

## Rethinking English language testing in the post-Covid era: Integrating online testing in EFL classes

اعادة التفكير في تقييم اللغة الانجليزية بعد جائحة الكورونا

Hanane SAIHI

University of Biskra (Algeria) , h.saihi@univ-biskra.dz

Received: 30/05/2022

Accepted: 14/03/2023

Published: 31/03/2023

### ABSTRACT:

The global pandemic impacts the learning process as well as its assessment, for it altered the traditional classroom portrait from face to face to the virtual classroom. This new premise pushed the teachers to rethink how to evaluate their students by keeping their lives safe. In this paper, we sought to uncover the teachers' attitudes toward the online assessment of their students at Biskra University. To achieve this objective, we administered an online mixed questionnaire. The responses showed that the teachers have a positive view towards the use of online assessment if they can overcome obstacles which are mainly related to the lack of knowledge and experience in using IT among both teachers and their students. Moreover, they spotted the light on the problem of internet connection for test-takers living in remote locations. Yet, the respondents who have a negative view justified that online assessment affects the selection of test item type, and this will negatively affect the test validity. The research findings did confirm that there are controversial views among Biskra University teachers towards the adoption of online assessment in the post-pandemic era. This recommends rethinking the position of online assessment and its effectiveness after Covid-19.

**Keywords:** Attitudes, online testing, post-Covid era, rethinking English language teaching

الملخص:

اثرت جائحة الكورونا على التعلم و اختبار المتعلمين. حيث اجبرت القائمين على العملية لتبديل الطريقة التقليدية بالتعليم الافتراضي. هذه الوضعية اجبرت الاساتذة لاعادة التفكير في كيفية اختبار و تقييم الطلبة و ابقاءهم في مأمن عن تداعيات الجائحة. تحاول هذه الدراسة الكشف عن آراء الاساتذة في قسم اللغة و الادب الانجليزي فيما يخص التقييم الافتراضي في ظل جائحة كورونا. من أجل ذلك؛ قمنا برسالهم استبيان الكتروني. كشفت الاجابات عن وجود تضارب الآراء اراء ايجابية في تبني هذه الطريقة في ظل توفر الظروف لذلك. أما الفريق الثاني؛ رفضوا الفكرة نظرا لتأثيرها على اختيار على نوعية الاسئلة و فعالية و مصداقية النتائج المحصل عنها. تضارب آراء قسم اللغة و الادب الانجليزي استوجب التفكير في وضعية و ظروف استعمال التكنولوجيا في تدريس اللغة الانجليزية و ايضا استعمالها في اختبار و تقييم الطلبة. كلمات مفتاحية: آراء، التعلم الافتراضي، مرحلة ما بعد كوفيد 19، اعادة التفكير في تعليم اللغة الانجليزية

### 1- Introduction:

The global pandemic had messed up all the educational programs and institutions all over the world as well as in Algeria. In March 2020, all educational institutions were closed to save Algerian people's lives. This governmental decision had impacted the learning and assessment process and provoked the decision-maker to rethink the learning and assessment process to keep lives safe. Thus, they started seeking an alternative to the traditional face-to-face

- Corresponding author: Hanane SAIHI

doi: 10.34118/ssj.v17i1.3220

<http://journals.lagh-univ.dz/index.php/ssj/article/view/3220>

classroom into a virtual classroom. This prompt decision was a heavy burden for both the teachers and students of Algerian University, especially in terms of the students' assessment and evaluation.

At the Algerian University, and Biskra University as a sample, students were exposed to what is called a blended classroom, so they studied face-to-face and online. The groups were divided into small groups who studied in a face-to-face classroom and online classroom each week successively. However, the assessment was officially face-to-face whether it is formative or summative. In other words, learning the English language at Biskra University was blended, yet the assessment was only face-to-face. The Algerian University promptly sought to implement blended learning despite that most of the University teachers have limited experience in using technology to deliver pedagogy. The global pandemic urged the students' online assessment, but the face-to-face assessment was the only type used in Algeria. In the present paper, the researcher attempted to uncover teachers' attitudes if they use online testing accompanied by the face-to-face evaluation of their students.

### **1-1- Research questions:**

- What are the teacher's attitudes towards implementing online testing to evaluate their student of Biskra University during and after the Global Pandemic?
- Will online testing be the alternative testing type or an additional type to evaluate the English language students?

