Revue de Traduction et Langues Volume 18 Numéro 01/2019, pp. 115-128
Journal of Translation and Languages **مجلة الترجمة واللغات**
ISSN (Print): 1112-3974 **EISSN (Online): 2600-6235**

Towards a Dynamic Approach to Assessing Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Higher Education

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To cite this paper:
Benmouhoub, L. & Boukhedimi, Y. (2019). Towards a Dynamic Approach to Assessing Students' Critical Thinking Skills in Higher Education. *Revue Traduction et Langues 18(2),* 115-128.

Received: 12/10/2018; **Accepted**: 31/07/2019, **Published:** 31/08/ 2019

Abstract: *The present article probes the perceptions of first year English degree students towards their teachers' assessment. University teachers' literacy and attitudes towards dynamic assessment in EFL classes are also investigated. The aim is to experience a new approach to assessing students' critical thinking skills by making a change in assessment practices in higher education. To reach this aim, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were adopted. The results revealed the positive and negative perceptions of students towards their teachers' assessment as well as their (i.e. students) lack of critical thinking skills in the English language. The results also demonstrated the positive attitudes of teachers towards the use of dynamic assessment in EFL classes.*
Key words: *Assessment, critical thinking, dynamic assessment, Higher education, LMD system, the English language.*
Résumé : *Le présent article vise les perceptions des étudiants de première année licence concernant l'évaluation adoptée par leurs enseignants. La connaissance et les attitudes de ces derniers à l'égard de l'évaluation dynamique dans les classes d'EFL sont également étudiées. L'objectif est d'expérimenter une nouvelle approche d'évaluation des capacités de réflexion critique des étudiants en modifiant les pratiques d'évaluation au niveau de l'enseignement supérieur. De ce fait, un questionnaire et un entretien semi-structuré ont été utilisés. Les résultats ont révélé les perceptions positives et négatives des étudiants vis-à-vis de l'évaluation adoptée par leurs enseignants ainsi une faible capacité de penser de manière critique en langue Anglaise. En outre, les résultats ont indiqué les attitudes positives des enseignants face à l'utilisation de l'évaluation dynamique dans les classes d'EFL.*
Mots clés : *Enseignement supérieur, évaluation, évaluation dynamique, pensée critique, langue anglaise, système LMD.*

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1. Introduction

The goal of teaching and learning in higher education is required to develop critical thinkers and reflective citizens. Students are expected, however, to acquire the necessary skills that will help them question the things around them and act critically in their academic and professional career. This will help them to be with the same path of the global world's needs and requirements. Among the skills that need to be developed at tertiary education is critical thinking. This concept is given various explanations by specialists such as philosophers, psychologists, and scholars in the field of Applied Linguistics and TEFL. This makes it a complex skill to define and teach since there is still a debate on whether critical thinking can be promoted in a culture where it is rarely practised socially. However, it is important to note that assessment of students' critical thinking skills does not appear to have gained much concern in the literature, specifically at the level of the Algerian context. For this reason, the authors of the present research were interested in examining the issue of assessment at the department of English,

University of Algiers 2 Abou Kacem Saad Allah (Algeria).

In so doing, a mixed-methods approach that consists of a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview was adopted. A primary aim is to explore the perceptions of first year English degree students towards their teachers' assessment, and the way they design tests, along with the purpose/s for assessment. We were interested to know whether teachers' assessment targets students' critical thinking or the retention of the content of the course. This has led us to elicit students' views on current assessment procedures on the one hand, and explore teachers' literacy and attitudes towards dynamic assessment on the other. In this connection, a selected account of critical thinking is provided, including a synthesis of the three types of assessment: Static, formative and dynamic assessment, as well as an account of the issues and criteria for good assessment practices in higher education.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of critical thinking

