Onsite and Online Summative Assessment and EFL Learners' Perceptions of Task Engagement within Hybrid Instruction: Case of Master's Students at the University of Algiers 2

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Abstract

This article reports on a study aimed at investigating EFL Master's degree students' perceptions of task engagement in onsite and online end-of-term exams within hybrid instruction. The study further attempts to examine the reasons these students advance to justify their engagement with onsite and online modes of assessment. Towards these aims, a sequential, embedded mixed-methods approach was used. To obtain quantitative data, a questionnaire was administered to 40 Master 1 and 40 Master 2 students. Moreover, a semi-structured interview was used to gather qualitative data from 5 Master 1 and 5 Master 2 students. The overall findings of the study showed that students perceive onsite exams to be moderately more engaging when doing learning tasks than online exams, particularly at Master 1 level, but the results of Master 2 students' performance were less significant. The participants' perceptions were mainly motivated by the fairness, challenge, course credit, and extrinsic motivation of onsite exams. A closer analysis of the reasons they advanced to justify their onsite exam engagement revealed some factors related to challenges of online exams, such as issues of cheating and internet connection disturbances. It can therefore be suggested that if these problems were attended to adequately in the future, students' perceptions of task engagement with online-assessed courses may be improved, and hence be equally positive for onsite-assessed courses.

Keywords: Summative assessment; student task engagement; EFL Master's students; student perceptions; hybrid instruction; higher education in Algeria

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1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, there has been an intensive interest in "student task engagement". According to the literature, the latter is generally viewed as having a positive connotation when it comes to identifying what is central to higher education (HE). To cater for the demands of the highly competitive job market for qualified staff and the challenges of tertiary education, today's students have to be engaged "longer and more deeply" (Lawson & Lawson, 2013, p. 432). According to Trowler and Trowler (2010), students who are engaged in learning tasks are more likely to be successful students as engagement in educationally-oriented activities leads to favorable outcomes and an increase in their performance, persistence, and satisfaction. Moreover, Oga-Baldwin (2019) claims that engagement is "perhaps one of the most crucial steps in predicting how students succeed at languages in formal education settings" (p. 4). Egbert (2020a) also rightly remarked, "at a time when learners may be experiencing fear and chaos in other aspects of their lives, a focus on language task engagement is essential across both online and offline language learning contexts" (p. 314).

Wimpenny and Savin-Baden (2013) reported that student engagement can be affected favorably or adversely by the teacher's style and approach, the socio-cultural learning context, or the student's connection or disconnection with their peers, teachers, and expectations of academic study. High levels of academic integrity have been reported to be a factor that can increase student engagement (Maloshonok, 2016). Other factors affecting task engagement such as task challenge or difficulty, sense of control over the task, concentration, and interest and familiarity with the task topic (Egbert, 2003; Egbert, 2020b), as well as extrinsic motivating factors like attendance policy and course grade (Caulfield, 2010) have also been addressed by research. Assessment, however, has been little examined.

The focus of this paper is student task engagement in relation to summative assessment, which even when not used as the unique assessment form, often represents the largest proportion of a student's pass or fail score in a course. Given the scarcity of studies on summative assessment and students' perceptions of task engagement, specifically those in relation to the context of hybrid instruction, researching this topic seems to be fairly pertinent as it may help fill a significant gap in this area.

The goal of this research is twofold: to investigate how students perceive their task engagement in a course when assessed onsite and online, and to examine the reasons that make these students engage while doing learning tasks for each mode of assessment in the Master's courses. Based on this goal, one main research question has been formulated to frame the study:

How do Master's degree EFL students perceive their engagement with learning tasks when end-of-term exams are taken onsite and online?

A sub-question has also been posed to explore the factors leading to students' perceptions:

What reasons do these students advance to justify their engagement with learning tasks when end-of-term exams are taken onsite and online?

Before presenting the data collection and analysis methods used for this research, it seems essential to define some basic concepts and critically review relevant theoretical and empirical sources.

- ***Defining "Student Task Engagement"***

Learning and student engagement are issues that have become widely significant in the 21st century. Yet, there is relatively little empirical attention to "task engagement" in the L2 learning field (Aubrey et al., 2020). Prior to any definition of "student task engagement", the construct "student engagement", which is a more widespread term, should be clarified so as to avoid any confusion in terminology. To highlight the width of the concept of student engagement, Dunne and Owen (2013) state:

> [I]t is used in the same breath as student participation, involvement, commitment, effort, time on task or motivation. (…). It is linked to curriculum design and is claimed to be promoted by a variety of modes of teaching or learning, as well as by the nature of assessment and feedback provided for learners, to the role of peers as mentors, or to the power of technology to promote engagement. (p. xv)

Being such a multi-faceted term, engagement can therefore be conceived of as the active participation and meaningful involvement of students in university-related activities, either within the curriculum or outside it.

On the other hand, student 'task' engagement has been defined as "a state of 'heightened attention and involvement" in a learning task (Philp & Duchesne, 2016, p. 51), also as "involvement in initiating and carrying out learning activities specific to assigned earning tasks" (Caulfield, 2010, p. 1). What can be established from the above definitions is that students' task engagement can be determined not only by their meaningful involvement in the task and the attention they give to it, but also the initiative they take and the energy they put in order to accomplish the task.

