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Integration of Digitally-Assisted Assessment in the EFL Classroom

The global landscape of higher education has dramatically changed since 2020 due to the pandemic caused by the spread of COVID-19. The pandemic has forced Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in emergency digitalization at all levels, in teaching and assessment. Through online teaching, the discussions about knowledge protection, cheating, plagiarism resulting from the emergency transition of Distance Learning cannot avoid. It is witnessed the effort taken by the academic and administrative staff of HEIs to timely tackle forcedly changed policies, chanced practices, and the reality in the New Normal. Based on the above-mentioned circumstances; educators from different countries including Kazakhstan, Turkey and Georgia, decided to get united and illustrate through the current study the integration of Digitally Assisted Assessment (DAA) with teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in these countries. Subsequently, the study has considered the necessity to acquire the opinions from various EFL educators and practitioner teachers locally and globally to develop a qualitative survey seeking responses on the ways how the assessment system has changed in the digital classroom. Also, the type of employed digital tools for successful assessment and how these tools have helped teachers to succeed in digitally assisted assessment. At the same time, the paper aims at identifying the advantages and disadvantages of using DAA in EFL classrooms. Finally based on the survey results will attempt to demonstrate best practices of successful iteration of DAA and to provide practical recommendations for future improvement.

Keywords: higher education, COVID, digitalization, online teaching, distance learning, English as a foreign language, digital tools, assessment.

Introduction

In the past decade, the increased employment of digital tools, formats, and technology utilized in education has been observed. These tools have enhanced both teaching and assessment in the academic environment. How the manner students are assessed greatly affects what and how they learn. Today, distanced instructors are challenged to ensure appropriate feedback. It enables students to identify their strengths and weaknesses in academic performance.

Leibold & Schwarz believe that the quality feedback in distance learning mode can be implemented by addressing the learner by name, providing immediate, balanced, specific feedback, using a positive tone, and asking the question to promote thinking [1].

Traditionally, Ypsilandis defines feedback as a response, a reaction that is triggered and received by the learner and provided by the teacher [2]. The feedback process begins with the production of student work. After receiving the teacher's feedback on the work, the student can receive feedback positively or negatively. According to Yorke, some students experience feedback as information to be assimilated and accommodated, other students as a failure [3]. Despite this fact, Light & Cox recommend regarding feedback as a tool that admits students to assess themselves and others [4].

Also, Rovai states that deficiency of feedback frequently conduces to students' poor academic achievements [5]. The most crucial question is how to provide helpful and suitable feedback in terms of distance learning. Distance learners are challenged to organize their learning through self and peer assessment, discovery learning, reflection, and articulation. In this regard, assessment necessitates a continuous and seamless procedure to address all students' needs. Instructors are expected to acquire a balance between providing a rational amount of time and a chance to respond [6].

Appiah & Tonder highlight that DAA differs from the schemes in a traditional physical classroom. It can be delivered online or offline. Online assessment requires a constant Internet connection, whereas offline requires the download of tests/tasks into students' computers. Institutions can also place their assessment tests on the official servers to be available at any time for their students [7].

Theoretical background

Joint Information System Committee (JISC, 2004) defines E-assessment as an 'end-to-end electronic assessment procedure' where ICT serves as the primary tool for presenting assessment activities and recording students' answers [8]. The procedure is guaranteed by the two main components, such as the assessment engine and item bank. The first comprises software and hardware where assessment tests or tasks are configured and delivered. The second comprises random-order questions and instructions to deliver e-assessment. Addressing to basic principles of e-assessment, Brink and Lautenbach have mentioned its authentic, consistent, transparent, and practical characteristics.

The Guide to best practices in e-assessment informs about the need for a specially trained staff who demonstrate the following skills and knowledge:

- Good understanding of fair e-assessment.
- Awareness of security measures in the conduct of e-assessment.
- Familiarity with e-assessment systems and delivery at the institution.
- Ability to prevent and detect a malfunction in e-assessment [9].

Whitelock et al. designed the framework that provides cycles of the e-assessment process as demonstrated in Figure 1. The initial stage in the e-assessment process starts with a motivation that plays a vital role in assessment. The first stage is followed by elaboration and design of assessment. The next stage is a test commencement after which the results are given. Afterward, the data is processed, and feedback is provided. Lastly, the cycle is accomplished when students evaluate the results and analyze the feedback [10].