Critical thinking (henceforth, CT) is a concept that has been given a myriad of definitions across the world. The term comes from the Greek word 'Kriticos' and Latin 'Criticus' which means to discern or separate (Cooper & Patton, 1946). According to Houston (2011), the term was originally a subfield of philosophy and later it extended to other disciplines such as psychology and education. Houston (op. cit.) sees it as the discipline of thought and the validity of arguments. In 1960s, CT was defined in terms of classification, comparison and contrast strategies, and then in 1980s, it included problem-solving situations and transfer skills (Ameziane, 2016). In addition, other researchers like Moon (2008) conceive the term as the construction of more challenging and complex ideas. Nunez, Medina and Cubides (2018: 146) have suggested a recent definition to this term. For these authors, CT 'is the constant and never-ending interactive process of observing, analysing, reflecting and evaluating a reality'. This might mean that CT does not develop at the individual level only, but with the assistance of other members of the community of practice.

In sum, CT is not just about giving arguments to defend one's stance, but one needs to convince the other and help him/her understand why a given idea is crucial and the other not. According to El Ouchdi-Mirali (2015: 102), 'reaching a high level of thinking

entails a successful learning process'. For this to happen, many qualities need to be acquired such as: Respect, politeness and tolerance of uncertainty. Awareness of these aspects makes our ideas more cogent and academic, and this of course reflects the quality of a powerful education. In order to enhance the latter (i.e., a powerful education) at tertiary level, we need to make critical thinking as the cornerstone b searching for modern and dynamic methods of assessment especially that English is approached a the 'economics of language' nowadays (Beddiaf & Bensafi, 2018: 169).

2.2. Overview of assessment

2.2.1. Static assessment

In the past decades, the type of assessment that used to be adopted is the static assessment (Henceforth, SA). Elliott et al. (2010: 220) defined the term as 'the traditional approach to testing whereby the tester assumes a neutral stance'. In other words, no change occurs in the testee's performance. For Jensen (1980), business, schools and the military adopted this type of assessment during the Second World War to orient people towards special school programs and jobs. Yet, a significant number of teachers expressed their discontent about such tests because they lack a description of the person's problem-solving abilities and have little usefulness in educational planning as reported by Feuerstein et al. (1979). Similarly, Agheshteh (2015) maintained that traditional assessment procedures rely on psychometric principles that use consistent scores across different administrations. Other researchers such as Nazari and Mansouri (2014) stated that the findings of SA could only demonstrate the already existent capacities of the student. From the aforementioned assumptions, it seems that SA may not be the appropriate type of assessment in tertiary education. Teachers need to use other types of assessment that boost students' confidence, CT, creativity and pragmatic competence.

2.2.2. Formative assessment

In contrast to SA, formative assessment (henceforth, FA) provides more feedback about students' learning. In his book, Alastair (2008) made a comparison between formative feedback **(FF) and** (**FA)**. According to him, FA acts as a support and construction for FF. The specific formative activities he mentioned include practical exercises, tutorials, drafts of assessment, project supervisions, group discussions and group work, students' demonstration and presentations, portfolios, reflective log books, and diagnostic interviews as well as tests. All these activities might lead to students' cognitive growth and autonomy. Other scholars such as Moss and Brookhart (2009) explain that FA is an ongoing learning process that is active, intentional, and systematic. They added that their core aspect is that it focalises on change in terms of quality and quantity of teacher-student interaction. They chime with Alastair (2008), and for them feedback is concerned with teachers' reaction to students' works which can be written, oral or in a form of a demonstration. On the contrary, Yorke (2003) points out that FA is not necessarily a continuous process; yet, it can be occasional.

Other prominent researchers like Black and Wiliam (1998: 2) define FA as 'all those activities undertaken by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged'. It seems, therefore, that assessment needs to be an interactive

work between teachers and their students to promote both the teaching and the learning quality at tertiary education. More crucially, what is interesting in their claim (i.e., Black and William) is that conventions are developed after the changes made between teachers and students in class. For example, a curriculum is formative if its aim is to develop it; that is to say, to make this curriculum purposeful and in accordance with the students and society's needs (Wiliam, 2006). Wiliam and Thompson (2007) further claimed that FA is not determined by the frequent use of tests, but by the objective of undertaking them in the classroom.