- ***Students' Perceptions of Task Engagement and Assessment***

Robbins and Judge (2022) define perception as "a process by which we organize and interpret sensory impressions in order to give meaning to their environment" (p. 111). This implies that people's perceptions are their interpretations of what they see and hear and experience in their reality. In light of this definition, it can be argued that although students' perceptions of teaching and learning environments can sometimes lead them to bias, it is fair to say that these perceptions, when positive, can be very helpful for students to enhance their learning experiences. In the same vein, Fageeh (2015) asserts that understanding students' perceptions of learning environments is essential for enhancing teaching practices and learning outcomes. Drawing on Robbins and Judge's (2022) argument, we believe it is worth researching students' perceptions as their behaviours and decisions

are often based on their perception of what reality is, herein hybrid instruction and assessment.

However, few empirical studies are related to students' perceptions of task engagement in relation to assessment, and few are related to students' perceptions of online and onsite learning. In Tichavsky et al.'s (2015) study, for example, 56% of students had positive perceptions about onsite courses, comparing to hybrid courses (30%) and online courses (13.6%). Similarly, Kemp and Grieve (2014) concluded that students appreciated the flexibility of completing tasks online, but were more engaged when class discussions were conducted onsite. However, it is worth mentioning that Schlenz et al. (2020) reported a predominantly positive student perception of online learning as an indicator of high task engagement, and Boyles (2011) concluded that online learning is an enhancer of learning. Other studies revealed positive students' perceptions of flipped learning in general (Sebbah, 2019), while Fageeh (2015) concluded that students' perceptions of online testing are generated by their perceptions of self-efficacy, enjoyment, usefulness, behavioural intentions to use online assessment, system satisfaction and system challenges.

- ***Task Engagement and Assessment***

Research has shown that assessment is a key incentive to student engagement in HE. According to Rust (2002), students at university study strategically; they often choose to engage seriously with tasks if they are marked on them. Holmes (2017) further highlights that students are "assessment-driven" (p. 23). However, Bond et al. (2020) noted that educational technology assessment tools are more likely to lead to student disengagement. This may suggest that the assessment practices used by teachers in hybrid teaching/learning situations may also affect the quality of the learners' task engagement experience. For example, students might tune the degree of their engagement in class tasks to the mode of assessment that will be used to measure their performance or achievement in a specific course. Thus, Egbert (2020a) views assessment as one of the elements of a language task which can lead to increased levels of task engagement, and to improved task outcomes.

- ***Hybrid Instruction in Algerian Higher Education***

The hybridization of learning and teaching is not a new concept in Algerian HE. A number of studies were conducted on this issue before the Covid-19 pandemic and underscored the benefits of combined modes of instruction. Thus, an experimental study conducted by Arar (2015) at the university of Blida revealed that the use of a blended learning model, combining computer-assisted writing instruction and metacognitive awareness-raising instruction, had a positive effect on EFL students' proficiency in general and their achievement in writing in particular. Similarly, when investigating the impact of flipped learning on developing Algerian first year EFL degree students' reading ability at the university of

Algiers 2 and exploring their perceptions of using flipped learning, Sebbah (2019) found out that the experimental subjects in her study had positive perceptions of using the flipped learning model; she highlighted that "engaging in flipped learning supported flexibility, encouraged self-paced learning and interaction, enhanced intercommunication and autonomy, increased enjoyment, and assisted students in their learning process" (p. 7).

The unprecedented Covid-19 outbreak in 2020 forced Algerian university authorities to adopt a hybrid form of teaching/learning to ensure the continuity of university courses. Online learning/teaching, via Moodle platform and other online channels, was paired with the already existing onsite learning/teaching to prevent interruptions in the delivery of course contents. It is important to note that what was advocated by the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research was 'hybrid' teaching/learning. But in the context of this study, the terms 'hybrid' and 'blended' are not used interchangeably. While 'hybrid' instruction refers to a form of teaching that is roughly balanced between face-to-face and online formats (about 50/50), 'blended' instruction refers to "a mostly traditional face-to-face course that incorporates a few class sessions' worths of online instruction (think 25/75)". (re: The Center for Excellence in Learning and Teaching (CELT) at Iowa State University, 2020)

- ***Summative Assessment within Hybrid Instruction in Algeria***

During and even after theCovid-19 health crisis, universities worldwide adopted both online and onsite (face-to-face) assessment procedures. This resulted in three types of assessments: (1) synchronous, face-to-face; (2) synchronous, online; and (3) asynchronous, online tests (Muhammad & Ockey, 2021). However, online test delivery came with many challenges as unfamiliarity with online test technology, security issues, which further raised fairness issues (Muhammad & Ockey, 2021), and internet connectivity issues (Kearns, 2012; Muhammad & Ockey, 2021).

In the Department of English of the University of Algiers 2, and at Master's degree level, online end-of-term exams were used to assess students' achievement in transversal and discovery courses, while onsite exams were used with fundamental courses, namely skills, content, and methodology courses. A total of 6 courses out of 10 in the first year and a total of 3 courses out of 9in the second year were assessed online.

It should be noted as well that in Algerian universities, the first year of the Master's degree level (M1) includes two semesters S1 and S2 (each semester including 10 courses). M2 is the second year of the Master's degree level, which includes two semesters, S3 and S4. S3 includes 9 courses and S4 is devoted exclusively to dissertation writing.

