


Teachers' Attitudes towards Online Writing Assessment during Covid-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has imposed an abrupt change in our teaching practices. Particularly the online assessment of students' writing has been an unprecedented, novel situation for many English foreign language teachers. What is novel about this issue is the constraint of adopting it in a critical situation in which it has been an alternative way to assess students in the absence of the physical presence of students. The shift from face to face assessment to online assessment has been a novel experience for many Moroccan English foreign language teachers who have never implemented it before nor have any background knowledge about its mechanisms and methods albeit there are some teachers who are familiar with online teaching and online assessment. The issue has generated important points for English language teaching practitioners and stakeholders about the strategies and challenges of this compulsory mode of assessment during COVID-19 lockdown. From this perspective, the purpose of this paper was to reflect on writing assessment in the era of COVID-19 pandemic through the lens of teachers. The paper aimed to explore the perceptions of Moroccan English foreign language teachers about online writing assessment and the challenges that encountered them. For this purpose, data were collected from 100 English language teachers in the region of Casablanca through the use of questionnaires. The findings of this study substantiated that most participants considered online assessment of students' writing a real challenge and hence hold a negative attitude towards it. Based on the results of this study, it was recommended to teach digital writing skills to English foreign language learners and design teaching training programs about online writing assessment.

1. Introduction

The emergence of online assessment in academia and the teaching-learning process is intertwined with the emergence of ICT. With COVID 19 pandemic, the issue once again comes to the fore as an emergency. The shift from face to face assessment to online assessment is a necessity rather than a choice because it is the only alternative to assess students' writing in the absence of physical contact with them. Although much research has tackled the issue of online assessment in EFL teaching during COVID-19 pandemic, no research, to my mind, has been devoted to the issue of online writing assessment from teacher's perspectives in the Moroccan context. The investigation of teachers' viewpoints is among the issues that deserves due attention because of its paramount importance in evaluating the enablers and barriers of the experience of online writing assessment in the era of COVID- 19 pandemic.

The ultimate concern of the present study was to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions about online writing assessment and the challenges that encountered them. Thus, the study aimed to answer the following two questions:

- (1) What are Moroccan EFL teachers' perceptions about online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic?

- (2) What are the challenges that face Moroccan EFL teachers in the online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic?

2. Literature review

2.1 The types of assessment in English foreign language teaching.

Assessment plays a key role in the teaching-learning process; it is the benchmark that guides teachers to identify and gauge the level of their students' performance and achievement and hence keep track of their improvement. It also helps students identify their progress and measure their level of understanding. There are two types of assessment, namely formative and summative assessment. According to Sarah Earle et al. (2019), this classification is based on the aim and applications of assessment, not on assessment tasks. For them, formative assessment aims to look for and respond to information to improve long-term learning, while the aim of summative assessment is to report and epitomize students' achievement.

This means that while formative assessment is a continuous process, summative assessment is a final, holistic process that targets the overall evaluation of students' learning progress. With the emergence of ICT and its integration in language teaching, another typology of assessment has evolved. This is specifically related to the learning environment where it takes place, be it a physical environment i.e., the classroom with the physical presence of learners or a digital environment like an electronic platform. The first type is called face to face assessment, while the second type is called online assessment. While the first typology is based on the objectives of the assessment, the second typology is based on the environment of assessment.

Online assessment has been used interchangeably in literature with different terms such as computer-based assessment, computer-assisted assessment, computer-aided assessment, web-based assessment, online assessment, computer-based testing, technology-enhanced assessment, and e-assessment (Stodberg, 2011). The common point between all these terms is the component of ICT and the internet which means that these two components are the idiosyncratic features that distinguish E-assessment from traditional assessment. In this regard, Falcao & Soeiro (2019) defines the term of E-assessment as "the use of ICT and the internet in particular for the assessment of learning, including design, delivery, and/or recording of responses" (p.247).