### **2- Literature review:**

#### **2-1-Approaches to foreign language testing:**

The history of foreign language teaching is a set of searches for more effective ways of teaching. The twentieth century witnessed endless debates around the grammar role in language instruction, curriculum design, and vocabulary role in the learning progress, learning theories, learning strategies and as a decisive part of all of these issues, the assessment process. Debates around this latter led to the emergence of successive approaches to language assessment; each reflects a teaching method.

#### **2-1-2- Direct and indirect testing:**

Commencing by direct testing means the involvement of a skill that is supposed to be tested (Hughes, 1989). The application of the direct testing to EFL classes means that the instructor is interested in testing a particular skill; for example, if an instructor decides to check listening comprehension, the students will be given a test that will check their listening skills, such as listening to the tape-recorder and performing the accompanying tasks. Such type of test engages other skills. The instructor is free to decide him/herself what kind of material the students should be provided with. If the instructor decides to teach the students to comprehend the real, native speech, s/he applies the authentic material in teaching and tests respectively. Bynom (2003) assumed that direct testing introduces real-life language through authentic

tasks. Consequently, the instructor/tester uses role-plays, summarizing the general idea, and providing the missing information.

Yet, indirect testing differs from direct one in the way that it measures a skill through some other skills. It could mean the incorporation of various skills that are connected; for example, listening and speaking skills. Hughes (1989) declared that they check using language in a real-life situation, and they are relevant to all situations; whereas, direct tests are bound to certain tasks intended to check a certain skill. Hughes (1989) further assumes that indirect testing is more effective than a direct one, for it covers a broader part of the target language. It denotes that the students are not constrained to one particular skill and a relevant exercise. They are free to elaborate on all four skills, so their ability to operate with those skills is checked and applied in various, even unpredictable situations. This is the true indicator of the student's real knowledge of the target language.

### **2-2-2- Discrete point and integrative testing**

Based on the traditional view of the grammar-translation method of teaching, there emerged two approaches to language testing: the discrete point and integrative testing in the early 1970s and 1980s. Discrete point testing assumed the usefulness of teaching the target language by breaking it into its components. The student's mastery of the individual grammatical items such as nouns, articles, adverbs, and so forth is to be tested, scored, and evaluated (Colton- Sonneberg, 2007). In other words, linguistic competence is the point of assessment in this trend; however, the four skills are tested separately and indirectly.

In another hand, the claim toward a global test that integrates all the grammatical items and samples the four skills altogether emerged as an integrative testing trend. This latter intends to measure the learners' knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and spelling together. Brian K. Lynch (2003) considered the testing-skill-together testing the more useful one and the first seed to the emergence of communicative language teaching and testing. However, the incorporation of discrete point and integrative testing yielded communicative language testing.

### **2-2-3- Communicative language testing**

Starting from the early 1970s till the mid-1980s, a new trend emerged based on the new approach that focused on language use rather than broken grammatical items. Dell Hymes (1974) proposed the notion of communicative competence which is the ability to produce correct language in appropriate situations. Bachman and Palmer (1996) declared the new era in foreign language teaching and testing when they noted that,

if we want to use the scores from a language test to make inferences about individuals' language ability, and possibly to make various types of decisions, we must be able to demonstrate how performance on that language test use in specific situations other than language test itself. (10)

They claimed the necessity for a correspondence language test performance and language real use since the integrative testing did not show the learners' real ability to use the language,

but their linguistic competence. Communicative language testing involves the knowledge of grammar and its application in written and oral language: when to speak, what to say in an appropriate situation; knowledge of verbal and non-verbal communication.

Based on these assumptions, the claim for authenticity provoked test designers to focus on communicative competence. As a result, the literature of language testing was enriched by the works of Canale and Swain model of communicative competence in 1980 and of Bachman in 1990 which comes with the notion of 'communicative language ability'. These models added more notions and concepts to the language testing and teaching further than the linguistic competence. Bachman (1990) set that the language competence, which he called (CLA), is divided into organizational and pragmatic competencies which are also subdivided into grammatical, textual, illocutionary and sociolinguistic competencies respectively. Bachman and Palmer also added to these competencies the strategic competence in 1996 which reflects the hidden effect of the language produced. Test designers; thus, focused on the pragmatic and the strategic abilities rather than on the linguistic competence.

