, even if being traditional, is a key component of every instructional program. Critics however, fault traditional testing methods with failing to tap the students' full array of abilities, raising serious concerns about traditional kinds of tests.

Psychologically speaking, the test raises the students' anxiety. It is, for this reason, called the 'necessary evil' and therefore, adjustment in approaches to the language assessment has been called for, snaking the way to shift from psychometric to alternative approaches .To this end, educational reforms are seeking to reframe teaching, learning and to reshape the trend of assessment for one that is supportive to learning and teaching alike (Shâaban, 2005). Consequently, the field of evaluation in the language classroom has witnessed a movement away from strictly summative testing tools to a range of procedures for alternative assessment. Admittedly, traditional tests offer students a 50% chance of getting the answer correct, they are strongly criticized as being 'one - shot', norm-referenced and speed–based (Hamayan, 1995). Furthermore, keystone testing fails to provide information about students' motivation, interests and learning strategies as it targets measurement only. According to Black & William (1998), at the educational level, methodology of the teacher in the classroom is affected as various kinds of exam practices are taken up at the expense of

didactic activities which lead students to adopt surface methods of learning rather than profound ones.

Concerning its terminology, two main alternative words refer to alternative assessment which are performance and authentic assessment. Alternative assessment is based on the assumption that "there is a much wider spectrum of student performance that can be displayed than that limited by short-answer standardized tests" (Callison,1998, p.1) . Clearly, shifting from the traditional way of testing to the modern ongoing assessment is targeting a personalized learning that requires new forms of formative and summative assessments.

During the past two decades, alternative assessment has gained considerable momentum as a pedagogy that is experiencing a sharp dividing line between formative and summative assessments; 'assessment for learning' and 'assessment of learning'. Some scholars describe 'assessment for learning 'as one of the main challenges of blended learning which generates a transparent feedback through more responsibility and autonomy from the part of the learners who are " […..] predominantly passive receptors in the testing process, have rarely had their voices and opinions taken into account in test development "(Broukhart, 2015, p.70). The fact of which was to lead practitioners and researchers in the field of language teaching to seek to overcome the limitations of the summative 'one - shot' assessment framework to find a new multi-agent integrated teaching and assessment framework through alternative assessment theories that strongly correlate to the students' social learning ones (McTighe& Ferrara, 1998).
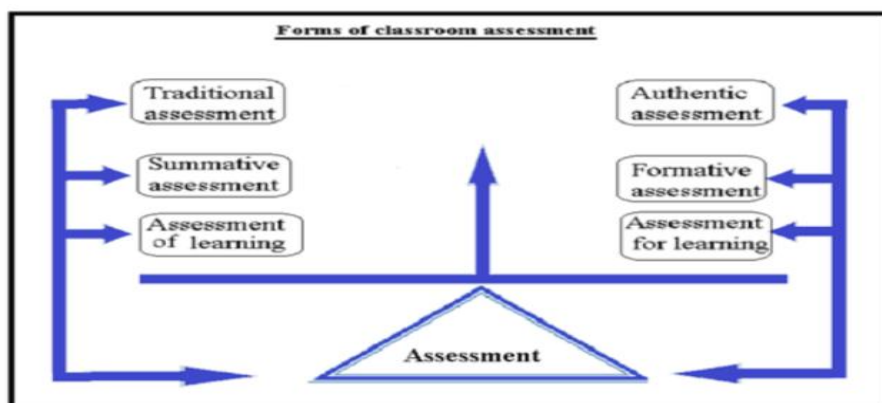

Figure.1. The Complex Interconnections between Different Assessment Facets.
(Kerma, M, 2019, p.31)

It is worth mentioning here that formative assessment forms an art that many educational systems disseminated via alternative assessment tools, principles underlying it, as well as it various methods that are discussed in what follows.

3.2. Common Methods of Alternative Assessment:

As many educators agree, the most popular examples of alternative assessment methods are the following:

3.2.1. Self Assessment:

Self assessment is a key element to achieving the development of skills and abilities needed by students to face the challenges of real life and the massively globalized world (O'Malley & Pierce, 1996). They regard that without self - evaluation and reflection from the part of the learner, students cannot take responsibility to see language learning as a process.