2.1. Face to face vs. online writing assessment

The shift from face to face to online assessment is a shift from one mode of assessment to another mode because each mode has its own characteristics. Talking about the online writing assessment, Penvold (2005) contends that this shift redefines the whatness of a text as well as the criteria of its assessment because the characteristics of E-texts differ from paper texts in terms of "length, processing information, style and purpose, editing and cross-trained skills"(p.30-31).

It is a shift from conventional textual writing to E-textual writing which necessitates teachers to rethink both the text and the standards on which it can be judged, namely "the types of skills, essential writer's knowledge, and discursive strategies needed to be literate in a technological environment" (Penvold, 2005, p.49). Thus instead of investigating just students' flaws in writing and assessing students' development of writing skills, teachers should also assess their students' knowledge of the different technological tools and options and how they can be used to solve problems while writing for a networked audience. This is referred to in the literature as digital literacy, which designates the knowledge of using technologies to write in various forms such as hypertexts, images, audio and video, and the rhetorical rules for design and layout (Bureu Senturk, 2020).

2.3. Challenges of online writing assessment

Breuch (2004) Argues that despite the great efforts invested in online writing instruction, there are still a number of challenges that constrain the implementation of online writing instruction and assessment. These challenges are related to the lack of computer integration training for writing teachers, the absence of computer-based writing instruction, and teachers' reluctance to transfer face-to-face activities to virtual spaces. All the aforementioned challenges can be subsumed under the construct of "language assessment literacy" which involves possessing the necessary knowledge and skills, internalizing the fundamentals of language assessment, and awareness of language assessment's historical and social context (Fulcher, 2012). With regard to COVID-19 pandemic situation, writing assessment has moved to a new historical and social context that requires the knowledge of digital writing skills and fundamentals that fits into the new historical and social context it has moved to, i.e. from face to face to online context.

3. Methods

3.1 Population and sampling

The participants in this research were 100 Moroccan high school EFL teachers in the region of Casablanca who were selected through snowballing sampling technique. 46% of the participants were female, while 54% were male, their teaching experience range between 1 and 30 years and above.

3.2. Data collection and analysis

Data were collected using a five-point likert scale questionnaire ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree to answer the research questions. The questionnaire was administered to high school teachers of English in the region of Casablanca, Morocco. It consists of two main sections. The first section is devoted to the EFL teachers' perceptions about the online writing assessment, while the second section is about the challenges that faced writing teachers during the online writing assessment.

Descriptive statistics were used to calculate the participants' responses' means and standard deviations. As illustrated below, means were further explained and interpreted based on Pimentel Jonald's (2010) model of explaining means.

Table 1: Pimentel Jonald's (2010) Adapted model of explaining means according to 5-point Likert Scale

Likert-scale	Interval	Difference	Description	Level
1	1.00-1.79	0.79	Strongly disagree	Very low
2	1.80- 2.59	0.79	Disagree	Low
3	2.60- 3.39	0.79	Neutral	Moderate
4	3.40- 4.19	0.79	Agree	High
5	4.20- 5.00	0.79	Strongly agree	Very high

4. Results

This section presents the demographic description of participants in this study and results about the participants' perceptions of online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic and the challenges they faced during this process.

Table 2: Demographic variables of participants

	Gender		Teaching experience			
	Male	Female	1-10	10-20	20-30	30 and above
Number	46	54	26	39	23	12
Percent	46%	54%	26%	39%	23%	12%

Table (2) shows that the highest percent of the total sample were females by 54%, while males constitute 46% of the total sample. 39% of the total sample have between 10 and 20 years of teaching experience, followed by 26% of participants who have between 1 and 10 years of teaching experience followed by 23% who have between 20 and 30 years of teaching experience and 12% having between 30 years and above of teaching experience. The following figure shows these results.

