



# Using Virtual Learning Teams (VLTs) to Enhance EFL Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy (LAL)



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## ABSTRACT

Although education and assessment are inseparable, many capable teachers find ment activities for their classes. equipped to develop/use assess-themselves ill Language teachers, similarly, may be familiar with language teaching methodology faire -and second language acquisition theories, but may still have little or no savoir dies indicate that the majority of regarding educational assessment. In fact, many stu language teachers are lacking in Language Assessment Literacy (LAL). Therefore, and in line with current educational theories which encourage collaboration and team otential solution for this work, a Virtual Learning Team (VLT) was proposed as a p and similar teacher education problems: In the current study, a VLT aimed at enhancing EFL teachers' Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) was created and Yourself Learning Management System (DIYLMS) as the-It-employed, using a Do technological venue. The success of the VLT was ascertained and the factors course -and post -made pre-affecting its efficacy were identified through a researcher structured interviews (Appendix B). -course semi-survey (Appendix A), as well as post ults of the study indicated that there four factors which affect the efficacy of a The res VLT, namely; technology, instructor/team leader, interaction, and enhancement of content and digital literacy). It was also revealed that -knowledge/skills (both course four factors do not work in isolation, and interact with each other in complicated these ways. It is believed that the results of the current study can be beneficial for future .teacher professional development programs

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## Introduction

The link between language teaching and language assessment is admittedly a strong one; nonetheless, empirical research suggests a low level of Language Assessment Literacy (LAL) among foreign language teachers ([Tsagari & Vogt, 2017](#)), despite a growing recognition of its importance ([Hill, 2017](#); [Tsagari & Vogt, 2017](#)). Research studies in educational assessment demonstrate that teachers' assessment and evaluation practices, if existing at all, are largely not in line with recommended best practices ([Koh Burke, Luke, Gong, & Tan, 2018](#)). In fact, language assessment training remains marginalized in certain teacher education programs ([Fulcher, 2012](#)). This is while language teacher education programs with a focus on assessment can create a space for collaborative forms of learning, in which joint efforts of participants will produce new knowledge and lead to a critique of accepted knowledge ([Berger, 2012](#)).

On the other hand, advancements in technology and the digital revolution have triggered interest in virtual collaboration and knowledge sharing. "The digital promise has led companies and higher education to implement virtual teams in their training or instructional practices" ([Yoon & Johnson, 2008, p. 595](#)). Unfortunately, however, many teachers have not received enough training to provide support in collaborative learning environments since their own experiences of being engaged in online learning environments have not been enough and this problem critically affects students' learning ([Ernest et al., 2013](#)). Taking part in a VLT can give teachers a chance to experience taking part in a collaborative learning environment. The virtual nature of collaboration in a VLT also increases teachers' confidence in their own abilities and thus increases their self-confidence ([Topchyan & Zhang, 2014](#)). [Aşık et al. \(2019\)](#) suggested that focusing on improving language teachers' ICT skills

and strategies in language teacher education programs can improve their effectiveness in preparing future language teachers. Technology can also be used as a tool to improve teachers' content areas knowledge and this will in turn generates a positive attitude about using technology among teachers. According to [Hoven \(2007\)](#) teachers will embrace technological innovations only when they can observe positive benefits in terms of direct relevance to their content area, usefulness from a practical point of view, and more effectiveness in terms of their day-to-day classroom teaching. The availability of authentic materials in online courses also adds to their value. Web-searches and email exchanges among members in online courses, for example, can be considered as two examples of the vast opportunities that online course participants can benefit from ([Hampel & Stickler, 2005](#)).

Thus, in an effort to enhance the language assessment literacy of teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the use of

Virtual Learning Teams (VLTs) was proposed and explored in this study. The main reasons for the selection of a VLT were as follow: First, researchers have already indicated that learning is most effective when students work in groups, verbalize their thoughts, and challenge the ideas of others ([Johnson & Johnson, 1994](#)). Indeed, most current educational theories are in favor of learner collaboration, to the extent that [Donato \(2004, p. 284\)](#) maintains, “The belief that collaborative activity is consequential to cognitive, social, historical, and affective development has become widely accepted in developmental psychology and educational research.” Despite its popularity on paper, collaboration may not always be feasible in academic contexts due to time and space limitations; in virtual space, however, such limitations may be transcended.