2. Research Method

In the present study, a sequential, embedded mixed-methods research design was adopted. The approach was initially meant to be explanatory, which would start with a quantitative phase that later on would guide the

choice of the qualitative phase for a more focused follow up investigation. But due to some organizational issues,we opted for an exploratory approach, with an embedded design in which the qualitative data obtained from a semi-structured interview in the second phase of the research were used to support and strengthen the quantitative data gathered in the first phase.

2.1.Participants

The participants are first and second year EFL students majoring for a Master's degree in Didactics of Foreign Languages. The rationale behind the choice of this population is that the participants had already completed a minimum of three years as undergraduate students culminating with a Licence (Bachelor's) degree and thus had a reasonable experience of studying English on the university campus. This choice would thus allow us to collect useful, relevant and detailed data in line with this study's purposes. There was a total of 40 M1 students, including 6 male and 34 female, and 40 M2 students, including 4 male and 36 female.

Half of the M1 participants (n=20) reported that they had a job, 12 were involved in a university sport, or music club, while 5 of the participants reported reading simultaneously for another degree. As for the M2 participants, 18 of them stated that they had a job, 9 were part of a university sport, or music club, and 5 studied for another degree. Moreover, one participant reported having a family, with two children to take care of. One can note that at this stage of their university pathway, students feel mature enough to make additional commitments, which results in many of them not dedicating themselves exclusively to university study. Besides, students reading for a Master's degree are eligible to work; this encourages many of them to get a job in order to gain experience.

2.2.Data Collection Instruments

Data were collected through two research tools: a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The purpose of the questionnaire (Appendix A) was to gather quantitative data about the participants' perceptions of task engagement in relation to onsite and online end-of-term examinations, and the reasons that motivated their perceptions. The questionnaire contained a demographic information section which inquired about the participants' gender and commitments outside university. This section was followed by two closed-ended questions, one of which included an open-ended sub-question as a follow-up question to further examine the participants' responses on key issues in the research.

To triangulate the research, and to dig deeper into students' perceptions of their engagement when doing learning tasks and assessment modes in end-of-term exams across the two years of Master's degree, a semi-structured interview was conducted with a smaller number of students (10 out of the 40 students who responded to the questionnaires at each Master's level). The interview (Appendix B) included two main questions and two sub-questions which targeted the identification of the procedure followed when taking online exams as well as the students' perceptions of their task engagement

and the reasons behind it in onsite- and online-assessed courses in end-of-term exams.

2.3.Data Collection Procedure

The questionnaires were administered to the participants onsite in February 2023, at the end of the first semester for Master 1 students and the end of the third semester for Master 2 students in the academic year 2022-2023.

Five M1 students and five M2 students took part in the semi-structured interview (4 female and 1 male M1 students, and4 female and 1 male M2 students). Their age ranged between 21 and 23 years old. The interviews were conducted onsite about a week after the administration of the questionnaires, and at an interval of one week, with M1 students being interviewed first. All the ten participants gave their consent to participate in the interviews, but some of them did not accept to be recorded. So field notes were taken down during the interviews.

Both the questionnaire and interview items were piloted before their actual use. This allowed the adjustment of the wording of some questions.

2.4.Method of Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to analyse the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaires. The results are presented in the form of crosstabulations in order to compare the data across the two years of study. As for the interviews, coding, content and thematic analysis were used to analyse the qualitative data obtained.

3. Results

The findings of the study are displayed in tables and figures. The results of the two research tools are presented separately in this section and are later fused in the discussion section.

3.1. Results of the M1 and M2 students' questionnaire

The data obtained from the questionnaires are presented in the following tables and figures. Each table or figure represents the responses given to each of the main questions or the follow-up question. A brief analysis of each table and figure is provided to highlight major or intriguing findings, and to uncover patterns of responses to the open-ended question.

Table 1. Digital devices used by students to study

		Laptop	Smartphone	Tablet	None of the above	Other devices	Total
M1	Frequency	29	33	1	0	0	40
	Percentage	72.5%	82.5%	2.5%	0%	0%	100%
M2	Frequency	33	31	1	0	0	40
	Percentage	82.5%	77.5%	2.5%	0%	0%	100%
Total M1+M2	Frequency	62	64	2	0	0	80
	Percentage	77.5%	80%	2.5%	0%	0%	100%

As can be seen in Table 1, all the participants reported using smartphones and laptops as main study tools (80%), with M2 students slightly outnumbering their M1 counterparts in the use of laptops (82.5%), and M1 students slightly advantaging the use of smartphones over laptops (82.5%).

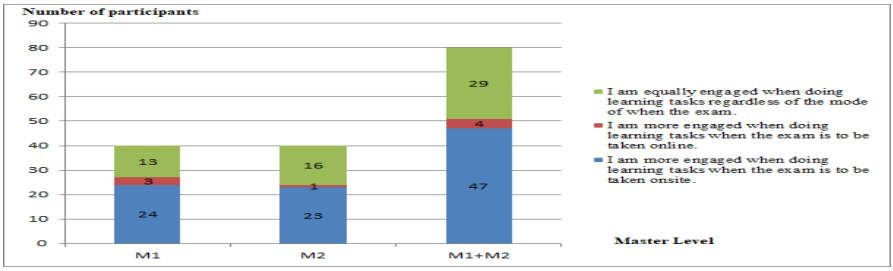

Fig. 1.Students' perceptions of their degree of task engagement in learning tasks in relation to onsite and online assessment modes

Fig.1. above shows that students' perceptions of task engagement are almost identical across the two levels of study. 47/80 perceive more engagement when doing tasks when the exam is onsite whereas 29/80 respondents asserted that their degree of engagement is the same. Only 4/80 respondents perceive more task engagement when the exam is online.

