



Challenges of online assessment during Covid-19 Pandemic:

An experience of Study Skills teachers

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Abstract ;	Article info
<p><i>This study explores Study Skills teachers' perceptions and challenges of assessing students' learning in an online environment during Covid-19 pandemic. It used a descriptive method employing qualitative data collection methods through focus group interview for five teachers. Results indicated that these teachers believe that online assessment was necessary and helpful especially during the pandemic lockdown, but at the same time, they are still reluctant to integrate it due to adapting to this mode of assessment, lack of students' training, technical problems and academic dishonesty. We suggest that effective application of online assessment can provide advanced pedagogical strategies that facilitate an ongoing and adequate learning.</i></p>	<p>Received 18 December 2021</p> <p>Accepted 02 February 2022</p>
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1. Introduction

Education of the 21st century is steadily increasing the use of blended learning which led to the growth of online learning in order to keep up with this changing world. During Covid-19 pandemic, many teaching platforms have been used to introduce lectures and assess students. Faculty members and students faced many challenges trying to adapt to this new online education versus traditional classroom environment. Many studies have shown that effective online teaching and assessment require different teaching strategies and assessment techniques than that used for traditional teaching (Almeida & Monteiro, 2021; Totaro et al., 2005; Baleni, 2015). Since online courses take more time to design and implement, well-planned courses and appropriate interaction options are the key factor for students' satisfaction and interaction in the course (Jacobs, 2013).

When the Ministry of Higher Education announced on March 2020 to suspend all presental teachings, all university faculties rushed to organize different tutorials to acquaint faculty members to Moodle platform as a substitute to face-to-face teaching. Most teachers were struggling to equip themselves with the necessary knowledge on online education. Later on, teachers learned about other educational platforms in conjunction to Moodle, like Google classroom, Google meet, Zoom, etc. Yet, the majority of Algerian universities established a set of

recommendations for their use and left the teacher to use any model or platform to teach online either through synchronous or asynchronous modes. Eventually, the biggest challenges are to adapt to this new model of teaching and to ensure the availability of the internet and all the technical resources to access online classes.

The complete shift to online learning during this crisis makes it necessary to revise assessment practices and discover new forms of assessment suitable for virtual environment. Online assessment has become an essential component for effective blended learning. It presents opportunities for students to demonstrate their developing skills and receive assistance for their distant learning. Online Study Skills teaching and learning methods must be assessment-centered to offer learners opportunities to show their skills and receive backing to reinforce their learning. The main questions of this research are:

1. What are the perceptions of Study Skills teachers in terms of:
 - Online teaching/assessment experience?
 - Attitudes of online assessment and its effectiveness?
2. What are the challenges of online assessment during Covid-19 Pandemic?

This study explores Study Skills teachers' perceptions and challenges of assessing students' learning in an online environment

during Covid-19 pandemic. It aims at fostering understanding of the main assessment concepts in an online environment and presenting the challenges that this strategy displays. This paper describes the experience of Study Skills teachers to adapt to this new online assessment.

2. Literature review

Assessment with all its forms has always been a fundamental part of educational practice. It is widely viewed as an ongoing process designed to understand and improve student's learning and to support teaching. This process helps teachers to gather diverse information about student's level of achievement of learning goals. This assessment may comprise all the observation and analysis of samples of student's homeworks, tests, essays, classroom activities, etc. For this reason, there are two approaches to classroom assessment. The first approach fulfils formative function. It is integrated in the teaching and learning process and involving feedback to improve student's performance. Formative assessment is assessment for learning intended to identify the strengths and weaknesses to enhance future performance. The alternate approach is summative assessment or assessment of learning. It occurs at the end of an educational activity making a summative/final judgement for grading or readiness for progression, and it usually involves formal examinations and tests.