Also, in addition to knowledge sharing, knowledge *application* is also important in virtual learning teams ([Horvath & Tobin,](#)

[1999](#)). In a VLT, students are supposed to hand in assignments which are designed based on the skills they need to learn, and this adds to the practical aspect of the teaching/learning process, something which appears to be largely missing in current language assessment courses in Iran ([Janatifar & Marandi, 2018](#)).

A virtual learning team, which requires internet technologies such as video conferencing and chat rooms to become functional ([Johnson et al., 2002](#)), is a group of people working independently and interdependently to achieve a common goal ([Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999](#); see also [Lipnack & Stamps, 2008](#)). According to [Chen et al. \(2011\)](#), a virtual learning team could consist of instructor, students, guest speakers, and assistants, all working together to improve the learning effectiveness for students and teaching effectiveness for instructors.

Although it shares many features with a Community of Practice (CoP), a VLT entails certain characteristics which make

it distinct. An important distinction is that while "a virtual [learning] team is a group of people who share a common objective and combine to provide a variety of different and complementary skills in order to achieve that objective" ([Coakes & Clarke, 2006, p. 583](#), brackets added); Communities of Practice "do not necessarily require a tangible result to their activities" ([Coakes & Clarke, 2006, p. 590](#)). A VLT is also different from a work group. Although they both entail some sort of group-based activity, "What differentiates virtual teams from traditional work groups, whose relationship depends primarily on physical proximity, is the mobility to allow group members to collaborate through different time zones and distributed locations" ([Yoon & Johnson, 2008, p. 596](#)). There are two major types of VLTs; workplace VLTs ([Gibson & Cohen, 2003](#)), and educational VLTs ([Yoon & Johnson, 2008](#)).

[Bailey and Luetkehans \(1998\)](#) put forward the following ten tips for maximizing the efficiency of VLTs:

- Help team members manage "cyber-stress" by helping them feel connected to the facilitator and other team members
- Plan frequent e-mail prompts to help team members overcome procrastination
- Provide a variety of tools to support the different phases of problem solving
- Assist team members when they struggle with achieving consensus
- Assemble teams strategically based on task and talent
- Provide timely and meaningful feedback
- Scaffold topical discussions using a threaded discussion (asynchronous) tool

- Encourage elaboration through questioning and hypertext linking
- Discourage judgment, criticism, and personal attacks
- Intervene to highlight areas of common ground among conflicting team members

The selection of appropriate tools in a collaborative online environment is a very complex and important factor. The appropriateness of such tools will depend on factors such as task objectives, learners' proficiency in using those tools, availability for collaborative work (professional, family, and general time constraints), and also learners' experience with and commitment to such group works ([Ernest et al., 2014](#)).

The Capella University Virtual Learning Teams Program is offered here as an example of how VLTs can be put into effect. According to the [Capella University Catalog \(2014\)](#), a VLT at Capella is usually comprised of five to seven

members with diverse backgrounds and skills. The team is temporary, and projects usually last about six weeks, or one half of the course. Once the project is over, the team is disbanded and the final project work is graded. The same framework used at Capella University is adopted in the present study, since this university offers an organized and coherent approach to VLT, which includes the five steps of "set up, plan, develop, deliver, and evaluate" ([Capella University Catalog, 2014, Introduction section, p. 4](#)).

In the current study, the researchers attempt to pinpoint the factors which affect the efficiency of VLTs; therefore, the following research question was put forward:

*What factors affect the efficiency of virtual learning teams in enhancing Iranian EFL teachers' language assessment literacy levels?*

## Materials and methods

The researchers of this study aimed to find out what factors affect the efficiency of a VLT; thus, an online course was formed which aimed at enhancing Iranian EFL teachers' LAL through a Virtual Learning Team. LAL was defined based on the definition put forward by [Fulcher \(2012, p. 125\)](#).

A Do-It-Yourself Learning Management Systems (DIYLMS), as one type of Learning Management System (LMS), was used to fully cover the technological aspects of this project. LMSs generally facilitate learning and interaction among learners in online courses. An LMS enables an institution to

develop electronic learning materials for students, to offer these courses

electronically to students, to test and evaluate the students electronically, and to



generate electronically student databases in which student results and progress

can be charted ([Paulsen, 2003, p. 134](#)).

DIYLMS can be used in situations where teachers are expected to develop courses quickly and on minimal budgets; moreover, flexibility and creativity in a DIYLMS can be achieved using a mashup of Web 2.0 tools ([Stevens, 2012](#)).

