Students' Perceptions of the Effectiveness and Challenges of Online EFL Assessment in Libya during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Abstract
Online platforms have been embraced in the teaching and learning of English as a second and foreign language in almost every country in the world. Many studies have found out that the online medium is effective in the ESL/EFL teaching and learning. However, the area or assessment is still a challenge to many teachers and students in ESL/EFL teaching and learning. Therefore, this study investigates the Libyan undergraduates' perceptions of online assessment. A survey research design is adopted for the study. Data were collected from 105 Libyan undergraduates from six universities using a questionnaire. The data were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis. The findings reveal that the students have positive perceptions towards online assessment because it is convenient, flexible and give instant feedback. In addition, the findings show that the online assessment motivates them to learn subject matter. They prefer the online assessment than the traditional assessment because online assessment is suitable for all subjects and students respectively. It enhances technical skills as well as self-learning skills. Many Libyan undergraduates are motivated and aware of the benefit of online assessment. On the other hand, the findings indicate that the students perceive online assessment to facilitate cheating among students.
Keywords*: EFL; Libyan undergraduates; Online Assessment.*

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has brought about changes in educational sector in almost every part of the world. Many educational institutions partially or fully embrace the use of technology or Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in the teaching and learning activities as new normal. The teaching and learning of English as a Foreign Lang (EFL) is not left behind as various institution integrate technology therein. It is referred to as e-learning, online learning, digital learning etc. On the one hand, the technology was used to avoid the spread of the virus through physical contact, on the other hand, it was used to enhance the teaching and learning activities.

Scholars have identified various benefits of online EFL teaching learning to students which include flexibility in learning and assessment which enables students to learn or take assessment from wherever they find themselves (Al-Jarf, 2020). It also enables students achieve their learning objectives and develop their language skills (Alsowayegh et al. 2019). Using online assessment, students become more independent learners as instant feedback is given to learners which facilitates learning and improve learning outcome (Alruwais, Wills and Wald, 2018). On the other hand, there are some challenges regarding the online EFL teaching and learning such as poor teacher-student interactions, low credibility before of the high tendency for students to cheat or as for help from more experience fellows (Al-Nuaim, 2012; Kanaan et al., 2013). Difference in time

zone among students is another challenge of online among others. As for the challenges of adopting ICT in the ELT in Libya, Salem and Mohammadzadeh (2018) pointed out numerous factors that affect the proper implementation of ICT in ELT in the country. These include lack of enough funding to purchase the required ICT facilities as the major factor. Also, poor ICT knowledge and skills among teachers and students affect the implementation of ICT in Libyan educational setting.

To overcome these challenges, studies have suggested the need to explore the teachers' as well as students' perceptions of online EFL teaching and learning. This would enable educators as well as policy makers to redesign and re-planned the e-learning process for improved performance. Studies have been conducted in many countries including Libya to examine students' perceptions of the online EFL teaching and learning. Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, few students were conducted in the Libyan context to examine the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. For instance, Abukhattala (2016) investigated the readiness of pre-service English language teachers on the integration of ICT in some high and secondary schools in Misurata, Libya. He found out that all the teachers involved in the study were ready and willing to use ICT in EFL teaching. However, they expressed their major concerns on some factors that may affect the process such as lack of funding, scarcity of technological equipment in schools and lack of proper training to use technology. Salem and Mohammadzadeh (2018) also reports that Libyan teachers have positive perception towards integrating ICT in teaching English language. They consider the ICT as a powerful tool for promoting the teaching of English in the country. In addition, concerning the relevance of ICT in education and the socio cultural setting of Libya, the study further reveals the teachers' positive perception that it does not contradict the cultural practices of Libya. Rather, the use of ICT in ELT uplifts the living standard of the students and increases their chances of getting better jobs. Nevertheless, the teachers were uncertain regarding the positive influence of ICT on students' academic performance.