Three essential components of FA are worth emphasising; feed-up, feedback, and feed-forward (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Feed-up is concerned with the purpose of undertaking the task; it is crucial for students to know why they are being assessed in order to prepare themselves psychologically for the task. They need also to have feedback on their performance to be on track, and finally feed-forward means the improvement of students' performance.

2.2.3. Dynamic assessment

Dynamic assessment (henceforth, DA) is the alternative approach suggested in the present article to promote EFL students' critical thinking skills. According to Lantolf and Poehner (2004, 2010), DA is conceptualised as the combination of both assessment and instruction. As for its origin, they indicate that Alexander Romanovich Luria is the one who coined the term because it had never been used by Vygotsky as he died at an early stage. This author (i.e., Luria) introduced it within Vygotsky's approach. Schneider and Ganschow (2000) conceive DA as a continuous diagnostic approach that requires the teacher and student to be in a continuous assessment cycle. This is what makes it different from FA as the latter has gained little theoretical considerations in the literature. Zeidner (2001) gives an important definition to DA. To this scholar:

> DA refers to an assessment of thinking, perception, learning and problem-solving by an active teaching process aimed at modifying cognitive functioning. The major idea of DA is to observe and measure change criteria as predictors of future learning (Zeidner, 2001: 451).

Indeed, in higher education, an assessment of students' productivity and creativity should be the primary focus in order to enhance learner centeredness and action research. Equally important is Haywood and Lidz's idea (2007) that DA can be used in different disciplines such as psychology, neuropsychology and education. Yet, a degree of professionalism is highly required to successfully implement it in foreign language settings.

According to Hatton (1990), the reason that pushed researchers like Feuerstein and associates to shift to DA was the various criticisms that were addressed to mental testing like the phenomenon of bias. In a similar vein, Fullan (2006) criticised the traditional approaches of assessment, which, according to him, are not based on comprehensive theories of action, as their users are unaware about the things happening in classrooms and school cultures. Because of so much criticism, new approaches related to DA have been developed to overcome the gaps of the traditional tests, which did not aim at boosting

students' autonomy and motivation. Among other authors who gave a clear description of DA is Lidz (1991). This scholar defines it as an active and interactive learning process that focuses on student's modifiability.

One of the core concepts of DA is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978: 86) defines it as the 'distance between actual development as determined by independent problem-solving and the potential development as determined through problem-solving under the adult guidance'. This hints at the idea that students promote their CT through the participation with the members of the community of practice. Another important element to DA is the approach developed by Reuven Feuerstein, which is called **'Mediated Learning Experience' (MLE)**. Kao (2014) noted that MLE refers to the degree of interaction between the person and his/her environment. In other words, students acquire knowledge and develop their mental skills thanks to the experiences they go through when participating with the members of their society. Moreover, within DA, we distinguish two types of approaches: Interventionist and interactionist (Duvall, 2008; Poehner, 2008; Thouësny, 2010; Birjandi & Sarem, 2012). The interventionist approach is based on psychometric methods of assessment and mediation and can be implemented to large-scale assessment. Whereas, the interactionist approach is flexible and sensitive to ZPD, and more appropriate to small-scale assessment. The former is used mostly in writing and the latter in speaking.

2.3. Issues and criteria for good assessment practices in higher education

Successful education requires effective assessment practices. Nevertheless, many issues are always affecting both the students' achievement and teachers' professional development. Evidence from research suggests that the degree of disagreement on language learning purposes, lack of knowledge and understanding of assessment hinders the process of decision-making concerning the choice of assessment types that will be used in higher education (Green, 2014). Other problems that influence the assessment practices include management rules and requirements, parental anxieties, and scoring pressures (Lantolf, & Poehner, 2004). In addition, Quinn (2015: 2) stated that, 'not all lecturers have opportunities to think differently or deeply about the potential of assessment to contribute meaningfully to students' learning on their courses and beyond their courses'. Indeed, the majority of teachers' favour traditional assessment, as it is less demanding and time consuming. This is confirmed by Boud (2007) who maintained that the dominant view of assessment in higher education is that students are seen as passive recipients of knowledge who adhere to the rules assigned to them.