Table 2.Students' reasons behind their task engagement in relation to onsite and online assessment modes

Level	Task engagement in relation to onsite or online assessment mode	Reasons of task engagement	NR
M1	**A. I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken onsite.**	- Onsite exams are fairer (documents and digital devices are not allowed; they decrease students' cheating opportunities). - Onsite exams are more effortful and challenging. - Onsite exams are used to assess high credit courses. - Onsite exams are more motivating.	18 14 4 4
	B. I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken online.	- Online exams are less stressful. - Online exams are more convenient.	2 1
	C. I am equally engaged when doing learning tasks regardless of the mode of when the exam.	- Both are important. - Both exams contribute to learning. - Both exams contribute to success. - Both exams require effort in information processing. - Both exams require extensive reading. - Both exams are motivating.	9 3 3 2 1 1
M2	**A. I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken onsite**	- Onsite exam are fairer (they decrease students' cheating opportunities; documents and digital devices are not allowed). - Onsite exams are more effortful and challenging. -Onsite exams include easier questions, hence less time pressure. - Onsite exams' setting involves fewer distractions compared to online ones. - Onsite exams do not include connection and network issues. - Students are used to onsite exams ("we got used to them from primary school").	9 9 4 4 2 1
	B. I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken online.	- Online exams are less stressful.	1
	C. I am equally engaged when doing learning tasks regardless of the mode of when the exam.	- Both are important. - Both exams require effort in information processing. - Both exams contribute to learning. - Both exams have disadvantages (internet issues and suspicion of plagiarism in online exams increase anxiety, but they are practical; onsite exams rely on memorization and decrease creativity, but there are no cheating or internet issues).	6 6 2 2

Table 2 shows that there is a significant divergence in students' perceptions of onsite and online exams in categories A and B. In category **A**, M1 and M2 respondents agree that this is mainly due to the fact that onsite exam are fairer than online exams as documents and digital devices are not allowed and students are invigilated by teachers, and that these exams are more challenging than online exams. Other interesting, but quantitatively less significant, reasons reported are the high number of credits attributed to onsite-assessed courses, the extrinsic motivation they provide students with, students' familiarity with them, and the comfort of not having to worry about the distractions and technical issues experienced in online exams.

In category **B**, 3/4 respondents related their engagement to the fact that online exams make them less stressful as they can consult their course documents and check concepts on Google, which makes them more relaxed (and engaged) when doing tasks during the course. Convenience was the reason given by the last respondent who stated that he has a job, and thus this exam mode engages him more in his learning tasks.

Table 3. Students' final comments about hybrid instruction and assessment

Level	Topic	Students' verbatim comments
M1	**Reality of hybrid instruction**	*"Eventhough we are supposed to study hybridly, in practice almost all teachers send handouts and for them it is considered as online teaching. That's why, I think a lot of students are more engaged onsite."* *"Online studying has benefits; however, relying on it has made us struggle with studies in general. Interactions in onsite classes are necessary."*
M2	**Online exams issues**	*"In the near future, I would like that stakeholders find a solution to make online exams more credible, for instance checking students' identity while doing exams."* *"Network problems cause much stress to students. I would suggest doing longer stretches of writing, like analyzing articles, in online exams with much more time given to students."* *"Teachers must educate themselves digitally. Teachers can know if their students cheated or not while taking online examinations. They have to avoid penalizing students for things they did not do."*
	Online classes issues	*"As enriching as online classes may be, they are extremely time-consuming and draining. Teachers must find innovative ways to keep them light and interesting."*

Table 3 above illustrates the final comments made by some participants. One M1 respondent complained that, for many teachers, teaching online classes means uploading lesson handouts on Moodle, or emailing them to students without any interaction. M2 respondents also reported the lack of innovative ways on the teachers' part to make their classes more interesting. Cheating and network disruption problems were reported to hinder the fairness and reliability of the exam scores. Participants suggested checking students' identity or using other types of assessments to avoid cheating.

3.2.Results of the M1 and M2 students' interview

Coding, content and thematic analysis were used to analyse the qualitative data obtained from the interviews. M1 participants were coded as M1-P1, M1-P2, M1-P3, M1-P4, and M1-P5. M2 participants were coded as M2-P1, M2-P2, M2-P3, M2-P4, and M2-P5.