According to [Stevens \(2012\)](#) a DIYLMS is normally comprised of the following or similar elements:

- A wiki portal for course information and organization, with links pertinent to course content and management, and other relevant resources;
- Google Docs for student submission of assignments, and teacher feedback on student creativity
- Blogging, to showcase student work

- Etherpad clones for group collaboration tasks
- Jing and Screenr to create and annotate screen-capture and screencast tutorials
- Back-channel tools such as Twitter, Skype group chat, or Edmodo
- Google Hangout or WiZiQ for live webcam and voice-enabled interaction

The DIYLMS approach "offers optimal flexibility for both learners and facilitators since its components are adapted according to need" ([Stevens, 2012, p. 10](#)).

Five participants took part in this study. Volunteer sampling procedure ([Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005](#)) was used, since participants were required to be self-motivated and had to complete the course. In fact, in order to abide by the rules of the VLT all participants were required to finish the course and the dropout rate for the course needed to be zero. A consent form was attached to the LAL



questionnaire in which those who were willing to join a future online course on language assessment were asked to provide their contact information and willingness to participate in the study. The first five participants who were contacted and accepted the invitations were recruited as participants. Since this was the first time that a VLT was used with the aim of enhancing EFL teachers' LAL in Iran, the researchers decided to minimize the

number of participants based on the Capella framework discussed above. The participants were from three different cities and took part in a six-week online course on language assessment. Pseudonyms are used to protect participants' anonymity. The demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1.  
*Demographics of VLT Participants*

<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>TEFL Degree</b>	<b>Teaching experience (in years)</b>	<b>Prior attendance in an online course</b>
Ahoo	36	Ph.D.	15	Yes
Nazi	44	Ph.D. candidate	6	Yes
Goli	27	M.A. holder	3	No
Shirin	37	M.A. holder	12	Yes
Negin	30	Ph.D. candidate	5	No



A collection of Web 2.0 tools were used in the VLT in this study. Prior to launching the course, all participants were informed about the course purposes and objectives, course components, course grading, and course timeline and topics via email. They were also informed about the VLT structure and the DIYLMS in this course which included Skype, Blogger, Telegram messenger, Edmodo, and e-mail. The Web 2.0 tools were selected by the researchers based on the course objectives and also their accessibility. The course content was

developed for six weeks and was based on a needs analysis of what Iranian EFL teachers' believed must be included in a course on language assessment ([Janatifar & Marandi, 2018](#)). Both synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication were used in this online course, since they were both needed to achieve the course objectives. The various technology tools and the purposes they served in the online course are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table 2.

*DIYLMS Components and their Purposes*

Technology tools	Purpose of technology tools
Skype	Synchronous communication
Blogger	Writing weekly reflections
Telegram Messenger	Socializing
Edmodo	The main platform, weekly discussions on language assessment topics, uploading e-portfolio entries, Forum discussions
E-mail	Sending notifications



The course purpose was two-fold: developing awareness of some key theoretical issues in language assessment, and providing practical guidance regarding development and implementation of appropriate language tests, especially in the four language skill areas (reading, writing, speaking, and listening).

Participants self-selected the skill they wanted to work on for their portfolio project; however, in order to facilitate their work, three templates were provided for them by the instructor (i.e. the first researcher) throughout the course.

Edmodo was the main platform and as an educational website, played the role of an LMS in this course; thus it was primarily used for knowledge sharing purposes. New resources were introduced by participants on the Edmodo page; participants' questions regarding the practical and technical aspects of the project were primarily raised either on the Edmodo page or during the weekly synchronous Skype sessions, and were answered via the

same platforms. At the end of the online course, each participant was supposed to upload four e-portfolio entries onto the Edmodo page; the first two were related to writing test/task specifications, determining the learning objectives and the assessment types based on their own teaching context. The third and fourth e-portfolio entries were related to skills-based assessment. A link to an assessment glossary ("Assessment Terminology for Gallaudet University") was also put on the Edmodo page to be used by participants as needed.

There were weekly forum discussions in the Edmodo where participants answered questions related to language assessment issues and dilemma. (The forum questions were taken from [Tony Green's \(2014\)](#) book *Exploring language assessment and testing: Language in action*, because the book was a recent one with a focus on practical aspects of language assessment.)

The main purpose of the weekly Skype synchronous sessions was reviewing the

content of the assigned topics and assignments, and creating the necessary coordination among the participants regarding future assignments. There were six Skype sessions in this online course, each of which lasted an average of forty-five minutes. The sessions were recorded using *HyperCam* software (version 2.29.00), and compressed using the *Any Video Converter* software to make the file sizes manageable for future retrieval and analysis by the researchers.

