English foreign language students attitudes towards online university assessment: limitations and potential solutions

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English foreign language students attitudes towards online university assessment: limitations and potential solutions

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Abstract

Coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19) has affected all life's tasks, including teaching and assessment. Teachers and students throughout the world have faced a distinct context in which online assessment has to function fully. This paper focuses on University students' opinion about online assessment during the ongoing pandemic of Covid-19. A questionnaire was administered to 26 Licence English language students at Mohammed Seddik Ben Yahia University of Jijel. The aim of this data collection and the study is to unveil possible limitations of English language online assessment and potential solutions to render this imposing practice of networked assessment effective and valid. The study revealed that most of the students had mixed feelings towards the use of online assessment, mainly because of internet problems, lack of technological means, and cheating; however, they equally reported liking home as a perfect exam-taking environment and having progressed in the use of internet and technological means. Finally, the study concludes that technological backwardness of the country is the major hindrance to online assessment; consequently, it suggests, among many other solutions, setting up a national plan for equipping both teachers and learners with cheaper computers and internet access.

Keywords: Online assessment, E-learning, Internet, Assessment challenges, Synchronic assessment.

Introduction

Because of Coronavirus disease of 2019 (Covid-19), the Algerian Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research issued as early as March as 2020 a decree notifying teachers to prepare their courses for a potential shift to online teaching (Boukhdouni & Benachour, 2020; Mami & Deramchiya, 2020). Earlier, the Ministry had already attempted to establish and prepare an online teaching platform called Moodle; however, both the Ministry and the teachers were lukewarm and uncertain about its use. This is partly because physical presence teaching is much valued and appreciated by all educational parties including the students and, partly because the lack of technological advancements and paucity of telecommunication means prevented educational stake-holders from experiencing with this instructional mode.

However, during the confinement that followed the outbreak of Covid-19, both teachers and students were required to continue the academic year through online means of communication. The teachers were instructed by the Ministry to post their lectures online and the students were supposed to study from home (Bensalem, 2020; Boukhdouni & Benachour, 2020; Mami & Deramchiya, 2020). This unique experience revealed many problems in relation to virtual instruction. To note, but a few, the teachers and the students lacked adequate internet access and means of telecommunication, the students complained of the difficulty of studying away from their teachers, and assessment seemed almost impossible.

One of the challenging issues in relation to online teaching/learning is assessment. Fair and valid assessment is hardly achievable online (Hewson, & Charlton, 2019). Accordingly, the physical distance between the student and teacher is problematic (Kearns, 2012). In fact the teacher needs to verify the identity of the learner and make sure that the answers are provided by him or her. Additionally, the students complain

of lack of technological access means to take their exams at the right time.

As online assessment has become a reality of the Algerian higher education classes, it is time to look at the students' views about this new evaluation mode. Since the beginning of the 2020-2021 academic years, the Algerian higher education authorities have imposed distance assessment of some secondary modules. For example, in English foreign language (EFL) classes such modules as "Communication Practices", "Italian", and "Statistics" have been assessed at distance, either through written assignments or online through the use of Google Forms, Google Meet, and Zoom. Consequently, the students who have already experienced e-assessment can report their experiences and make their views known.

This study aims to unveil the Licence EFL students' opinion about online assessment at Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia University. More specifically, it looks (1) to evaluate its acceptability by this population, (2) explore its major hurdles with regard to its application in the Algerian context, and (3) find out potential solutions from the perspective of the learner.

1. Definition of the Construct

Online assessment is one type of distance assessment and it is considered by far as the most popular and timely mode of remote assessment. It is the type of assessment that takes place over the internet, either synchronously or asynchronously (Stern, 2012). Synchronous assessment is conducted through real-time interaction between the teacher and students whereas asynchronous assessment is not conducted at different times, no real time interaction (Liu & Chen, 2018). For instance, when the examiner provides a test that the students should answer on the spot, it is considered as synchronous assessment; and when he/she gives the test and allows the students to answer at their own pace,

it is regarded as asynchronous. This investigation is concerned with both synchronous and asynchronous assessment modes and, consequently, does not involve correspondence assessment that is usually conducted through offline written assignments.