Some comprehensible criteria for good assessment are worth mentioning. For instance, Wiliam (2006) insisted on clarity and specification of assessment, which have to be in harmony with the learning outcomes. Lenski, et al. (2006) spoke of assessment literacy, which is an essential quality that determines the qualification of the teacher in higher education. In our beliefs, assessment literacy is not only attributed to teachers, but students too when the classroom learning is an action-interactive process. Other criteria like transparency, professionalism and cooperation between teachers and administrators are equally important. Overall, assessment reveals to be an important, but a complex enough process for both university teachers and students. For its efficient applicability, more focus on how, when and why to implement it, is highly required.

3. Methodology

3.1. Context

This study tackles the perceptions of first year degree students towards their teachers' assessment practices, as well as the teachers' assessment literacy and their attitudes towards the use of DA in EFL classes. The study took place during the academic year (2017-2018), at the University of Algiers 2 Abou Kacem Saad Allah (Algeria). The aim is to suggest a new approach to assessing students' critical thinking skills by making a change in the assessment practices at the level of higher education.

The main question of the present paper is stated below:

- Does EFL teachers' assessment contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills?

The main question is subdivided into three sub-questions:

Sub-question 1: What are the perceptions of first year degree students towards their teachers' assessment?

Sub-question 2: Are first year degree students able to think critically in the English language?

Sub-question 3: Are EFL teachers familiar with DA? If yes, what are their attitudes towards its use in EFL classes?

3.2. Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 200 first year degree students and 10 teachers, at the department of English, University of Abou Kacem Saadellah-Algiers 2 (Algeria). It is essential to mention that the interview was addressed to 25 teachers, but only 10 accepted to sit for it. Information about the participants' profiles appears in Tables: 1, 2 and 3

Options	N/200	%
a- (17-20)	153	76.5
b- (20-24)	40	20
c- (25-29)	4	2
d- (34-52)	4	2

Table 1. Students' Age

Options	N/200	%
a. Males	32	16
b. Females	164	82
No Answer	4	2

Table 2. Students' Gender

Participants	Gender	Experiences in Teaching	Academic Qualifications	Speciality
T 1	Female	3 Years	Master (Currently A doctoral student)	Literature and Civilisation
T2	Female	4 Years	MAB	Linguistics
T3	Male	One Year	MAB	Civilisation
T4	Female	8 Years	MAB	Linguistics
T5	Female	11 Years	MCB	Linguistics and Didactics
T6	Male	7 Years	MCB	Literature and civilisation
T7	Female	18 Years	MAA	Linguistics
T8	Female	10 Years	MCB	Literature and Civilisation
T9	Male	4 Years	MAB	American Civilisation
T 10	Female	17 Years	MCB	Linguistics

Table 3. Teachers' Profile

3.3. Instruments and research design

The authors of this article followed a mixed-methods approach that included both quantitative and qualitative methods. To this end, a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview were used as tools for data collection. The questionnaire was handed to students, whereas the semi-structured interview targeted the teachers, and it was conducted face to face by using both note taking and a tape recorder because not all the participants accepted to be recorded. As for the research design, an exploratory case study had been adopted to go hand in hand with the nature and purposes of this study. The philosophical assumption underpinning this research stemmed from an advocacy/participatory knowledge because the aim is to bring about change and innovation in assessment practices by raising the participants' awareness of the importance of shifting from traditional assessment approaches to more dynamic, creative and interactive ones. According to Creswell (2007: 21), 'the basic tenet of this worldview is that research should contain an action agenda for reform'. This is the main goal of this study. To facilitate the analysis of the questionnaire and interview data, the authors relied on descriptive statistics, synthesis and evaluation.