Likewise, according to Tierney et al (1991), such method to alternative assessment is useful for evaluating the processes learners use to complete a particular task in which they feel involvement in evaluating themselves. By doing so, EFL students tend to feel positive towards learning .In the same vein, Black & William (1998, p. 26) contend that "self - assessment is a sine - qua non for effective learning".

3.2.2. Peer Assessment:

Peer assessment is another method to alternative assessment, but to a great account similar to self-assessment as within the two responsibility of evaluation is placed on the learner (Black & Harrison, 2001). Axiomatically, learning is by nature, a social activity and the students in the classroom form the small society that is managed by the teacher; effective peer and group participation in class then, facilitates learning.

3.2.3. Performance Assessment:

It refers to the process in which students demonstrate their ability or knowledge through activities that are often direct and active (Marzano et al, 1993). Because of that, educators think that there should be a variety of performance assessment tasks granting students the opportunity to choose ones that suit them better. In describing such performance activities, Shepard (1989) highlights that "they are well united to assuring application of content-specific knowledge, integration of knowledge across subject areas and lifelong learning" (as cited in McTighe and Ferrara, 1998, p. 8).

Educationists claim that learners are supposed to perform better on an assignment that they are completing to assess their own knowledge of a given subject area in comparison to the time they are being tested and graded by a test or an exam, the so-called, "the payment by marks". With the use of assessment, that is commonly referred as, continuous assessment, assessment for learning, performance assessment, authentic assessment, and formative assessment, learners often do not realize or rather feel that they are being assessed, which lessens their anxiety and provides a more accurate measurement of the learning achievements.

Figure.2. below provides a description to the basic steps to be undertaken in formative assessment. It shows the fundamental components that are required for a successful formative assessment in the ELT classroom. It outlines the key factors which bring about active learning and drive all learners to be active and dependent participants in the construction of their own learning.
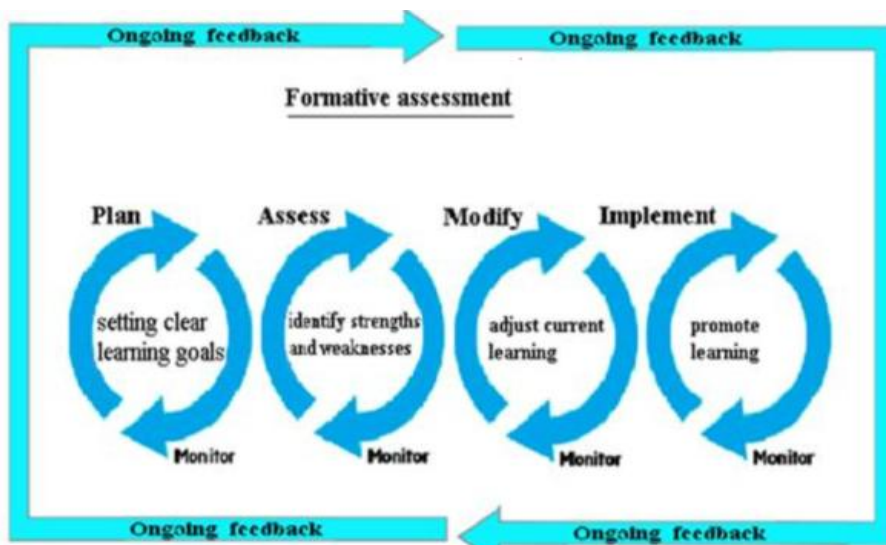

Figure.2. Basic Steps to Be Undertaken in Formative Assessment (Kerma, M, 2019, p. 38)

4. Results:

4.1. The Participants:

Attempts to select the participants were made on the basis of their qualifications, overall teaching experiences, age, and gender to ensure a

broad range of perspectives to be sought about their practice to assessment. The researcher tended to take two teachers per school in ten schools were randomly chosen. The researcher gained the occasion of a seminar for ELT teachers to realize the sampling, it was an occasion for providing any clarifications for the teachers. Some teachers refused to collaborate and the researcher couldn't force them to do, the total number of informants responding to the questionnaire then was 41, although 50 questionnaires were administered and distributed.