However, one important aspect of online EFL teaching and learning that is not discussed by previous studies in the Libyan context is online assessment. Online assessment has many benefits to both students and teachers than the traditional paper and pen assessment. First, it is more flexible because it can be administered or taken any time anywhere provided there is an internet connection. Students are given more freedom to decide on the time and place to take the assessment (Sarah et.al, 2018). Another benefit of online assessment is it gives learners more autonomy to become independent learners and give prompt feedback to learners which facilitates learning and improve learning outcome (Alruwais, Wills and Wald, 2018).

Despite the numerous benefits, online assessment has some challenges or disadvantages. One of the major concerns of teachers and students is the low credibility of online assessment because students can easily heat and without being detected. Many students are worried because their classmates tend to ask for help from more experience people during online assessments or even copy from the internet. As such it is not fair for some to get higher scores after cheating (Weleschuk, Dyjur and Kelly, 2019). In addition, poor ICT skills and lack of facilities especially in rural areas is another disadvantage on online assessment. Studies have shown that many students obtain poor scores from online assessment simply because they lack the required computer knowledge and skills or due poor internet connection especially in rural areas (Al-Hattami, 2020). Thus, there is a need to explore students' perceptions of language online assessment because it is an integral part of teaching and learning. Knowing about students' perceptions of the

assessment will also help in proper designing and implementation of ICT in EFL teaching and learning in Libya.

In addition, assessing students' perceptions of online EFL teaching and learning activities is important would allow teachers and policy makers to evaluate the whole teaching activities. Based on the students' perceptions, modifications can be made of both leaning materials and teaching delivery (Amalia, 2018). Thus, assessing students' perceptions of online assessment will enable educators and policy makers to make appropriate changes that would enhance the process. For example, when the students have negative perception on a particular type of online assessment or tool, particular attention should be paid on that to make necessary changes. This would help in obtaining the real performance of the students. Finally, scholars suggest that exploring the students' perception of online assessment plays a vital role in revealing the extent of their acceptance of online learning in general. This would also help educators and policy makers to make informed decision in designing e-learning (Abdullah, Muait & Ganefri (2019).

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the Libyan students' perceptions of online EFL assessment in order to identify its effectiveness and challenges. Since ICT is generally adopted into the educational sector in order to improve the process and students' learning outcome, it is important to examine each aspect of it such as assessment in order to identify any possible obstacle and propose viable solutions for improved performance. The following research questions are formulated to guide the study: (1) What is the Libyan undergraduates' perceptions of online assessment?; What is their perceptions of the effective of the online assessment?; and What challenges do they face in completing the assessment?

2. Literature Review

Learning Assessment is generally defined as a process whereby students' learning outcome is evaluated and appropriate feedback is given to motivate them to learn more (Muñoz, Palacio & Escobar, 2012). Assessment plays a vital role in improving both teaching and learning as it allows teachers to evaluate not only the students' performance but their teaching process and the curriculum for the purpose of improvement. According Webber, (2012), assessment is generally designed to facilitate student' learning. Therefore, online assessment is considered as an assessment of students' learning outcome and giving feedback through online medium (Iskandar, Ganesan, & Maulan, 2021). It could be in a form of online test, quiz, exam, presentation, assignment, report, essay, reflection among others (Weleschuk, Dyjur & Kelly, 2019)

Many studies have been conducted to investigate students' perceptions of online assessment in various fields around the world. For example, some years before the Covid-19 pandemic, Petrisor et al. (2016) examine the perceptions of online web-based assessment by medical students. They discovered that the students largely have positive perceptions towards the online web-based assessment as they preferred it over the traditional pen and paper assessment. The main reason behind the preference is that they were expose to the online assessment for a long period. Howe (2020) also revealed similar findings that both students and lecturers have positive perceptions towards online assessment at the institute of Development Management in Eswatini. In the same vein, Valdez, and Maderal, (2021) investigated the students' perception of online assessments and its ability to motivate the students to learn mathematics. They collected the data from 127 second year engineering students in a university in Philippines. The findings of the

study show that the students have positive perceptions towards online assessment and it increases their motivation level toward learning mathematics.