Table 4. Students' description of the online exam procedure

Level	Online exam procedure pattern	Respondents' verbatim responses
M1	**1.** Teacher sends exam question to all students via Moodle/Google Classroom or to students' delegate via email. **2.** Students are allotted 90 or 120 mins to answer (depending on the course) with 5 to 10 additional mins to late students. **3.** Students upload their answers in *Word* or *PDF* files on Moodle or send them to the teacher via email.	**P1:***"For me, it's a complex procedure. Some teachers send us the exam questions on Moodle or Google Classroom because not all students have access to Moodle. We are to open our Google accounts and click on the link to the exam question. It's always one hour and a half plus 5 minutes for late respondents because of internet issues. But if you exceed one hour, your answer is not accepted."* **P2:***"The teacher sends the exam questions via email to the delegate, then the latter shares it with us in a group chat. Then, we upload it on our phones. Some teachers specify the format of the file we send (PDF or Word). We only use Moodle for lessons."* **P3:** *"They [teachers] send you the exam file with questions to the delegate by email or through Google. The exam time is generally one hour and a half. Ah….. it's a lot of trouble to be honest… Sometimes we have delays, the email [the student's answer]is not sent … there is a bug… and sometimes they [teachers]do not believe you. They think you are trying to cheat."* **P4:** *"They [teachers] tell us about the time of the exam and then they send us [the exam question] via email. They give us just one hour and a half. We do it and then we send it via email."* **P5:** *"Google doesn't work very well. So the teachers send us the exam questions via email. They usually give us one hour and a half to send the answer. For Translation exam, the teacher sends the exam via Google Classroom and we answer in the same way."*
M2	**1.** Teacher sends exam question to all students via Moodle/Google Classroom or to students' delegate via email. **2.** Students are allotted 90 or 120 mins to answer (depending on the module) with 5 to 10 additional mins to late students. **3.** Students upload their answers in *Word* or *PDF* format on Moodle or to the teacher via email.	**P1:** *"Teachers send us exam questions via Moodle. A link directs us to a Word file including the question(s) with guidelines and conditions about plagiarism and time allotted for the exam. In case there are problems with the platform, we send the answers to the teacher's professional email address."* **P2:** *"The teacher gives the exam topic to the group delegate who shares it on our Facebook group. When we finish, we send the exam answers via email (most of the time) or via Google Classroom."* **P3:***"This year, almost all teachers used Moodle platform. They upload the exam question on the exam section of the module. Then we download the exam file and we answer within a time limit. They may add 10 extra minutes. If there are any issues with Moodle or internet connection, we send it [the exam answer] via the teacher's email address. Another way is the teacher sends the exam file to the delegate 10 minutes before the exam and then the delegate shares it with us on Facebook group."* **P4:***"I open either Moodle or Google Classroom or my email box, just in case the preceding does not work or the link to the exam does not work. The teacher may also send the link to the delegate who, in turn, posts it on our Facebook group."* **P5:** *"The teacher sends the exam question to the delegate by email and the delegate posts the exam on our Facebook group. Students write the answer in Word format and send it to the teacher by email, Google Classroom or Google Forms or via Moodle."*

According to the participants, all online exams were asynchronous. Internet connectivity issues and Moodle platform system failures were also highlighted by both M1 (P1, P3, P5) and M2 respondents (P1, P3, P4). The figures below represent the participants' perceptions of task engagement in relation to the onsite and online modes of assessment.

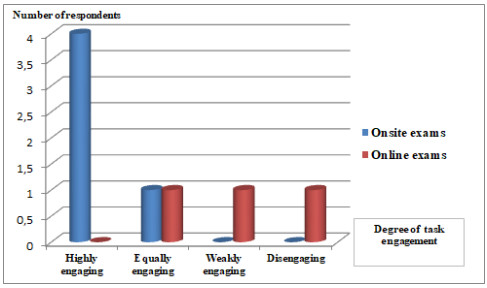

Fig.2. M1 students' perceptions of engaging modes of assessment

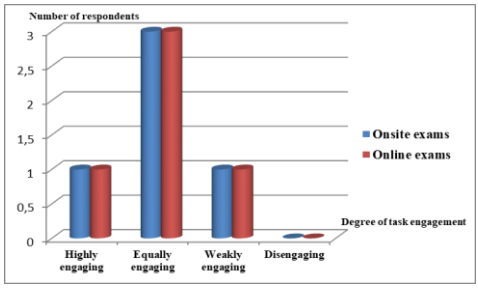

Fig.3. M2 students' perceptions of engaging modes of assessment

Figs. 2 and 3 are more nuanced than Fig.1 in terms of degrees of task engagement. While most M1 participants (4/5) perceive onsite exams to be highly engaging, one student perceives both exams to be equally engaging. P3, however, said that she perceives online exams to be disengaging as evidence of engagement like meaningful involvement, initiative or energy when doing tasks is nowhere to be found in her response. P1 also reported weak engagement with online-assessed courses. In M2, the results are less conclusive. More than half of the participants (3/5) perceive online and onsite exams to be equally engaging, one student perceives online exams highly engaging and another one perceives onsite exams highly engaging.

Table 5. Students' reasons for their perceptions of engaging modes of examination

Level	Degree of engagement	NR	Respondent's reasons for engagement
M1	**Onsite exams** highly engaging +**Online exams** weakly engaging	4	**P1:***"If the exam is online, I will not be really engaged with the tasks (either in onsite or in online classes). I am more engaged with the tasks because I have to train myself for the onsite exam. For online exams, I usually go and look for other sources (other than the teacher's sources). I lack motivation. I'm not a digital learner at all. I prefer pen and paper ….the traditional way."*
	Onsite exams highly engaging		**P2:** "*There is a big difference between having the exam onsite or online. The difference is that some of us, those who study hard don't miss classes. When the exam is to be onsite, I will be engaged 100% because I'm going to make a search for every detail and because I will be expecting any type of question. It's more challenging for me. But I prefer to have exams online because of my busy schedule. I don't think online exams would reflect the real intellectual level of the students. It's more a question of convenience for me."*
	Onsite exams highly engaging+ **Online exams** disengaging	1	**P3:**"*Because no one is watching you [in online exams]. You're gonna just read and answer. It [the online exam] hinders the learning. The connection goes off and on and sometimes it's [the online exam] scheduled late at night…..So, why bother? I'm not engaged. I just read the lectures through or take notes passively when the class is onsite in order to take the exam online. When the exam is onsite, I 'm fully engaged. I take my classes seriously. I listen to the teacher; I take notes; I ask questions whenever I don't understand. To be honest, the problem is also in the teacher. The teacher can for example use educational games for adults, interaction, or lesson presentations by students to motivate them and keep them focused on the tasks. It's fun learning, We think it's interesting because they make it interesting, not just memorise this like spoonfeeding."*
	Onsite exams highly engaging		**P4:***"I engage more when the exam is to be taken onsite. But I engage because the module is fundamental and in general all fundamental modules with high credit are tested onsite. We have to work hard in order to have a good mark. It's mainly because of the importance of the module… and the mark as well."*