4. Results and Discussion

Q 1. What are the perceptions of first year degree students towards their teachers' assessment?

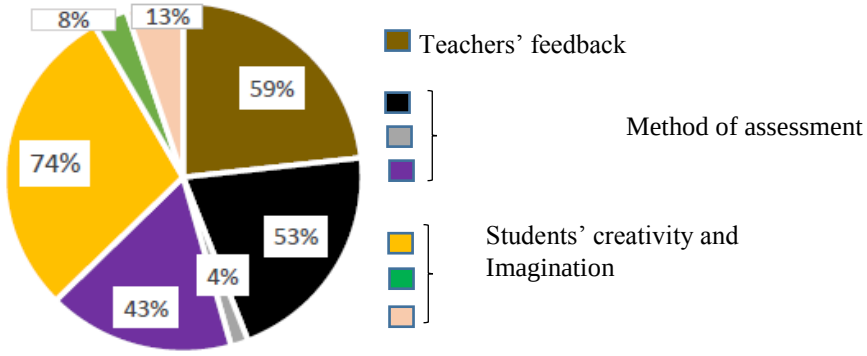


Figure 1. Students' Perceptions of Their Teachers' Assessment

The results of the questionnaire **(See Figure 1)** showed that first year degree students are not all satisfied with their teachers' assessment. The majority (59%) said that they do not all the time learn from their teachers' feedback, but only occasionally. In addition, a high proportion of students (53%) stated that some of their teachers adopt a traditional method of assessment; others (4%) announced that all their teachers assess them in a traditional way (i.e. during tests and exams only). 43% of the respondents declared that some of their teachers use a mixture of traditional and a modern assessment practice. In fact, the method of assessment a teacher adopts depends on his/her belief towards teaching and learning. Also, motivation and perseverance are crucial in order to make changes and come up with innovative and updated types of assessment, by using creative and effective strategies and techniques to harness teachers' assessment practices.

When asked whether their teachers' assessment helps them develop their creativity and imagination, the respondents (74%) answered that only some of their teachers' assessment assisted them in achieving that goal. Only 8% of the respondents mentioned that all their teachers' assessment boosts their creativity and imagination. Surprisingly, 13% of them reported that none of their teachers' assessment encourages their creativity and imagination. A possible explanation to this issue can be related to the quality of questions as most of them target students' retention of the content being taught, which encourages rote learning rather than meaningful and active research. When students mistakenly believe that their creativity is less important than their ability of repeating the content they have been taught, they (students) will base their answers in exams or tests on what their teacher wants them to write or say. To confirm our statement, Struyven et al. (2005) declared that students' perceptions of assessment have a greater influence on their approaches to learning and studying.

Q 2. Are first year degree students able to think critically in the English language?
To this question, the result of the questionnaire revealed students' low ability to think critically in the English language. An illustration is shown in Figures: 2 and 3

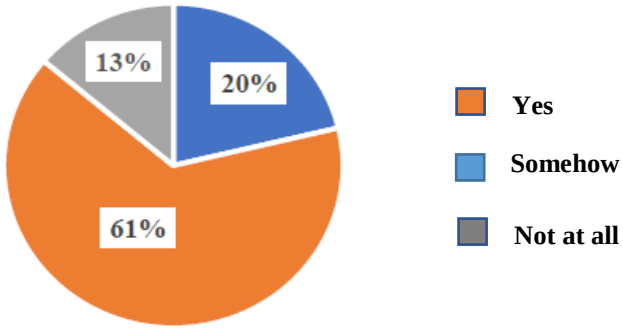


Figure 2. Students' Ability to Evaluate Their Teacher/Classmates' Ideas

The students who answered **'yes and somehow' (See Figure 2)** argued that CT helps them to understand better and share ideas with others since each one of them has a different idea and opinion, which leads to debates. According to them, people cannot be always right, so comparing others' ideas and evaluating them is very important. Some students pointed out that, as they are students at university, it is their right to do that in order to learn from others, exchange meaning and evaluate their ideas. However, the students who said **'not at all'** gave the following arguments:

- 'Because I'm not in the level that permits me to evaluate.'
- 'I'm not able to evaluate.'
- 'Because the majority of people dislike critics.'
- 'Because I'm always getting distracted.'
- 'It's not my duty to do it.'
- 'It's not interesting.'
- 'Because in class, you may have classmates that try to put you down.'