However, Sarah Khan and Rashid Azim Khan (2018) in their study revealed that the undergraduates had negative perceptions towards online assessment. They did not even appreciate or accepted the effort made to introduce the online assessment. In another study, Amalia (2018) reported both positive and negative perceptions of online assessment by students. Some of the challenges the students face includes time constraint and poor internet connectivity. Recently, Iskandar, Ganesan, and Maulan, (2021) explored the undergraduates and postgraduates' perceptions of online assessment in Malaysia during the Covid-19 pandemic. They discovered that both the students have negative perceptions towards online assessment, they preferred the traditional assessment over the online one. They both face communication, personal and technical challenges while completing online assessment.

From the previous studies reviewed above, it is evident that very few studies have been carried out in the Libyan context to examine students' perceptions of online EFL teaching in general and particularly online assessment. Therefore, this study will fill in the gap by exploring the students' perceptions towards online EFL assessment

3. Method

The study adopts a survey research design to investigate Libyan undergraduates' perceptions of online language assessment during the covid-19 pandemic. The research design the researcher to collect large amount of data without having to get in face-face contact with the respondents. Also, the large amount of data can be collected from numerous respondents within a short period (Creswell, 2012). Thus, a questionnaire is employed for the data collection for the study because it does not require any specific training.

3.1 Respondents of the Study

The respondents for this study are 105 undergraduates in six local universities in Libya. They are both male and female gender with age range of 18-24 years old.

3.2 Instrument for the Data Collection

The study uses only a questionnaire for the data collection. The questionnaire is adopted from Iskandar, Ganesan and Maulan (2021). It is designed in two parts: closed ended and open ended. The closed ended part consists of 5-point Likert scale to indicate the extent to which the participants agree with the items of the questionnaire. As for the open-ended, the participants are allowed to write as much as they like.

4. Results

To answer the research questions of the study, the data obtained from the closed-ended questionnaire were analysed using descriptive statistical analysis. The results are supported with the findings of the open-ended questionnaire. The findings are presented in the following subsections.

4.1   Libyan EFL Undergraduates' Perceptions of Online Assessment

The results of the closed-ended questionnaire show that the respondents generally have positive perceptions of the online assessment. The prefer online assessment because almost 100% of the respondents agree that the online assessment is convenient and flexible as shown in item 10. Item 11 also shows that about 70% of the students

believe that the online assessment motivates them to learn the subject matter.

It allows them to acquire technical skills as shown by item 2 of Table with more than 80% strongly agreed. Other reasons why majority of the respondents have positive perceptions of online assessment or prefer the online assessment than the traditional assessment is because it enhances their learning and self-learning in particular (as indicated in items 1 and 3).

The results further reveal that the respondent's positive perceptions of online assessment is connected to the believe that online assessment is easier and faster compared to the traditional paper-pencil assessment. This is the believe of the majority of the respondents as indicated in items 12 and 13. In addition, items 7 and 8 indicates that 50% of the respondents agree that online assessment is suitable for all subjects and students respectively.

However, the majority (about 70%) of the students believe that the online assessment facilitate cheating among students as indicated by item 6. Table 2 present the details of the result of the descriptive statistics. These findings have been supported by the findings of the open-ended questionnaire. Majority of the respondents explained that the online assessment provides them with enough opportunity to write their exams, quizzes everywhere. A respondent added that with the online assessment, no students will lose a class attendance or any examination because it can be taken from anywhere in the world.