	Onsite and online exams equally engaging	1	**P5:** *"It doesn't matter for me as we are taking the same lessons. For me all the modules are important. I am as engaged in the fundamental as in the non-fundamental modules. But I consider online exams easier because I am in my comfort zone. When I'm at home, in my room, I'm more comfortable."*
M2	**Online exams** highly engaging + O**nsite exams** weakly engaging	1	**P1:** *"For onsite exams, I'm not highly engaged. I just attend and try to catch something from the teacher's explanation. I depend more on the teacher to provide me with information about the course, so that's why I'm not likely to engage. On a scale of 10, the teacher's share may be 7/10 and my share is 3/10. If the exam is online, it's completely the opposite. I feel more engaged because my contribution should be more than the teacher's. On a scale of 10, it is 7/10 effort for me and 3/10 from the teacher. In some other cases, it depends on the teacher and his/her way of delivering the course content. I have fears about not being able to make it in the exam, so I start making my own efforts offsite. I study to compensate lack of understanding."*
	Onsite exams highly engaging +**Online exams** weakly engaging	1	**P2:** *"When the exam is to be taken onsite, I have to be more prepared because the day of the exam I do not have any devices or documents to use. In online exams, I can check my summaries (at least), so this makes me less engaged during the course. My degree of engagement is higher when the exam is to be taken onsite."*
	Onsite and online exams equally engaging	3	**P3:** *"This depends on the module. Last year, when the module's credit is high, automatically, the exam is taken onsite. So I am highly engaged during the course…. I prepare my lessons, I ask questions, I focus, I attend classes (I don't miss them). When the exam is online, I may skip classes, I revise in the last minute….. This year, it's different. I'm engaged whatever the mode of the exam is. Now I give importance to all the modules. I apply what I learn in my job [teaching]. "* **P4:** *"It doesn't matter for me whether the exam is going to take place online or onsite. My engagement is the same. For me, teachers are clever enough to adapt exam questions to the mode of assessment (online or onsite). One of the teachers asked exam questions related directly to her own classroom explanation. We could not Google the answers the day of the online exam. That's why, I'm actively engaged in my learning tasks regardless of the mode of the exam."* **P5:** *"I personally give both exams the same importance. I am equally engaged. I don't miss my classes, I do homework, I participate, I ask questions or clarifications, I prepare essays and ask for teachers' feedback in both cases [when the course's exam is online or onsite]."*

Table 5 demonstrates that the reasons advanced by the four M1 participants to justify their high degree of engagement in onsite-assessed courses are the challenge they involve and their familiarity with these forms of assessment (P1), the students' difficulty to rely on lecture notes or digital devices (P2) and the credit the course is worth (P4). In M2, the reasons justifying the equal degree of engagement in both online- and onsite-assessed courses are the perceived usefulness and importance of all the courses (P3, P5) and the similar degree of difficulty in both exam modes. The role of the teacher was also perceived as a factor that alters task engagement for M1-P3 and M2-P1. Although M1-P2 and M1-P5 appreciated the convenience of doing tasks online in their own time, they perceived onsite exams as highly engaging (M1-P2) and as engaging as online exams (M1-P5).

4. Discussion

The objective of this study is to examine how students perceive their task engagement in a course when assessed onsite and online, and the reasons that make them engage in each mode of assessment of the Master's course.

This section discusses the findings of the present study and attempts to answer the main research question and sub-question.

Cross-checking the questionnaire quantitative data and the interview qualitative data has revealed the following:

4.1.Positive Students' Perceptions of Task Engagement in Onsite-Assessed Courses, Generally

According to the questionnaire's responses (Fig.1), M1 and M2 students' perceptions of task engagement were more positive in onsite-assessed courses than in online-assessed ones. This finding seems quite compelling due to the highly digitalized student population involved in the research (100% of the participants reported using either laptops or smart phones to study); the analysis of the qualitative data obtained (Table 2) helps make sense of this result.

4.2.Reasons of Student Task Engagement in Onsite-and Online-Assessed Courses

Four themes emerged from the reasons given by the participants to positively engage in onsite-assessed courses: fairness, challenge, course credit, and motivation.

4.2.1. Fairness

The fairness that characterizes the test-taking environment in onsite exams was the major motive reported by the participants to justify their perceptions of the higher degree of task engagement. Being invigilated by teachers, students have very limited opportunities to cheat using unauthorized documents or devices. Students' perception of engagement is more likely to increase when a high level of academic honesty is ensured, as demonstrated by Maloshonok (2016)'s study.