2. Methodology

In order to explore the issue of online assessment from the learner standpoint, this study employs a qualitative research design. An open-ended questionnaire was administered to 26 EFL Licence students at Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia University. This sample had already taken part in online assessment in different modules such as in "Research Methodology", "Communication Practices", and "Italian Foreign Language". Most of these assessments were in the form of online written assignments to complete at home, Google forms tasks, and sometimes Google Meet sessions.

The questionnaire was open-ended to allow the students to express themselves freely and unravel new insights that the researcher himself might have not thought of (Tsui, 2001). According to Cresswell (2002), when the questions of the questionnaire are less imposing on the informants, it is more likely to get original and novel findings. In other words, when the researcher does not force the student to focus on given and predetermined topics, the respondents will indulge in spontaneity and expression of their deep mind. Consequently, the researcher took the risk of getting valuable findings at the expense of testing routine research themes that have been deeply researched.

The open-end questionnaire simply included the following question: *Tell us all about your experience (usefulness, advantages, disadvantages, and limitations) of online assessment?* It was distributed via Google Form which made its implementation quick and more practical. Additionally, it yielded a satisfactory level of responsiveness; as a matter of fact that, 26 copies were fully completed. In fact, one of the advantages of

Google Form questionnaire is the use of the option of "answer all or none".

Google from is limited in terms of the analysis of qualitative data as the answers were provided in prose. Consequently, the researcher employed Strauss and Cobin (1997) grounded theory. In simpler terms, data were used to build up a theory or an explanation to a phenomenon using a bottom-up approach. The data obtained from the texts yielded by the students were used to find an explanatory model to online assessment positive and negative aspects.

The data yielded by the 26 informants was carefully read looking for topics and themes such as internet issues, technological means, cultural issues, anxiety, and practicality (Open coding-Strauss & Cobin, 1997). At this stage, the researcher remained open-minded and avoided imposing his own view on the learners' answers. Only broad themes were used to approach and codify the informant responses (Nunan, 1992; Bell, 1999). After that, the broad topics were narrowed down and common links between them were set up in a way condense data till saturation (Axial-coding-Strauss & Cobin, 1997). At last, the shortened topics were further slimmed down to get into the student regular thought that is expressed in different ways due to language limitations (Selective coding-Strauss & Cobin, 1997).

Finally, it should be noted that qualitative data is rendered statistically to show the reader the importance of each theme. This mixed method approach (Creswell & Clark, 2006) is advantageous as it permits drawing on both the positive aspects of qualitative and quantitative research design models and thwart their respective limitations. In other words, mixing grounded theory (qualitative analysis) and statistical (quantitative) presentation of the results allowed the researcher to both reach deep understanding of the problem of virtual assessment and present data in easily understandable and readable format.

3. Findings and Discussions

In this section, the most important findings that have sprung from this study are highlighted and discussed.

3.1. Students' Opinion towards Online Assessment
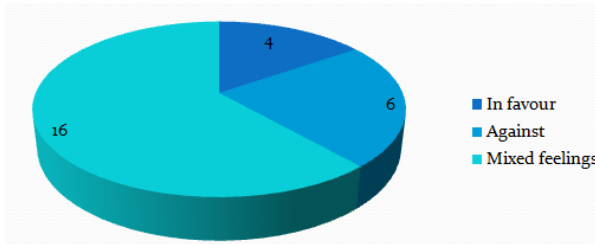
Figure 1. *Students' Attitudes towards Online Learning*

As shown in Figure 1, most of the students have mixed feelings towards online assessment. This means that the students in reality do not reject this practice, but probably they think that it is fraught with obstacles.