As an opening step, the respondents are asked about their gender. Here is an exhibition to the sampling population that was not planned by the researcher, but occurred on random.
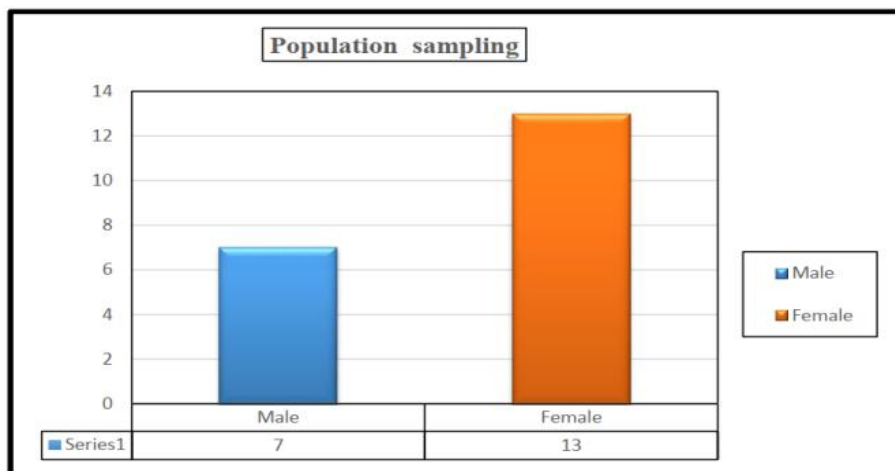

Figure3.Participants'Gender

4.2. Discussion of the Main Results:

In what follows, the questionnaire findings are discussed:

-    **Item One**: How many years have you been teaching English?
            Table.1. Teaching experience of the informants**.**

Teaching Experience	Number	Rate
04 moths	01	2.43 %

01 year	01	2.43 %
02 years	03	7.43 %
03 years	03	7.43 %
04 years	01	2.43 %
06 years	02	4.87 %
08 years	03	7.43 %
09 years	03	7.43 %
10 years	05	12.19 %
15 years	02	4.87 %
18 years	02	4.87 %
20 years	03	7.43 %
22 years	04	9.75 %
23 years	04	9.75 %
24 years	02	4.87 %
25 years	02	4.87 %

It is very necessary to consider the teaching experience of the informants to find out whether the latter has an effect on the teachers' practice to assessment. The results show that more than (50.46%) of the informants were of a considerable and mature experience in their teaching career, and few only were novice. That was a positive point for the researcher, to facilitate answering the next questions.

- **Item Two**: Did you receive any training in the English language education?

Suggestions	Number	Rate
Yes	10	24.39%
No	31	75.6%

Table 2.Teacher training

Half of the informants' number who were mature, received no training, while (24.39 %), who were novice, said that they received an educational training, but it was not in the core of the English language teaching.

-   **Item Three**: To what extent do you welcome new instructional strategies in your classrooms?

Suggestions	Number	Rate
Very Receptive	02	4.87%
Somewhat Receptive	25	60.97%
Not Sure	07	17.7%
Unreceptive	07	17.7 %

Table. 3. Teacher receptiveness to innovation

The majority of them (60.97%) slightly welcomed instructional innovations, equal rates stood for not doing and unsure about that, while very few of the informants (4.87%) did.

-   **Item four**: How familiar are you with the use of assessment?
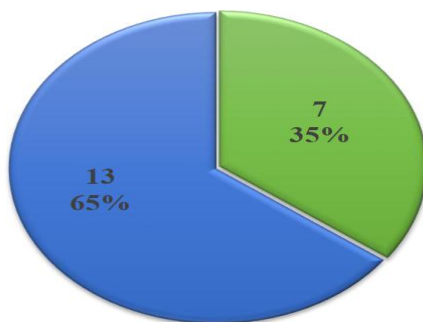
Pie-chart 1. Teacher familiarity with assessment

The large majority of the informants that is estimated by (65%) declared their unfamiliarity with assessment .Whereas, the remaining rate, estimated by (35 %) of them stood for slight familiar.

- **Item Five:** Through assessment, EFL teachers can evaluate the learning outcomes which cannot be evaluated with traditional paper - and -pencil tests.

