

A PRELIMINARY STUDY ON NEW UNDERGRADUATES' EXPERIENCE OF UNDERTAKING ONLINE ASSESSMENTS FOR ENGLISH POST COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstrak

This initial study set out to investigate university freshmen's feedback on their online assessment experience using the university's learning management system in their English Language course which was conducted online. The objectives of this study were to investigate a) the learners' perception on their overall online assessment experience for a language course using the university's LMS, b) the learners' experience in completing a writing assessment and c) the learners' experience in completing a listening assessment. This basic mix-method study investigated 27 English Language learners of a public university in Malaysia attending Level 1 English proficiency course. A questionnaire containing 17 items using 5-points Likert-type scale was administered to measure their general online experience and their writing and listening assessment experience using the university LMS. This was followed by a round semi-structured interviews to probe further reasons behind their perception and experience. The study found that the freshmen expressed positive perception towards their overall online language assessment experience. They also indicated positive feedback for their experience in taking online writing and listening assessments Through the interviews the students highlighted that they are able to familiarize themselves and adapt faster by drawing on their previous experience during online learning at home during Covid-19 pandemic for their high school studies. They learnt to be patient and not panicky whenever there is any technical glitch which they had faced quite a lot during the pandemic. This shows that the students have developed certain level of literacy and digital education competency.

Keywords: online assessments, English language learning, online distance learning, learning management system

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected the education system around the globe by distracting the normal face to face teaching and learning process. This predicament also extended to the area of assessment of learning where all conventional forms of homework, tests, quizzes, presentations and demonstrations could not be carried in the usual conventional manner. This includes language learners and the language test-taking process. In overcoming this inevitable misfortune, the education fraternities throughout the world have resorted to technology as provider of new learning opportunities and interaction platform via online and distance learning mode (ODL).

Through the engagement of technology as a learning medium, platforms such as a learning management system (LMS) emerge. Via such platforms, alternative and innovative teaching options are made available for English language lessons and all these offer new learning experiences for the learners (Zulfa & Yuniasih, 2017). Albeit the presence of educational quality initiatives like Outcome Based Education (OBE) and Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) to enhance the implementation and outcome of university language courses, deep seated issues continue to leave a trail of shortcomings in the outcomes and abilities of university graduates in terms of language and communication (Ahmad et.al, 2019). One crucial factor in ensuring successful education is the understanding of the mindset of the learners when designing an online learning approach to teaching and learning inclusive of testing (Hu & Spiro, 2021). This is to ensure the system to be developed caters to learners' needs as well as to their interests. New technologies are integrated in education to help the process of learning in many fields including English via learning Management System (LMS) (Adnan et al., 2022).

The lock down of educational institutions during Covid -19 pandemic has also strangely benefitted education in an indirect fashion. Some of the previously reluctant senior teachers who are not savvy and not adept at using online teaching and learning tools were 'forced' to migrate into full scale users. This unavoidable circumstance has in a way expedited technology acceptance and digitization of learning, albeit during the time of health crisis. During the period of online learning, students had to learn, navigate and adapt to learning applications such as Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams and become more reliant on online technology.

Gathering learners' feedback is crucial for teachers in order to help identify the quality of their teaching and learning by investigating their method's strengths and weaknesses and finding areas that may need further improvements (Abduh, 2021; Bradley, 2021). Online education is known as something which is commonly accessible, dependable, flexible, time-efficient and cost effective in supporting learning and teaching (Mahyoob, 2020). Furthermore, the current advancements in technology have further supported the distinctive features of web-based technology which enhance effectiveness of online learning (Abasli, 2023). Despite its advantages, it has not been easy for students to switch to full online learning and to hybrid mode without encountering challenges. A few studies reported that students face multiple challenges in online learning (Al-Kumaim, et al., 2021).

Online learning offers new learning experience for the learners, improving their active participations, improving their exam grades and promoting their engagement and interaction with the lesson which are achievable through an LMS (Zulfa and Yuniasih, 2017). Assessment is vital in education (Abduh, 2021) improves the quality of education and learning process motivates students to learn, offers feedback on their progress and measures their achievement. Online quizzes and assessments administered through the LMS have been found to be very helpful in various learning settings (Abasli et al., 2023). LMS has increased learners' access to learning and has resulted in better resource management (Bradley, 2021). Ahmad et al. (2021) perceive language courses as having slightly different nature in terms the learning outcomes to be attained than normal content-based courses such as in the need to assess the required real time language performance, abilities and range of skills. Thus, it poses great challenges to educators when done in online or long-distance mode (ODL)