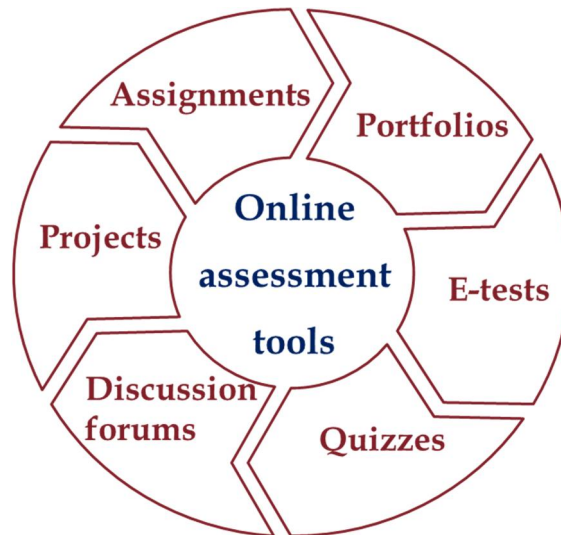
In his report, Shepard (2000, p. 33) proposes a model of classroom assessment that requires the improvement of the content and character of assessment as well as the integration of the collected information and insights into the ongoing learning process. For him, the main purpose of assessment is "to help students learn and to improve instruction rather than being used only to rank students or to certify the end products of learning." To achieve the aforementioned purpose, it is important to ensure its *validity* (all the relevant aspects of the student performance are covered by the assessment) and *reliability* (the assessment is accurate and not influenced by the assessor). Nowadays, the two approaches are not only used in class as paper-based assessment, but also within online environment. To ensure quality online assessment, Vipin (2019) suggests that the content of the assessment must be simple, clear and easy to understand free from any flaws; besides, the test must be objective, creative and attracts students' interest.

In fact, one of the most important aspects of online learning is the assessment of the students' skills and competences. The current situation entails an online form of assessment which was earlier ensured by traditional, paper-pen, mode. Online assessment comprises any form of providing feedback, appraising students' achievements and directing their learning process in an online environment

(Ndibalema, 2021; Sözen & Güven, 2019; and Amua-Sekyi, 2016). Because of the lack of face-to-face interaction between teachers and students, several tools can be

used for assessing periodically online learning such as e-tests, quizzes, assignments, projects, presentations, portfolios and discussion forums. These forms are presented in figure 1.

Fig.1. Online assessment tools



Eros and Fleming (2003), in their study conducted to compare online exams and traditional ones, demonstrate that an online exam has better results than traditional exam. The former should be rather seen as a form of diagnosis of students' performances on a continuous basis and diverse forms (Tsai, 2009 cited in Almeida & Monteiro, 2021). Specifically, through online learning, Almeida & Monteiro (2021) emphasize on the features of some innovative platforms which are equipped with different tools that can assess students' different skills and provide immediate automatic feedback; thus, making teachers concentrate on the learning process rather than on grading students. According to Biggs & Tang (2011), the choice of assessment is critical, and the way the assessment is properly aligned to the

learning outcomes can evidently produce a constructive learning practice. This effect of assessment on students is referred to by these researchers as "backwash".

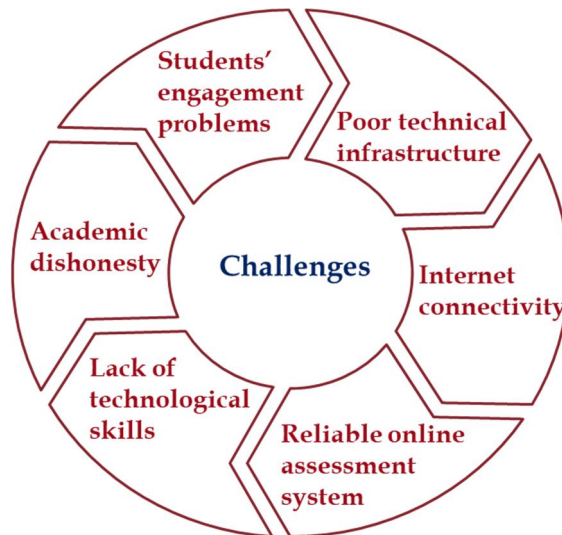
Up to now, several studies have reported the advantages of online assessment on students' learning. Baleni (2015), for example, highlights the benefits of online assessment stressing on the improvement of student commitment, enhanced flexibility around time and place of taking the assessment task, faster feedback and less marking time. In the same vein, it has been demonstrated that online assessment can measure language learning skills unmeasurable on conventional tests under less stress and more affordable and efficient (Ndibalema, 2021). Seminal research conducted by Benta et al. (2014) show that Moodle platform improved both