#### **2-2-4- Performance-based assessment:**

Instead of just producing the language using pen and paper, there was a trend toward performance-based assessment of language added to communicative competence assessment of language. This trend involves spoken and written language, open-ended responses, integrated performance, and group performance in language testing (Brown, 2004). It tends to more extensive tasks to display students' abilities to more real-life situation for the production of the target language.

This approach is considered as time consuming approach that cannot be adapted in time restricted formal tests. Testers need time and space for further interactive tasks that are to be used to measure the test-takers' communication skills whether separately or mainly in an integrative way. Integrative reading and writing can be involved in this assessment trend; integrative speaking and reading are also to be measured. In brief, "paper-and-pencil tests certainly do not elicit such communicative performance" (Brown, 2004, 11). Performance assessment is one alternative to traditional methods of testing student achievement. While traditional testing requires students to answer questions correctly (often on a multiple-choice test), performance assessment requires students to demonstrate knowledge and skills, including the process by which they solve problems. Performance-based assessments mean the "application of knowledge, skills, and work habits through the performance of tasks that are meaningful and engaging to students" (Hibbard et al., 1996, 5). This type of assessment provides instructors with information about how a student understands and applies knowledge.

#### **2-2- Types of Language Testing:**

A tester gathers data about learners' levels, and categorizes them accordingly. This process is of different types depending on the stage of teaching and learning process, at the

beginning, diagnostic and placement tests; during the teaching and learning process, progress test; at the end, achievement test. However, all of these types of tests are to answer the questions why does the tester test and what does he test?

### **2-2-1- Diagnostic language test**

Referring to Longman Dictionary of LTAL diagnostic test is a test that is meant to display what the student knows and what s/he does not know. The dictionary gives an example of testing the learners' pronunciation of English sounds. Moreover, the test can check the students' knowledge before starting a particular course. Diagnostic language test is set by the tester at the early stage of language instruction in order to diagnose deficiencies in the students' current language ability and knowledge. Any teacher and administrator is to hold such type of testing that diagnoses and pictures the learners situation before setting out the language instruction. Hence, this type of testing is designed to "identify strengths and weaknesses in a learner's knowledge and use of language" (Alderson, 2006, 11).

In other words, an EFL instructor is supposed to analyse through the students' scores the deficiencies that need remediation through an instructional method. He further provides documents and tasks that motivate the students for further improvement in his/her learning progress. The diagnostic testing is useful for it measure the learners' target language. It also helps discovering the learners' needs in specified areas in the target language. Tara Chand Sharma (2004) summed up the purpose of diagnostic test that it "generally yields a profile which is of greater interest than a single total score" (181). In other words, it gives the instructor Curriculum Vitae (CV) about his/her students.

### **2-2-2- Placement language test:**

Placement test is given at the very start of language instruction, added to the diagnostic test. It distinguishes students' levels of the current knowledge and ability about the target language. The gathered data about the students help putting them into groups according to their levels. Furthermore, the general abilities of the students are the points of tests through which the tester and administrator allocate the elementary, intermediate, and the advanced students according to their performance (Colton Sonnenberg, 2007).

Alderson (2006) also denotes the purpose of placement testing which is "to group learners in homogeneous groups in order to have a suitable basis for further teaching and learning" (5). Consequently, there will not be a class of multiple levels that hinder the language teaching process appropriately. Elementary group will have parts of speech as a start to move along the elements of language learning progress; whereas, the intermediate one starts from the sentence structure and move to the more complicated aspects of the target language, while the advanced group undertake discourse settings in the target language with its complex aspects.

### **2-2-3- Progress language test:**

Alderson et al. (1995) gave it a brief identification, “progress tests are given at various stages throughout a language course to see what the student have learnt.” (12). It generally occurs during the language instruction to measure and to check the learners’ progress in grasping successfully the language programmed courses. Instructor checks certain elements, but general topics taught along the unit of instruction, mainly recent ones. Therefore, the instructor might expect his/her learners to get rather high scores. It is used after the students have learnt either a set of units on a theme or have covered a definite topic of the language. It will display the instructor whether the material has been successfully acquired or the students need additional practice instead of starting a new material.