Telegram Messenger was primarily used to serve as a social networking tool. With its capacity to send short videos, texts, photos, and voice files, it facilitated interaction among participants and gradually became their favorite means of interaction due to its ease of use.

Participants were also required to create a page in Blogger.com and write their weekly reflections on topics and assignments there. They were also asked to provide feedback to other participants'

reflections in their respective Blogger pages.

Besides the data obtained from the DIYLMS sections mentioned above, interviews and a researcher-made pre- and post-course survey (Appendix A) were also used as means of data collection. The survey included five general questions regarding how language teachers perceived and dealt with language assessment-related issues in their classes. The survey questions were based on Likert scale and ranked from 1 indicating *strongly disagree* to 4 indicating *strongly agree*. They were designed based on the results of [Janatifar and Marandi's \(2018\)](#) study and the answers were used to estimate participants' overall language assessment knowledge once before and once after the online course.

Semi-structured open-ended interviews with all the VLT participants took place at the end of the online course with the aim of determining what factors affect the efficiency of a VLT in enhancing EFL

teachers' LAL. The interview protocol can be found in Appendix B. The interviews took place via Skype, were recorded using *HyperCam* (version 2.29.00) screen recording tool, and were later transcribed for further analysis. A descriptive data analysis procedure was used to analyze the survey data, whereas content analysis was used to analyze the data gathered from interviews, following a qualitative structural scheme. Content analysis is defined by [Mayring \(2000\)](#) as the process of summarizing and reporting data in such

a way that “the essential contents are preserved but a short, manageable text is produced” ([p. 268](#)).

## Results and Discussion

Based on the results of the interview analysis, four main factors and some subcategories for estimating the efficiency of a VLT were identified. The findings are presented in Table 3.

Table 3.

### *Factors Affecting the Efficiency of a VLT*

Main factors	Subcategories
<b>Technology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accessibility</li> <li>• Ease of use/familiarity</li> <li>• Combining synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication</li> </ul>
<b>Instructor (Team leader)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal traits (e.g. leadership, problem solving, and rapport-building capacities)</li> <li>• Professional traits (i.e. Introducing quality resources, providing timely and constructive feedback by the instructor)</li> </ul>
<b>Interaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Trust</li> <li>• Resolving conflicts (general disagreements, differences of opinion, etc.)</li> <li>• Providing honest, constructive feedback</li> </ul>
<b>Enhancement of Knowledge/Skills</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Course-specific (language teaching and language assessment knowledge/skills)</li> <li>• Digital literacy</li> </ul>



## Technology

The role of technology in virtual learning teams is paramount since "Virtual teams primarily differ from F2F teams in their heavy reliance on information communication and technology (ICT) media as a link between people and the purpose for communication" ([Lipnack & Stamps, 1997](#)). It is believed that the use of (ICT) helps teachers and students to meet the future challenges in life and this is why teachers and students should be able to use ICT in their teaching and learning activities ([Yunus, 2007](#)).

Three out of the five participants had already experienced taking part in an online course; however, all of them reported experiencing some problems with technology in this online course. These technology problems were of two types: Some problems were due to their own insufficient technology know-how, and others were imposed from outside and were out of their control.

All participants expressed having experienced some problems logging on to their Blogger pages because they needed a VPN to open the page, which was seen as an inconvenience by Nazi. As Nazi pointed out: "As far as we were concerned, this course was not a technology course *per se*. .... We could have used other free blog sites. If the course had been for improving knowledge of educational technology, we should have been told." In fact, she expected to have been told about the necessity of using a VPN before taking part in the course. Participants also reported some connection problems during the synchronous Skype sessions, due to slow internet connections.

On the other hand, some of the problems were due to the participants' insufficient knowledge about technology. Such problems were gradually resolved with the help of other participants and the instructor as the online course proceeded. Regarding Skype, for example, Ahoo pointed out: "At first, I had some problems. I had no

experience using Skype before, but I gradually got the hang of it and found it very convenient and useful." Similarly, regarding Edmodo, Negin mentioned that she had found it confusing at first since she hadn't used it before, but later on she received help from other participants and learned how to use it efficiently. Goli also pointed out that she had faced difficulties finding the other participants' feedback on her comments in Edmodo, because the page sometimes looked messy.