Additionally, the majority of students (54%) reported their difficulty to summarise a text or speech and then make an analysis of it. However, most of them (59%) listen to their peers when these latter express their opinion in the classroom. When it comes to the acceptance of opinions, 45% of respondents admitted that they do accept opinions from both their teacher and classmates **(See Figure 3)**.

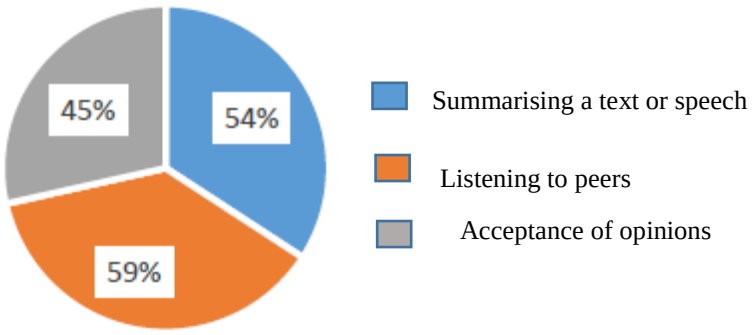


Figure 3. Students' Ability to Summarise a Text/Speech, Listen

toPeers and Accept Opinions

The students' justifications regarding their acceptance of opinions are displayed below:

- 'People have different minds, different thoughts, that lead them to get different ideas.'
- 'It's so important to accept others' opinion.'
- 'Yes I listen to them because I like to learn from others' ideas and I always accept an opinion that contradicts to mine because it will create a debate and an exchange of information.'
- 'Yes, because everybody has the right to tell his opinion.'
- 'We need to accept others' opinion because it's a way to learn about other things and get to see them in a different perspective maybe.'

Q 3. Are EFL teachers familiar with dynamic assessment? If yes, what are their attitudes towards its use in EFL classes?

The results of the semi-structured interview revealed that teachers' perceptions towards teaching are not in harmony with their assessment practices. The majority of the respondents seem to assess their students only at the end of each term **(T2, T4, T6, T7, T9)**, whereas others continuously **(T5, T8, T10)** by relying on group work, students' homework, giving/asking for feedback during the classroom to check students' understanding. One teacher **(T1)** admitted that the choice of assessment type depends on the will of students if they like to be assessed continuously or at the end of each term. She added that most of her students are lazy and not interactive in the classroom. **T3** changed from traditional assessment (in the first semester) to continuous assessment (in the second semester) because for him, ongoing assessment is more beneficial and constructive. Below are some of the objectives of assessment that have been listed by the interviewees:

- 'Because I believe that giving assessment and feedback is the most important way of learning, and written feedback is very important **(T1)**.'
- 'To grade and rank students; it is purely administrative, to have an idea of my students, to know whether what they have been taught was well learned or not, and whether the idea is well transmitted or not **(T2)**.'
- 'I want them whatever the objective of the module, to make sure they acquired the elements of the course **(T3)**.'

Concerning the way our interviewees design mid/end-term tests and exams, the results revealed convergent answers. For example, **T1** said that she very often tries to ask one question of the main topic which is general and then asks students to write an essay and structure it according to the thesis statement (in the module of literature). For reading and writing, she stated that she relies on an already designed material from Cambridge or Oxford reading and writing references. **T2**, **T3** and **T4** reported that the design of mid/end term test or exam depends on objectives, which are stated in the syllabus. **T4** further adds that, in the design, she needs to respect what was taught; sometimes she relies on gap

filling or direct questions (in linguistics and phonetics) to see the content, and sometimes she asks her students to write a paragraph to assess the mastery of the language.

