Challenges in Implementing Online Language Assessment-A Critical Reflection of Issues faced amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

Norkhairi Ahmad[1], Ina Suryani Ab Rahim[2] and Salawati Ahmad[3]

[1]*Universiti Kuala Lumpur Malaysia France Institute, {norkhairi@unikledu.my}*
[2]*Universiti Malaysia Perlis, {inasuryani@unimap.edu.my}*
[3]*Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia, {salawati@uthm.edu.my}*

ABSTRACT

Over the years many literature on language assessment continue to highlight a myriad of issues and challenges. The delivery of tertiary language courses including their assessments components were put to the test during the recent outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic that necessitates total shift to online mode from the previously conventional or partially online. Due to this circumstance, this paper aims to identify the challenges faced by language lecturers in administering assessment in the online mode and the need to plan good mitigation strategies. Qualitative data was elicited from twenty one key language lecturers as purposive samplings from eleven public universities. Based on basic Delphi approach, they were grouped according to three expertise domains namely online language learning, language curriculum and pedagogy. The expert respondents gave inputs and views to questions via structured written interviews as well as follow-up oral interviews. Emerging themes from the qualitative responses point towards ten challenges representing four categories of issues namely infrastructure, lecturers' online assessment literacy, language learners' commitment and integrity and absence of specific implementation guidelines for online assessments. The findings also indicate that specific online language assessment guidelines and framework is deemed necessary to ensure best educational practices are applied to ensure attainment of course and programme outcomes.

Keywords: online assessment, literacy, language courses, challenges during pandemic

I   INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic brought about education challenges to the routine physical face to face teaching and learning processes due to closure of institutions, movement controls and lock-downs. Although this phenomenon has been described as a disruption or crisis situation, some see this as the big push for serious technology integration and full on-line learning adoption (Li & Lalani, 2020). The effort to resort to digital learning via online mode and to substitute physical face to face learning sessions with online learning have been described as desperate damage control effort, crisis management measures and act of innovations to mitigate new arising challenge. Among the crucial area affected is the administration of assessments which have been predominantly delivered via pen and paper, sit-down conventional mode and in particular the summative assessment (Cancino & Capredoni, 2020). As language courses have slightly different nature in terms the learning outcomes to be attained, the need to assess the required real time language performance, abilities and range of skills, it poses great challenges to educators in times of pandemic.

II   PROBLEM STATEMENT

Demand for graduate with communicative competence who master lingua franca such as the English language has been escalating due to growth in businesses and economic activities. Even Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) and professional bodies like the Malaysian Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC) have emphasized language mastery and communicative competence as part of the 21st century educational goals to be attained by undergraduates. This is pertinent as academic grades churned out for undergraduates through assessments will be the tipping point for decisions on employment purposes by companies (Ahmad Tajuddin, 2015). The emergence of digital education and the increased emphasis for English language mastery for 21st century employability and career growth have yet to increase graduates' attainment in this area. Studies have shown that the lack of technical competencies, communicative abilities and skills to seek employment as the primary reasons for many graduates to continue to be jobless (Hanafi & Zaid, 2014). During trouble times like the current Covid-19 pandemic, delivery of academic programmes are severely affected and eventually, the credibility of grades awarded for undergraduates, the assessment procedures undertaken and the overall quality of academic programmes will be doubted by the community that comprise parents, employers and the public in general if graduates continue to display poor attainment of the desired attributes.

In relation to the above, Pill and Harding (2013) describe literacy in language assessment as a challenging range of abilities requiring language instructors to acquire assessment knowledge, construct items, assess items and engage in analysis of data from language assessment. Similarly, numerous studies have highlighted gaps in terms of assessment beliefs held by language educators' as compared to those of assessment professionals' caused by insufficient assessment engagement, lack of assessment exposure and limited training opportunity (Sheehan & Munro, 2017). Many language educators reported on their minimal roles in assessment matters and this has reduced their engagement within a wider range of assessment undertakings such as in developing and implementing assessments (Plakans & Gebril, 2016). In addition, general perceptions on communication has shifted due to the advent and availability of technology for daily tasks as well as for essential domain like higher education where learners have preference for enhanced communication and additional attention from instructors via digital learning (Kotz, 2016). This is a prevalent trend as 21st century digital natives have higher data and information consumption via daily communication and engagement on digital platform and technologies and the running of conventional classroom teaching and learning is apparently not adequate anymore in meeting the digital needs of learners (Chan & Yee, 2009). All these seemingly negative scenario becomes more critical within the domain of digital learning as it requires a different set of approaches for instructional purposes.

