

Learning to Assess through Coursework: Developing Pre-service English Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy

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Abstract

Language assessment literacy (LAL) is widely recognized as a core component of effective language teaching, yet empirical evidence on how it can be systematically developed during the pre-service phase of initial teacher education remains limited. This study investigates the role of coursework in fostering pre-service English teachers' learning to assess and their development of language assessment literacy. Adopting a mixed-methods design, the study collected quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative survey responses from pre-service teachers enrolled in a compulsory language assessment course. Quantitative findings reveal statistically significant improvements across multiple dimensions of LAL, particularly in assessment purposes, task design, and ethical awareness. Qualitative findings further indicate conceptual and belief-related shifts in how participants understand assessment, with increased attention to formative assessment, feedback, and learning-oriented practices. The study argues that structured coursework constitutes a meaningful site for learning to assess in pre-service English teacher education. Implications are discussed for curriculum design in teacher education, pre-service teacher learning, and future research on assessment literacy.

Keywords: assessment for learning, language assessment literacy, pre-service English teachers, teacher education.

1. Introduction

Assessment is an integral component of language education, shaping not only how student learning is evaluated but also how teaching is planned, enacted, and reflected upon. In language classrooms, assessment decisions influence instructional pacing, task selection, feedback practices, and students' opportunities to learn. As such, teachers' ability to understand and use assessment effectively has increasingly been recognized as a key dimension of professional competence.

This competence is commonly conceptualized as language assessment literacy (LAL), a construct that encompasses teachers' knowledge, skills, beliefs, and ethical awareness related to language assessment. Over the past two decades, LAL has emerged as a prominent focus in applied linguistics and language education research, reflecting growing concerns about the quality and consequences of classroom assessment practices. Despite this growing interest, questions remain regarding how LAL develops and, crucially, how it can be supported through formal educational interventions.

Much of the existing research on LAL has concentrated on in-service teachers, examining their assessment practices, beliefs, and professional development experiences. These studies have provided valuable insights into the challenges teachers face in implementing sound assessment practices, particularly in examination-oriented educational contexts. However, comparatively little attention has been paid to the pre-service stage of teacher education, where foundational understandings of teaching and assessment are first formed.

The pre-service phase represents a critical period in teachers' professional learning. Beliefs and practices developed during initial teacher education often serve as reference points for later professional decision-making. If assessment is introduced to pre-service teachers primarily as a technical or marginal topic, there is a risk that future teachers will enter classrooms with limited or fragmented assessment literacy. Conversely, if assessment is conceptualized as an integral part of teaching and learning, coursework may provide a powerful context for developing learning-oriented assessment practices before teaching routines become established.

In many English teacher education programmes, however, assessment-related courses are positioned as discrete or technical components of the curriculum. Such courses may focus on test formats, scoring procedures, or basic statistical concepts, without adequately connecting assessment to pedagogical decision-making. As a result, pre-service teachers may struggle to see how assessment relates to everyday classroom practice or to student learning more broadly.

Against this background, the present study investigates whether and how coursework can support the development of LAL among pre-service English teachers. Specifically, it examines changes in participants' assessment literacy following a language assessment course and explores their learning experiences within the course. By adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study aims to provide both empirical evidence of change and qualitative insights into the process of learning to assess.

The study contributes to the literature in three main ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on coursework-based LAL development in a pre-service English teacher education context. Second, it conceptualizes LAL development as a learning process embedded in teacher education coursework rather than as an outcome of teaching experience alone. Third, it offers pedagogical insights into how assessment courses can be designed to support learning-oriented assessment practices.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Conceptualizing Language Assessment Literacy

Language assessment literacy (LAL) has been conceptualized in multiple ways, reflecting shifts in how assessment is understood within language education. Earlier definitions tended to emphasize technical competencies, such as test construction, scoring procedures, and the interpretation of reliability and validity indices, positioning LAL primarily as a form of measurement expertise. While such technical knowledge remains important, recent scholarship has argued that this view is insufficient to capture the complexity of assessment in classroom contexts.

Contemporary research increasingly conceptualizes LAL as a multidimensional and socially situated construct. Rather than viewing assessment as a neutral or purely technical activity, recent frameworks highlight the interpretive, contextual, and ethical dimensions of assessment practice (Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). From this perspective, teachers' assessment decisions are shaped not only by knowledge and skills, but also by beliefs, values, and professional judgment.