All the participants expressed their satisfaction with how Telegram Messenger and emails were used for the sake of achieving the goals of this online course because, as Shirin explained: "we already use them in our daily lives for general communication purposes." Therefore, it is recommended that the technology tools be selected from among those which are used by participants on a daily basis, or that participants receive some preliminary training on technology issues in order to maximize the efficiency of the VLT. This

is in line with [Bélanger & Watson-Manheim's \(2006\)](#) suggestion that it is necessary to train team members and instructors/leaders with regard to strengths and weaknesses of different media and how to choose them appropriately. In order to set some objectives as targets for these preliminary training courses on technology, it is recommended that participants' familiarity with technology be estimated by using some pre- and post-course questionnaires.

Interestingly, the participants appeared to have expected to receive some training about using technology before launching the main course, and although such training was not offered to this VLT, the participants still felt that their technology skills and digital literacy had been enhanced by merely taking part in the program.

All the participants expressed satisfaction with the combination of synchronous vs. asynchronous modes of communication in the course, as they were felt to

complement each other very well. Goli, for example, considered having different ways and venues for interaction among participants to be a positive point.

### **Instructor (Leader)**

The participants considered two major characteristics to be necessary for the instructor (leader) of a VLT; being supportive (personal trait) and being able to provide timely and accurate feedback on technical and professional issues (professional trait).

They expressed mixed views about their leader in this online course. Negin mentioned that the team leader (i.e. the first author) was very helpful, was always available to answer questions promptly, and provided the participants with easily accessible resources which were also introduced at the right time. According to Negin, the instructor would immediately lead participants back to the main path in the course discussions whenever they digressed. She also pointed out: "the weekly checklists provided by the

leader/instructor helped me organize the tasks and assignments I was supposed to do and in this way I was never late in handing in my assignments." However, Shirin was dissatisfied with the leader because, as she put it: "the instructor (team leader) was not strict enough with one of the participants who was always late on assignments. She [the participant] didn't apply any of our feedback on her work. I believe the instructor should have been blunter about it with her."

Handling such problems indeed is one of the responsibilities of the team instructor/leader. In a VLT, all members must be clear on the goals, processes, deliverables, expectations and deadlines ([Baker, 2006](#)). Unlike face-to-face teams, the leadership role in a VLT is shared among team members ([Johnson et al., 2002](#)); however, ultimately, it is typically the responsibility of the team leader or manager to handle such issues ([McCarthy, 2012](#)).

## Interaction

There were two major types of interaction in the VLT in this study, participant-to-participant and instructor/leader-to-participant; and although both types of interaction existed, the former was dominant in terms of the number of postings.

Also, the main sub-themes of interaction raised in the interviews were related to the three issues of trust, conflicts, and providing feedback among participants.

Some participants initially found it hard to trust other members of the team, since the course was a fully online one. Ahoo revealed: "At first, when I didn't know them [the other participants] well, I was sort of skeptical. But as time passed I got to trust them more." Goli also mentioned: "as we moved forward I gradually learned how to get help from other members and trust them."

The participants also reported experiencing some conflicts with each other. For

example, Shirin complained: "I really don't understand why Ahoo doesn't do the tasks on time. I think the team instructor must ask her to work more closely with the rest of the team." Ahoo also claimed: "The way I look at the issue of test validity is different from the other members. This has caused their dissatisfaction, I guess."

There was also some dissatisfaction with regard to the quality of feedback-giving among participants. As Nazi pointed out: "Using kind words and giving thanks to make up for the shortcomings of text-based asynchronous communication became so common in this course that it often wasn't followed up by constructive and critical comments and feedback. It gradually became sort of artificial, exaggerated, and repetitious." Negin raised the same concern and mentioned: "I didn't understand why we thanked each other so much; it looked more like a face-saving strategy, rather than providing good feedback either on the comments left by other participants or on the new resources