III   RELEVANT LITERATURE

The rapid growth in demand for digital education for learners via flipped and blended platform has become a primary trend in higher education (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016) along with active transformations of institutional digital set up and approaches in educational instructions (Becker, Cummins & Freeman, 2017). Though student assessment would influence the quality of the graduates produce, many assessment strategies are found to inhibit this intention (Adnan, Wan Abdullah, Muda & Mohd Sallem, 2020). In the context of present digital eduaction scenario, Helfaya and O' Neil (2019) observe that e-assessment and e-feedback are not still well-developed and widely used methods at many universities. Moreover, many existing management system for online learning have limitations in supporting educational functions such as generating assessment items which are well aligned to and aptly gauge the target course learning outcomes of academic courses (O' Sitthisak, Gilbert & Davis, 2008).

Higher institutions which are not fully embracing this digital transformation will not be well positioned to undertake technology adoption, and integration and shift to digital and remote learning from existing conventional teaching and learning mode (Salmon, 2005). There is an apparent dearth of studies conducted on educational practices of teaching and learning utilised by higher education personnel for academic programmes offered via fully online or hybrid mode like flipped or blended version (Montelongo & Eaton, 2019). Digital learning via online education offer immense potential and outcomes for higher education fraternity like undergraduates, faculty member and administrative staff in terms of avenue for innovation and best practices (Montelongo, 2019).

IV   METHODOLOGY

Data for this qualitative study based on purposive sampling was elicited based on basic Delphi approach that comprised three expertise grouping of key language lecturers who are well versed in online learning, langauge curriculum and language pedagogy. A number of qualitative educational research have incorporated the basic Delphi approach where experienced personnel or experts are identified and grouped according to domain expertise and get to respond the data elicitation tools for a specific topic. Literature review sources and initial interviews with five experts guided formulation of the interview questions and protocols as well as the choice of coding process and the topic and identification of themes. The transcribed qualitative data was analysed thematically together with member-checking and triangulation procedure to verify their accuracy and validity. This was followed by data presentation in the form of non-linear diagrammes and matrix to assist easier viewing and comprehension of the discovered points. This also facilitated easier analysis of the results juxtaposed with current literature on the subject matter. A total of twenty one academicians from the three expertise grouping responded to written interviews via google form containing structured questions and via follow-up oral interviews.

V   FINDINGS

This study provides essential insights into the present scenario of how the rapid growth in 21st century technological advancements impacts higher education in terms of digital teaching and learning implementation. This is in line with the surge in preference for interactive online education among the present millenials who are considered as digital natives. This echoes the study by Killen, Beetham and Knight (2017) that educational institutions need

to essentially cultivate and work towards establishing proper infrastructure, responsive policies and positive culture that complement and spur effective digital practices.

Twenty one key language academicians from eleven public universities formed the three expert groups comprising 14 males and 7 females, participated in this study. The Language Curriculum group averages 22.4 years in work experience, followed by the Online Learning group with 18.3 years and the Language Pedagogy group with 19.6 years. These respondents also hold important designations at their institutions such as Deans, Deputy Deans, Head of Programmes, Head of Units, Coordinators and Resource Person. Fourteen are holders of PhDs while seven academicians have Masters qualifications.

Table 1. Respondents' Demographic Information

Expert Grouping	Public Universities North (N), Central (C), East (E) & South (S) Regions)	Designation
Online Learning 6 Unis 6 Males 1 Female	MSu (UniN1), IMa (UniN3) AAz, MRMa (UniC2), MMo (UniC3), AAr (UniE1) NKH (UniC4) **6 PhDs and 1 MA**	Dean, Resource Person, Head of Unit 18.3 years average work experience
Language Curriculum 7 Unis 2 Males 5 Females	ISu (UniN1), HDz (UniN2), ZHa (UniC1), HHa(UniC4) SOm (UniE2) AAL(UniS2) NKa(UniS1) **7 PhDs**	Dean, Deputy Dean, Head of Unit Head of Program, 22.4 years average work experience
Language Pedagogy 7 Unis 6 Males 1 Female	FZu (UniN1), MMus (UniE1), AAA (UniC2), MZO (UniC3), AAM (UniC4), NRa (UniS1), NDa (UniS2) **1 PhD and 6MAs**	Head of Unit, Senior lecturers, Resource Person 19.6 years average work experience

The findings from this study reveal that the previously partially recommended formative online language assessment had to be done full-swing in online mode due to the Covid-19 scenario. Even the sit-in summative final examination had to be transformed into a more flexible online version language tasks. All these were done via university based Learning Management System (LMS) along with other synchronous online interaction tools that have multiple functionalities like recording and noting attendance. All expert respondents agreed that the LMS and functionalities of the online communication tools could not fully substitute the personal touch and impact of conventional face to face classroom assessment sessions. All of them

also concurred that existing LMS and commonly available online tools are inadequate to replace face to face assessment especially to gauge summative productive skills which are real-time performance based like oral responses, group interaction and writing. Rather, they must be applied in combination via proper selection and planning.