3.2. Problems and Negative Points of Online Assessment
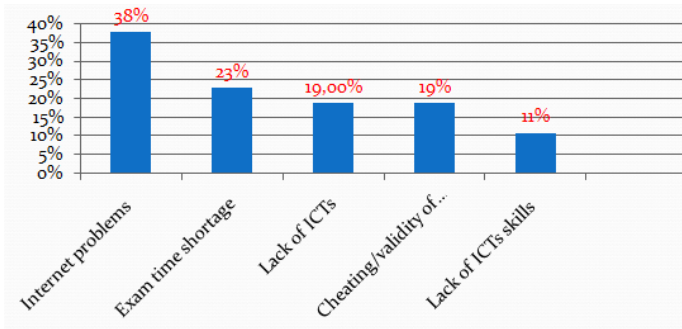
Figure 2. *Negative Aspects of Online Assessment*

The bar chart above shows that biggest hurdle to online assessment is the problem of internet. Indeed, internet bandwidth

in Algeria is still slow; in reality, most of the students and even teachers do not have a stable internet connection. In certain cases, students do not have internet access at all. Consequently, in this context, it is almost impossible to conduct synchronous tests since they require real time responses. About this issue of internet access and stability, the participants reported what follows.

> *There are a lot of points that we have to mention about online tests; first of all, according to me, it is more comfortable to take the tests at home, but at the same time there are a lot of internet problems that may face us especially in our country. The internet connection is really poor and this may affect our examination negatively.*

> *…Plus, I feel like we are not prepared for such a step [Online assessment]. There are students who don't have Wifi and there are those who don't possess a cellular phone or a PC. Many are not capable to afford these basic tools. I see that if there's only one student who can't take the assessment online, then it is not acceptable because he/she will feel discrimination. (Square brackets added and the answers are edited for language errors)*

As testified by the students themselves, the internet connection does not allow them to take their test comfortably from their homes. This obstacle is really problematic because, even in more developed countries they sometimes have this setback. Additionally, even if the internet is of high-speed in these advanced northern countries, they have foreign students who cannot take their tests conveniently away from their home countries. For instance, Orendain and Djalante's (2020) reported in their study that some foreign students from less developed countries who were studying in Japan could not get a satisfactory internet access during the Covid-19 confinement of 2020.

The second major impediment with regard to online assessment is time management. Students usually ask for more time to complete their tests. This is probably due to the slowness of the internet and their lack of computing and online skills. One student said, "As I finished the test, I pressed on "send", but the answer was not sent. Therefore, I had to rewrite again my answers". Additionally, the teachers give their students less time compared to face-to-face tests in order to hinder them from swapping answers among themselves. This finding matches with Kearns' (2012) study in which the teachers complained that online assessment requires more time to insert feedback than in hard copy assignments.

The third major difficulty concerning online assessment is the lack of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). Many students use cellular phones to take tests or to access and review online courses. These devices are not practical for studying and assessment and the students use them because they cannot afford more sophisticated and suitable technological equipment such as personal computers or laptops. Still, some students, as one participant pointed out, do not have even smart phones.

The fourth factor that impedes online e-assessment is cheating. Since the tester cannot authenticate the identity of the learner when using Google Forms tests, the student can easily cheat and this makes it possible for more able persons to take the test instead of the candidates. One student reported regretfully that, due to online assessment, he/she cheated for the first time in his/her educational career. He said, "I suggest omitting the option of what is called distance assessment. I cheated for the first time in my learning life hhhh". It follows then to say that the way tests are taken now is not valid. This finding from the Algerian context stands in opposition to what Hewson and Charlton (2019) reported in their investigation about the validity and fairness of e-

assessment. These writers indicated that the students did not perceive any major problem that could jeopardize the validity of internet assessment. Therefore, it could be argued that the problem in the Algerian context is in the way online tests are conducted which opens avenues for the candidates to easily cheat.

The fifth and last factor that affects negatively e-assessment at the University of Jijel is the learner unpreparedness to online work. As many students do not possess computing means of communication, they are unskilled in their use. Therefore, it is difficult for them to sit for synchronous tests in which they have to act swiftly and respond instantly.

All in all, e-assessment at the University of Jijel is premature. Many factors stand in its way; these factors include mainly internet access, unavailability of appropriate technological means, and students' unpreparedness in terms of online and computing skills.