Through these findings, the target is measuring the teachers' knowledge about the various types of tasks that all together work under the concept of   alternative assessment.
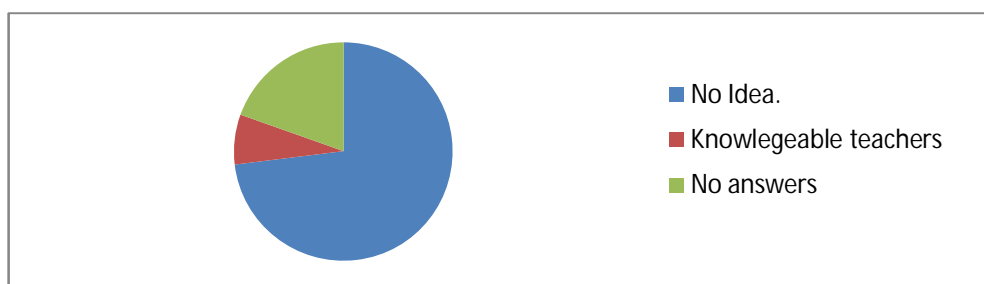
Pi-chart.2. Teachers' knowledge of the types of alternative assessment tasks

The results demonstrate a negative attitude towards using the assessment as an alternative to keystone testing, and the large majority of them doubted about that. While few participants believed in assessment as a better alternative to measure the learning achievements in the ELT classroom.

- **Item Six**: How often do you rely on continuous assessment tasks to check your learner's learning progress?

The table below addresses the frequency of the ELT teachers' reliance on assessment to check the learning achievement as there are some obstacles that hinder its frequency of use and practicality in the Algerian EFL classroom.

Suggestions	Number	Rate
Always	03	07.43%
Sometimes	13	31.7%
Rarely	25	60.97%

Never	00	00%

**Table.4.** The frequency of classroom practice to alternative assessment

A percentage of (60.97%) from the respondents claimed that they never tended to rely on continuous assessment tasks to check their learner's learning progress; while the remaining percentage of the participants said they rarely did. The results are not surprising as the respondents have already declared their unfamiliarity with assessment.

-Item Seven: How can assessment tasks help you design remedial work?

Due to the findings in item six, the space devoted for the seventh question that stands for planning remedial work on the basis of classroom assessment feedback was lest a blank.

-Item eight: Are your learners becoming more motivated by working in group during assessment sessions?

The following pie - chart reflects the respondents' opinion about using projects for an active learning.
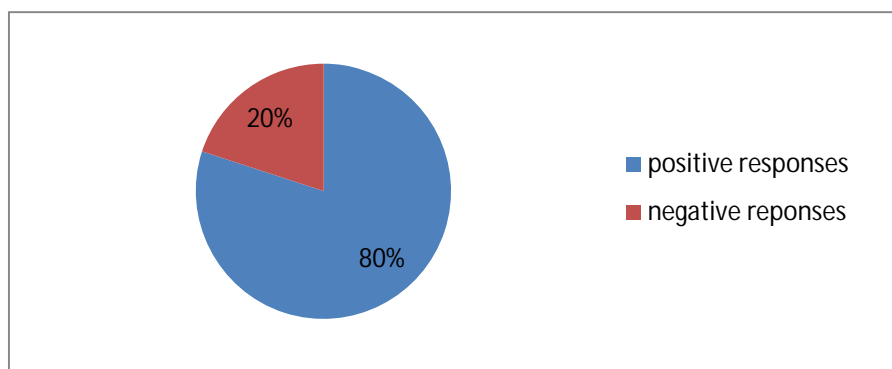
Pie -chart.3.Motivation in assessment

As can be shown through the pi-chart, nearly all of the participants we addressed (80.48%) provided positive responses saying that by working in groups the learners become competitive and hence, more eager to learn. whereas a minority of (19.51%) of the informants negatively responded to the question; for them, learners do not collaborate when working in group and if they do, it is not a purely personal work but rather copied.

-Item Nine: To what extent are these aspects of project-based assessment important for you?

The table below overviews the teachers' behaviors towards the different aspects related to assessment.