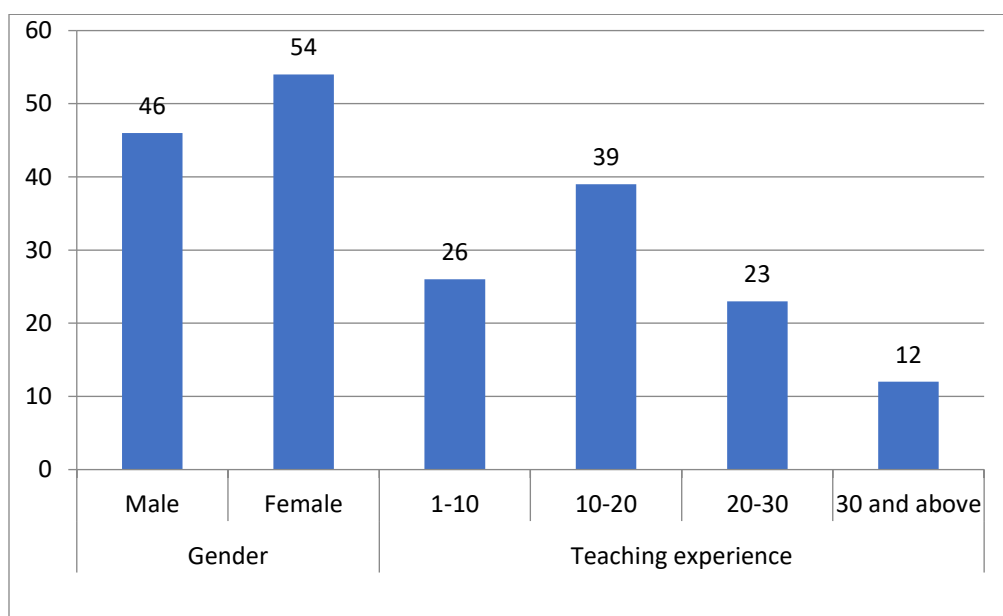


Figure 1: Demographic Data %

The subsequent table shows the results of the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the first research question: "what are EFL teachers' perceptions about online writing assessment?"

Table 3: Descriptive statistics for teachers' perceptions towards online writing\ assessment

No	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std dev
1	I prefer online writing assessment to paper writing assessment.	65% (65)	35% (35)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.45	1,167
2	Online writing assessment is similar to paper writing assessment.	58% (58)	39% (39)	3 % (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.45	,557
3	online writing assessments is more Challenging than paper writing assessment.	0% (0)	2% (2)	6 (6)	33% (33)	59% (59)	4.49	,703
4	I am used to assess students' writing Online.	50% (50)	46% (46)	0% (0)	4% (4)	0% (0)	1.58	,699
5	online writing assessments is based on the conventional writing assessment Criteria.	59% (59)	38% (38)	3% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.44	,536
6	Online writing assessment involves the assessment of students' digital writing skills.	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	37% (37)	63% (63)	4.63	,485
7	Online writing assessment helps me measure students' writing progress.	47% (47)	40% (40)	13% (13)	0% (0)	0% (0)	1.66	,699
Overall mean							2,3714	,241

Table (3) shows descriptive statistics for teachers' perceptions towards online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic. Two items (N 3 and 6) have the highest means of 4, 63 and 4, 49 respectively, while most of the items have low means that range between 1, 44 and 1.66 in which most of the participants either strongly disagree or disagree, which indicates a very low or low level perceptions according to Pimentel Jonald's (2010) model of interpreting means. For instance, 47% of the participants strongly disagree and 40% disagree with item No 7: (online writing assessment helps me measure students' writing progress), 50% strongly disagree and 46% disagree with item No 4: (I am used to assess students' writing online), 65% strongly disagree and 35% disagree with item No 1: (I prefer online writing assessment to paper writing assessment), 58% strongly disagree and 39% disagree with item No 2: (online writing assessment is similar to paper writing assessment) and 59% strongly disagree and 38% disagree with item NO 5: (online writing assessment is based on the conventional writing assessment criteria). These items scored respectively (1, 66; 1, 58; 1, 45; 1, 45 and 1, 44). The overall mean of teachers' perceptions towards online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic is 2, 3714, which categorizes as a low-level perception.