3.3. Advantages of E-Assessment
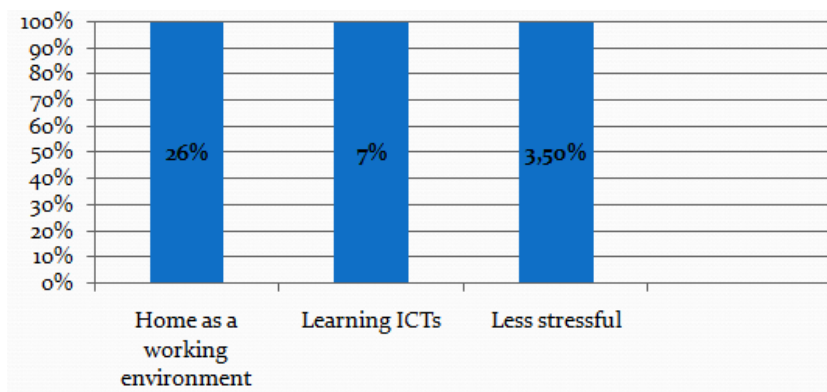
Figure 3. *Advantages of Online Assessment*

On a positive note, the students at Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia University reported a set of strong points of e-assessment. They are as follows.

First, a considerable number of the students, as shown in figure 3 above, said that they liked taking their exam at home. This definitely spares them the troubles of transportation and staying in campuses. In the following excerpts the students emphasized the advantages of taking tests from home:

> *During this year, I had sat for many online exams which are quite different from the classroom ones. Based on this experience, I can say that online exams put us in comfortable environment which helps us to avoid the stress related to sitting the exam in the classrooms.*
>
> *It [e-assessment] is positive in … We work from home in a less stressful environment and also it is clear and understandable. (Square brackets added and answers edited for language mistakes)*

Contrarily, the students in Orendain and Djalante's (2020) study reported that home is a nonworking environment. The university students in this foreign university pointed out that they were prone to distraction during their online learning experiences, and they wished for social interaction with their mates. For example, they said that they could not work hard in the solitary environment and their smart phones took all their attention at the expense of their studies. Indeed, the use of internet itself is the major source of distraction to students; consequently, online learning/assessment is not sufficient for ensuring academic success.

Second, 7 % of the students said they learned new computing and online skills. For example the participants learned to use Google Forms, Zoom/Google Meet applications, and many other skills. One student said, "There are positive sides like to be

familiar with the use of the internet as a means of teaching and learning".

Third, a few students (3.5 %) in study said they felt less anxious in online tests than in classroom exams. A student said, "Based on this experience, I can say that online exams put us in a comfortable environment which helps us to avoid the stress related to sitting the exam in the classrooms". Moreover, another participant said that by virtue of participating in online sessions, she managed to handle her anxiety.

On the whole, only a few students mentioned some positive aspects of online assessment. Then, it could be argued that the way e-assessment stands now at the University of Jijel is fraught with obstacles and disadvantages largely outweigh the advantages.

3.4. Students' Suggestions for Improving E-Assessment

The following suggestions about the improvement of online testing are generated by the students.

- Use of synchronous assessment

- Increasing the exam time

- Explaining synchronously lectures and allowing more interaction to practice language

- Training learners to online skills

- Providing inferential questions to fight cheating

- Providing direct questions such MCQs to solve the problem of time shortage

With regard to favoring synchronous assessment, the students thought that it is the only way to verify the test-respondents' identity. They knew that many of their peers cheated

and this made the exam unfair for rest of non-cheating cohort of the students. One informant said unhappily that one of his peers who used to get the lowest marks in Italian classroom tests got the best mark in online test.

As far as the suggestion of extending the time allotted for exams is concerned, many students stated that they could not complete their virtual exams in time. As already mentioned, since the students lack computing and internet skillfulness, probably it is wiser to give them more time. For example, one participant said that the link of the exam was closed before most of the student could complete the test.