A progress test will basically display the activities based on the material the teacher is determined to check. To evaluate it the teacher can work out a certain system of points that later will compose a mark. Typically, such tests do not influence the students’ final mark. The administration demands the instructor to conduct progress tests; however, they themselves decide on the necessity of applying them. Progress test is inevitable part of the learning process because facilitates the material acquisition in a way. The students preparing for the test look through the material again and there is a chance it can be transferred to their long-term memory. Furthermore, Alderson et al. (1996) who presumes that such type of testing could function as a motivating fact for the learners, for success will develop the students’ confidence in their own knowledge and motivate them study further more vigorously.

### **2-2-4- Achievement language test**

It is the final assessment which comes at the end of a unit of instruction, a scholar year. It measures a target language that a student has learnt during a specific course or a specific program. Achievement test checks the acquisition of a covered material along a period of study. It is also set to measure students’ mastery of the target language. Furthermore, it is the most formal test in language instruction and assessment. Sharma (2004) stated that achievement test “aims at finding out the quantum of language skills acquired by a learner during the course of instruction” (180). This means that achievement tests are held to measure the extent to which the students have learnt from the language program. In other hand, the scores resulted from the test type helps evaluate the previously taught program; not only this it helps evaluate the teaching methods as well. In brief, the achievement language test is a global test that involves all testing actors, for it can be given to more than on class in order to test and evaluate learner’s progress, the teacher’s work and the language program at once.

The test is based on a syllabus studied or a book taken during the course. This test could be described as a fair test, for it focuses mainly on the detailed material that the students are supposed to have studied. Hughes (1989) points out that if the test is inappropriately designed, it could result in unsuccessful accomplishment of it. Sometimes, the demands of the test may differ from the objectives of the course. Therefore, the test should be based directly on the

objectives of the course. Consequently, it will influence the choice of books appropriate to the syllabus itself. The backwash will be positive not only for the test, but also for the teaching process.

### **2-2-5- Proficiency tests:**

Longman Dictionary of LTAL defines proficiency test as a test which measures how much of a language a person knows or has learnt. It is not bound to any curriculum or syllabus, but it is intended to check the students' language competence. Although some preparation and administration was done before taking the test, the test's results are what being focused on. The examples of such tests could be the American Testing of English as Foreign Language test that is used to measure the learners' general knowledge of English in order to allow them to enter any high educational establishments or to get a job in the United States of America. Another proficiency test is Cambridge First Certificate test that has almost the same aim as TOEFL.

Hughes (1989) gives the similar definition of proficiency tests stressing that training is not the thing that is emphasized, but the language (10). He also declared that 'proficient' a student who is able to use the target language according to an appropriate purpose. It denotes that the student's language ability could be tested in various fields or subjects --such as art, science or medicine-- in order to check whether the student could suit the demands of a specific field or not, referring to TOEFL tests. Concerning, Cambridge First Certificate test, which is general and does not concern any specific field, this test aims to reveal whether the students' language abilities have reached a certain standard set. Any student who is interested in testing the level of language knowledge can undertake this special tests levels, which can be chosen by a candidate. If a candidate has passed the exam s/he can take another one of a different level; however, these entire tests are not free of charge because they are payable.

### **2-3- Definition of Online assessment**

Online assessment, also known as e-assessment, digital assessment or computer-based assessment, is the use of ICT (Information and Communication Technology) to evaluate students' learning progress and achievement. Face-to-face or online assessment are two sides for the same coin. Linn and Miller (2005) define assessment as any of a variety of procedures used to obtain information about student performance. They are both used to judge the quality of the learning process and achievement using a standard of measurement. In other words, assessment is merely procedures taken to determine a complex attribute to an individual or groups of individuals (Brown, 2004). It seeks to identify students' weaknesses and strengths.

Whatever is the method used to assess learning process and achievement, assessment determines the students' abilities, instructor's qualifications, and the efficiency of the learning program. Moreover, it is the only way to engage students with the course material (Bloxham & Boyd, 2007). Assessment outcome is a reliable evidence of what the students have learned and what the instructor has clearly delivered. Assessment refers to the full range of information

gathered and synthesized by teachers about their students and their classrooms (Arends, 1994). The ultimate objective of assessment at university is to engage student in the learning process and obtain evidence for their understanding and performance.

### **3- Research methods and procedures:**

#### **3-1- Sample:**

The present study was addressed to EFL teacher of the department of English language and literature of Biskra University. The teachers were supposed to have witnessed the corona virus circumstance during their career; they were N=17 teachers who were mostly full time teachers and some were part-time teachers.