Table 4 shows the results of the means and standard deviations of the participants' responses to the second research question: "what are EFL teachers' challenges in online writing assessment?"

Table 4: Teachers' challenges in online writing assessment

No	Statements	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree	Mean	Std dev
1	I face problems in assessing students' writing online.	4	3	12	22	59	4,29	1,075
2	I do not have a background knowledge about online writing assessment.	6	6	0	36	52	4,81	,394

3	I do not have a background knowledge about digital writing skills.	4	5	4	31	56	4,30	1,040
4	I have never had training in online writing assessment.	0	0	0	33	67	4,77	,423
5	I am not sure I assess students' writing online in the same way other teachers do.	0	7	14	26	53	4,25	,947
6	Students do not have the appropriate digital skills to write online.	0	0	0	23	77	4,22	1,124
7	Digital literacy skills are not incorporated in writing curricula.	0	0	0	19	81	4,67	,494
	Overall Mean						4,4729	,4310

Table (4) shows descriptive statistics for teachers' challenges in online writing assessment. Unlike the result of participants' responses related to the first research question, the results here reveal that all items score high means that they range between 4, 22 and 4, 81. In all these items, most participants either strongly agree or agree. For instance, 52% strongly agree and 36% with item No 2: (I do not have a background knowledge about online writing assessment), 67% strongly agree and 33M agree with item N 4: (I have never had training in online writing assessment), 81% strongly agree and 19% agree with item N 7: (digital literacy skills are not incorporated in writing curricula), 56% strongly agree and 31% agree with item N 3: (I do not have a background knowledge about digital writing skills), 59% strongly agree and 22% agree with item No 1: (I face problems in assessing students' writing online), 53% strongly agree and 26% agree with item No 5: (I am not sure I assess students' writing in the same way other teachers do) and 77% strongly agree and 23% agree with item No 6: (students do not have the appropriate digital skills to write online). These items score respectively (4,81; 4,77; 4,67; 4,30; 4,29; 4,25; 4,22). The overall mean of the participants' responses about the challenges they faced in online writing assessment during Covid- 19 pandemic is 4,4729 which is considered as a high-level perception.

5. Discussion

This section discusses the results of the two research questions based on the findings of the study. The majority of participants hold low-level perceptions towards online writing assessment and hence prefer paper writing assessment to online writing assessment. According to the study, This is due to different factors that are considered as real challenges to Moroccan EFL teachers, such as the differences between the two modes of writing assessment criteria and writing skills that each mode requires, the lack of a prior experience in online writing assessment, the lack of background knowledge in online writing assessment and the digital skills it entails both from the part of teachers and students as well as the absence of digital writing skills in writing curricula. Hence, Moroccan EFL teachers faced real challenges during the online assessment of their students' writing during COVID-19 pandemic. From the aforementioned findings, we recommend teaching digital writing skills to EFL learners and designing teaching training programs about online writing assessment.

6. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating the issue of EFL teachers' perceptions towards online writing assessment and the challenges they faced during this process. The findings of the study confirmed that online writing assessment is a real challenge for EFL teachers who have negative attitudes towards it. For instance, most of the participants either strongly disagree or disagree with the items of the first section of the questionnaire which score low means that range between 1, 44 and 1.66, while most of the participants either strongly agree or agree with the items of the second section of the questionnaire which score high means that range between 4, 22 and 4, 81.

The present study would contribute to the scarce research about online writing assessment during COVID-19 pandemic. However, despite the importance of the paper, it has the limitation of being restricted to the Moroccan context. That is why further research is recommended to be conducted in other teaching contexts.

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