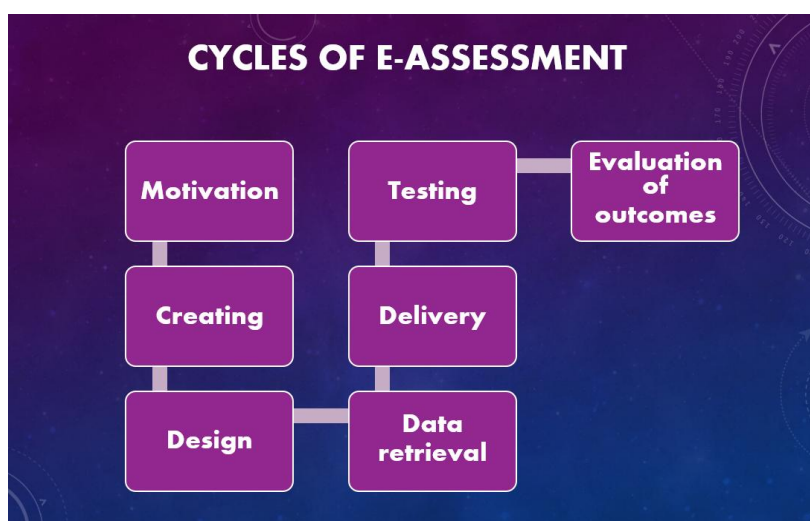


Figure 1. Cycles of e-assessment [10]

As illustrated in Table 1, a carefully designed assessment assists the boost not only students' critical-thinking skills but also permits them to evaluate their comprehension of the course content [11]. Depending on the timing and objective of the assessment, different categories of e-assessment can be distinguished, from diagnostic to formative and summative types. When it comes to the issue of what language skills can be digitally assessed, the experts believe that it is less relevant and effective in evaluating students' speaking and writing skills. It is more common in checking their listening and reading comprehension skills. The features of e-assessment activities can be well-illustrated through the following aspects, such as when to apply, what for, and in what way.

Table 1

Types of E-assessment

	When?	Why?	How?
E-discussions	Throughout or/and at the end of the course	Provide students' interaction	Daily or weekly posts
E-portfolios	Throughout or/and at the end of the course	Generate document learning	'Standalone' or 'connected'
Formative feedback	Throughout the course	Identify gaps & improve learning	Online practice quiz
Summative feedback	At the end of the instructional period	Collect evidence of students' knowledge	Weekly test
Authentic assessment	Throughout or/and at the end of the course	Provide productive citizens	Real-life situations
Peer grading	Throughout or/and at the end of the course	Provide students' interaction	Open or anonymous

Thus, language instructors and before choosing a certain type of assessment in the classroom should critically evaluate technologies for language teaching purposes. In this regard, various factors impact the success of technology integration:

- 1) Teacher factors;
- 2) Student factors;
- 3) Organization factors;
- 4) Technology factors.

Reflecting on the first primary group of factors, which relies on teachers' technology embracement and technical skills, it is crucial to consider time for technology introduction and technology training. Administrations are expected to endure academia with relevant methodological support and training, besides guidelines for successful online instruction. Additional sub-factor deals with the personal qualities of language instructors. There is always a risk when one teacher may adopt technology, while another may completely reject it. Every teacher must be approached and handled as a unique entity with its unique approach. This closely aligned with the last teacher factor which is teacher expertise with technology. The reason why lots of teachers feel hesitant in applying technologies, in the language classroom, is that they feel their expertise is lower than the expertness of students. Several practitioners do not descend from technology-driven generations. There is the perception that instructors will lose face ahead of students when they are not competent as their students. That is called expertise and emotional barriers caused by the exceeding of the student's technical expertise, the teacher's expertness [12].

Summing up, whatever type of e-assessment a teacher prefers, all these technologies can be divided into two major categories. The first category allows the instructor to do manually any procedures that can be done in the classroom that should be replaced by available technology. The second category enables instructors to do entirely new procedures, such as Google Docs for collaborative writing.

Results and Discussion

The informants included in the current study are provided by 15 EFL teachers from Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Turkey. The following questions have been answered by the informants of the study:

- 1 Has Assessment changed during the pandemic in the Digital classroom?
- 2 What digital tools have been used for successful assessment?
- 3 How digital tools have helped teachers to succeed in digitally assisted assessment?
- 4 What are the pros of using DAA in the EFL classroom?
- 5 What are the cons of using DAA in the EFL classroom?
- 6 How can digital assist assessment be successfully integrated into the EFL classroom?

The obtained information, corresponding to the response of the question, can be summarized as follows.