#### **3-2- research tool:**

As the nature of the present research is a social research type, we sought to use an electronic questionnaire to collect data. A questionnaire is a research instrument which consists of a sequence of questions to gather data from its respondents. Data can be collected relatively quickly because it does not require the presence of the researcher; however, questionnaires can lead its respondents to lie due to social desirability, and most of them attempt to present a positive image. Due to the Covid-19 circumstances and the technological advances, e-questionnaires was an effective means of measuring the attitudes, preferences, opinions and intentions of relatively large numbers of subjects more cheaply and quickly than other research tools.

#### **3-3- Data analysis:**

Using google form database, we collected data automatically that was automatically encoded in forms of pie charts and bar charts. We interpreted them descriptively to detect their attitudes towards integrating online testing in the post-Covid-19 era.

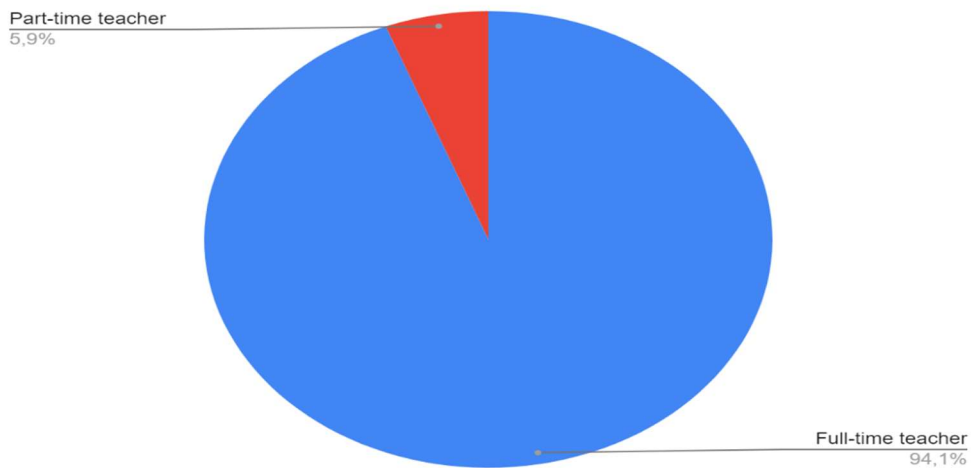
### **4- Results and discussions:**

The obtained results are shown in forms of figures. The respondents to the e-questionnaire tend to give their attitudes towards the possible integration of the online testing method to evaluate their students. The attitudes were split between supporter to the integration and those who are against the integration and claimed that there will be no alternative testing form to the face-to-face testing.

#### **4-1- Teacher status at University of Biskra:**

The first question posed to EFL teachers of Biskra was about their status as full time or part-time teachers.



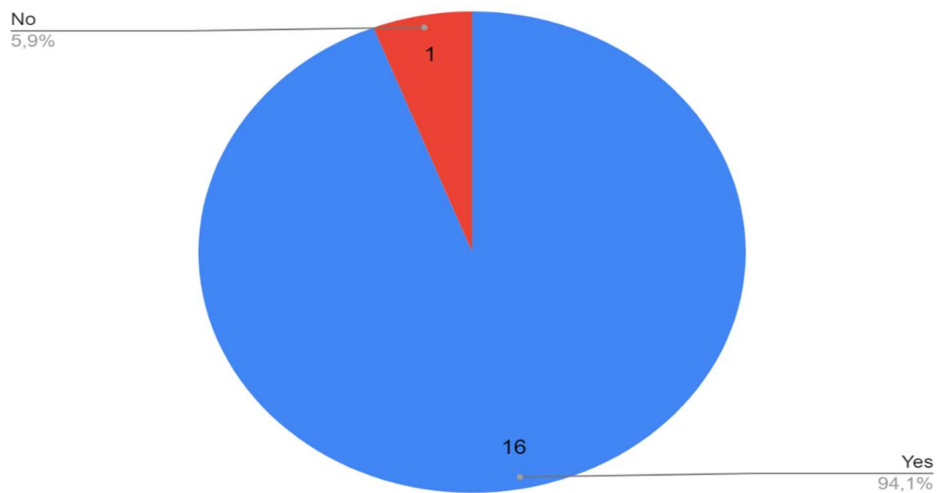


**Fig. 1 Teachers' status**

As shown above, except one teacher, the majority of teachers respondents to this e-questionnaire are full time teachers that means they have a reliable period of time in teaching English at university. They are supposed to have taught and tested their student before the Covid-19 era and during

