

Assessing Foreign Language Learners in Online Learning: Methods, Challenges and Strategies

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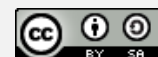
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ABSTRACT

Artikel ilmiah ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis metode, tantangan, dan strategi penilaian daring untuk pembelajar bahasa asing selama Pandemi Covid-19 di lingkungan pendidikan tinggi. Kuesioner secara daring dibagikan kepada dosen Jurusan Pendidikan Bahasa Inggris di Universitas Nusa Cendana. Hasil Penelitian meunjukkan bahwa dosen menilai kemampuan bahasa mahasiswanya melalui proyek, kuis, ujian, tugas tertulis, diskusi daring dan presentasi. Tantangan utama adalah sifat penilaian daring yang tidak efektif karena tidak dapat mengukur kemampuan bahasa mahasiswa secara komprehensif dan rentan terhadap ketidakjujuran akademik. Berbagai masalah teknis seperti manajemen waktu, koneksi Internet dan miskomunikasi juga dihadapi oleh para dosen bahasa Inggris. Namun, mereka juga menerapkan beberapa strategi untuk mengatasi tantangan tersebut termasuk mengubah sistem penilaian, menurunkan standar, memberi mahasiswa waktu tambahan untuk menyelesaikan tugas, menggunakan alat tes daring untuk menilai dan menyimpan tugas, menginstruksikan tugas melalui konferensi video seperti Zoom untuk menghindari miskomunikasi. Dosen diharapkan mampu menggunakan berbagai macam metode untuk menilai kemampuan bahasa asing mahasiswanya dan mampu mengatasi setiap tantangan yang dihadapi dengan menerapkan strategi yang bermakna.

This paper is aimed at analysing methods, challenges and strategies of online assessment for foreign language learners during the Covid-19 Pandemic at a higher educational setting. The online questionnaires were distributed to lecturers of English Department of Nusa Cendana University. It was revealed that the lecturers assessed students' language skills by project, quiz, exam, written assignment, online discussion and presentation. The main challenge was ineffective nature of online assessment because it cannot measure students' language skills comprehensively and was prone to academic dishonesty. Various technical issues such as time management, Internet connection and miscommunication were faced by the English lecturers as well. However, they also applied several strategies to overcome those challenges including changing scoring system, lowering the standard, giving students extra time to complete the assignment, using online testing tools to score and store the assignment, instructing the assignment via video conference such as Zoom to avoid miscommunication. It is expected that lecturers are able to use various kinds of methods to assess their students' foreign language abilities and to be able to overcome every challenge they encounter by applying meaningful strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the beginning of 2020, schools across the globe have faced immense challenges about how to function effectively and safely. Covid-19 Pandemic has impacted the world in many aspects including education. Health protocols require people to do social distancing; hence, schools have been closed. A natural reaction to the unprecedented situation of corona virus pandemic requires the immediate closing of schools without warning or preparation. Lecturers have to teach from a distance and students have to study from home. Since online learning is applied in educational system during this pandemic, online assessment is also the only option for evaluating students' performance. Assessment influences learning because students have to study and fulfil the assessment requirements (Joughin, 2010). Assessment does not only affect content but also forms of learning (Arend, 2007). Therefore, teachers are required to select proper methods to assess their students. Assessment refers to the method of obtaining student knowledge in all forms. Assessment plays crucial role in learning (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010; Kearns, 2012) and it is aimed at providing information for teachers and learners on student's progress and to measure whether the learning goals are achieved or not (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000).

Online learning has developed enormously during the pandemic which also requires lecturers to shift their assessment from face to face to face to screen mode. They have tried to transfer the principles of traditional assessment to online assessment; however, they have faced various challenges (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010). Online learning management system (LMS) such as blackboard, Google Classroom, Moodle, etc., is equipped with many asynchronous and synchronous functions and resources (Joughin, 2010; Sun, 2011). Students are usually given grades based on a variety of assignments, quizzes, reports, exams, community projects, and discussion to avoid dishonesty as well as to build a learner-centered environment (Arend, 2007). Different ways of evaluation promote multiple styles of learning. Even, the type of an examination or essay question may influence how learners study (Arend, 2007). Hence, in the online world, there is obviously a need to explore assessment practices.

Previous researchers under the same topic focused only on one or two aspects such as methods or challenges and strategies (Joughin, 2010; Kearns, 2012; Kerka & Wonacott, 2000; Kim, Smith, & Maeng, 2008). Whereas, this research focused on those three aspects, methods, challenges and strategies. Besides, this research was done in an area with limited resources for online learning. This research also focused on a higher education setting and lecturers' perspectives. Just a few studies have taken a broad look at the standard assessment of online higher education courses across disciplines (Arend, 2007). More empirical evidence on the

status of online assessment is needed to respond to increased calls for transparency and to support constant exploration in this area. This research is intended to fill this literature gap and lead to an understanding of what online assessment looks like.