The response to Question 1 shows that some educators have acknowledged the gaps in processing assessments in online conditions and the absence of the necessary steps to meet the needs and constraints of digital learning and correspondingly, assessment, namely, the use of traditional exam materials which are placed on the official servers of the institutions.

'We are still assessing students' learning results in the same way we used to do before the pandemic. There is a false assumption that we have converted our assessment in accordance with the needs of digital learning and assessment once we have transferred our exams onto an online platform'.

Another share of respondents claims that modern digital tools provide the same level of interactivity as in the traditional physical classroom. Therefore, they strongly believe it caused no difference in assessing learners' outcomes.

'For me personally, it hasn't. The criteria of assessing foreign language speech activities remain the same, but the process itself is conducted within the digital learning environment and supported by the specific type of a digital tool or online instrument convenient for testing the skills the teacher wants to evaluate'.

Question 2 helped to reveal the top common tools for successful assessment in a language classroom amid the poles. The majority rely on online platforms for interactive assessment of students' speaking and listening comprehension skills, particularly Zoom and Moodle platforms. 32 % of language instructors use Google forms, Kahoot, and Quizlet for designing exam materials. The two-thirds apply Webex, MindMeister, Google handouts, Padlet, Jamboard, etc. as the instrument for assessing students' progress in developing communicative competence in the interactive format and as the platform for evaluating the products of their learning activity (projects, presentations, pieces of written works, etc.).

The summary of the responses to Questions 3 & 4 shows some benefits of using digitally-assisted assessments in the language classroom via virtual classroom:

- Helpful for integrating more fair and objective assessment practices and bases of building trust and mitigating cheating.
- Timesaving.
- Plagiarism acts are detected with no special efforts.
- Meets the principles of the student-oriented approach in EFL.
- Process is accuracy-based, unbiased, and allows learners and instructors to reflect on the results.
- Easy exam management.
- Automated scoring.
- Improves authenticity and alignment with learning outcomes, helps to clarify marking criteria, spreads the assessment load for staff and improves student engagement, and promotes deeper learning.
- Enables to view the percentage of the students' success.
- Fun and engaging.
- Ensures real-time grading.

Only one response has expressed a negative attitude claiming that:

'Digital tools used for assessment are overrated in terms of their impact on the effectiveness of assessment'.

Hence, as expected assessment tools are versatile and this is evidently resulting from the inner circle requirements within the surveyed teachers since various platforms were applied by the Higher Educational Institutions in the target countries.

According to the responses to Question 5 and in terms of practical tips for the successful integration of e-tools in assessing learners' results, the practitioners believe that they can be used in the different stages in the class outline. For example, as a minute quiz at the beginning or end of lessons. Another beneficial feature is that they enhance more traditional methods by the use of blogs and wikis, reading forums for reflective and creative work assessment. Portfolio assessment is suitable for digital environments, a tool for students' self-assessment and a tool for formative and summative assessment. Teachers should provide in-time and quality feedback, making them aware of being autonomous.

Conclusions

Digital assessment is specified by online or offline delivery. Depending on the type of delivery it can be processed with the employment of computers or the official university servers, where assessment materials are uploaded. Generally, any technology requires special training and guidance for a successful implementation. All the stages of digital assessment are interrelated according to the Whitelock et al. framework. There are plenty of e-assessment technologies in the global practice, but certain types are the most common in the geographical locations of the current study. The majority of respondents have a positive attitude towards DAA, claiming that it is more beneficial in online and hybrid learning conditions.

It must be admitted that there are various digital tools for technology-assisted assessment which contribute to fair and objective evaluation. These technologies improve authenticity and alignment with learning outcomes, help to clarify marking criteria, remove the assessment load for staff and boost student engagement, promote deeper learning, and simultaneously facilitate learners to achieve desired goals.

Based on the survey results and, in general, observations made by EFL educators and practicing teachers COVID-19 pandemic indeed resulted in an emergency transition to digitally-assisted assessment, which required taking urgent steps, i.e., revisiting the curricula and proposing necessary changes into them to ensure objective and fair assessment in tandem with achieving learning goals set with the courses. Besides this, we can also mention the fact of less exposure to digitally-assisted assessment among EFL teachers and educators not being much experienced in using online platforms, applications, or diverse tools, though all in one also to a certain extent significantly contributed to raising digital literacy skills being forced to use ones and getting a valuable help for more experienced 'digital-native' colleagues. We believe that advantages and benefits of Digitally-Assisted Assessment will be maintained and integrated into the curriculum and further developed and adapted to various scenarios, i.e., traditional, synchronous or asynchronous learning environments.