**4-2- The use of online testing with their students:**

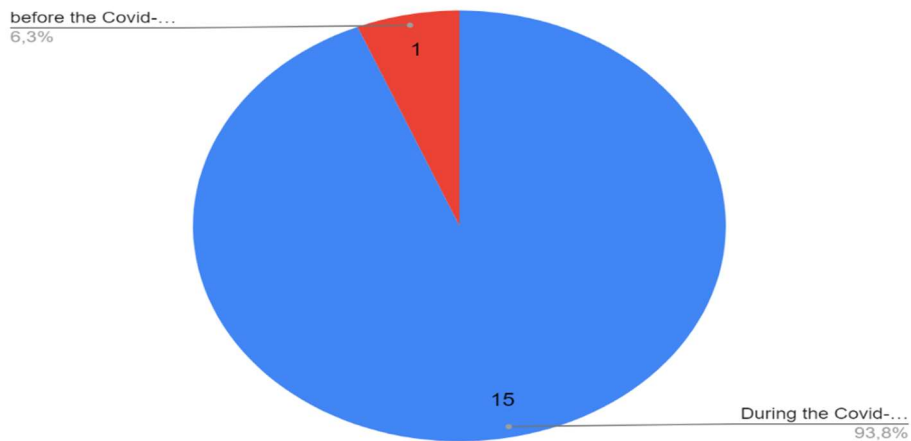
As a response to a question about their use of the online testing, the 17 respondents confirmed the use of online testing. The Covid-19 circumstances obliged the majority of teachers to use this form of testing.



**Fig. 2 The use of online testing**

#### 4-3- The time of using online testing:

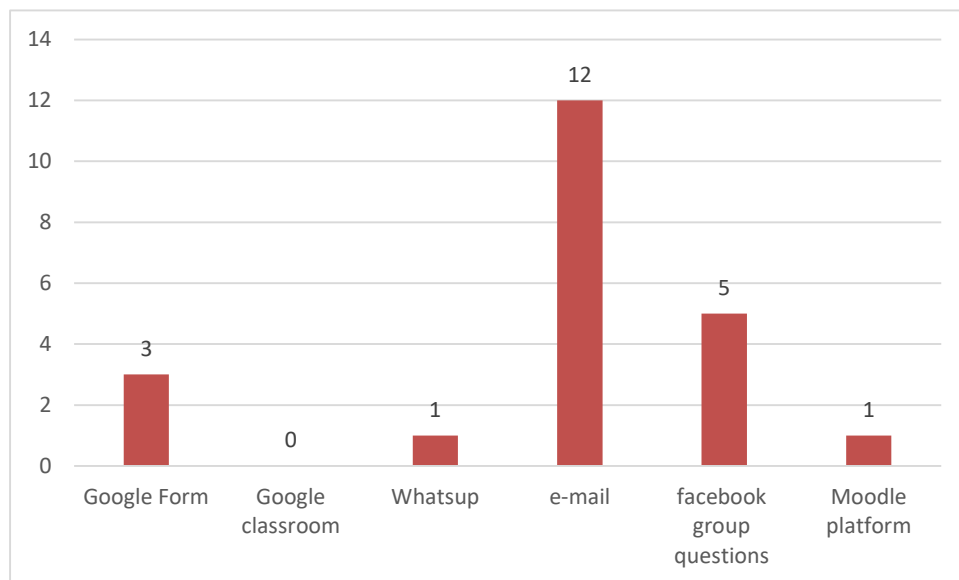
Except one respondent, the majority of the respondents who confirmed their use of online testing stated that they used it during the covid-19. This means that the obligation of keeping lives safe pushed them to select this form of testing



**Fig. 3 When to use online testing**

#### 4-4- The online media used to test university students during the pandemic:

N =12 of the respondents selected and used their own e-mails to send the questions to their students to answer and get a score. Yet, N=5 used the Facebook groups to evaluate their students. Moodle platforms, Whatsup and Google classroom are of less interest and use in their testing and evaluation.