Table 2 Sample Responses and Themes

Expert	Sample Responses	Themes
FZu UniN1	Creativity in planning, conducting and performing assessment is lacking. the ability to embed and weave methods and sources from various tools is a huge advantage for instructors. however, this is lacking nowadays	Lecturers' online assessment literacy
AAA UniC2	Not exactly coherent. Probably due to no proper guidelines on how the test should be administered, which platform to 'park' the test for the students to sit for, as well as no proper way to monitor the students from copying or cheating as they sit for the test	Lack of implementation guidelines
MMo UniC3	Questionable as we couldn't control the students. We have to consider many aspects. First whether to limit the time in order to ensure they do the questions themselves. At the same time, we need to consider the internet constraints faced by them.	Learners' readiness, integrity, validity and reliability of process
AAr UniE1	when you are talking about online assessment, it will incur costing problem for example certain dollars for an online assessment platform that can really observe the candidate in terms of validity of answering the questions.	Costing and quality of online tools
ZHa UniC1	Introduction to the recommended tools and the purpose they serve and how to use them effectively will be useful.	The need for specific guidelines

The assortments of relevant responses above do not paint a rosy picture on the state of affairs of online learning and online language assessment at public universities in Malaysia. Every single expert respondent has touched on the crucial issue of internet bandwidth, speed and stability to sustain the online learning sessions. Each respondent also acknowledged that they were aware of the equity and disparity issues in terms of internet access for the majority of their students who were at their respective homes throughout the country. Cases of disruptions and technical glitches to online lessons

experienced both by the respondents and their students were also narrated.

The second pressing issue is the competency in technology integration by language educators as observed and experienced by the experts. The range of familiarity, competency and ease of exploring the full potential that the online tools and online platform or management system offer, vary between educators. Apart from the basic online mode for lecture delivery and interaction, the tentativeness of the less ICT/Online savvy group became apparent during this pandemic. Even for the online savvy language educators, many of them narrated the challenge of conducting assessment in terms of planning, executing and monitoring the reliability and validity of the processes particularly for the summative assessments. For instance, identifying the suitable and balanced assessment tools for the specific language skills be it receptive or productive skills was quite challenging due to issues of tools availability, assessment literacy, online literacy and internet access.
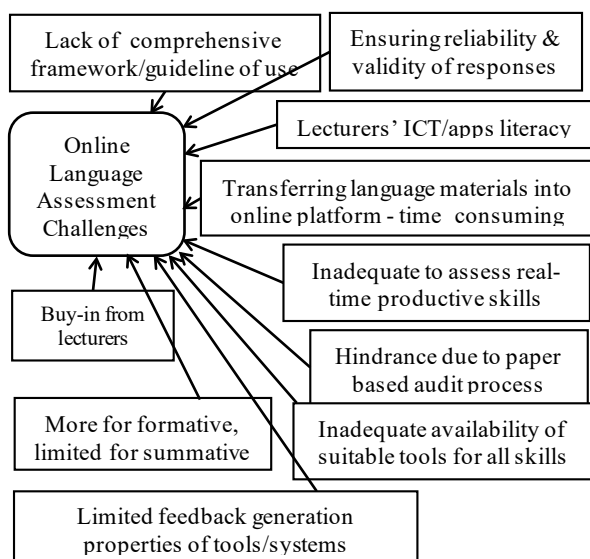

Figure 1. Challenges in online language assessment.

Four categories of issues could be detected from the list of ten challenges that emerged from the qualitative expert response. The first issue is infrastructure that covers access to the internet, bandwidth, speed and stability plus availability of effective management system platform and recommended tools. Second is the issue of literacy and technology competency to effectively plan administer and monitor language assessment via online mode. Third is the rate of participation and commitment of the undergraduates in the online learning and assessment process, as the party most affected and most pressured to undergo the tertiary education and attain the expected goals and outcomes, within a less conducive condition. Fourth,

there is an absence of specific online language assessment guideline that explicitly spell out best practices, mitigation strategies, alternative measures and a host of tips for campus fraternities, administrators, language educators and undergraduates to be aware of and rely upon for language assessments. Such guidelines should be able to assist all parties such as less online savvy lecturers to lessen time taken for preparing online materials, improve adoption of technology in classrooms and enhance learners to achieve the intended learning outcomes of the language courses.
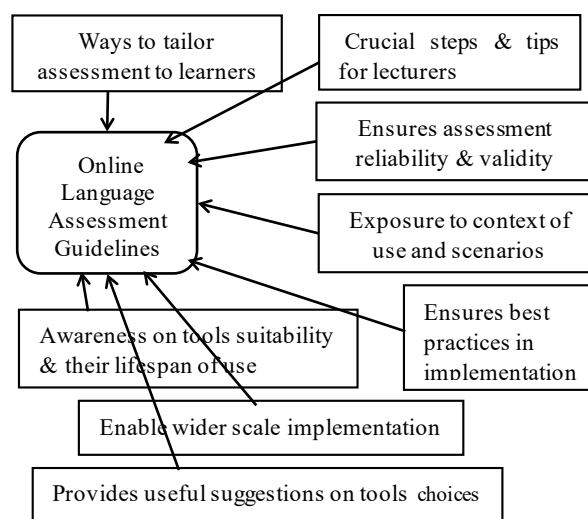

Figure 2. Need for Guideline/Framework

The figure above captures the justifications and reasons put forth by the experts respondents from all the three groups for a specific online language assessment guidelines and framework to be developed and put in place.

Stake holders and higher education authorities were also urged byt the expert respondents to be adept at managing issues revolving around technology acceptance in education such as literacy, access, infrastructure and cost. Crucial attention must be paid to the effort to develop guideline that recommends effective implementation best practices for online language assessments.

Findings from this study have high transferability to other institutions with similar contextual set-ups as they are relatable to the current realities of the respective institution. The expert groupings have a general consensus that online learning despite being actively propagated to be the main stream practice was not fully implemented in full-swing by academicians until the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic that inevitably forced its use for teaching and learning purposes.

VI   DISCUSSION

There is an increasing demand for quality graduates for employment purposes that necessitates assessments and grading done via online and web-based platform to ensure their real competency is properly gauged (M.Ilahi, Cheniti & Braham, 2013). Cancino and Capredoni (2020) believe on the crucial need to expose learners to new assessment tools from the beginning of any programme to enable them to familiarize with differences in terms of tasks and formats as well as allowing them to adapt to the required new strategies for attempting online assessment tasks. Likewise, Phil and Harding (2013) believe that the shift from conventional from paper assessments to digital version could be challenging and not swift for higher institutions that lack technology adoption and not putting in place proper online response systems for assessment purposes .

Despite the immense benefits generated for education as a result of technology adoption and digital tools integration for learning purposes such as for assessing learning attainment via web-based or online mode, disparity and shortcoming could still be detected between summative and formative online assessment tools capability. In addition, there is clear inadequacy in the provision of detailed automated feedback and achievement summary by learning management systems (LMS), particularly for big scale and multiple tasks (Cagliero, Farinetti & Baralis, 2017). Most common is the inability of many online learning tools and systems to automatically generate detailed feedback or summaries for outcomes from online assessment for quick learning input for learners and most importantly for them to be able to follow the recommendations that relate to their learning needs (Killen, Beetham & Knight, 2017).

The current millennial generation who are digital natives are sensitive to even small things from digital media like the online layout of an online instructions. Such minute details could affect their perception on online item usability and may seem difficult for them to follow and understanding what was required from the task. Being users of learning and assessment through online tools would come naturally for this generation as their engagement would be easily elicited as they are able to relate behaviourally and cognitively to the digital materials and platform they are familiar with. Thus, they are more prepared to remember the lessons, retrieve the information required and achieve the intended learning (Cardoso, 2011). Such realities were also captured by Buragohain (2020) who reported that digital immigrant language instructors need to be adept with the whole range of digital necessities of the millennial language learners who are digital natives and develop competency to apply 21st century digital tools in creating interactive online language classroom sessions.

As such, Kent (2019) in his investigation of the efficacy of online response tools for formative assessment, emphasizes on the need to develop teacher-interaction and peer-interaction techniques. This will enable interactive and active learning environment to be created where learners could feel engaged and identify their gaps in online learning. Due to current circumstances, there is also a pressing need for a framework of use or guidelines for implementation of online language assessment that will empower language educators to effectively plan and administer competence-based assessments and adhere to principles of evidence based validity, reliability and feedback (M.Ilahi, Cheniti & Braham, 2013).

All key language lecturers as expert respondents for this study have echoed similar observations and views as depicted in the above scenario and cited literature. They pointed out realities and challenges that require mitigation in the aspect of online assessment literacy of educators, learners' familiarity and readiness, lack of online assessment implementation guidelines, internet access and stability of internet infrastructure. Generally, all the experts concur that online learning as a whole is not fully embraced by the higher education community as it has not yet become a culture.

VII   CONCLUSION

This findings from this study are significant in providing insights into the state of affairs of the online delivery academic courses at universities. Understanding the nature of online language assessment challenges highlighted by this study will pave the way for mitigation measures and lay smooth path in developing effective online language assessment implementation strategies. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a good wake-up call and has unearthed a whole range of inadequacies that must be addressed. This study also highlights justifications for developing explicit framework or guidelines for best practices in online language assessments to uphold validity and reliability principles and best practices. Such measure is crucial in ascertaining that the grades awarded truly reflects undergraduates' learning attainment and mastery of the languages that they learn.

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