Online Assessment in English Language Teaching and Learning at Tertiary Level: A Reflection of Its Effectiveness

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Abstract

The world of academia has been going through a complete overhaul since the emergence of Covid-19. The sudden relocation to online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic has offered several pedagogical uncertainties, ambiguities, and challenges in Bangladesh due to the poor quality of multifaceted factors like infrastructure, socio-economic condition, and technological competence. Moreover, teachers and students find it challenging to adapt to the new reforms resulting from new pedagogical necessities, and universities have been forced to opt for online assessment without any orientation and preparation. This has posed a major challenge for stakeholders alike around the world during this pandemic. The article explores the different forms and patterns of online assessment to evaluate its effectiveness. A qualitative approach has been applied to collect data using FGDs and interviews of teachers and students of English at different private universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. The study reflects the effectiveness and inevitability of online assessment.

Keywords: Teaching, learning, online assessment, reflection, efficacy, effectiveness

The Covid-19 pandemic has thoroughly disrupted the education system causing educational institutions to shut down all across the world. Globally, over 1.2 billion students have been out of the classroom and as a result, education has changed dramatically, with the distinctive rise of online teaching and learning, undertaken remotely and on digital
platforms (Li & Lalani, 2020) ever since the outbreak of the pandemic. It has resulted in a significant increase of the demand for digital platforms of education and the traditional assessment process has got replaced by the latest trend: the online assessment. Compared to many countries, Bangladesh was less prepared for the crisis and undisrupted education in the challenging times. The sudden switch to online education exposed its unpreparedness for such an unprecedented situation. Many educational institutions from primary level to tertiary one faced several challenges, such as, the poor infrastructure in the ICT sector, e.g. insufficient bandwidth, frequent power cuts, lack of awareness among the people, the unavailability of suitable necessary digital devices, and the poor buying capacity, and lack of training. Despite these challenges, many universities, especially private universities in Bangladesh, have already and successfully transitioned to online education, whereas most of the government universities have opted for online education quite late and have been struggling to ensure the continuation of online education. The private universities have been playing pioneering roles in online teaching and learning as they have some advantages, such as offering a limited number of courses, relatively small class sizes and students from affluent families. One of the most important forces for the private universities for running online teaching and learning has been the revenue generation from the students (Mustak, 2021). Since the onslaught of Covid-19, the authorities of the private universities have continued to remain very vigilant and have been constantly monitoring the online academic activities of their teachers and ensuring regular payments by the students. They have also been very conscious about maintaining the satisfaction of their students. Alamgir (2020) reported that APUB (Association of Private Universities of Bangladesh) had even requested the Chairman of UGC (University Grants Commission, Bangladesh) to allow the private universities to award grades to their students without holding semester finals which the commission rejected outright. Considering overall academic and pandemic situations across the country, the commission, finally in May 2020, issued a directive allowing the private universities to evaluate their students through online presentations and viva exams, keeping the device camera on contingent on the completion of 70 per cent of academic activities for the outgoing semester and the conduction of online classes successfully for theoretical courses. However, the commission expressed a major
concern about the validity and reliability of the online assessment and
issued guidelines to the private universities about how they should
conduct their online assessments and examinations.

Although the online assessment has been in practice in developed
countries for quite a long time, and as such has led to a successful
transition, this online assessment is relatively very new in Bangladesh.
In fact, it arose overnight during the lockdown in March 2020 without
any preparation, planning, orientation, or proper guidance. It has been
already a year and a half and it is time to evaluate the online English
language assessment system and its reliability, validity, and efficacy have
been brought to criticism, question and doubt. There has not yet been
any significant research in the context of Bangladesh. This pandemic
time demands an in-depth exploration of this issue.

Hence this article was undertaken to find out through two major
stakeholders, i.e. teachers and students at the tertiary level, the
effectiveness and efficacy of online assessment in English language
teaching and learning in Bangladesh.