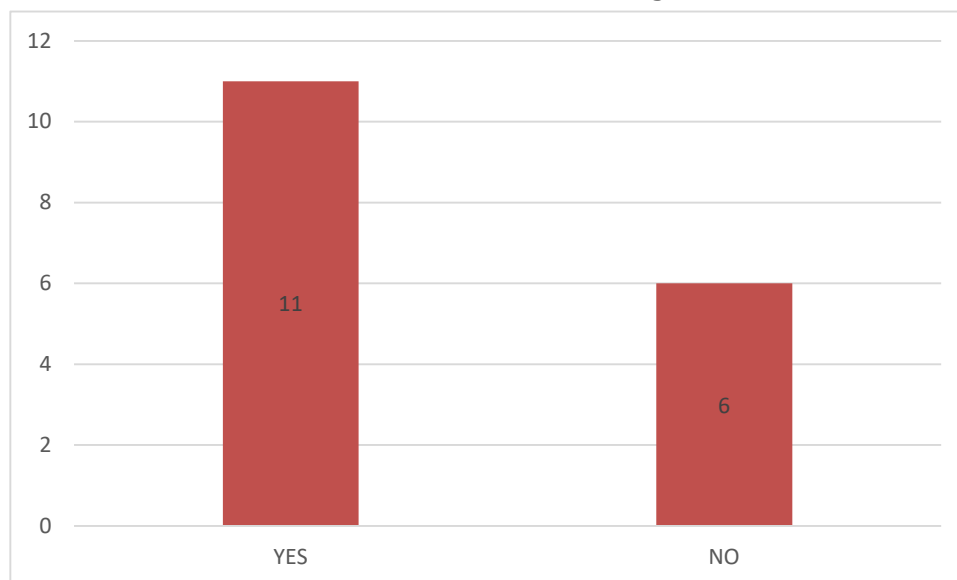


**Fig. 4 Online media used**

N= 3 used google form to test and get the scores automatically; this can be a better way to test and evaluate the students yet it is not used effectively.

#### 4-5- Online testing as an effective solution DURING the Global pandemic:

Responses of the teachers to the question about their opinions about the effectiveness of the e-testing during the pandemic revealed that the majority N= 11 agreed that it is an effective solution to such a situation of lockdown. Yet, N=6 did not agree.



**Fig. 5 effectiveness of online testing during the pandemic**

The respondents (N=11) justified their supporting answers concerning their selection of online testing. They stated that it helps both teachers and learners to carry out with their studies and finish the intended syllabus. It could further be a solution but on the ground, lots of obstacles would hinder its process. Moreover, they claim that it provides great opportunities to evaluate students' work in distance. It allows both teachers and students to pursue their tasks despite the distance and diseases. They also claimed that since classroom instruction has been avoided, online teaching and online assessment are a necessity to accomplish the teaching tasks.

However, the respondents (N=6) who were against. They claimed that it helps students cheat. Another respondent claimed that online assessment is not a valid criteria, and students' level is threatened. In addition, students do not take online assessment seriously. Besides, they are not used to it. It is not easy to assess a big number of students and this gave the chance to non-serious students just to copy their friends' answers.

#### 4-6- Using the online testing AFTER the pandemic:

The use of online testing is controversial topic between teachers respondents to this e-questionnaire. A group of respondents thought that it is not necessary, for it does not work with all learners in the same way. Some learners can rely on themselves, but most of them ask others to do the job for them. Another claimed that it is a time-consuming form of testing.

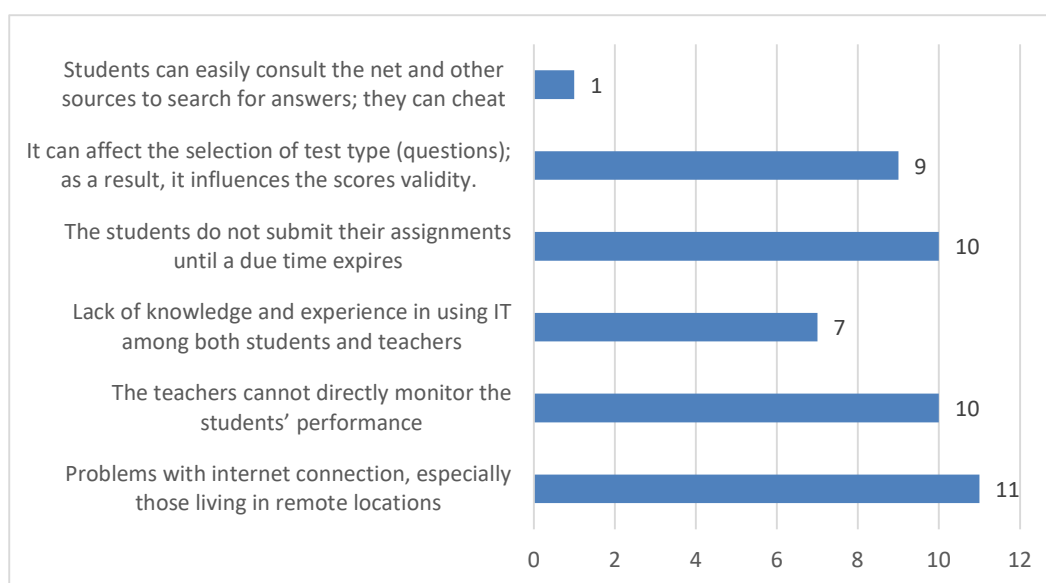
This needs a systematic and careful study.

