**English Teachers’ Assessment Practices during the COVID-19 Pandemic:**

**Opportunities and Challenges**

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to a sudden shift to emergency remote teaching. Along with the new teaching experiences in online platforms, the teachers were forced to adapt their assessment practices. The current study aimed to investigate the high school English teachers’ perceptions of online assessment practices within the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, 35 English teachers were asked to write their answers to four open-ended questions in the form of self-reflection essays and reported their methods of assessment, challenges and strategies to overcome them, and their preferences for assessment procedures. The content analysis of the data revealed that the English teachers mostly took advantage of formative assessment techniques such as classroom discussions, active participation, problem-solving tasks, and different types of homework. Furthermore, the English teachers referred to such challenges as weak internet connection, limited time, students’ lack of motivation and literacy, difficulty of scoring and interpreting the test results. To rise to these challenges, the teachers attempted to encourage the students, send them reminders, give them adequate time, and use convenient platforms. The English teachers also expressed that they preferred in-person assessment due to its authenticity and credibility. The findings revealed the deficiencies which hindered accessible and user-friendly assessment procedures. The results raise the stakeholders’ awareness to provide the teachers and students with the required training programs to enhance their technological literacy.

**Keywords:** COVID-19 Pandemic, English teachers, Online assessment, Self-reflections.

**Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a sudden shift to emergency remote teaching, and caused the educational institutions to transfer their in-person instructional programs to online platforms (Mousavi, Saidi, & Mahmodi, 2021). The conversion from in-person to online classes during the global pandemic has brought about numerous challenges for the teachers and learners (Crawford et al., 2021). Teachers were compelled to serve a wide range of roles, and thereby, were obliged to develop their technological literacy (Park & Son, 2009).

The sudden shift to online learning and teaching has turned the scholars’ heads towards the remote teaching and learning experiences resulting from the new instructional paradigm shift. Numerous studies have been conducted on exploring EFL teachers’ experiences in online classes within this period (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Khatoony & Nezhadmehr, 2020). The pandemic was a challenging condition for the educational practitioners particularly in developing countries since “they have rarely transitioned to distant education prior to the crisis” (Toquero, 2020, p.185).

Along with the new teaching experiences in online classes, the teachers were forced to adapt their assessment practices. In this regard, they have taken advantage of the facilitative merits of online testing such as providing immediate feedback, saving time, gearing test items to the students’ level, and exposing the students to lower levels of anxiety. Nevertheless, they were put in a challenging situation due to demerits of online assessment like validity threats, misinterpretation of the students’ performance, and technical problems leading to students’ malfunctioning (Tazik, 2021). All in all, the compulsory technological integration in the educational system has led to taking new lines of research.

Online assessment as one of the less practiced realms seems to have remained untouched during the COVID-19 pandemic (Ahmed Khan & Jawaid, 2020). Online assessment enables the students to demonstrate their abilities in an online context supported by their teachers as facilitators. The results of relevant studies in medical education contexts have revealed the high satisfaction of the teachers and students towards online assessment (Ahmed Khan & Jawaid, 2020). Bearing this in mind, the current study aimed to explore the English teachers’ perceptions of online assessment practices within the pandemic period in the high school context.

**Method**

A total number of 35 English teachers participated in the study. They were 10 male and 25 female high school teachers ranging in age from 24 to 36. Their experience ranged from 3 to 8 years. The study relied on a qualitative content analysis and qualitative methods of data collection and analysis. The teachers were asked to write their answers to four open-ended questions in the form of self-reflection essays. They reported their methods of assessment, the challenges they had to assess the students’ performance, their strategies to overcome the challenges, and whether they preferred online or in-person assessment.

To analyze the teachers’ responses, theme-based analysis was conducted. The recurrent themes were identified, classified, and reported. Some examples are provided to clarify the obtained results.

**Results and Discussion**

The first question inquired about the online assessment methods that teachers use to evaluate students’ learning. Almost 30 (%85.71) teachers preferred formative assessment to evaluate students’ degree of knowledge and understanding to make online classes more real-like. Activities that teachers implemented were involving students in classroom discussions, asking comprehension checking questions, being present actively, doing problem-solving tasks, allowing peers to ask questions, assigning different types of homework, and collecting all into portfolios.