students' and teachers' interaction and increased students' satisfaction with online lectures. It has also found that students attended lectures regularly and their attendance increased to (96%) as compared to their attendance in face-to-face sessions (83%). Importantly, they have found that this platform has proven effective and helpful for the submission of assignments and tests. Moreover, online assessment provides students with more opportunities for practice, self-testing, self-regulation and self-evaluation, as well as saves teachers' time in reading and grading, and eventually have closer interactions with students (Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021).

Simultaneously, this abrupt crisis presents challenges of online assessment. Many

institutions did not expect this shift from face-to-face environment to online, thus, faculty members and students were not prepared and trained to cope with this drastic change. Previous research on the implementation of online assessment into language teaching and learning has shown different limitations (Daniels et al, 2021; Fitriyah & Jannah, 2021; Gillett-Swan, 2017; and Fageeh, 2015). In these relevant literature, online assessment presented many challenges such as internet connectivity, lack of skills to handle online tools, poor technical infrastructure development, students' engagement problems, lack of reliable online assessment system, and increase in cheating and plagiarism. Figure 2 sums up online assessment challenges.

Fig.2. Online assessment challenges



Hence, identifying such limitations, mainly training both students and teachers with IT (Information Technology) skills will help to provide adequate and reliable assessment. A broader perspective has been

adopted by A Sarrayrih & Ilyas (2013) who propose a security system using biometrics; an E-monitoring of students' finger prints and cameras, which helps to eliminate cheating and impersonation, just to

mention a few. Other studies suggest the revision of educational policies and the adoption of innovative systems that support online assessment. Similarly, in order for online assessment to be applied correctly, Baleni (2015, p.230) believes that “assessment needs to be done early in an online or blended course to make sure that technological obstacles are not preventing students from succeeding in this environment.”

3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the study

This study uses a descriptive method employing qualitative data collection and analysis methods through focus group discussions. According to Hennink (2007), focus group methodology is becoming one of the central tools of qualitative research incorporated in the social sciences. Focus group interview gives interviewees greater control of the topic raised in the discussion, since they are discussing the topic between themselves rather than directly with an interviewer. The objective of the focus group discussions with Study Skills teachers was to get them to talk spontaneously about their assessment practices and share their ideas and experiences. “The context of a group discussion is thought to create greater spontaneity in the contributions of participants as it replicates everyday social interactions more than a traditional one-to-one interview.” (Hennink, 2007, p.5)

3.2 The instrument

The focus group interview is organised online via zoom cloud platform, in November 2021. A random sample of 5 Study Skills teachers teaching the different levels of graduation (L1, L2, L3) in the department of Letters and the English Language, Frères Mentouri university, Constantine1 were invited to sign into a Zoom meeting. All the participants have already received training on blended learning as a requirement for recruitment. Prior to the process of collecting data, an invitation was sent to all Study Skills teachers via messenger to ask them to voluntarily participate in the study explaining its purpose and the tool used. In an effort to ensure anonymity, no attempt was made to identify the name of the interviewees.

The focus group discussion was guided by a semi-structured interview guide to probe and explore in depth the interviewees' perceptions and challenges of assessing students' learning in an online environment during Covid-19 pandemic. It lasted in 48 minutes.

4. Results and discussion

The collected data is analysed in relation to the overarching research questions. After transcribing the interview, all the transcripts were organised and analysed thematically. Thematic analysis enables researchers to have a thorough understanding of the research topic (Porte,

2002). The quotes in the next section illustrate the interviewees' discussions.