The article attempts to answer the following two research questions:

1. What challenges has the sudden shift to online platform generated
   for the English language assessment at the tertiary level education
   in Bangladesh?

2. To what extent has the online assessment of English been effective
   at the tertiary level education in Bangladesh during the Covid-19
   pandemic?

Literature Review

While a massive digitalization has been taking place in developed nations
around the world, Bangladesh is still struggling to achieve its economic
independence which is one of the preconditions for development
in both the ICT and the education sector. Countries across the globe
have been adapting to and successfully overcoming the unprecedented
challenges in education posed by the pandemic through innovations
and inventions in science and technology and have been able to conduct
educational activities online and uninterrupted. Canada, Australia, the
countries across Europe, China, Japan, and Korea have been examples of
exemplary achievements in online education. However, in Bangladesh,
most of the educational institutions, i.e. schools, colleges, and universities
from primary level to the tertiary one have been grappling to ensure the continuation and quality of online education, particularly the efficacy and effectiveness of the online assessment system.

Many studies were conducted over the last several years on the important role of assessment in teaching and learning. Sharmistha et al. (2014) state that the assessment highly affects the nature, process and the quality of teaching and learning; however, they found a “mismatch” between the intended English language learning outcomes and assessment practices and emphasize that classroom practices have an important role and determine the success and failure of curriculum implementation. Islam et al. (2021) affirm that assessment and the students’ processes of learning have an intricate relationship and emphasize that assessment plays a critical role in the learning and teaching process in any domain of education. Abduh (2021) also asserts that assessment is central to the teaching process. Both Hasan (2020) and Islam et al. (2019) have pointed out that assessment and feedback at the tertiary level in Bangladesh are “part and parcel of English language teaching” and assessment enhances learning through the provision of feedback and facilitates constructive interactions between the students and the instructors. Anuradha et al. (2020) argue that online assessment is the inevitable and indivisible part of online education and requires a whole e-system. It not only includes a mere assessment of students but also includes execution, delivery, feedback, and analysis of different types of online assessment tests.

The assessment process of English language has always been a major issue of debate, concern, and doubt for all the stakeholders in the education sector in Bangladesh. Sharmistha et al. (2014) question both the validity and reliability of the assessment of English language skills in Bangladesh. Rahman and Pandian (2018) point out that Bangladesh is a country with a long history of chaotic English language planning and policy and has been struggling to establish a stable assessment policy consistent with the curriculum goals and objectives. Another major concern regarding the online assessment is that it cannot ensure students’ engagement in tasks and interactions and collaborations among them and it may also lack fairness. In Bangladesh online assessment in private universities has been characterized by a unique dichotomy. On the one hand, it is the constant monitoring and guidance by the government, Ministry of Education, and UGC; on the other, it is the absence of social learning environment and the significant reduction of students’ interaction...
and involvement in online teaching making the online assessment particularly of English in private universities challenging and ineffective. Critical language testing (CLT) introduced by Shohamy (2017) is a useful philosophical framework to have a better understanding of the dichotomy. Shohamy states that it is the power of tests or assessment that causes the test takers and educational institutions to change their behaviours and strategies. One of the CLT claims is that tests or assessments are influenced by the culture of test makers and this puts people from other cultures at a disadvantage when taking the test. In online education today the technologically advanced group of students and teachers living in urban areas having all modern facilities are reaping the benefits of online education; while those in rural areas having poor network, inadequate facilities, insufficient awareness about online education, and lack of digital learning, etc. are at stake and most severely affected. Hence digital disruptions and disadvantages are causing the low level of efficacy of online assessment of English language.

**Methodology**

This is a qualitative study and data were collected through semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD). Only private universities were approached as they have been the pioneering universities in online education in Bangladesh. Teachers and students of English Departments only were involved as this study focuses only on English language assessment.