 *Involving students in online classes is very challenging for me. I try to set positive points for that and let the students know the importance of being active and cooperative. (T1)*

 *While I am presenting subjects, I come up with some to-the-point questions to check the comprehensibility of the materials. In this way, students can realize their gaps. (T5)*

 *Doing different kinds of activities is vitally important to make online classes like real ones. Teachers can use problem-solving, information-gap, discussions, information- exchange activities to immerse students’ minds actively. (T6)*

 *Homework can be both a source of motivation or boredom. So, teachers can use a different variety of activities and homework to make students motivated. (T8)*

 *I mostly set criteria for students for different aspects of their performance and collect them in form of a portfolio. This can avoid students cheating in online classes. (T9)*

Moreover, 5 (%14.28) teachers followed different assessment administration procedures such as using different evaluation processes to measure the extent of learning, employing assessment sites and applications to make and interpret tests, explaining the assessment procedures before an exam to avoid problems, following guidelines imposed by the ministry of education to enhance the validity of their works, and dedicating more assessment opportunities to increase the reliability.

 *I use different forms of tests for different purposes. Teachers can have quizzes, tests, power tests, objective or subjective tests, and many more. (T2)*

 *As scoring and interpreting tests are time-consuming, I choose testing sites to make test items, score, and interpret automatically. Also, it is more accurate and efficient. (T19)*

*Problems during online classes are common; and the only way is to understand students’ constraints such as time limitation, internet connection, and unfamiliarity. I try to explain in detail about testing procedures beforehand to alleviate the problems. (T12)*

 *Online classes mostly lowered the standards since teachers did not pursue standardized guidelines. Therefore, we can make online classes standardized to make students ready for official examinations. (T15)*

 *During online tests, students might have some serious problems with their devices and connections, so teachers can set more criteria and options for students. (T21)*

The second question asked teachers to express their challenges during online classes. In this regard, 24 (%68.57) teachers admitted that their problems are due to weak internet connection, poor-quality cameras and devices, problematic assessment sites, students’ low approachability, last-minute arrivals, and limited time. Also, 8 (%22.85) teachers pointed out that students lacked motivation and cheated or sought help from another person. Furthermore, 3 (%8.57) teachers associated unsuccessful online testing with inaccurate results due to lack of concentration and difficulty of making, scoring, and interpreting tests and.

 *During online tests, students become disconnected constantly by their weak connection.(T20)*

 *Students seek help from more knowledgeable peers with answering their questions. Here, it is the negative wash-back effect on students’ perception and development. (T22)*

 *It is happening many times that we, as teachers, become confused when students send lots of things, so we cannot concentrate appropriately. (T31)*

The third question solicited strategies to solve previous challenges to increase the quality of online assessment. A total of 16 (%45.71) suggested using sites, avoiding cheating, explaining the process, solving problems of the site, being attentive and accessible during an exam, lowering the students’ stress, encouraging students, talking with parents, sending reminders, and assigning marks for homework and class work.

 *Teachers can use sites for assessment purposes, thus they reduced their load of work. (T3)*

 *Positive feedback like encouraging students can decrease stress; therefore, it leads to better performance. (T34)*

In last question, the teachers demonstrated their preference between online and in-person assessments. About 29 (%82.85) teachers chose in-person assessment as it seemed more authentic, reliable, and manageable. And, almost 6 (17.15) teachers preferred online assessment because of having classes online.

 *I assume that we do not have the foundation to run online exams since they are very challenging. (T16)*

 *In-person tests do not allow students to cheat so they have to study more deeply. Also, it has constructive stress that pushes students for better learning. (T18)*

 *For the reason of having classes online, it is wiser to run the assessment the same. (T33)*

**Conclusion**

The current study explored the English teachers’ perceptions of online assessment practices, challenges, and strategies during the COVID-19 outbreak. The results of analyzing self-reflections revealed that the teachers made use of such methods as having classroom discussions, asking comprehension questions, giving tasks and collecting portfolios. They also reported numerous challenges, namely, weak internet connection, students’ low level of motivation and high probability of cheating, difficulty in scoring and interpreting tests, and suggested such strategies as training the students to master the technical requirements for taking online tests, giving clear instructions, encouraging the students, and lowering their stress. Most of the teachers preferred in-person assessment.

It seemed that the compulsory online paradigm shift led to an increased and improved awareness of adopting and adapting technology enhanced assessment. The findings supported the shift towards implementation of online assessment even in post-pandemic period based on the English teachers’ perspectives. The results can enrich the existing literature on the online assessment practices in EFL settings during the global pandemic. Furthermore, the findings raise the stakeholders’ awareness of the deficiencies which existed and hindered more convenient assessment practices. In addition, it is time to move in the right direction by utilizing technology enhanced learning and assessment for the ELT programs (Ahmed Khan, 2020).

The current study focused on the English teachers’ perceptions of online assessment practices. Further studies can be conducted on eliciting the students’ perceptions. Moreover, the online assessment experiences of the teachers who teach other subjects can be analyzed. The teachers’ gender and computer literacy may also influence their online assessment methods, challenges, and strategies.

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