A new experience to these fresh school leavers since this would be their first experience with online learning and LMS. ICT incorporation into language learning must be thoroughly considered to avoid any complications. Online platforms were often experiencing malfunctions and technical support that might not be a valuable resource during the limited time of exams. This might be exhausting for some instructors and stressing for students (Abduh,

2021). Unlike the traditionally face-to-face language learning setting, learning can be difficult when human interaction and support have been reduced due to the increased time with the technology (Gyamfi & Sukseemuang, 2018). Students lacked training to budget their time for online assessments and they always sought for some extra time to answer (Abduh, 2021). The complexity and unfamiliarity with the different technologies involved in online testing can affect students' test-taking experience (Abasli et al., 2023). Ahmad et al. (2021) highlighted that there is still inadequacy in the provision of detailed automated feedback and achievement summary within the present learning management systems (LMS) utilized by many higher learning institutions throughout the country.

Research Objectives

Due to the learners being product of high -school education during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is interesting and pertinent to be sure of their level of digital learning exposure and competency. The university should not assume and take for granted that all of them managed to benefit from the 'forced' ODL that they had to endure while studying at home during the pandemic. Some learners from affluent socio-economic background might have maximum access to the internet and the online learning process while a group of unfortunate others might be derived of such privilege. As such, the objectives of this research are set to be as follows:

- a) to investigate the learners' perception on their overall online assessment experience for a language course via the university LMS,
- b) to investigate the learners' experience in completing online writing assessments and
- c) to investigate the learners' experience in completing online listening assessments

The specific questions for this research are as follows:

1. How do English Language learners perceive their overall online assessment experience?
2. How do English Language learners perceive their online writing assessment experience?
3. How do English Language learners perceive their online listening assessment experience?

Firstly, for this preliminary study, the authors will try to understand these freshmen's perception of their own LMS experience when completing assessment for an English proficiency course. Secondly, the findings of this study will allow the lecturers and the institution to learn about the students' experiences and make future improvements and adjustments. Thirdly, this research as an initial work in progress could be replicated to other groups of students at a bigger scale to explore more on the opportunity to enhance and optimize the online learning experience.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a basic mix-method approach that utilizes a simple quantitative survey followed by a round of semi-structured interviews on the purposive samples of respondents. The respondents for this research are new university undergraduates who enrolled in Bachelor's degree course at a public university after finishing their high school and pre-university studies via online learning methods amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. The results of the survey are tabulated and descriptively analysed while the interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews were analysed via content analysis to look for points and emerging themes on the subject matter of this research.

Data Collection

A simple survey was done on 27 new English Language learners enrolled for undergraduate studies at a public university in Malaysia. All of the participants have attended Level 1 English proficiency course in the previous semester. A set of questionnaires on online language assessment usage containing 16 items using 5-points Likert-type scale was administered to them. The class leader and five leaders of the group assignments in the course were also interviewed via a set of semi-structured interview questions to probe their experience in using online language assessments via the university Learning Management (LMS). This is again pertinent to see how readapt back to normal learning situation post Covid-19 pandemic while continue to experience learning via blended physical face to face as well as through the online platform.

Choice of Online Assessment

Two types of online language assessments namely the listening and the writing test were administered to the students. The listening test consists 20 MCQ items where the audio function as stimulus and the questions were shared using the university LMS for the students to listen to and respond. A single online listening test was administered to the students of the course for the semester while the online writing test was given twice to the students for the particular semester. The online writing test involves a short personal reflection of a short story that the students have to listen to and write a discussion paragraph.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The new students were very favourable towards the use of the online language assessment administered via the LMS platform. This could be observed from the survey that all the items under online assessment domain registered rating above 70% agreement by the respondents. Only 1 item on sufficiency of online assessment registered 7% non- agreement among the respondents. While neutral ratings were only a bit high for three items namely sufficiency of assessment (19%), online listening improves language skills (22 %) and writing improves language skills (19%).

Table 1 Online Assessment in General

Statement	Disagree (1) (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4)(5)
Online learning encourages me to increase my language use	0%	11 %	89 %
Online assessments increase my participation in my English course	0%	15 %	85 %
Online assessments are sufficiently provided	7 %	19 %	74 %
Online Listening assessment helps improve my language skills	0%	22 %	78 %
Online Writing assessments help improve my language skills	0%	19 %	81 %

Varied responses were received for items that fall under the online listening assessment domain. Three items registered a small disagreement by the respondents namely no glitch during the online listening process (11%),

clear test procedure (4%) and ability to check online score (7%). It is quite worrisome that the items that garner high neutral response and positive response are quite close for three items namely easiness to complete test (44% and 56%), no glitch in completing test (48% and 41%) and test is user friendly (52% and 48%). The worry on this matter was answered based on the findings from the semi-structured interviews that many students chose the neutral item to show that they can deal with it and it is not an issue negatively and neither do the thing being very positive and very impactful. This shows that the learners showed that they have developed some level of digital learning awareness and competency based on their one-year plus school lock down during the pandemic. This also showed a sense of adaptation and reconditioning as their make another adjustment to learning processes during the new learning post Covid-19 pandemic.