To ensure the validity of the data, English teachers of different ranks (Lecturer to Associate Professor) of four private universities from the top rank to low one were selected and interviewed (See Figure 1 for the information of the interview participants). Interviews were conducted on Zoom to maintain social distance as the countrywide lockdown was going on and in Bangla which is the mother tongue of the participants so that the participants would feel comfortable while speaking and conveying their perceptions, feelings, and experiences without any kind of constraints. The participants were informed of the research purpose and the recording well ahead of time, and assured of the safety and security of the information they shared. Each interview lasted for almost an hour.
Three focus group discussions were conducted for the students of three private universities. Six to eight students participated in each FGD which lasted for about an hour and a half to about two hours and in total 21 students participated in 3 FGD sessions (See Figure 2 for the academic and socio-economic background of the FGD participants). FGD participants were from across the country and different social classes including indigenous and minority groups. FGDs were also conducted on Zoom to maintain social distance and similar procedures as those of interviews were followed.

Figure 1. Profile of Interview Participants

Figure 2. Profile of FGD Participants
A pilot study of FGD was conducted and it aimed to test the data gathering instruments and to identify the thematic patterns to understand the sudden shifting to online and its impact on the assessment of English language teaching and learning and its effectiveness.

The following thematic analysis process (Figure 2) of Creswell (2013) has been followed in the data analysis and validation process. First, the interviews and focused group discussions were transcribed into English. All data were carefully read several times and then organized into and labelled with different codes which were then categorized into several major themes. The themes have been interpreted in the following Findings and Discussion Section to answer the research questions.

**Figure 3.** Thematic Analysis Process (adopted from Creswell, 2014, p. 197)

Findings and Discussion

The study involved two major stakeholders, i.e. English language teachers and students of online English language education at the tertiary level in Bangladesh, and attempted to identify the challenges and the effectiveness of online assessment of English language. For ethical considerations, the pseudonyms of the participants have been used.
Adaptation to the Online Assessment

Adaptation is one of the major strategies to survive in a changing environment. When traditional education unprecedentedly and suddenly shifted to an online platform because of Covid-19 pandemic, it demanded adaptation by teachers and students to the novel environment, particularly to the new form of online assessment of the English language. In answer to RQ: 1 the online assessment was found to be challenging and the teachers and students faced unique challenges during their adaptation to the newly introduced online form of assessment. Major challenges found in the study include a huge workload, burnouts, mental stress and anxiety, poor internet connectivity, lack of or insufficient digital training and orientation, and unavailability of proper digital devices (See Figure 4). Both teachers and students of the English language experienced many difficulties in adapting to this online assessment as they were not mentally and physically prepared and it required a sedentary lifestyle and a quiet environment for the teachers and learners and it was completely different from the traditional approach which requires an active life. They suffered back pain, neck pain, and blurry vision. All participating teachers agreed that they suffered burnouts. A huge workload particularly for the interview participants made their adaptation process difficult. The majority of the interviewees and FGD participants affirmed that they did not receive any digital training or orientation about different online platforms and various ways of online assessment from the university authorities or from the government. They had to go through psychological trauma or mental stress as they did not have any expertise or experience to handle the situation. Nafisa Nawal, an FGD participant, said: “At the beginning, I felt confused and puzzled about so many online platforms, e.g. Google meet, Zoom, Slack, and Discord.” Most of the FGD participants affirmed that they did not receive full cooperation from their family members during their online engagement because of the lack of digital awareness among the family members and their relatives. The family environment was not at all online-friendly. For example, Sadia Rahat, a student said, “My parents are often irritated and it’s very difficult for me to convince them about being online for a long time.” Fabiha Bushra told us that she often got scolded by her parents for being online for a long period.
Infrastructural Facilities and Effectiveness of Online Assessment