Three respondents **(T5, T9, T10)** design tests and exams by asking students to synthesise the lesson (summarising, analysing and then providing examples). **T5** pinpointed that she tries to apply the aspects learned during the process of conducting her research **(T5)** on metacognition and learning strategies. Similarly, **T9** tries also to apply the knowledge he gained abroad in his profession. Because **T8** teaches CT, she designs test/exam based on text analysis. **T6** said in the test, he gives students a quiz, whereas in the exam, he just reported that it is formal but did not give further explanation. **T7**answered that she includes questions in which she asks students to apply the grammatical structures in context.

When it comes to answering whether teachers are familiar with DA, the results of the semi-structured interview demonstrated that only two teachers know the meaning of the term (**T2, T10)**, whereas others did not **(T1, T3, T4, T5, T6, T7, T8, T9)**. When informed about DA procedure/scheme, all the interviewees expressed a positive attitude towards its implementation in foreign language settings provided they have smaller groups and time.

What is surprising is the paradox between teachers' perception towards teaching and their assessment practices. The majority believe that teaching is an active process and interactive, but most of them assess their students at the end of each term and the objective is to check their understanding of the content rather than promote students' CT and developmental growth. Semmoud and Azzouz (2012) state that, 'teachers also insist on a mismatch between modern ELT approaches and the language situation that prevails in the EFL context' (p. 169). This is a problem that needs further investigations in order to understand the reasons of the paradox between teaching approaches and current assessment practices in Algerian universities.

Rationally, teachers' conception about the method of teaching and assessment has an important role in shaping their profiles as teachers at university. What is noticeable in our interviewees' responses is that the majority have some knowledge on both SA and FA but not on the third type, which is DA. This explains the reason behind the lack of studies on DA in the Algerian context. Our research corroborates the study of Kerma and Ouahmiche (2018) who explored the teachers' perceptions of classroom assessment practices in the Algerian primary school. They relied on a survey method involving 156 primary school teachers from 40 schools in Sidi Bel Abbes (Algeria). The results of their research showed that the participants see themselves confident and competent in using traditional assessment methods and techniques (such as multiple choice items, homework, gap filling, true/false, and in-class observation), whereas they seem to be less competent in using dynamic methods of assessment (such as projects, self/peer assessment, group work and students' presentation).

5. Conclusion

This article explored the perceptions of first year English degree students towards their teachers' assessment. It also probed the teachers' literacy and attitudes towards the use of DA in EFL classes. The aim was to have knowledge on the current assessment practices adopted by teachers of English at the University of Algiers 2 Abou Kacem Saad

Allah (Algeria), and whether these assessment practices boost students' critical thinking skills or the retention of the content of the course.

To this end, a significant account of CT and three types of assessment, along with the issues and criteria for good assessment practices in higher education were provided. For instance, CT was conceptualised as the ability to reflect, analyse, synthesise, and evaluate others' ideas. For the types of assessment, three concepts were highlighted such as SA, FA and DA. The first was said to have connection with the traditional approaches of assessment such as having a neutral stance. The second relies on ongoing feedback in order to improve learning and teaching. The third, which is the major focus of the present article, takes mediation as its cornerstone in order to encourage a change in students' learning. Concerning the criteria for effective assessment practices in higher education, three elements were emphasised such as clarity, specification of assessment, and assessment literacy.

The authors of the present article followed a mixed-methods approach involving two tools for data collection. They reached significant and insightful findings, which is that first year degree students demonstrated a lack of critical thinking skills due to the type of assessment practice adopted in higher education, as well as their language incompetence, shyness and fear of evaluation. In addition, the authors concluded their article by showing the paradox between the teachers' teaching approaches and their assessment practices.

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