4.2.2. Challenge and Effort

Another reason mentioned by the respondents is the amount of challenge and effort that onsite exams usually involve, which makes them engage more during the course to do well in the exam. This finding corroborates Egbert's (2020b), who asserts that "a challenge and skills balance helps to engage learners because they perceive that the task is doable yet requires some effort." (p. 112). However, very few respondents perceive more engagement with learning tasks when the exam is online because the convenience of taking the exam at home reduces their worry about the course. But the assertion that online exams reduce stress was disproved in many studies (Bernik & Jereb, 2006; Shraim, 2019), as the real challenges are the technical problems, and unfamiliarity with technology, as discussed below, which increase students' stress. This point was stressed by one M2 participant: *"Network problems cause much stress to students"* (Table 3).

In sum, onsite exams were generally perceived to be highly engaging because of students' reliance on themselves and their personal effort to retrieve information to answer exam questions and achieve well, as explained by the participants P1 and P2.

4.2.3. Course Credit

Some respondents associated their engagement to the credits a course is worth (P4). This explains their strategic preference for the onsite exam mode as high-credit fundamental courses are assessed onsite and non-fundamental ones are assessed online. This finding is supported by Rust (2002) who argues that "students are likely to take a strategic approach to their studies, and in general only seriously engage with learning tasks if they are going to be assessed, with marks attached" (p. 153). This result is similar to Caulfield's (2010) finding that extrinsically motivating factors like course grade could positively influence student engagement.

4.2.4. Motivation

Few M1 participants reported the extrinsic motivation that onsite-assessed exams provide them with, compared to online exams. Knowing that online-assessed courses are almost exclusively taught online, with very few onsite classes only, and that the participants' experience with online instruction is very limited, this may explain their little motivation to engage with the course tasks. This finding is supported by Tichavsky et al. (2015) who reported that students with very limited experience in online classes claimed that they would not be motivated enough to engage in the course or complete the work without attending a face-to-face class.

Motivation was also reported by P1 who voiced his preference of pen-and-paper onsite exams which increase task engagement.

As for P5, his positive perception of onsite exams and task engagement seem to be generated by his intrinsic motivation. With reference to Ryan and Deci's (2000, p. 56) definition of intrinsic motivation as "the doing of an activity for its inherent satisfactions", this result somewhat corroborates Hennessey et al.'s (2015) assumption that the pleasure coming from within the doer of the task is gained from his/her engagement in the task.

It is also worth noting that lack of active interaction with teachers and peers and lack of teacher feedback in online learning environments can affect student task engagement, as reported by some studies (Tichavsky et al., 2015; Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

4.2.5. Other Factors

Other factors affecting onsite and online assessment with respect to student task engagement (or disengagement) include the following:

- ***Perceived usefulness of onsite- and online-assessed courses***

The participants who viewed onsite- and online-assessed courses as equally engaging justified their response by the perceived usefulness of the tasks performed in each mode outside the university, as stated by P3. This finding is similar to Fageeh's (2015) study in which perceived usefulness is one of the generators of students' perceptions of online testing.

- ***Development of autonomous learning with online-assessed courses***

M2-P1 perceived online exams to be highly engaging and she justified this by saying *"I have fears about not being able to make it in the exam, so I*

start making my own efforts offsite. I study to compensate lack of understanding." This view corroborates that of Fageeh (2015) which reported that students were willing to spend more time on tasks to gain understanding and to strive for better achievement in the online assessment.

- ***Online assessment challenges***

What can be inferred from the responses relating to why students perceived the onsite assessment mode as more engaging when doing learning tasks is that they were weakly motivated by their negative experiences with online assessment**.**

According to the results, all M1 and M2 interviewees reported that the online exams they took were asynchronous (Table 4), and this generated a number of issues. Fairness and internet connectivity issues were reported by the respondents both in the questionnaires and the interviews, and are in accordance with Muhammad and Ockey's (2021) findings. This may justify students' poor engagement (and sometimes disengagement) when doing learning tasks in the courses assessed online.

The possibility of cheating in the non-proctored online exams remains a major concern for many students, who considered these exams unfair (see Tables 2, 3 and 5). As one of the interviewees (M1-P2) declares, "*I don't think online exams would reflect the real intellectual level of the students"*. This finding is consistent with the studies by Karaman (2011) and Shraim (2019). Similarly, Garg and Goel (2022) state that cheating in exams leads to a misrepresentation of a learner's ability and knowledge.

Another concern reported by some respondents is network and internet connectivity and intermittent technology failure (Tables 2, 3 and 5). This was confirmed by a number of studies (Bernik & Jereb, 2006; Kearns, 2012; Muhammad & Ockey, 2021). This concern about online assessment technology might lead in some cases to task disengagement, as reported by M1-P3. This view is also supported by Bond et al.'s (2020). Indeed, one participant (M1-P3) expressed her disengagement in online-assessed courses and her frustration due to lack of academic honesty, internet connectivity problems, and inconvenient test schedule in online exams. Bond et al. (2020) also stressed the likelihood of student disengagement as a result of online assessment tools.