The purpose of this research is to find out the online assessment that applied by the lecturers to the foreign language learners. The methods, challenges and strategies of online assessment were investigated through this research. Methods refer of ways of assessing the students, which might be similar or different to the assessment used in face-to-face classes. The challenges are about what and how the assessment takes place. Lecturers also attempt to apply several strategies to overcome those challenges.

METHOD

This research used descriptive qualitative method that sought to investigate the methods, challenges and strategies of online assessment for foreign language learners. Online questionnaires, administered through Google Form, were used to gather data. The questionnaires contained structured and open-ended questions to describe lecturers' experiences in online assessment during Covid-19 Pandemic in a university level.

The online questionnaires were distributed to seven lecturers of English Department of Nusa Cendana University. The lecturers teach not only English skills courses such as speaking, listening reading and writing; but also, pedagogic courses such as language testing and evaluation, translation and interpretation and others. Some of them also teach literature courses such as poetry and drama. Hence, this research elaborated the assessment methods used for a wide range of courses. The lecturers were asked about the methods that they used to assess their students. Besides, the questionnaires also investigated the challenges they faced during online assessment and strategies that they applied to overcome those challenges.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The first part of the questionnaire asked about the methods of assessment that the lecturers used to assess their students' English skills and knowledge. Table 1 shows the list and percentage of assessment methods used by the lecturers at English Department of Nusa Cendana University.

Table 1. Online Assessment Methods

Assessment Methods	Percentage (N=7)
1. Project	57%
2. Quiz	57%
3. Exam	86%

Assessment Methods	Percentage (N=7)
4. Written Assignment	83%
5. Online discussion	43%
6. Presentation	57%

Table 1 indicates that exams and written assignments were still used by most of the teachers in online mode. Project was also one of the types of assessment method used by more than half of the respondents to assess students' language ability. Quiz and presentations were used by 57% of the respondents. While online discussion (43%) was used only by few teachers.

It was revealed that the assessment methods used by the English lecturers to assess their student's language skills were exam, written assignment, project, quiz, presentation and online discussion. Lecturers can use various method of assessment such as exam, paper, project, portfolio and peer-evaluations (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000; Sun, 2011; Rovai, 2000). The lack of physical space and face-to-face interaction between teachers and students in the online world contributes to multiple forms of assessing students in a class (Arend, 2007). Online assessment is effective when it includes wide variety of assignments on a regular basis (Baker, 2011; Gaytan & McEwen, 2007; Meyer, 2006). Researchers also claimed that assessment methods should be diverse (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010; Kearns, 2012; Kelum, Gamage, & Gunawan, 2020). Each assessment method has its functions and characteristics. The first assessment method found in this research was exam and it was given to almost all courses. Online exams were similar to traditional ones that are normally taken by students in face-to-face classes (Kearns, 2012). Midterm and final term exams were given to students within specific time (Rovai, 2000). Another assessment method was written assignments and they were submitted electronically through the Learning Management System (LMS) (Kearns, 2012). In Nusa Cendana University, the lecturers used Moodle which is known as 'e-learning' in the system. However, lecturers also used Google Classrooms because it is more user-friendly especially for senior teachers (Inoue, 2018). Another suitable method found in this study to assess students' language skills was virtual discussion. Research indicated that weekly online discussion was highly recommended in online classes (Vonderwell, Liang, & Alderman, 2007) because the assessment should be an on-going process to find out students' unique problems (Rovai, 2000). Discussion was initiated by the lecturers by posting some questions in the LMS (Kearns, 2012). Weekly online discussions and quizzes were used in almost all courses so that teacher can monitor students' progress. When students post their ideas in online discussion forum, teacher will notice their problems or issues. Besides online discussion, other courses

such as poetry, drama or translation and interpreting, used quizzes and projects as parts of assessment. Projects are relevant and unique for online learning because it is relevant to each learner and gives them autonomy (Kim, Smith, & Maeng, 2008). The last method of assessment is presentation where Microsoft PowerPoint is often used by the students to create the presentation under certain topics (Kearns, 2012). Lecturers assigned students in groups to present their discussion in a synchronous way using either Zoom or Big Blue Button.

In collecting the data, the researcher did not only investigate how the lecturers assessed their students but also the challenges they encountered in online assessment. Table 2 illustrates the challenges faced by English lecturers in the university.

Table 2. Challenges of Online Assessment

Challenges of Online Assessment	Percentage (N=7)
1. Ineffective nature of online assessment (Academic Dishonesty)	43%
2. Unable to measure students' language skills comprehensively	57%
3. Various technical issues such as:	
a. Time management	43%
b. Internet connection	43%
c. Miscommunication	43%

Table 2 indicates that most lecturers (57%) claimed that they could not measure students' language skills comprehensively in online mode. The respondents also faced other problems such as academic dishonesty (43%) and several technical issues (43%).