Table 2 Online Listening Assessment

Statement	Disagree (1) (2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4) (5)
The online test is easy to be completed	0%	44 %	56 %
The online test is completed without any problem	11 %	48 %	41 %
The online test procedures are clear	4 %	26 %	70 %
The online test system is user friendly	0%	52 %	48 %
I could check my scores online	7 %	22 %	69 %

Table 3 Online Writing Assessment

Statement	Disagree (1)(2)	Neutral (3)	Agree (4) (5)
The online test is easy to be completed	4 %	33 %	63 %
The online test is completed without any problem	4 %	48 %	48%
The online test procedures are clear	4 %	22 %	74 %
The online test system is used friendly	7 &	44 %	49%
I could check my scores online	7 %	22 %	71 %
I could oversee my writing feedback online	0%	30 %	70 %

Overall, the learners were satisfied with their first experience completing online language assessments using the university LMS. They have indicated positive feedback for their experience for both types of online assessments though there were some concerns raised which relate to high percentage of neutral responses. The 5 Likert scale is chosen instead of 4 to ensure that they can decide on all possible stands. Despite completing all their tests, teacher’s guidance and demonstrations, uncertainties over application issues do occur such as encountering problems during the test and the platform not being user friendly. All these need to be looked into further by the lecturers and the management.

Ahmad et al. (2021) pointed out that despite the wide range of benefits gained as a result of technology adoption and digital tools integration for learning purposes via web-based or online mode, disparity and shortcoming could still be detected within online assessments. For instance in the context of summative and formative online assessments, there are disparity in terms of the online tools capability. In addition, the findings from studies by Ahmad et al. (2021) also indicate that specific online language assessment guidelines and framework for online assessment implementation is deemed necessary to ensure best educational practices are applied, to ensure maximum attainment of course and program outcomes.

Interview Responses

The class leader and five leaders of group assignments also narrated positive experiences and ease of use when undertaking the online language assessments. The interviews were able to further explore the reasons behind their favourable responses and positive level of technology acceptance albeit not being fully exposed to any online language assessment via LMS previously at school. The findings also disclose that the Neutral responses to the questionnaires represent their acceptance of the capability of the LMS as they find it not too difficult to handle.

As a whole the students showed that they were able to adapt well from conventional face to face language assessment that are predominant at schools. The exposure to use of online learning including learning assessment was made inevitable during the Covid-19 pandemic. The previously just physical face to face classroom lessons with direct assessments have been transformed to full online language lessons with online language assessments. They learned to be more patient, not panicky and to mitigate simple strategies whenever there is any technical glitch to the tools or the learning platform. The previous challenges faced during the pandemic has conditioned them to be adaptable to new online situations.

Balta-Salvador et al. (2021) remarked that many previous research focused on negative emotions of online learning, however, assessment of positive feelings should not be overlooked. This research has managed to indirectly investigate this aspect based on the positive and neutral responses within the survey questionnaire. The respondents gave justifications during the interview that such positive emotion and perception on the online language assessments were due to their level of confidence and awareness in digital learning applications as a result of the level of literacy and digital learning competency previously developed during the pandemic. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown that normalization and stability to learning adjustments and adaptation are the key areas that institutions and curriculum designers need to enhance for continued improvement in terms of quality as well as for preparation of future educational changes. The changes in learning mode requires flexibility in course design to adapt from face to face, to hybrid or to blended learning and to full online learning as any of these mode will come in handy and need to be put in place based on circumstances and needs. This requires strong emphasis on the importance of systematic steps for learning plans and implementation (Ahmad et al., 2021).

4. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that new the language learners have positive experience in using new online language assessments. Their positive feedback on their overall online assessment experience using the university's LMS shows that they have some level of awareness and competency of digital education and digital literacy. These awareness and competency were developed during the pandemic as a means to mitigate the deprivation of normal conventional learning. The respondents also have positive perception towards their experience in completing the listening and the writing components of the online language assessments. University administrators and lecturers

need to continuously monitor the progress of students' closely so that their level of digital literacy and competency will continue to increase so that they could cope with the demand of tertiary studies. This will also enable them to grow into individuals who will be responsible for their own learning and will manage their own asynchronous learning time systematically. For future research it could be recommended that aspects of quality of learners' autonomy and the level of learners' ethics could be examined to complete a whole cycle of study on overall aspects of 21st century learners.

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