Concerning the suggestion of synchronous explanation of courses, the student reported that the lectures posted in the Moodle Platform were not explained to them through interactive learning; consequently, they rejected this passive pedagogy of provision with courses in PDF format. If e-assessment has to be conducted synchronously, so should be e-learning. Besides, interactive learning is of crucial importance in foreign language classes in which language proficiency is acquired through social interaction among the students and their teacher.

With reference to the students' lack of internet and computing skills, the informants of this study demanded special training to equip them with rudimentary study skills they need for operating ICTs. In reality, the students have a computing module in their second year, but it seems that it is not efficient enough since most of them lack expertise in computer skills. Besides, the fact that the majority of the students do not own a personal computer makes it even harder for them to develop their computing and online abilities.

On the subject of online test questions, the students seem to have contradicting views. Some students proposed the use of direct questions like Multiple Choice questions (MCQs) in order

to be able to respond quickly and on time; others suggested the use of referential questions (indirect and opinion questions) to discourage cheaters from providing similar answers. When considering the way online tests are taken, both suggestions are justifiable. Unless the problems of cheating and lack of technological means and internet access are addressed, no test question format might be efficient. If online tests have to be successful, they should resemble classroom tests in which students' identities are openly revealed and enough time is given to complete the testing tasks.

4. Conclusions and Pedagogical Suggestions

This inquiry that delved into the timely problem of e- assessment has found that this practice is very limited in the Algerian context, more specifically, at Mohamed Seddik Ben Yahia University of Jijel. Although the students liked for instance that they could work comfortably from home without the hassle of transportation, they emphasized the fact that online assessment is almost impossible in the Algerian context.

Among the biggest hurdles to virtual assessment is the problem of test or assessment validity. A considerable number of the respondents to the questionnaire pointed out that online assessment is subject to cheating practices and that some learners are not getting their genuine scores. Consequently, Algerian universities should make sure that the identity of the learner is authenticated while taking exam. Showing faces, for example, on Zoom or Google Meet is one way for checking the learner's identity. Additionally, many other techniques could be used to minimize teaching; for example, Stern (2020) proposed the following tips to reduce cheating: Keeping cameras on, using questions that relate to students' lives and the unique content of the course, providing different questions to different students, and varying the order of questions.

Moreover, the informants stressed equally the problem of lack of proper technological equipment and good internet in general. Many students rely on their smart phones to do their academic job; this practice is little practical and very distracting to the student. Most of the time, as reported in the study, the students are distracted by social media and other online hobbies. Added to this, according to Blagg and Luetmer (2020, in Orendain & Djalante, 2020), the students who lack access to good quality internet and computers usually lag behind.

Due to the above limitations, if the Algerian higher education authorities want to ensure genuine online assessment, they have to think of large-scale project of equipping cheaply both the teachers and the students with telecommunication aids and equally think of building high-speed internet gateway. Moreover, the students have to be sensitized that face-to-face online instruction and assessment has to be accepted as a reality in our modern times. Maybe the students will need some time to adapt themselves and come to accept this reality, but it is urgent to break the resistance that it faces knowing that in educational settings even recordings could be controlled by the teacher who orchestrates sessions in applications like Google Meet. The latter is lately made easily accessible to the large public and user-friendly; therefore, it should be exploited optimally.

Furthermore, the online platforms should be operational, and made easily accessible and practical for synchronous teaching and assessment. Actually, university platforms are more academically accepted and they can be controlled and limited to specific users. If these platforms are developed optimally, they can partially substitute in-person teaching and assessment.

In conclusion, the Covid-19 period has allowed the Algerian universities to experience officially for the first time with both online learning and assessment. Despite the limitations of these teaching and assessment modes, both the students and the

teachers have benefited from the unique experience of learning/teaching and assessment at distance via the internet and technological equipment. This imposed trial has clearly shown the deficiencies in the systems of telecommunication that could be gradually and imperatively addressed. The Universities and the Ministry have already started looking for solutions to make online learning and assessment a day-to-day reality in the Algerian context. For instance, the University of Jijel has recently bought more sophisticated equipment to make the teaching platform and messaging more efficient. Equally, the teachers have already started conducting most of their tasks online (e.g., posting courses and students' grades online).

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