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of Online Assessment

S/N	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	Online assessment enhances my learning quality			2%	53%	45%
2	Online assessment improves my technical skills.		10%	15%	50%	25%
3	Online assessment enhances self-learning.			10%	10%	80%
4	Online assessment provides immediate feedback about my performance.				10%	90%
5	Online assessment provides unbiased grading. It is fair.		10%	25%	45%	20%
6	Online assessment does not facilitate cheating.	40%	30%	15%	15%	
7	Online assessment is suitable for all students	10%	10%	30%	30%	20%

8	Online assessment is suitable (applicable) for all subjects.	15%	15%	20%	30%	20%
9	Online assessment reduces the exam stress.	10%	20%	20%	40%	10%
10	Online assessment is convenient and flexible.				60%	40%
11	Online assessment motivates me to learn the subject matter.		10%	30%	40%	20%
12	Online assessment is easier than the traditional assessment.	20%	10%	10%	45%	15%
13	Online assessment is faster than the traditional paper assessment.			10%	50%	40%
14	I prefer online tests, quizzes, exams, presentations and other online assessment tools than the traditional assessment.		10%	20%	50%	20%

4.2 Libyan EFL Undergraduates' Perceptions of Effectiveness of Online Assessment

The results of the questionnaire show that the respondents have positive perceptions of the online assessment. They consider it effective because it enhances their learning which is agreed by almost 99% of the respondents as indicated in item 1 of Table. Items 2 and 3 also show that about 90% of the respondents agreed that the online assessment improve their technical and self-learning skills respectively. Item 11 also indicates that 60% of the students believe that the online assessment motivates them to learn their subjects. It also improves their technical skills as shown by item 2 and provides immediate feedback which help them to improve their learning. Details of the results are presented in Table 2 above.

4.3 Libyan EFL Undergraduates' Perceptions of Challenges of Online Assessment

The analysis of the questionnaire items reveals various challenges the respondents face while taking online assessments. Lack of internet access is agreed to be a challenge to about 55% of the respondents as shown in item 3. Other major challenges face by the students while taking online assessment include their inability to think fast in doing the assessments like quiz, test or exams. This is agreed by more than 50% of the respondents. Specifically, the respondents face difficulties in answering open-ended questions quickly during online assessment as shown by item 12. Generally, time constraint is considered a challenge to about 50% of the respondents as shown by item 13. The findings of the open-ended questionnaire also reveal some challenges faced by the students while taking online assessment. Some of the respondents mentioned that

technical factors such as poor internet connection especially in rural areas affect their online assessment. Other respondents identified lack of appropriate devices also affect them while taking online assessment. This is because some of the software/applications for online assessment are not supported by all devices. In addition, the respondents mentioned differences of time zone as another challenges towards successful implementation of online assessment. The complained that some of the times of the online assessments are not suitable for all students due to time differences.

However, very few respondents consider lack of motivation and awareness as major challenge of online EFL assessment in Libya as shown in items 5 and 9. In addition, only 20% of the respondents lack of money to buy internet bundle as a challenges of online assessment. As for nervousness of online assessment, only 40% of respondents.

Table 2: Challenges of Online Assessment

S/N	Items	1	2	3	4	5
1	Lack of physical space or proper facilities	20%	10%	30%	30%	10%
2	Lack of access to resources at the library	10%	30%	40%	10%	10%
3	Lack of internet access	10%	20%	15%	40%	15%
4	Distraction at home	20%	30%	10%	30%	10%
5	Lack of motivation	40%	30%	10%	10%	10%
6	Economic challenges (internet fee)	30%	40%	10%	10%	10%
7	Lack of feedback from lecturers	20%	10%	40%	20%	10%
8	Online assessment made me nervous	20%	10%	30%	20%	20%
9	Lack of awareness on the internet skills and reluctance in taking responsibility for completing the assessment	20%	20%	30%	20%	10%
10	Technological challenges (lack of technological knowledge/ unavailability of technological equipment.	10%	30%	20%	20%	20%
11	I must think fast in doing the assessment like quiz, test or exams	10%	10%	30%	40%	10%
12	I face difficulty in answering open-ended questions quickly.		10%	40%	30%	20%