Responses from teachers on focus group interview were grouped into two major themes: Study Skills' perceptions of online assessment and the challenges in using online assessment, and both were further divided into subthemes.

4.1 Study Skills teachers' perceptions of online assessment

- *Online teaching/assessment experience*

Teachers reported that because of the pandemic, online assessment was the only available modality to track students' performance in Study Skills classroom. All teachers had previous experience of teaching online before Covid-19 Pandemic. As they have already been trained to use online learning, most of them switched to online teaching and assessment via Moodle platform and other tools like google classroom. The material delivered to assess students' performance was in the form of lessons, videos, activities, tests, quizzes, assignments and research papers.

- *Online assessment and its effectiveness*

The analysis showed that teachers believe that online assessment was necessary and helpful especially during the pandemic lockdown. For example, teacher H revealed, *"I think online assessment was an essential shift in teaching. It provides an alignment between distance education and assessment."* As Brown et al (1996)

indicates, "due to paradigm shift in educational technology, it may become unfair to train students online and then use pens for assessments." Most teachers expressed their willingness to carry on using online assessment, but commitment is required.

Most teachers further explained that the use of Google classroom was simpler and more convenient than Moodle. The teacher can create classes, allocate assignments, score them, and send feedback in one place. For example, teacher H noted *"because students keep complaining about using Moodle, google classroom was more comfortable and easier for them. It was very interactive for students."* Another teacher F added *"it was manageable and an effective social networking tool to support the online assessment than Moodle. It helped me to stimulate students, evaluate their works and provide immediate feedback."* It provides effective formative feedback and teachers can track students' performance. Gikandi et al. (2011) find that effective online formative assessment can promote assessment centered focus through formative feedback and enhance student's engagement in their learning experiences. All teachers share the same idea that online assessment reduces time and effort compared to paper testing.

Moreover, all the interviewees spoke about the importance of group work in Study Skills teaching and how they managed to keep the spirit of cooperation and

collaboration among students. Teacher H stated that *“via online teaching, some activities related to critical thinking were posted to students in google classroom, I found my third-year students very interested, well prepared and were actively engaged in the discussion.”* However, some teachers prefer face-to-face interaction and group work because *“it is easier to monitor and assess.”* (Teacher A) William, Cameron & Morgan (2012) believe that the type of practices assigned in online environment for group work are limited in the variety and modes, and teachers can use specific techniques to support group dynamics and make the process of evaluation more visible to students, such as using Students Peer Evaluation Rubric and Individual Students Scoring Rubric for a Group Project.

- *Satisfaction with online assessment*

Eventually, from the results above, it shows that Study Skills teachers appreciated online assessment. There was larger inclination for online assessment, but still most teachers assert a preference for traditional assessment while few prefer a mixture of both, when asked whether they prefer traditional assessment or online assessment. Teacher A acknowledged that *“due to all the problems encountered in using online assessment, I prefer to keep on using the traditional forms of assessing my students.”* Another teacher added, *“I think the traditional form is easier, I can directly give instructions, observe and control my students simultaneously.”* These teachers

are still reluctant to integrate online assessment and examinations due to the different challenges that are exposed in the next section.

4.2 Study Skills teachers' challenges using online assessment

This category is divided into five subthemes.

- *Adapting to online assessment*

As expressed by all Study Skills teachers regarding online assessment, data reveal that they are experiencing several challenges. For Alruwais et al. (2018), it is a challenge for both teachers and students to adapt to online assessment. Although they were trained to online teaching, it is their first experience to really get connected with online environment, so they found themselves struggling to adapt with this trend since switching from traditional classroom to a virtual classroom makes the whole teaching and learning experience completely different. Teacher A, for example, stressed that *“the biggest challenge is to adapt to this new distance model of teaching.”* Teacher M added that *“online assessment is not enough without a framework for conducting online testing, and an evaluation grid or rubric for assessment in a subject whose model of assessment is based on formative type.”*

- *Technical problems*

Most of the challenges faced by both teachers and students were about technical problems and the availability of

technological tools. Teacher M wondered *“how to ensure that all students have the internet and the necessary technological tools, like personal computers or tablets to access online classes.”* The first challenge raised by all the interviewees was *“poor and unstable internet connection.”* This challenge was widely covered in the literature.