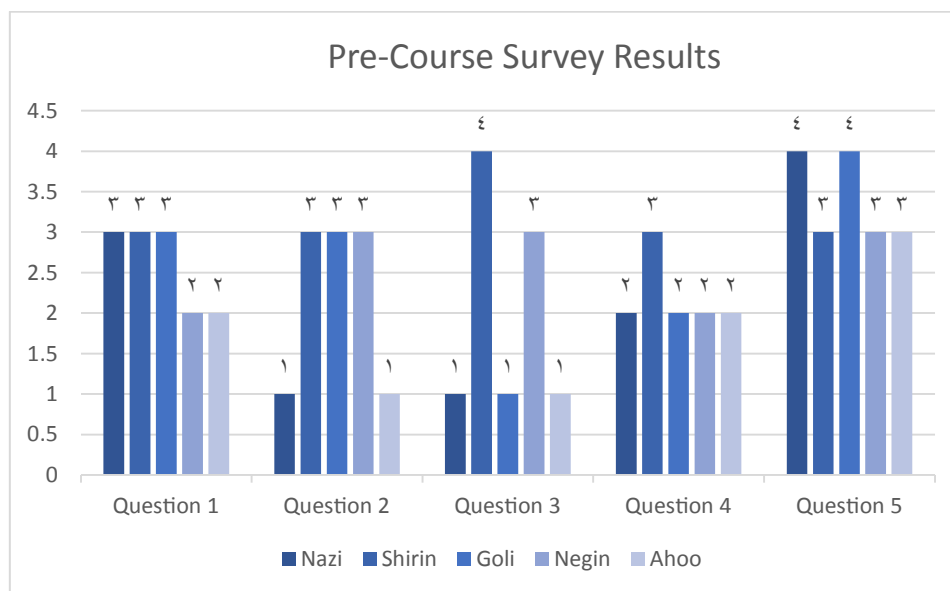
they introduced. I think it is a cultural issue."

Nevertheless, all the participants believed that they had learned how to handle such problems as the course proceeded.

### Enhancement of Knowledge/Skills

Obviously, a VLT can only claim to be successful if learning does actually take place and the team members are satisfied

with their increased knowledge/skills. Thankfully, the results of the survey indicated that the participants' overall knowledge and skills about language assessment were enhanced through taking part in the VLT. The pre-course survey results may be observed in Figure 1, and the post-course survey results may be seen in Figure 2.



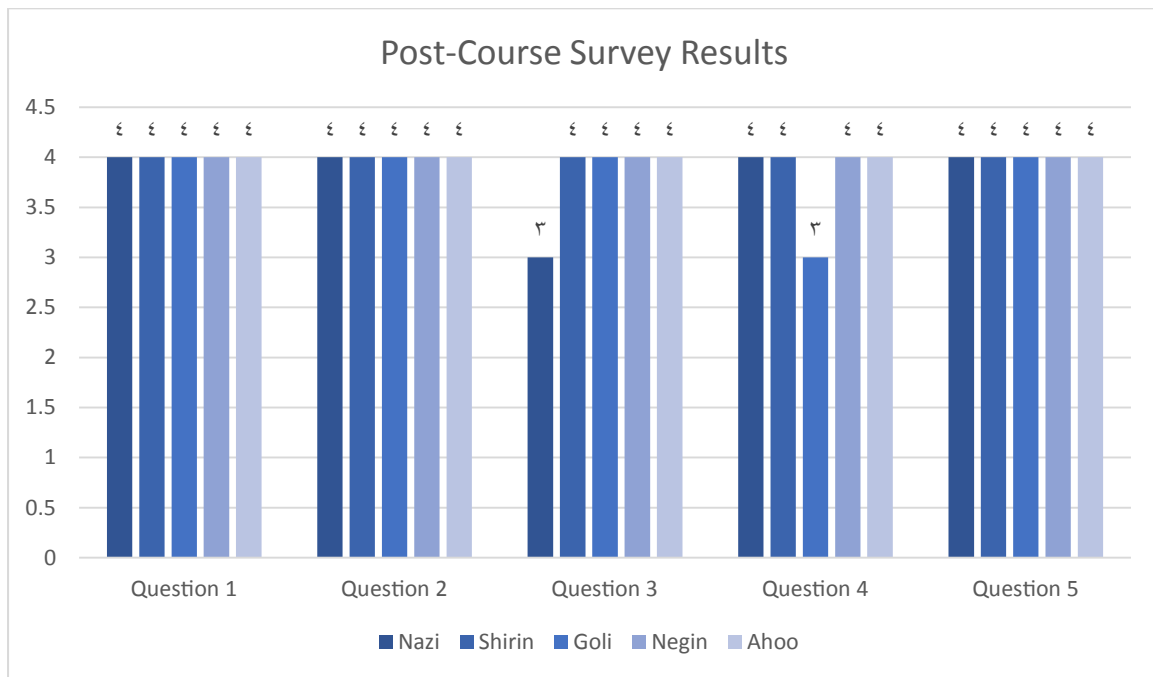
**Fig 1** Pre-course survey results

As the charts demonstrate, the participants' levels of familiarity with different assessment types (Question 1), the importance they attached to their students' being aware of how they were being assessed (Question 2), the importance they

attached to the role of standardized assessment in their instruction (Question 3), their ability to understand what constitutes a quality assessment tool (Question 4), and the significance of assessment social contexts in EFL environments (Question 5) had all

increased by the end of the online course, although the greatest increase was related

to the role of standardized assessment.