One of the prominent challenges of online assessment was ineffectiveness of the online version, which refers to academic dishonesty such as plagiarism and cheating (Kelum, Gamage, & Gunawan, 2020). In writing course, for example, lecturers admitted that students do plagiarism by copying someone else's opinions. Cheating is unavoidable during online assessment; hence, the assessment may not reflect students' true ability. Research indicated that cheating in online classes is greater than in face-to-face setting (Kennedy, Nowak, Raghuraman, Thomas, & Davis, 2000). Besides academic dishonesty, another challenge of online assessment was that lecturers could not assess students' language skills comprehensively. This is because of distance that makes lecturers unable to fully control the students (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000). When they do exam, quiz or make projects; students may ask others to help them. Various technical issues such as time management, Internet connection and miscommunication were other main challenges during online assessment. Lecturers spent a considerable amount of time to make a test and post it in online platform such as e-learning or Google classroom. Time

management is an issue for developing and selecting assessment methods for lecturers (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010; Joughin, 2010) In underdeveloped areas such as eastern parts of Indonesia, Internet connection is a foremost problem. Lecturers and students find it difficult to get connected to the learning management system due to limited Internet coverage. Access is one of the technical problems in online learning due to limited Internet connection and electronic devices (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000) (Kelum, Gamage, & Gunawan, 2020). Miscommunication between lecturers and students were also a common problem. The instructions were misunderstood by the students because they were written not spoken (Kerka & Wonacott, 2000). In written instruction, lecturers cannot interact with the students and the language might be too complicated for them. Facial expressions and tones are unable to convey in written instruction, hence, students may neglect some points that highlighted by lecturers. When giving spoken instructions, lecturers can check students understanding by allowing them to ask or simply just notice their facial expressions.

Every problem has at least one solution. This also applies to challenges in online assessment where lecturers managed to find ways to overcome those challenges. Table 3 describes the strategies used by lecturers to solve or minimize issues they faced in online assessment.

Table 3. Strategies Used by Lecturers to Overcome Problems in Online Assessment

Strategies to overcome issues in online assessment	Percentage (N=7)
1. Using online testing tools to score and store the assignment	100%
2. Using various online platforms to suit the need of each subject	86%
3. Instructing the assignment via zoom to avoid miscommunication	57%
4. Changing scoring system	43%
5. Lowering the standard	43%
6. Giving students extra time to complete the assignment	43%

Table 3 to depicts the strategies to overcome challenges in online assessment used by English lecturers in English Department of Nusa Cendana University. All lecturers used online testing tools such as Exam and Assignment tools in LMS. 86% of the respondents used diverse online platforms in assigning exams or quizzes for each course. In instructing the assignment, more than half of the respondents used Video Conference such as Zoom to avoid misunderstanding. Not more than three respondents (43%) used other strategies to overcome the challenges such as changing scoring system, lowering the standard and giving extra time to

students to complete the assignments.

This study revealed that regardless of those challenges in online assessment, lecturers managed to apply various strategies to overcome them. The first strategy was using online testing tools to score and store the assignment. This is an important strategy because lecturers can access this platform later on after finish teaching to score students' work. Another useful strategy was using various online platforms to suit the need of each subject, for example, Zoom is mostly used to assess students speaking abilities while Google form was used in grammar course to give weekly quiz. Video conference was used to avoid miscommunication between lecturers and students. When giving instructions in written forms, students sometimes misunderstood it. Lecturers, then, invited students to have Zoom meeting to interact and give instructions about the assignments. Changing scoring system and lowering the standard were also other strategies used by teachers. Lecturers used this strategy so that students can pass the classes. Students may find it difficult to get higher scores because of some issues such as limited access to LMS and low Internet connection. The last strategy was giving students extra time to complete the assignments (Kelum, Gamage, & Gunawan, 2020). Research indicated that online assessments were more accessible and flexible both for teachers and students in terms of time management (Kim, Smith, & Maeng, 2008). Lecturers have to consider time management in designing the assignments (Beebe, Vonderwell, & Boboc, 2010). Lecturers often extend the deadlines of the assignments or exams because of limited Internet connection and black out that regularly happen in several areas in Kupang.

CONCLUSION

Online assessment during this pandemic is challenging but teachers and students have managed to get through it. This study revealed that through exam, project, quiz, written assignment, online discussion and presentation; the lecturers evaluated the language abilities of students. However, the lecturers encountered several problems in assessing foreign language learners in online mode. The biggest problem was the ineffectiveness of online assessment because it was unable to comprehensively assess the language skills of learners. The English lecturers often faced numerous problems, such as time management, Internet connectivity and miscommunication. They have introduced many techniques to address these difficulties, including modifying the grading system, lowering the score, allowing students more time to complete the assignment, using online assessment platforms to score and store the assignment, and using a video conference to instruct the assignment to prevent miscommunication. Teachers

are required to be able to use different types of approaches to assess the students' foreign language skills and to be able to overcome the challenges they encounter by applying meaningful strategies.

Since this research was performed within a single institution with a limited sample of courses and lecturers, it is not acceptable to attempt to generalize its results to all online courses. As an exploratory review, however, it sheds some light on the areas of concern that lecturers have as they switch to online assessment, along with some of the techniques they have found to be useful in coping with difficulties they face. In terms of directions for future work, this study indicates some possibilities such as enlarging the population of the research and investigating each method, challenge or strategy in depth.

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