The effectiveness of online assessment depends on the availability of infrastructural facilities, i.e. internet connectivity, digital devices and IT orientation and uninterrupted power supply, etc. In answer to RQ: 2 all participants were found to agree that online assessment was not as effective as the traditional one. The majority of FGD participants had frustrating experiences during their assignments’ submission on different online platforms, e.g. Google classroom, Edmodo, Google Form, etc. Their frustration resulted from insufficient training or lack of training or orientation, mentioned earlier as one of the major challenges. One of the interview participants stated that he had received a 15-day long training workshop organized by the university. However, he felt that the workshop was not sufficient. Half of the FGD participants said that online presentation, one of the common forms of online assessment, was full of hassles, particularly for those in rural areas where the internet connection was very poor and students had to go to an open field and stay there for better connection. However, staying in the open field was often very difficult and risky during inclement weathers and at night. Even waiting for one’s own turn during online presentation was frustrating. The majority of them expressed a big concern that online assessment
was less reliable and less valid than the traditional one. The majority of the participants reported that they were always concerned or scared of a disaster, e.g. device malfunction or connectivity failure during an exam or test because of the unpredictable nature of the internet connectivity or frequent power cut and were anxious that they would not be able to perform up to the expectation.

Feedback in Online Assessment

Almost all the participants agreed that feedback was an important indicator of learning but it was not timely and sufficient. This was what the teachers acknowledged during their interviews. They recognized their failure to provide timely and sufficient feedback. The lack of feedback made FGD participants doubtful about their learning. Shahana Sanjida said that she was very concerned about the lack of timely and sufficient feedback which could help her learn about her mistakes and her progress. All interview participants agreed that it was difficult to provide timely feedback to every student because of the huge workload. “Although the online feedback sharing process has been easier, it is simply inhuman for me to provide timely feedback on about 1500 scripts.”—Nishat Tamanna explained.

Strategies of Effective Online Assessment

When the participants of the interview were asked about which strategies they followed for effective assessment, they all affirmed that viva or interview which was held immediately after a written test/quiz was very effective to avoid discrimination in online assessment. They all also had a similar agreement that creative questions were another best option for effective assessment. FGD participants also expressed a similar opinion. Abrar Galib, a student, mentioned that online assessment would be faulty if it was not based on creativity. To stop or reduce cheating in examinations or tests, and to ensure effective online assessments, different strategies were followed by interview participants. The majority of the participants informed that they focused more on alternative assessments, e.g. writing response papers on a chapter or a page of a book, quiz in Google forms in different sets having reshuffled serial numbers, individual presentations, and group presentations in which group members mark each other confidentially. Aniqa Tahsin mentioned a unique strategy that her university followed during any
online semester final assessment: “Students have to take a pledge before the examination that they will not use any unfair means during the examination and we warn them of strict disciplinary actions, for example, suspension; if they are found to have used unfair means,”

Conclusion

The study has found that online assessment of the English language at the tertiary level in Bangladesh was full of unique challenges which are not found in the traditional form of assessment. A major challenge was the mental and physical health issues of the teachers and the learners. Both the teachers and the learners experienced many problems in adapting to online education and assessment as the shift emerged overnight and intruded into the eco-system of the English language classroom and as they did not have sufficient training, proper devices available and poor IT infrastructure. In the study, almost 90 per cent of the participants were found dissatisfied with the online assessment and agreed that it was not effective. One major reason was not the severity of the Covid 19 pandemic, but the vulnerability and difficulties both teachers and students had to face. They had to struggle to adapt to the unprecedented virtual education system which was introduced without any orientation or contextualization. They missed the close teacher-student interaction of the traditional classroom which is also an important component of assessment. However, the answers to RQ: 2 indicate that the majority of the participants agreed that the alternative online assessment and synchronous interview of the English language learners may be an effective form of online assessment.

One major gap in the study is that it involved English teachers and students of only private universities, and so the study does not reflect the scenario of the government universities as these government universities remained closed during the study. Further researches in the future may be conducted involving these universities with diverse socio-economic and demographic backgrounds.

The study has an important implication not only for English teachers at the tertiary level in Bangladesh but also for several other major stakeholders, i.e. university authorities, University Grants Commission of Bangladesh, Ministry of Education, and policymakers of the government who are involved and responsible for the successful implementation
of not only effective online assessment of English language but also a nationwide digital education system.

References


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