**Fig 2** Post-course survey results

In addition to the survey results, the analysis of participants' interviews also indicated their satisfaction with the VLT; the participants believed it helped them improve their knowledge/skills in both course content (language assessment) and digital literacy.

All participants mentioned during the interviews that what they specifically liked about this course was its being practice-oriented rather than merely theory-laden. Goli said: "Theory and practice were

intermingled. I was sure that what I was reading in the reading part would be put into practice and that I would need that knowledge to carry out the assignments more efficiently, so I read them all carefully." They also believed that the course was a good one since the approach to test making was tailor-made for each participant, based on her instructional context. As Nazi pointed out: "One thing that we learned was the fact that tests are supposed to be developed based on specific needs of each educational

context." Furthermore, they believed that this alignment between the instructional context and the assessment for each individual teacher would help teachers combat some of the negative aspects of standardized testing, such as negative washback effects and teaching to the test since as Nazi pointed out teachers will be able to assess their students by means of tools other than just standardized tests.

The participants were very happy that they had increased their skills as well as their knowledge. For example, Negin said:

"I learned to use rubrics; this gave me the opportunity to actually construct one and put it into use. That was mostly because I never considered assessment as the teachers' responsibility before this course. I always thought, well, there are experts out there for this purpose; why bother? But then I learned if we as teachers simply ignore this responsibility, problems arise. Students needs to be assessed

based on what they've been taught, not something else, and who knows this better than their own teacher."

Nazi believed that if teachers learn to develop assessment tools or tests themselves, their students will be protected from the negative aspects of standardized testing on their learning, and will be able to focus on what they really need to learn.

As she put it,

"Teachers should write their test items on their own...; this way, students will focus on learning communicative skills and improving communicative competence rather than focusing on learning time management and other techniques and strategies needed for answering the multiple-choice items of the university entrance exam."

The participants also believed that writing learning objectives and aligning them with the assessment types in the process of developing the assessment tool helped



them learn more about language teaching and consequently improved their language teaching knowledge. They also mentioned that the quality of the feedback they gave to their students had improved, and that this had resulted in an improvement in their students' learning. As Shirin put it: "I think my students' awareness of the rules, as well as the feedback I give them afterwards have both improved. My students' awareness of what they are learning, and of their own learning biases has also increased."

Becoming involved with language assessment had improved the participants' awareness of their own assessment practices, as well. As Ahoo pointed out,

"I can say that I wasn't well aware of my assessment practices. I used to [just] make copies of the end-of-term tests and hand them over to my students, and was quite unaware that new and alternative ways of assessment may be much more valid. Not that I didn't know

anything about these methods; I just considered them as some theory to memorize."

Further, the participants believed that focusing on practical, hands-on aspects of language assessment skills would result in redefining the teacher's role and would transform them from being only teachers to being assessors, as well. It would also help both teachers and learners make up for the negative impacts of standardized tests on language teaching and learning processes, would improve the teachers' language teaching skills, would improve their awareness of their own assessment practices, and would also improve the quality of teacher feedback, which in turn would improve students' language learning.

Shirin also emphasized that this course had improved her knowledge about technology. She said: "This course was a vivid example of how technology and its products were at the service of learning and education."

Interestingly, in addition to the four above-mentioned factors (i.e., technology, instructor/team leader, interaction, and enhancement of knowledge/skills) having affected the efficiency of the VLT in enhancing EFL teachers' LAL and their subcategories, it was also observed that these factors interact with each other, albeit within a culture-bound milieu. Interactions, for example, were also considered to be highly affected by knowledge, technology, and the instructor. As mentioned earlier, for instance, one of the participants had a radically different viewpoint about the concept of test validity (knowledge) and this had caused a conflict among participants. The participants also mentioned that if the instructor had been stricter toward one of the participants who was always late in handing in her assignments, the group interaction would have proceeded more smoothly. In addition, the participants believed that their within-group interaction was facilitated to a large extent due to the

technology choices in the VLT, which were largely chosen from among the tools that they use in their daily lives. In sum, the interplay of the factors affecting the efficacy of a VLT seems to merit further investigation.