In language education, this reconceptualization has led to a growing emphasis on LAL as an integral component of teacher professionalism. Teachers are expected to make informed decisions about what aspects of language to assess, how assessment tasks align with learning goals, and how assessment information can be used to support student learning (Giraldo, 2019; Yan & Fan, 2021). As a result, LAL is increasingly understood as dynamic and developmental, evolving through experience, reflection, and engagement with assessment practices.

This shift has significant implications for teacher education. If LAL is framed solely as technical competence, it risks being taught as isolated content. In contrast, viewing LAL as a pedagogical and interpretive practice positions learning to assess as inseparable from learning to teach, and foregrounds assessment as a central aspect of teacher learning (Xu & Brown, 2016; Looney et al., 2018).

2.2 Empirical Research on Teachers' LAL.

Empirical studies conducted over the past decade consistently report uneven levels of assessment literacy among teachers across educational contexts. Recent large-scale and cross-contextual studies indicate that while many teachers demonstrate confidence in administering assessments, they often experience difficulty in interpreting results, providing formative feedback, and using assessment evidence to inform instructional decisions (Vogt et al., 2020; Yan & Fan, 2021).

Research has further shown that teachers' assessment practices are closely linked to their underlying conceptions of assessment and learning. Teachers who hold assessment-as-learning or learning-oriented assessment beliefs tend to engage more

productively with formative practices, whereas those with examination-driven conceptions often prioritize summative testing (Xu & Brown, 2017; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). These findings underscore the importance of addressing not only assessment knowledge, but also teachers' beliefs and professional identities.

Recent reviews and empirical studies suggest that professional development initiatives can support LAL development, particularly when learning opportunities are sustained, practice-oriented, and embedded in teachers' instructional contexts (DeLuca et al., 2016; Vogt et al., 2020). However, much of this research continues to focus on in-service teachers, with comparatively limited attention paid to how assessment literacy begins to develop during initial teacher education.

2.3 LAL in Pre-service Teacher Education

Research on LAL in pre-service teacher education has grown in recent years but remains relatively limited in scope. Studies consistently report that pre-service teachers often enter teacher education programmes with narrow or assessment-of-learning-oriented conceptions, shaped by their prior experiences as students (Hill & Eyers, 2021; Yan & Fan, 2021). Without explicit instructional intervention, these initial conceptions may persist throughout teacher preparation.

Assessment-related coursework has been identified as a key site for supporting pre-service teachers' LAL development. Recent studies suggest that well-designed courses can broaden pre-service teachers' understanding of formative assessment, feedback, and learning-oriented assessment principles, leading to measurable changes in self-reported competence and assessment beliefs (DeLuca et al., 2020; Pastore & Andrade, 2019). In language teacher education specifically, scholars emphasize the need for courses that address the distinctive challenges of assessing language skills and communicative competence (Giraldo, 2019; Kremmel & Harding, 2020).

Despite these advances, empirical evidence remains fragmented. Many studies rely on single-method designs or short-term interventions, limiting insight into both the outcomes and processes of learning to assess. Calls have therefore been made for research adopting mixed-methods approaches to capture how pre-service teachers' assessment literacy develops through coursework and reflective engagement with assessment practices (Hill & Eyers, 2021; Yan & Fan, 2021).

2.4 Coursework as a Site for Teacher Learning

From a broader teacher education perspective, coursework plays a central role in shaping pre-service teachers' professional knowledge, beliefs, and emerging identities. Coursework provides a structured environment in which theoretical concepts are introduced, pedagogical practices are modelled, and opportunities for reflection are systematically embedded. When designed effectively, coursework can support conceptual change and sustained professional learning.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes teacher learning in coursework as an active and developmental process, rather than the transmission of discrete knowledge. In assessment education, coursework can function as a mediating space between abstract assessment principles and future classroom practice by engaging pre-service teachers in authentic assessment tasks, case-based discussions, and reflective activities (Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Xu & Carless, 2021).

In the context of language assessment, coursework that foregrounds learning-oriented assessment and evaluative judgement has been shown to support deeper engagement with assessment principles and practices (Tai et al., 2020; Xu & Carless, 2021). However, empirical research examining how such coursework contributes specifically to LAL development among pre-service language teachers remains limited.

In summary, while the importance of LAL is widely acknowledged, there is a need for more rigorous empirical research examining how assessment literacy develops during pre-service teacher education. In particular, studies that investigate coursework-based LAL development using mixed-methods designs and that attend to both learning outcomes and learning experiences remain scarce. Addressing this gap, the present study examines how pre-service English teachers learn to assess and develop language assessment literacy through a dedicated assessment course.