13	Time constraint/management	15%	20%	20%	30%	15%

5. Discussion

The study discovers that Libyan undergraduates have positive perceptions towards online assessment because it is convenient, flexible and give instant feedback. These findings are not surprising because many students love the "freedom" given to them by the online learning environment. The findings are also in line with the findings of many previous studies such as Al-Jarf (2020) who observed that online assessment enables students to learn or take assessment from wherever they find themselves (Al-Jarf, 2020). Also, Alruwais, Wills and Wald, (2018) which reveal that online assessment gives instant feedback to students which as the results improve learning outcome and help them to be become more independent learners.

They also believe that the online assessment motivates them to learn the subject matter. They prefer the online assessment than the traditional assessment because online assessment is suitable for all subjects and students respectively. The findings of the study further reveal that the respondents' positive perception of online assessment is as the results of its ability to enhances technical skills as well as self-learning skills. These also agree with the findings of Alsowayegh et al. (2019) who reported that online assessment helped in developing students' language skills.

The findings contradict the findings of Selvanathan, Hussin, and Azazi (2020) who examine the online learning experiences of Malaysian students of higher institutions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The discovered that many Malaysian tertiary students are highly dissatisfied with the online learning during the pandemic. Most of the factors responsible for the dissatisfaction include lack of interaction between lecturers and students, limited internet access for students in rural areas,

However, the study reveals that the respondents believe that the online assessment facilitate cheating among students. This finding is also not new as previous studies such as Al-Nuaim (2012) and Kanaan et al., (2013) which show the low credibility of online assessment. It is surprising because for exactly a decade the finding does not change. This shows the need to improve the credibility of online assessment in order to improve students' learning output. When students know that they can cheat and pass, they will not bother to study. On the other hand, when they believe that they only way to pass is study, they will study hard.

Other challenges of the online assessment include lack of internet access by some students. The study also unveil inability to think fast by some students, time constraint and lack of appropriate devices as other challenges of online assessment. This agrees with the findings of Yeoh (2020) who discovered that most Malaysian students in rural schools do not possess phones that are suitable for online learning.

Despite all the challenges there are new and outstanding findings to the study. First, it is found that very few respondents consider lack of motivation, awareness and lack of money to buy internet bundle as major challenges to online assessment. These are major achievement recorded so far in the field of EFL teaching and learning in the Libyan context. The findings show that Libyan undergraduates are well informed on the benefits of online learning and the need to go with the current global trend in teaching and learning

especially in tertiary institutions.

6. Conclusion

The study aims at examining the Libyan undergraduates' perceptions of online assessment. The findings reveal that the students have positive perceptions towards online assessment because it is convenient, flexible and give instant feedback. In addition, the findings show that the online assessment motivates them to learn subject matter. They prefer the online assessment than the traditional assessment because online assessment is suitable for all subjects and students respectively. It enhances technical skills as well as self-learning skills. On the other hand, the findings indicate that the students perceive online assessment to facilitate cheating among students. Thus, teachers should device a means of improving the credibility of online assessment in order to improve students' learning output. For example, in the examination, teachers should give questions that encourage students do their work by themselves instead of coping online.

Other challenges of the online assessment include lack of internet access lack of appropriate devices by some students. The study has some limitations which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Thus, teachers should fully educate students on how to use any online learning platform selected by the teachers prior to administering any assessment.

The study is conducted using a small number of respondents. It also employed only a questionnaire for the data collection. In addition, it does not examine teachers' perception of the online assessment. Other variables such as gender, age, educational levels are not considered in this study. Therefore, future studies may consider these variables, perhaps, new findings regarding the students' perceptions of the online assessments. Despite the limitation, there are salient and new findings revealed by the study. Many Libyan undergraduates are motivated and aware of the benefit of online assessment.

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