- ***Teacher's method***

Another factor, not specifically researched in this study, but worth pointing to, is the teacher's method of lesson delivery. Students' responses in the interviews drew attention to the teacher's method or way of teaching as a factor that may increase or decrease their engagement (e.g. P3).According to M1 and M2 interviewees, the classroom dynamics and the interaction the teacher creates in class are more likely to engage them than the mode of assessment used in end-of-term exams. This goes in line with Wimpenny and Savin-Baden's (2013) claim that "[s]tudents hold expectations about their interactions with academics when entering higher

education. An academics style and approach can thus adversely affect student engagement. ” (p. 20)

- ***Ambiguity of hybrid instruction***

Students’ final comments in the questionnaire (Table 3) are quite insightful. Some participants’ task engagement in onsite-assessed courses stems from the absence of a genuine hybridity in the teaching of the different courses, as commented by an M1 respondent: *“Eventhough we are supposed to study hybridly, in practice almost all teachers send handouts and for them it is considered as online teaching. That’s why, I think a lot of students are more engaged onsite.”* It can be argued that teachers’ difficulty to adapt to the online teaching mode, which is an integral component of hybrid teaching, was bound to create a gap between their intentions and students’ expectations. This finding is consistent with Wimpenny and Savin-Baden’s (2013) claim that students’ disconnection with academic expectations can affect their engagement. The type of ‘hybrid’ teaching used in the context of this study, as reported by the respondent above, is rather ambiguous and unclear, and raises the question of ‘how hybrid is the instruction?’ The teaching practices used do not seem to align with what hybridity in teaching and learning is supposed to be (CELT, 2020). These practices are another form of blended learning wherein teachers and students are heavily invested in face-to-face teaching, learning, and assessment. Unless teachers invest more efforts to teach truly hybridly, students would not appreciate the benefits of this type of instruction which is developing fast everywhere in the world.

Having discussed the findings of this study, in relation to the theoretical framework and previous research findings, it can be concluded that fairness issues, technical problems, lack of balance in the credits of onsite- and online-assessed course credits, teacher’s lack of investment in hybrid instruction are factors contributing to students’ perceptions of weak task engagement and disengagement in online-assessed courses. Considering Robbins and Judge’s (2022) arguments that “[p]eople’s behavior and decisions are based on their perception of what reality is” (p.111) and that factors “shape and sometimes distort perception” (p. 112), if the factors hindering engagement through online assessment are dealt with, students’ perceptions of this assessment mode can be rendered more positive; hence they could optimize their engagement in the two modes of assessment.

4.3.Study Limitations

The main limitation of this study was the difficulty of having a purposive sampling in the interview. The students were not very cooperative and did not volunteer to participate in the interviews. As a result, the participants were not selected according to the responses they gave in the questionnaire, but according to their willingness or availability to answer the interview questions, the latter being regarded as an additional source of data to

triangulate the results. Had this condition been ensured, the study would have been more conclusive.

5. Conclusion

The goal of this research was to investigate students' perceptions of their task engagement in a course when assessed onsite and online, and to examine the reasons that make these students engage while doing learning tasks for each mode of assessment at two Master's degree levels. The findings revealed that students perceive their task engagement moderately higher when courses are assessed onsite, comparing to courses assessed online, specifically in the first year of the Master's degree study. These perceptions are driven by the fairness, challenge, high credits and motivation reported in onsite exams. In addition, a closer examination of the reasons advanced by the participants to justify their engagement when course exam is done onsite revealed some factors related to the challenges resulting from online exams' implementation, such as cheating and internet connection disturbances, which sometimes distort their online exam experience. Based on data gathered in this research and other studies, online exams can be viewed as a practical option for many of the increasingly digitally-inclined students. Nonetheless, teachers should find innovative ways to engage students, to accommodate to their demands of more flexible learning, and to maintain a high standard of exam validity in online exams within hybrid teaching/learning contexts.

What should be retained too is that Algerian HE has only recently embarked officially on the online mode of assessment; thus, raising awareness about the latter and changing faculty members' and students' perceptions of online teaching, learning and assessment are badly needed for the success of hybrid instruction as a whole. If hybrid assessment continues to be part of the long-term strategic plan for HE in Algeria, then we need to attend to the factors that hinder students' perceptions of their engagement with this form of assessment, and which are often associated with online testing. Potentiating online exam fairness, dealing with network disturbances and platform system failures, revising exam credit weighting across the online- and onsite-assessed courses, and supporting teachers in their transition to hybrid modes of lesson delivery through teacher development programmes can substantially help in enhancing students' perceptions of their task engagement in the online mode, hence maximizing their engagement in relation to these two modes of assessment.

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7. Appendices

Appendix A: Questionnaire to Master's Students

1. Gender: Female ☐ Male ☐

2. a) Do you have any other commitments outside your university study?

Yes ☐ No ☐

b) If yes, please, specify which one(s).

- Study (another degree) ☐ - Work ☐ - Sport/Theatre/Music club ☐

Other (please, specify) ……

3. Which digital device(s) do you use to study?

- A laptop ☐ - A smartphone ☐ - A tablet ☐ - None of the above ☐

Other (please, specify) ……..……..……

4. a) Which of the statements below mostly applies to your personal experience as a Master student? (Please, tick<u>one</u> answer <u>only</u>)

- I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken onsite. ☐

- I am more engaged when doing learning tasks when the exam is to be taken online. ☐

- I am equally engaged when doing learning tasks regardless of the mode of when the exam. ☐

Other (please, specify) ……..……..……

b) Explain why? ……

Please add any further comments here:……...

Appendix B: Interview questions to Master's Students

Q1: Please, explain briefly the online exam procedure.

Q2: Would you please describe your engagement with the learning tasks when the exam mode is onsite and when it is online? Why do you engage?