3. Methods

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a mixed-methods research design to examine changes in pre-service teachers' language assessment literacy and to explore their experiences of learning assessment through coursework. A mixed-methods approach was chosen to capture both measurable changes in LAL and participants' subjective perspectives on assessment learning.

3.2 Context and Participants

The study was conducted in a teacher education institution offering a Bachelor-level English teacher education programme. Participants were pre-service English teachers enrolled in a compulsory language assessment course. The course aimed to introduce key concepts and methods in English language teaching, as well as language assessment, including assessment purposes, test design, validity, reliability, feedback, and ethical considerations.

The course was structured around lectures, case discussions, group tasks, and assessment design activities. Rather than focusing solely on technical measurement issues, the course emphasised the role of assessment in supporting teaching and learning. Participation in the study was voluntary, and ethical

approval was obtained in accordance with institutional guidelines.

3.3 Instruments

Quantitative data were collected using a questionnaire designed to measure multiple dimensions of language assessment literacy, including assessment purposes, test design, interpretation of results, and assessment ethics. The questionnaire was administered before and after the course.

Qualitative data were collected through open-ended survey questions administered at the end of the course. These questions invited participants to reflect verbally on what they had learned about assessment, how their views had changed, and what challenges they continued to experience.

3.4 Data Collection and Analysis

Pre-course and post-course questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics and paired-sample *t*-tests to examine changes in LAL. Reliability analyses were conducted to assess the internal consistency of the questionnaire.

Qualitative responses were analysed thematically following an inductive approach. Responses were read repeatedly to identify recurring themes related to participants' assessment learning experiences. Quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated at the interpretation stage to provide a comprehensive account of LAL development.

4. Results

This section reports the quantitative and qualitative findings of the study. The results are organized into four subsections: (1) descriptive statistics of pre- and post-course language assessment literacy (LAL), (2) inferential statistical analysis of course effects, (3) reliability of the questionnaire, and (4) qualitative themes derived from survey responses.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics of Pre- and Post-course LAL

Descriptive statistics for participants' language assessment literacy before and after the coursework are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Pre-service Teachers' Language Assessment Literacy (Pre-test and Post-test).

Dimension of LAL	Test	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Assessment Purposes	Pre-	3.21	0.46	2.30	4.10
	Post-	3.89	0.41	3.00	4.60
Test Design	Pre-	3.05	0.52	2.10	4.00
	Post-	3.92	0.45	3.00	4.70
Interpretation of Results	Pre-	2.98	0.55	2.00	3.90
	Post-	3.68	0.48	2.80	4.50
Assessment Ethics	Pre-	3.34	0.44	2.50	4.20
	Post-	3.95	0.39	3.10	4.70
Overall	Pre-	3.15	0.39	2.40	4.05
	Post-	3.86	0.36	3.05	4.60

Overall, pre-service English teachers demonstrated a moderate level of LAL prior to the course ($M = 3.15$, $SD = 0.39$). Following the completion of the course, the overall mean score increased substantially to 3.86 ($SD = 0.36$).

Across individual dimensions, improvements were observed in all four components of LAL. The most notable increases occurred in Test Design (from $M = 3.05$ to $M = 3.92$) and Assessment Purposes (from $M = 3.21$ to $M = 3.89$). Gains were

also evident in Interpretation of Results and Assessment Ethics, although the post-test mean for interpretation remained comparatively lower than that of other dimensions. A visual

comparison of pre- and post-course mean scores across dimensions is provided in Figure 1, which illustrates a consistent upward trend across all aspects of LAL.