Meanwhile, another group supported its use in the post-Covid-19 era. They claimed that it can potentially be used sometimes along with class assessment. Another stated that it is better

especially for the correction, and it saves time. Another claimed that it can be used as part of assessment, but it can be effective if the assignment respects a deadline and the questions are analytical and reflective, which makes the answers personal and not plagiarized.

#### **4-7- Obstacle for implementing online testing**

The respondents were exposed to six main possible obstacle that they may face if they adopt e-testing in post-Covid 19 era. N= 11 denoted that they may face problems with internet connection, especially with students living in remote locations. N=10 claimed that the teacher cannot directly monitor the students' performance, and the students do not submit their assignment until a due time expires. N= 9 indicated that it can affect the selection of test type (question) which influence scores validity. Lack of knowledge and experience in using IT among both students and teachers can be an obstacle to N=7 of the total number of respondents. Only N=1 of the respondents who claimed that students can easily consult the net and other sources to search for answers, and cheat.



**Fig. 7 Obstacle hindering that face you and may face you when using online**

#### **5- Conclusion:**

The above results and discussions portrait the controversial views and attitudes towards adopting and adapting e-testing in the Department of English language and literature of Biskra university. This situation really pushes forward course designer as well test designers to rethink about the position of e-testing and e-learning in the cases of pandemics. This really proved that the normal learning situation is no longer effective and in case of any issue that may face EFL students and teachers, there will be an alternative that can be virtual using what technology can promise to offer. The present study was an attempt to uncover the teachers' attitudes of Biskra University towards implementing e-testing. The e-learning and e-testing can accompany the teachers and students, and no one of them can replace and alternate the other,

but they can be conjugated. Accordingly, we recommend training EFL teachers as well as their students to use electronic sources of learning effectively, especially in cases when the face-to-face class meetings is impossible or avoided.

### **- References**

- Alderson, J. C. (2006). *Diagnosing foreign language proficiency: the interface between learning and assessment*. London: Continuum.
- Alderson, J.C., Clapham, C.M. & Wall, D. (1995). *Language test construction and evaluation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Arends, R. (1994). *Learning to Teach*. New York: McGraw-Hill Inc.
- Bachman, L. F. & Palmer, A.S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: designing and developing useful language tests*. New York: OUP.
- Bachman, L. F. (1990). *Fundamental considerations in language testing*. Oxford: OUP.
- Bloxham, S., & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing effective assessment in higher education: A practical guide*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill International.
- Brown, H. D. (2004). *Language assessment: principles and classroom practice*. New York: Pearson Education.
- Bynom, A. (2003). Empowering the learner and all that rubbish. Retrieved from <http://www3.telus.net/linguisticsissues/rubbish.html>
- Colton-Sonnenberg, A. (2006) Computer-based language testing: C-test vs. rapid profile, scholarly paper. Norderstedt, Germany: GRIN Verlag.
- Hibbard, K. M. et al. (1996). *A teacher's guide to performance-based learning and assessment*. Alexandria, VA: association for supervision and curriculum development.
- Hughes, A. (1989). *Testing for language teachers*. Cambridge: CUP.
- Linn, R. & Miller, M. (2005). *Measurement and Assessment in Teaching (9th Ed.)*. Upper Saddle River NJ: Merrill-Prentice Hall.
- Lynch, B.K. (2003). *Language Assessment and Programme Evaluation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Sharma, T. C. (2004). *Modern methods of language teaching*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons.