Overview of Challenges in Conducting English for Specific Academic Purposes (ESAP) Course Assessments via Online and Distance Learning Mode (ODL) for Engineering Students Amidst Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract. While literature on language assessment continue to highlight various issues, the running of university English courses particularly their assessments components are put to the test during the Covid-19 pandemic where the shift to online mode from the previously conventional method becomes inevitable. Due to this n e w circumstance, this paper aims to explore the challenges faced by English lecturers in delivering online language assessments and the strategies they undertook for mitigation. Qualitative data was elicited from twenty one key language lecturers as purposive samples from eleven public universities. Based on basic Delphi method, they were grouped according to three expertise domains namely online language learning, language curriculum and pedagogy. The expert respondents provided views to structured written interview questions as well as follow-up oral interviews. Emerging themes from the responses point towards ten challenges that form four categories of issues namely ICT infrastructure, lecturers' online assessment literacy, language learners' commitment and integrity and the need for specific online language assessment guidelines. The expert consensus also indicate that formulation of specific online language assessment guidelines is necessary to ensure educational best practices are upheld for effective attainment of course and programme outcomes.

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Keywords: online learning · language assessment · assessment literacy · Covid-19 pandemic

1 Introduction

The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) scenario was brought about to the teaching and learning processes by the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic that entails

education challenges due to closure of institutions, movement restrictions and lockdowns [1]. Albeit the educational crisis situation, this disruptive phenomenon has been described as the big push for serious technology integration and full on-line learning adoption for the classroom [2]. Resorting to digital learning via online mode and substituting physical face to face classroom sessions with online learning have been described as crisis management measures and act of daring innovations to mitigate various types of arising challenges that have taken place around the world [3]. One of the affected educational aspects during the Covid-19 pandemic is assessments which were previously administered mainly via pen and paper, sit- down conventional mode, especially the summative assessments [4]. Language courses have more complex sets of outcomes to be attained due to the real time language performance, abilities and range of skills, that need to be taught and assessed. All these poses great challenges to educators in times of pandemic.

2   Problem Statement

Job market demand for graduates with communicative competence with good mastery of lingua franca like English increases as a result of growth in economic activities and businesses. Simultaneously, the process of assessing them becomes challenging as well. Even the country's professional agencies like Malaysia Qualification Agency (MQA) and the Malaysian Engineering Accreditation Council (EAC) emphasize language mastery and communicative competence as essential traits to be attained by undergraduates. Academic grades produced for undergraduates v assessments will be heavily relied upon by future employers and will be crucial for selection purposes by companies [5]. Albeit the advent of digital education and the growing emphasis for 21st century graduate traits development that includes English language mastery, graduates' attainment in this area crucial for employability and career growth is still lacking. Studies found the lack of technical competencies, communicative abilities and skills to seek employment as the main hindrance for graduates to secure jobs [6]. Compounded by troubled times like the Covid-19 pandemic, the quality of academic programmes delivered and grades awarded will be doubted by parents, employers and the public in general if graduates continue to exhibit poor mastery of the desired traits.

Many educators have to resort to using any available technological solutions, in an attempt to mitigate the Covid-19 lockdown circumstances that prevents physical learning sessions from taking place [7]. Thus, language assessment via the online mode will be an area which will be under scrutiny, in relation to such challenge. In addition, many studies point to gaps in assessment aspects like assessment views of language lecturers as compared to the views of assessment professionals. Such gap is caused by insufficient assessment engagement, inadequate assessment awareness and training sessions which is in short supply [8].

[9] Future teachers can only establish their own expertise in language assessment, when teacher trainers model sound assessment practices inside their courses. Likewise, many educators concurred on the limited roles assigned to them in assessment matters and thus resulting in reduced engagements within a wider range of assessment activities such as planning, constructing and administering assessments [10]. Even though web-

based language assessment may have enhance authenticity and reliability features via rich contextualized input, various response formats, and automated scoring there is still limited study conducted to investigate whether it can effectively work [11]. For instance, the ability of generating feedback is crucial where t for instance computer generated feedback could increase students' writing efficacy and their inclination to revise writing [12].

In general, there is a shift in perceptions on communication due to the availability of technology for daily tasks as well as for essential domains like higher education where learners have preference for enhanced communication and additional attention from lecturers via digital learning [13]. Presently, this is a common trend as 21st century digital natives use higher data and information for communication and engagement on digital platform and technologies. The running of conventional classroom teaching and learning is apparently not adequate anymore in meeting the digital needs of learners [14]. 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. In a number of studies highlight concerns over disparities between potentials and solutions offered by technology in education within in the circumstance of undertaking unavoidable big adjustments towards full online teaching and learning ecosystem [15].

3   Relevant Literature

The increase in demand for digital education for learners via flipped and blended platform has become a key trend in higher education [16]. This is in line with various rapid transformations, active adoption of digital set-up and implementation of online approaches in classroom instructions [17]. Digital learning via online education offer potential avenue and opportunities for higher education fraternity like undergraduates, faculty members and administrative staff for introducing innovations and applying best practices [18].

Literacy in language assessment is seen as having a set of abilities where educators have knowledge on assessment and are able to develop assessment items, administer the assessment to gauge learners' abilities as well as carry out analysis on language assessment data [19]. Though student assessments would influence the quality of the graduates produced, many assessment strategies appear to inhibit this intention [20].

In the context of present digital education scenario it could be observed that e-assessment and e-feedback are still not fully developed and not widely used at many institutions of higher learning [21]. Apparently, many current management system for online learning have limited functions in terms of generating assessment items which could be effectively aligned to outcomes and aptly gauge the attainment of target learning outcomes of academic courses [22]. This is one of the signs that higher learning institutions have yet to fully embrace digital transformation. They will not be strategically receptive towards technology adoption, integration and change into digital and online learning from the existing conventional teaching and learning methods [14]. Apparently, there is limited studies undertaken on of teaching and learning practices for academic programmes delivered fully online or via hybrid mode like flipped or blended version [18].

4 Methodology

Data for this qualitative study based on purposive sampling was elicited based on basic Delphi method that comprised three expertise grouping of key language lecturers who are well versed in online learning, language curriculum and language pedagogy. A number of qualitative educational research have incorporated the basic Delphi method where experts are identified and grouped according to expertise domains and are asked to respond to the questions for a specific topic. Literature review sources and Round 1 Delphi initial interviews with five experts guided formulation of the interview questions and protocols to be used for Round 2 Delhi interview. The choice of coding process and identification of themes were also based on literature reviews. 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 forming three expertise grouping responded to written interviews via google form containing structured questions during the round 2 Delphi method and round 3 Delphi method for selected follow-up oral interviews and verification (Table 1).

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. Data Elicitation and Analysis

Delphi Round1	6 Experts	Initial interviews to formulate questions
Dephi Round2	21 Experts	3 groups-responded to written interviews via google forms
Data coding and analysis		
Delphi Round3	6 Experts	Follow-up interviews and verification
Data Presentation in Non-Linear Form		

5   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. Educational institutions need to essentially cultivate and work towards establishing proper infrastructure, responsive policies and positive culture that complement and spur effective digital practices [23] (Table 2).

The findings from this study reveal that the previously recommended formative online language assessment had to be done full-swing in online mode due to the Covid-19 scenario. Even thesit-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 the experts 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 interactions and writing. Rather, they must be applied in combination vi a proper selection and planning.

Table 2. Experts' Demographic Information.

Expert Group (3 Categories)	Expert & Universities	Designation
Online Learning 6 Universities 6 Males 1 Female	MS, IM, AA, AZ, MR, MM, NK University: A,C, D, G, H, I **6 PhDs and 1MA** 18.3 years average work experience	Dean, Resource Person, Unit Head
English Curriculum 7 Universities 2 Males 5 Females	IS, HD, ZH, SO, HH, NKa, AAl **7 PhDs** University: A, B, F, I, J, K 22.4 years average work experience	Deputy Dean Unit Head of Program
English Pedagogy 7 Universities 6 Males 1 Female	FZ, MMus, AAz, MZ, AAm, NR, ND University: A, D, G, H, I, S **1 PhD and 6 Mas** 19.6 years average work experience	Unit Head Sr. Lecturer Resource Person

Table 3. Responses by Experts

Expert	Sample Responses	Themes
FZ UniA	Creativity in planning, conducting and performing assessment are lacking. The ability to embed and weave methods and sources from various tools is a huge advantage for educators.	Lecturers' online assessment literacy
AAz UniG	Not exactly coherent. Probably due to no proper guidelines on how tests should be administered, which platform to 'park' the tests for the students to sit for…no proper way to monitor the students from copying or cheating….	Lack of implementation guidelines
MM UniH	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
AA UniD	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
ZH UniF	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 in Table 3 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

Table 4. Categories & Types of Challenges

4 Categories of Challenges			
Infrastructure for ICT and Internet	Literacy and technology competency	Students participation and commitment	Absence of online language assessment guideline
Examples of Primary Challenges			
Ensuring reliability & validity of responses, Lecturers' ICT literacy, Assessing real time skills-limited tool functions, Lack of comprehensive guideline of use, Buy-in from lecturers, Poor& unstable internet			
Secondary Challenges			
Transferring language materials into online platform, Paper based audit process, limited feedback generation properties of tools, less tools for formative assessment			

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.

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.

The respondents also highlight the limited capacity for learning personalization which entails the fact that students characteristics influence the manner in which they engage in learning environments and the outcomes that are obtained [24].

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 course. The Fig. 1 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 (Table 4).

Stake holders and higher education authorities were also urged by 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
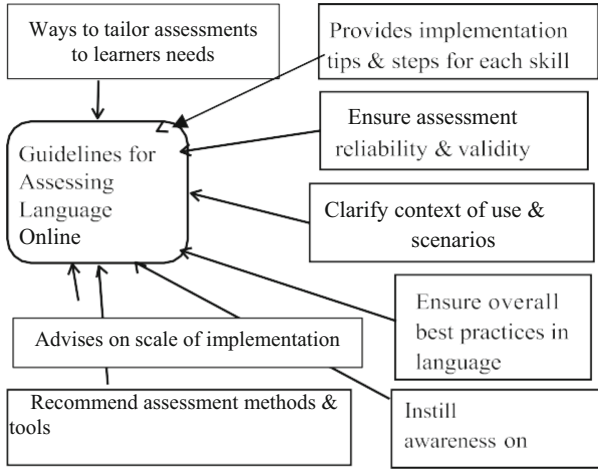
Fig. 1. The Need for Guidelines

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-up 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.

6   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 [25]. There is 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 [4]. Likewise, 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 [19]. On the onset of Covid 19 pandemic wave in 2020, online and distance learning became an inevitable solution to ensure everyone can continue the learning process [26].

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.

A number of these solutions have been argued as a new market strategy, created by the commercial digital learning platforms providers, which have been censured and

deemed as poorly designed in the aspect of pedagogical principles [27]. In addition, present learning management systems (LMS), does not have the function for detailed automated feedback and achievement summary particularly for large scale assessments and multiple tasks [28]. 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 is one of the common inadequacies [23]. Due to this, sometimes online learners could not independently follow recommendations that relate to their learning needs.

Language assessment literacy is an important piece of language teacher education puzzle which has not fully fallen into place as many teachers remain underprepared for bridging language assessment research-practice gaps in classrooms [29] and this includes aspects of literacy on assessing language via online tools, modes and platforms.

As digital natives, the current millennial generation who are sensitive to various aspects of digital media even the design, layout and content of an online materials and instructions. Even small unfavourable details could affect their perception on online materials usability and practicality. Such lacking could be seen by them as troublesome and difficult for them to comprehend and follow. Likewise, to understanding requirements from the language assessment tasks. Moreover, numerous studies reported positive buy in and impact from digital learning on the pedagogy as it becomes more innovative and engaging as technological tools have triggered new interest and motivation, and increased interactions within online teaching and learning environment [30].

Adult learners are generally self-directed in learning and will continue to learn based on personal interests and needs [31]. A number of studies found that 90% students consider that it is essential to adopt technology as part of learning as they rely on technology for interconnectivity and information [32]. Thus becoming users of learning and assessment through online mode would come naturally for this generation as their engagement may be easily elicited as they are able to relate behaviourally and cognitively to the digital materials via a platform familiar to them. Thus, they would be more prepared to remember the lessons, retrieve the information required and achieve the intended learning outcomes. The digital immigrant or language instructors need to be adept with the whole range of digital necessities of the millennial language learners who are digital natives [33].

Language educators must develop competency to apply 21st century digital tools in creating interactive online language classroom sessions. Apparently, there is a lack of knowledge management system which impacts knowledge creation [34] and the lack of awareness, skills, and competencies causes difficulties to create knowledge for teaching, learning and training purposes [35].

However, some may argue that students suffer from the insufficient interactions in technology-supported instructions. Even when they are not able to understand the lessons, students are afraid to ask questions due to disapproval, or deemed to be a defiant to a perceivable social characteristic, which reinforces lack of online communication self-efficacy [36]. This consequently impacts the students' overall readiness and performance.

The challenge of online learning is how teachers instill in students the hidden curriculum values [37], such as teamwork, honesty, responsibility, and mutual respect [38]. Studies on the efficacy of online response tools for formative assessment, emphasizes on

the need to develop teacher-interaction and peer-interaction techniques [39]. This will enable interactive and active learning environment to be created where learners could feel engaged and identify their gaps in online learning. Automated tools must be able to simulate the classroom assistance, input and feedback offered by language instructors as students need quality feedback to ensure that they are making good progress [40].

Due to current circumstances, there is also a pressing need for models or guidelines for implementing 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 [41].

Moreover, technologies such as mobile application, virtual reality, augmented reality have been adopted in teaching and learning. With the current COVID-19 pandemic situation, there is approximately 470 million educational mobile application downloads in the first quarter of 2020 [42]. Undoubtedly, effective learning management is the key to successful online learning [43, 44].

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 albeit having great potential, online learning as a whole is not fully embraced by the higher education community as it has not yet become a culture.

Malaysia as a rapidly developing country with 33 million population and has good internet penetration does not fare better than its counterparts Thailand and Indonesia which have 50% less per capita income but with double and quadruple population size of 70 million and 270 million respectively. That were many reported cases of no internet, access, unstable internet service and insufficient bandwidth and speed throughout the country. A national level macro intervention is badly needed to address infrastructural flaw and help millions of school going children, students at higher learning institution and workers to study and work in a more decent online environment.

7   Conclusion

This insights provided by this study are significant in understanding further the state of affairs of the online delivery of academic courses at universities. The Covid-19 pandemic serves as a good wake-up call and has unearthed a whole range of inadequacies that must be addressed in terms of online assessment. Understanding online language assessment challenges reported will pave the way for the planning of mitigation measures. Greater emphasis and a sense of urgency have also been triggered on the need to develop effective online language assessment implementation guidelines or strategies. This will enable best practices and principles for language assessments will continue to be upheld albeit within unfavourable circumstance like Covid-19 pandemic. All the mitigation measures, guidelines and strategies are crucial in ensuring the awarded grades reflect undergraduates' learning attainment and mastery of the languages.

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