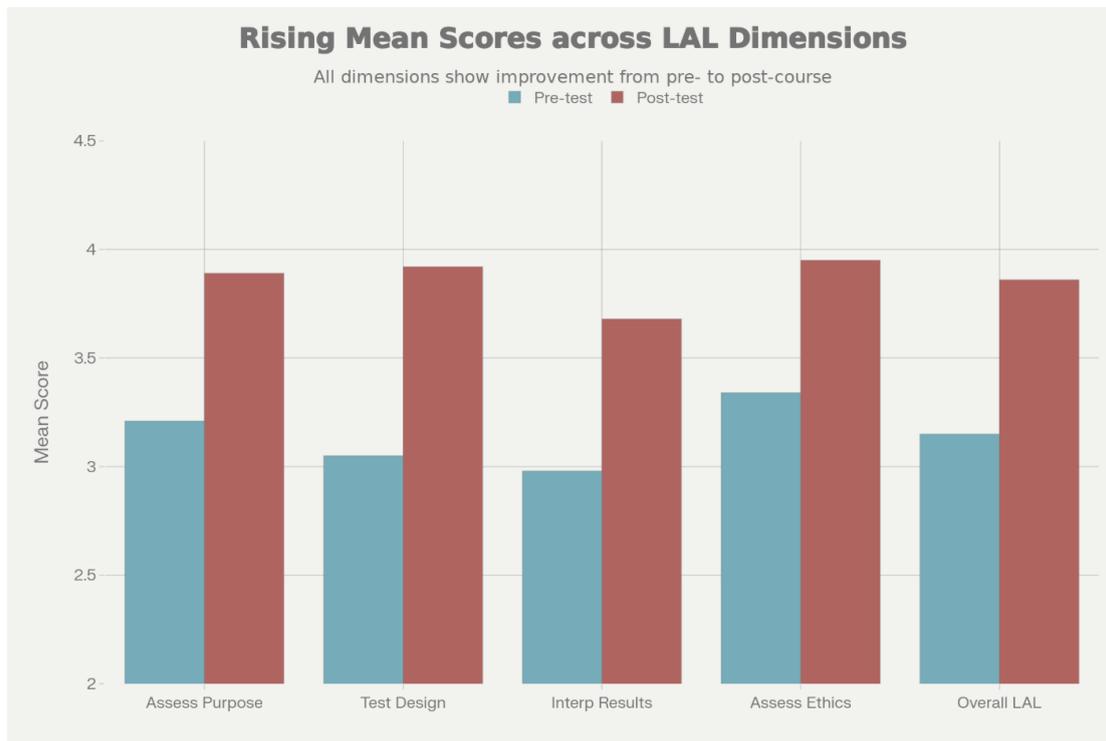


Figure 1: Comparison of Pre- and Post-course Mean Scores.

This figure displays a grouped bar chart comparing pre- and post-course mean scores across five dimensions of language assessment literacy (LAL): Assessment Purposes, Test Design, Interpretation of Results, Assessment Ethics, and Overall LAL. For each dimension, the post-test bar is higher than the pre-test bar, indicating that pre-service teachers' LAL improved in every area after completing the course. The largest gains are visible in Assessment Purposes and Test Design, while Interpretation of

Results, although improved, remains slightly lower than the other dimensions, suggesting it may be a relatively weaker area even after the training.

4.2 Effects of Coursework on Language Assessment Literacy

To examine whether the observed differences between pre- and post-course scores were statistically significant, paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted. The results are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2: Paired-samples *t*-test Results for Pre- and Post-course LAL Scores.

Measure	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	Cohen's <i>d</i>
Assessment Purposes	3.21	3.89	8.42	59	< .001	1.09
Test Design	3.05	3.92	9.15	59	< .001	1.18
Interpretation	2.98	3.68	7.63	59	< .001	0.98
Assessment Ethics	3.34	3.95	6.87	59	< .001	0.89
Overall	3.15	3.86	10.24	59	< .001	1.32

The analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in overall LAL following the course, $t(59) = 10.24, p < .001$, with a large effect size (Cohen's $d = 1.32$). Significant gains were also found for each individual dimension. The largest effect was observed in Test Design, $t(59) = 9.15, p < .001, d = 1.18$, followed by Assessment Purposes and Interpretation of Results.

All effect sizes exceeded 0.80, indicating strong practical significance. These results suggest that the coursework had a substantial impact on pre-service English teachers' language assessment literacy.

4.3 Reliability of the LAL Questionnaire

The internal consistency of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis of the Language Assessment Literacy Questionnaire.

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's α
Assessment Purposes	6	0.84
Test Design	8	0.88
Interpretation of Results	6	0.81
Assessment Ethics	5	0.79
Overall	25	0.91

As shown in Table 3, reliability coefficients for the four subscales ranged from 0.79 to 0.88. The overall questionnaire demonstrated excellent reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.91. These results indicate that the instrument used in this study

was sufficiently reliable for measuring pre-service teachers' language assessment literacy.

4.4 Qualitative Findings from Survey Responses

Qualitative analysis of the open-ended survey responses yielded four major themes, as summarized in Table 4.