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Шетел (ағылшын) тілі сабағында цифрлық бағалаудың интеграциясы

Жоғары білімнің жаһандық көрінісі 2020 жылдан бастап COVID-19 пандемиясының таралуына байланысты күрт өзгерді. Пандемия жоғары оқу орындарының (жоо) барлық деңгейлерін, оқыту мен бағалау процесінде шұғыл цифрландыруға мәжбүр етті. Онлайн оқытудың арқасында қашықтықтан оқытуға шұғыл көшу нәтижесінде пайда болатын білімді қорғау, алаяқтық, плагиат туралы пікірталастардан аулақ болу мүмкін емес. Бұл жоғары оқу орындарының академиялық және әкімшілік қызметкерлерінің саясаттың мәжбүрлі өзгерістерін, кездейсоқ тәжірибелер мен жаңа нормадағы

шындықты уақтылы шешу үшін жасаған күш-жігерін көрсетеді. Жоғарыда аталған мән-жайларға сүйене отырып, Қазақстан, Түркия және Грузияны қоса алғанда, түрлі елдердің оқытушылары осы елдерде ағылшын тілін шет тілі ретінде оқытудың цифрлық бағалаудың интеграциясын біріктіру және ағымдағы зерттеуде көрсету туралы шешім қабылдады. Кейіннен зерттеуде сандық сыныптағы бағалау жүйесінің қалай өзгергені туралы жауап алу үшін сапалы сауалнаманы әзірлеуде көптеген ағылшын тілі мұғалімдерімен, оның ішінде жергілікті және жаһандық деңгейдегі практик мұғалімдердің пікірлерін алу қажеттілігі қарастырылды. Сонымен қатар, сәтті бағалау үшін қолданылатын сандық құралдардың түрі және бұл құралдардың мұғалімдерге цифрлық технологияның көмегімен бағалау арқылы жетістікке жетуге қалай көмектескені айтылған. Мақаланың мақсаты — ағылшын тілін оқыту процесінде цифрлық бағалауды қолданудың артықшылықтары мен кемшіліктерін анықтау. Соңында, сауалнама нәтижелері негізінде цифрлық бағалауды сәтті жүзеге асырудың үздік тәжірибелерін көрсетуге және одан әрі жақсарту бойынша практикалық ұсыныстар беруге әрекет жасалған.

Кілт сөздер: жоғары білім беру, COVID–19, цифрландыру, онлайн-оқыту, қашықтықтан оқыту, ағылшын тілі шетел тілі ретінде, цифрлық құралдар, бағалау.

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Интеграция цифрового оценивания в условиях обучения английскому языку как иностранному

Глобальный ландшафт высшего образования резко изменился с 2020 года из-за пандемии, вызванной распространением COVID–19. Пандемия вынудила высшие учебные заведения (вузы) к экстренной цифровизации на всех уровнях, в преподавании и процессе оценивания. Благодаря онлайн-обучению невозможно избежать дискуссий о защите знаний, мошенничестве, плагиате, возникающих в результате экстренного перехода на дистанционное обучение. Это свидетельствует об усилиях, предпринимаемых академическим и административным персоналом вузов для своевременного решения вынужденных изменений политики, случайных практик и реальности в новой норме. Основываясь на упомянутых выше обстоятельствах, преподаватели из разных стран, включая Казахстан, Турцию и Грузию, решили объединиться и проиллюстрировать в текущем исследовании интеграцию цифрового оценивания с преподаванием английского языка как иностранного в этих странах. Впоследствии в исследовании была рассмотрена необходимость получения мнений различных преподавателей английского как иностранного языка и учителей-практиков на местном и глобальном уровне для разработки качественного опроса с целью получения ответов о том, как изменилась система оценки в цифровом классе. Кроме того, тип используемых цифровых инструментов для успешного оценивания и то, как эти инструменты помогли учителям добиться успеха в оценке с помощью цифровых технологий. В то же время цель статьи — выявить преимущества и недостатки использования цифрового оценивания в процессе обучения английскому языку. Наконец, на основе результатов опроса, будет предпринята попытка продемонстрировать лучшие практики успешной реализации цифрового оценивания и предоставить практические рекомендации по дальнейшему улучшению.

Ключевые слова: высшее образование, КОВИД, цифровизация, онлайн обучение, дистанционное обучение, английский как иностранный язык, цифровые инструменты, оценивание.