Aspects	NUMBERS				RATES		
	VI	I	NRI	NI	(%)		
- Supporting group work -Real world topics(authenticity) -Involving the learns in research process - Motivating the learners. -Enhancing the use of different language skills - Assessment rather than keystone testing. - self confidence for speaking in public -Building general knowledge -Enhancing autonomous and independent learning.							

Table.5.Teachers' attitudes towards aspects of project - based assessment

To unveil the informants' attitudes towards the degree of importance of assessment tasks , different aspects were ranked from 'very important', 'important' ,'not really important' to 'not important' in the format of a likert - scale .assessment .Therefore , the findings reveal that the respondents agreed on the fact that motivating the learners and encouraging autonomous learning come first in the scale of importance , followed by the topic's authenticity and practising assessment that is less daunting in comparison to keystone paper-and-pencil tests in the view of (97,56) of them.

-Item Ten: According to you, what must be done, to achieve a better practicality of assessment in the Algerian ELT classroom?

Regarding the findings of the last open - ended question that sought to grasp solutions to adjust the process of assessment, all of the participants felt the need to a meaningful, special and adequate training in the English language education that would help to enlarge their knowledge about assessment to adjust their teaching practices. Additionally, all of them shared the view the assessment is time consuming and reshaping, the syllabus would help a lot to its practice. A considerable high rate of the

respondents (80, 54%) went beyond that, to suggest that the provision of necessary assets to launch a practical e-learning through special platforms for teachers as well as students would save a lot of efforts and time to be so fruitful in assessing the learners' achievements continuously. To sum, analyzing the teachers' questionnaire has revealed many facts on their knowledge about and attitudes towards assessment, their perception of new instructional strategies and more precisely their assumptions and practices so far as alternative assessment is concerned. Admittedly, it is worth mentioning that most of the participants were mindful about the usefulness of assessment strategies to language evaluation for a litany of reasons. The way it is used by them however seemed to be foggy as the findings revealed. Hence, the results were not really favorable for excessive successful assessment practice.

4.3. Pedagogical Implications:

In this article, the literature on the main elements related to alternative assessment were reviewed in education settings. Through its content, we attempted to highlight how there has been a shift from traditional assessment techniques to alternative ones which are stressing and seeking the students' performance, and that are formative rather than summative. Through the practical part which is the core of our research work, several significant findings were revealed, the researcher concluded them in three main head one. Firstly, the teachers' knowledge of assessment was too narrow and thus needed to be raised due to some factors. Four main ones of them are obvious, the teachers' university courses, amongst which mine, did not include assessment. Worse than that neither as in-service teachers, they received a training courses in assessment, nor they received pedagogical support and resources on the way to process it. Secondly, assessment occupies a very tiny space in the school syllabus, the result then, is a weak frequency of its use. Thirdly, their overcrowded classrooms represent a direct cause that hinders the practice of assessment which requires 'snapshots' for every single student. Fourthly, most of the informants believed that assessment is challenging on the scale of teachers as well as students' subjectivity. All that made assessment the bugbear for EFL teachers.

As suggested solutions, teachers believed that assessment strategies are of an utmost benefit but they were unable to show their full potential, the provision of enough knowledge about it through meaningful training and rich pedagogical support would solve the problem. That entails the development of using assessment criteria for implementing them more

frequently and whenever learning takes place. Decreasing the number of learners should be considered adding to that thinking seriously and efficiently in opening the wide gate for technology in the Algerian ELT classroom to realize e-learning and e-assessment that would solve a lot of matters. In short, the trend of assessment is significant as it is intended to interpret the concept of learner–centeredness in a nutshell. With more understanding and knowledge to it, valuable opportunities to enrich the notion learning by doing would be provided.

5. Conclusion:

In down to earth terms, alternative assessment has a worldwide acknowledged effect in the educational areas for all concerns, teachers, learners, policy makers, and instructional materials. Due to that, the present research paper has been guided with the endeavor to investigate the EFL teachers' knowledge about and acquaintance with alternative assessment that is competency-based. The outcomes were highly reflecting the teachers' ignorance to the basic principles of assessment, and through this investigation, we could confirm the reality that the current trend of alternative assessment which is performance-oriented represents a serious challenge to secondary school EFL teachers in Algeria. This study, hereby, grants a research platform from which a large scale one can be explored in the field of educational evaluation mainly in the language classroom.

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