- *Students’ interaction and training*

Another teacher also complained *“this process requires well-structured strategies that facilitate interaction among teachers and students, including peer and self-assessment techniques to get students actively engaged in online activities.”* It is challenging to develop appropriate methods of students’ engagement in online environment because this latter does not really guarantee students’ interaction and collaborative learning. Brunet (2011) asserts that an important disadvantage reported by students in online learning is the absence of interaction between teacher and student. It is also problematic to manage time, as advanced by another teacher; *“first year students take much time to be familiar and comfortable with online learning let alone assessment.”* Teacher A added, *“they are not trained to use Moodle and the main techniques of evaluation.”* Students, in fact, lack computer knowledge skills. Training programmes should not be limited to teachers; they should also involve students.

- *Academic dishonesty*

The lack of trust in online assessment could be the reason behind online cheating and plagiarism, which are among the main challenges of online assessment. Impersonation and plagiarism question the reliability and credibility of online education. Teacher A claimed that *“When cheating becomes commonplace in online environment, academic honesty is at risk.”* Teacher H added, *“Through online assessment, when students carry out the online test, there is a high chance of cheating.”* Another teacher mentioned that *“it’s difficult to control misconduct of students, especially when dealing with impersonation or submission in deadlines.”* As a result, most Study Skills teachers, claiming *“to be fair”*, prefer to provide online teaching, but the *“summative evaluation is done in a classroom setting.”* The online assessment system should support the prevention and detection of cheating and academic dishonesty through the use of biometrics and by designing innovative ways to assess students (A Sarrayrih and Ilyas, 2013).

- *Providing effective assessment strategy and feedback*

Teachers also lamented about designing effective assessment strategy that tracks students’ performance in Study Skills subject. They presented concerns on how students should be assessed formatively in online environment and how to provide

effective feedback. Teacher A stated “because of the outnumbered classroom, I couldn’t manage to assess online my students and provide detailed feedback of their performances.” It is evident that through ongoing feedback, students identify their strengths and weaknesses and define flaws in their learning. This finding is in line with Gibbs and Simpson (2005), who pointed out that in order to enhance students’ performance, promote their motivation and maintain their engagement, constructing formative assessment and providing individualized feedback are the effective factors.

In a nutshell, the results of this study showed that the difficulties and obstacles outweigh the positive perceptions on online assessment that most teachers hold. The results suggest that online assessment in Study Skills subject is still in its early phases, and that only a small percentage of the teachers show that they would assess online in the future when the conditions would be better.

5. Pedagogical implications

We suggest that effective application of online assessment can provide advanced pedagogical strategies that facilitate an ongoing and adequate learning. As has been proved by Baleni (2015, p.228), “Ongoing trustworthy assessment tasks

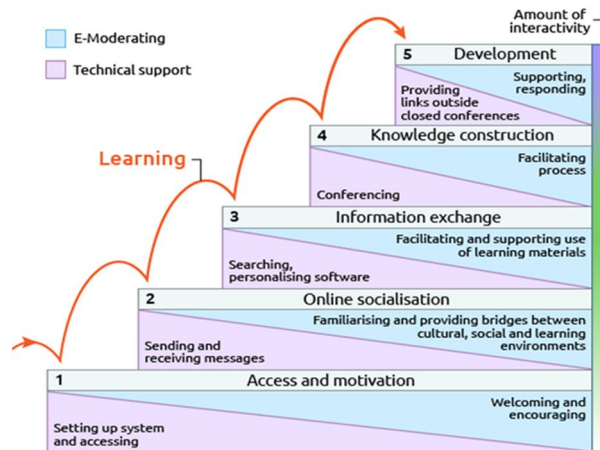
5. Providing links outside closed conferences, supporting responding

and interactive formative feedback were identified as significant features that will deal with intimidations to rationality and trustworthiness within the milieu of online formative assessment.” We also suggest the use of various online social networks such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Blogs and Wiki. These social networks not only encourage cooperation and information sharing, but also increase interest and interaction in online classes making students active learners who take charge of their own learning process (Jacobs, 2013).