Table 4: Themes Identified from Qualitative Survey Responses.

Theme	Description	Example Quotes
Awareness of Assessment Purposes	Participants reported clearer understanding of formative vs. summative assessment	"I realized assessment is not only for grading but also for supporting learning."
Confidence in Test Design	Increased confidence in designing tasks aligned with learning objectives	"Now I know how to design tasks that truly reflect what students have learned."
Shift toward Learning-oriented Assessment	Change from test-oriented thinking to learning-oriented assessment beliefs	"I used to focus on scores, but now I focus more on feedback and improvement."
Remaining Challenges	Difficulties in interpreting results and using statistics	"I still find it challenging to analyze test results quantitatively."

First, many participants reported increased awareness of assessment purposes, particularly the distinction between formative and summative assessment. Second, respondents expressed greater confidence in designing assessment tasks aligned with instructional objectives.

A third theme reflected a shift toward learning-oriented assessment beliefs, with participants emphasizing feedback, student learning, and improvement rather than solely test scores. Finally, despite overall positive perceptions, some participants reported ongoing challenges, particularly in interpreting assessment results and applying statistical concepts.

Taken together, the quantitative and qualitative results indicate a clear improvement in pre-service English teachers' language assessment literacy following participation in the coursework. While gains were evident across all dimensions, variations in the magnitude of improvement were also observed.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that language assessment literacy can be meaningfully developed through coursework in pre-service English teacher education. The observed improvements across multiple dimensions of LAL provide empirical support for the view that learning to assess is a structured and learnable process, rather than a competence that develops only through accumulated teaching experience. In this sense, the findings contribute to recent reconceptualization's of LAL as a developmental aspect of teacher learning (Kremmel & Harding, 2020; Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020). In response, the study directly addresses the gap identified in previous research, which has tended to privilege in-service teachers' assessment development over learning to assess during the pre-service phase.

Importantly, the study highlights coursework as a pedagogical space in which pre-service teachers' assessment beliefs and practices can be reshaped. Participants' increased emphasis on formative and learning-oriented assessment suggests a shift away from test-centered conceptions toward views that position assessment as integral to teaching and learning. At the same time, the uneven development observed across LAL dimensions underscores the complexity of learning to assess and points to the need for sustained and carefully scaffolded instructional support.

These findings align with contemporary perspectives on teacher learning that emphasise the integration of theory, practice, and reflection. Coursework that engages pre-service teachers in authentic assessment tasks and reflective activities appears to foster deeper understanding and professional judgment, supporting recent calls to foreground assessment learning within initial teacher education (Hill & Eyers, 2021; Xu & Carless, 2021).

5.1 Coursework as an Effective Context for Developing LAL

The most salient finding of this study is the substantial overall improvement in pre-service English teachers' LAL following participation in assessment-focused coursework. The large effect sizes observed across all dimensions suggest that LAL is not merely a by-product of teaching experience, but can be intentionally cultivated through systematic instructional design.

This finding aligns with recent research arguing that LAL should be treated as a teachable competence embedded within teacher education curricula (DeLuca et al., 2020; Kremmel & Harding, 2020). While earlier research largely focused on in-service teachers' assessment literacy development through professional development initiatives, the present study provides

empirical evidence that LAL development can and should begin during pre-service preparation.

A key feature of the course examined in this study was its emphasis on pedagogical engagement rather than abstract measurement theory. Participants were encouraged to consider assessment purposes, task design, and feedback practices in relation to instructional goals and student learning. This supports contemporary views that LAL development is most effective when assessment is framed as a pedagogical practice closely connected to teaching, rather than as a technical or statistical exercise isolated from classroom realities (Pastore & Andrade, 2019; Vogt et al., 2020).

5.2 Differential Development Across LAL Dimensions

Although statistically significant gains were observed across all dimensions of LAL, the magnitude of improvement varied. The largest gains were found in assessment purposes and test design, whereas comparatively smaller gains were observed in the interpretation and use of assessment results.

This pattern is consistent with recent studies suggesting that pre-service teachers tend to develop greater confidence in concrete, practice-oriented aspects of assessment more readily than in areas requiring abstract reasoning and data-based decision-making (Hill & Eyers, 2021; Yan & Fan, 2021). Designing assessment tasks and aligning them with learning objectives are often perceived as tangible and accessible skills. In contrast, interpreting assessment results requires familiarity with basic statistical concepts, confidence in evidence-based judgment, and the ability to translate data into instructional action.