Finally, according to [Yoon and Johnson \(2008\)](#) there are different stages in a VLT life cycle namely, orientation, scheduling, exploration, work and decision, progress check and evaluation, refinement and formatting, and termination. However, the participants in this VLT continue to interact with each other about a year after the fulfilment of the VLT project. In other words, this VLT has led to the creation of a CoP, in which participants are still connected with each other and exchange opinions on professional issues despite the fact that the VLT project was accomplished about a year ago. This might be regarded as one of the differences between the educational VLT and the workplace VLT, and one of the potential benefits of the educational VLT.

## Conclusion

Although most EFL teachers receive training in pre-service teacher education programs, they confess that they are underprepared when it comes to dealing with language assessment-related activities in their teaching context. What may be needed is more effective teacher development programs; for example, [Janatifar and Marandi \(2018\)](#) indicated that most Iranian EFL teachers feel they need to have more hands-on practice in their teacher development programs. According to [Ernest et al. \(2014\)](#), planning and management, designing online collaborative activities, setting ground rules for participation, moderating, and using tools and group space are the key skills that teachers need to develop to facilitate learner collaboration online. In this study a VLT was selected as the space for enhancing student teachers' collaboration. This study also aimed at pinpointing the factors which facilitates such interaction and collaboration in VLT.

In order to accomplish this task, VLT was used in this study for the first time in Iran, formed based on contextual needs of Iranian EFL teachers, since "language assessment literacy courses need to be modified or tailored according to the needs of the local professional context" ([Berger 2012, p. 78](#)). The VLT was found to be a viable option for online collaboration, with technology (i.e., accessibility, ease of use/familiarity, combining synchronous and asynchronous modes of communication), instructor/team leader (i.e., personal and professional traits), interaction (i.e., trust, resolving conflicts, providing honest, constructive feedback), and knowledge (both content and technology) emerging as the four factors interacting together to affect its efficacy. The participants expressed their satisfaction with the fact that the VLT inspired a balanced approach between theory and practice, leading to the simultaneous acquisition/integration of both knowledge and skills, which is

generally considered to be a weak point in the Iranian education system. Moreover, it further enhanced the digital skills of the participants, and led to such skills being quite naturally employed at the service of educative purposes, another major plus for the current Iranian education system.

This study had some limitations. Firstly, all participants in the VLT were volunteers and female, which made it hard for the researchers to identify how much of their motivation was internally driven and how much of it was the result of taking part in the VLT. Moreover, the interaction pattern in the VLT might have been different if there were some male participants as well. Secondly, as the course itself and the post-course interviews were conducted in a purely virtual space, non-verbal clues which can be a major element in communication could not be taken into consideration. Thirdly, it might have been better if the researchers were able to estimate participants' familiarity with technology before the course. This way,

the researchers could have had a more accurate estimation of participants' technology knowledge, which in turn, would have resulted in the selection of the best available technology choices and also those which were more in line with the course objectives. Finally, the VLT in this study was formed based on the EFL teachers' needs in the Iranian context and adopted a VLT framework based on the technology choices which were available in Iran. Evidently, more similar research studies in other contexts would increase the generalizability of the study results.

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## Appendix A

### Researcher-Made Pre- and Post-Course Survey

1. I know how to use different types of assessment in my EFL classroom context.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

2. My students should be informed of how they are assessed in my classroom.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

3. Standardized assessment is important in my English language instruction.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

4. I understand what constitutes a quality assessment tool in an English language classroom.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

5. I think it is important for me as an EFL teacher to understand the social contexts of testing and assessment.

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

1. Please provide the following information:

Name:

Years of teaching experience:

Educational level:

2. How do you rate your own technology skills?

Extremely non-conversant

Below average

Average

Above average

Extremely conversant

3. Have you taken part in an online course before?

4. Do you think participating in this online course improved your technology skills, your language assessment skills, your teaching strategy and pedagogy, and/or your skills and knowledge with regard to assessing your learners English language abilities?
5. How many hours per week did you spend on doing the tasks and assignments?
6. What technological devices did you use to participate in the course-related activities?
7. What expectations did you have from this course? Were they met or not?
8. Were you satisfied with the course in general or not? If not what could be changed/added to make you satisfied? (Team size, instructor's facilitative role, technology choices in the course, gender, instructor's attendance in the virtual course). What were some of the positive or negative points of this online course?
9. Did you find the tasks/assignments engaging enough for you to interact with other participants in this course?
10. Did you find the level of interaction among participants in the group satisfactory?