Moreover, Salmon (2011, p. 32) suggested a five-stage model to facilitate online teaching. This model provides a scaffolding developmental process which supports and develops students’ online learning at each stage. Figure 3 below illustrates well this process.

1. Setting up system and accessing, welcoming and encouraging;
2. Sending and receiving messages, familiarizing and providing bridges between cultural, social and learning environments;
3. Searching, personalising software, facilitating and supporting use of learning materials;
4. Conferencing, facilitating process;

Fig.3. The Five Stage Model



Source: Salmon, 2011, p. 32

Peer review is also an important implication that is encouraged in online assessment. There is research evidence to support the fact that peers can assume the role of co-facilitator to lead discussions and involve other students in the learning activities. Peer review improves the critical thinking skills of students (Jacobs, 2013 and Ruey, 2010). It can also increase satisfaction of the learning process and self-motivation.

6. CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is evident that Study Skills teachers’ reticence to embrace online assessment is likely due to the different faced challenges. It is also crucial that both teachers and students have a realistic perception of online assessment experience. The findings from this study imply that generating online assessment technology awareness, and changing both teachers’ and learners’ attitudes is essential for the success of its adoption and implementation in the future. Jacobs (2003,

p. 9) highlights that “The ‘Net Generation’ is interested in keeping up with the rapidly changing technological world. Education must adapt its teaching and learning approaches to be consistent with the ever-changing social world.”

In fact, online assessment may remain as a norm practice for the coming years if the pandemic persists to exist. The challenges that faculty members have faced for two years must be solved, and innovative application of online assessment can provide advanced pedagogical strategies that facilitate an ongoing and adequate learning. Online assessment has to be improved to adequately reflect students’ performances and teachers have to equip themselves with the necessary knowledge about blended learning.

As a future perspective, it would be interesting to acquaint all faculty members to online education to be aware of what distance teaching and assessment involve. There is a political awareness worldwide

that orients towards teaching with less teaching load and to achieve this aim, online education can make a big change.

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8. Appendices

Focus Group Interview Protocol

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the teaching of foreign languages worldwide. Many universities have converted to online education. As Study Skills teachers, you've experienced this type of online teaching and assessment. This focus group interview is designed to draw upon your experience with online assessment since this subject is assessed on a continuous basis and the challenges you faced in designing and administering this type of assessment. I will not refer to any participant by name in the report I will prepare. The information will be kept confidential and used only for this research.

Q1: Have you ever used an online teaching environment? If so, how was your experience?

Q2: Since Study Skills subject is 100% continuous formative assessment, how did you manage to design online assessment and track students' performance?

Q3: Have you ever been trained to design online tests and assignments? If so, please, explain.

Q4: What are the different types of online assessment you designed for your students? State some of them.

Q5: What are the challenges you've faced when assessing students online in the past two years?

Q6: Do your students respond spontaneously and confidently to the

assignments and tests you design? Whatever your answer, please explain.

Q7: Do your students struggle to adapt to this type of assessment? If so, please explain.

Q8: Drawing upon your experience, do you prefer traditional assessment or online assessment? Whatever your answer, please explain.

Q9: What are the features that would make online assessment more suitable to your needs?

Q10: What are the specific competences that should be developed in online assessment to obtain better results?

Q11: Is there anything else you would like to say about the topic of this focus group?

We can now conclude our focus group. Thank you very much for participating and sharing your thoughts and opinions with us.