The qualitative findings further illuminate this imbalance. While participants reported increased confidence in designing assessments, some continued to express uncertainty when interpreting scores or making instructional decisions based on assessment data. This suggests that coursework alone, although effective, may need to be complemented by additional scaffolding, such as guided data analysis activities, repeated exposure to authentic classroom data, and opportunities to practice evidence-informed decision-making. Such findings echo recent calls to integrate data interpretation more explicitly into assessment education for pre-service teachers (Vogt et al., 2020; Xu & Carless, 2021).

5.3 From Assessment Knowledge to Learning-Oriented Beliefs

Beyond gains in technical knowledge and skills, the findings indicate a notable shift in participants' assessment beliefs. Qualitative responses revealed an increased emphasis on formative assessment, feedback, and learning-oriented assessment practices, suggesting that the coursework supported conceptual change as well as skill development.

This shift is particularly significant in the context of language teacher education, where assessment practices are closely intertwined with teachers' beliefs about language learning and instruction. Recent research has emphasised that teachers' assessment practices are shaped not only by what they know, but by how they conceptualise the purposes of assessment (Levi & Inbar-Lourie, 2020; Yan & Fan, 2021). The emergence of learning-oriented beliefs among participants therefore indicates that the course functioned as a site for deeper professional learning rather than merely technical training.

The findings align with learning-oriented assessment frameworks that position assessment as an integral component of teaching and learning, rather than as a separate evaluative activity (Xu & Carless, 2021). By explicitly linking assessment design to instructional goals and student learning, the course appears to have fostered a more holistic and pedagogically grounded understanding of assessment among pre-service teachers.

5.4 Coursework-Based LAL Development in Teacher Education

The findings of this study contribute to ongoing debates about how and when LAL should be developed within teacher education programmes. While some perspectives suggest that assessment literacy emerges primarily through classroom experience, the present study demonstrates that well-designed coursework can serve as a powerful and effective site for LAL development in pre-service education.

From a curriculum perspective, these findings suggest that assessment-related courses should not be positioned as peripheral or purely theoretical components of teacher education programmes. Instead, they should be designed as core courses that integrate theory, practice, and reflection in a coherent manner (DeLuca et al., 2020; Hill & Eyers, 2021). The observed gains in this study are likely attributable not only to exposure to assessment concepts, but also to the constructive alignment between course objectives, learning activities, and assessment tasks within the course.

Methodologically, this study also demonstrates the value of mixed-methods approaches in LAL research. The quantitative data provided evidence of statistically significant change, while qualitative responses offered insights into participants' perceptions and learning experiences that would not have been captured through numerical data alone. The convergence of these data sources strengthens the credibility of the findings, while areas of divergence—such as strong quantitative gains alongside lingering qualitative uncertainty in result interpretation—highlight the complex and non-linear nature of learning to assess.

Several practical implications follow from these findings. First, teacher education programmes should consider introducing assessment literacy coursework early in the curriculum, rather than treating assessment as an advanced or optional topic. Early engagement may support the development of more coherent and learning-oriented assessment beliefs before pre-service teachers enter practicum settings. Second, coursework should balance assessment design with structured opportunities to interpret and use assessment data in pedagogically meaningful ways. Finally, reflective components appear to play a crucial role in fostering conceptual change and should be intentionally embedded in assessment coursework.

Despite its contributions, this study has limitations. The sample was drawn from a single teacher education programme, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. In addition, the study examined short-term changes following a single course and did not track the sustainability of LAL development over time. Future research could adopt longitudinal designs to examine how coursework-based LAL development interacts with practicum experiences and early-career teaching, as well as comparative studies across institutional and cultural contexts.

In summary, the findings provide strong empirical support for positioning coursework as a central site for developing pre-service English teachers' language assessment literacy. Taken together, these findings reinforce the argument advanced in the Introduction that language assessment literacy should be conceptualized as a learning process situated within teacher education coursework. By providing empirical evidence of change, illustrating how pre-service teachers learn to assess, and offering design-oriented insights for assessment courses, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on assessment education in initial teacher preparation.

Conclusion

This study provides empirical evidence that coursework can effectively support the development of language assessment literacy among pre-service English teachers. By framing assessment as a learning-oriented practice, the study underscores the importance of embedding assessment education within teacher preparation programs. Future research should explore longitudinal trajectories of LAL development and examine how coursework-based learning translates into classroom practice.

Author Biographical Note

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