Online Exams in the Time of COVID-19: Quality Parameters

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Abstract: Face-to-face teaching has been substituted by online teaching due to the closure of educational institutions during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main problem of the online platforms for teachers is to assess students and justify the level of their performance in the online exam. This paper has attempted to answer how teachers are justifying the online assessment of their students during the pandemic. A questionnaire comprising three open-ended questions about online testing was distributed among 50 teachers: 25 from King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia and 25 from Cluster University, Srinagar, India. Teachers' responses vary and were used as measures to check the quality of students' performance in online testing. The findings of the study sum up the teachers' views on the justification of online exams from home. According to the majority of teachers, it is possible when different assessment tools are used, objective and subjective questions are merged, and random blocks of one question paper are prepared to assess the students of one section following speaking exam or some kind of interaction about the online exam. Another way of justifying the performance of students in online testing is interactive, continuous, creative and alternative assessment throughout the semester. For this, synchronous online classes are required with active engaging activities. Some teachers responded that the active participation of students during the online lectures makes it easy for them to justify their students' level of performance in online assessment. Furthermore, this research recommends some tips to apply in online teaching to achieve success in online testing.

Keywords: COVID-19, Online Assessment, Remote Online Exams, Online Teaching, Students' Performance

1. Introduction

COVID-19 was declared the pandemic by WHO (2020, 11 March). With this declaration, all educational institutions, schools and universities were closed, as a result, education has been disrupted due to this crisis. While students are studying from their home, teachers are working remotely. Traditional classes/face-to-face classes have been substituted by online/digital classes, but it is unfortunate for those students who cannot get access to Internet. Due to certain reasons like poor connectivity or lack of smartphones, learning content is not accessible to them. On the other hand, there is a majority of students who are taking the benefit of online classes and the study materials which are sent to them. An online platform is an alternative and interactive platform, but it lacks social interaction or we can say that it is not as interactive as traditional classes where both teachers and students sit face to face and take classes lively.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This research intends

1. To investigate some quality parameters to check the quality of online exams.
2. To find out the fair and best way to assess the students during the Covid-19 scenario.
3. To explore the ways to justify the level of students' performance in remote online exams.

1.2 Significance of the Study

Online teaching/Blended teaching is smart teaching if taught in normal conditions where there is no pressure, but such teaching in a time of COVID-19 is a challenge where the class had to be taken online as there was no another option left. Taking this thing into consideration, how do teachers assess students by giving them online exams and how do they justify the level of students is the crux of this paper. This research has taken a present scenario of COVID-19 into consideration and draws inferences upon justifying the level of students' performance taking online platforms into consideration.

2. Literature Review

A very few articles are available on online assessment during the time of COVID-19. We have reported some studies and a Webinar on assessment. Frazer et al. (2017) emphasize the use of some effective teaching strategies of eLearning such as regular synchronous online sessions, discussions, feedback to discussions, formative and summative assessment and grading of tests. Like them, Dickinson and Gronseth (2020) have discussed the approach of Online Universal Design for learning with its effective teaching strategies, alternative modes of assessments and applying various modes of interaction to optimize student development. Then Arella (2016) has explained that a more authentic, reliable and valid image of the students' learning can be achieved through a blend of formative and summative assessments over time, collected from different websites and books. Chang (2020) in the fourth UNESCO COVID-19 Education Webinar, organized on 9 April 2020 has focused on some common issues emerging related to the fairness, authenticity, validity and feasibility of alternative assessments. Noting a distinct trend towards online assessment, he has said that "not all subjects and competencies can be assessed online or by phone." Further, he has advised, "we need to assess learners' progress to identify learning gaps and offer remedial and accelerated learning and assessment when schools reopen." It can be viewed that online assessment remotely is quite difficult and it can fail to justify the fairness and validity of students' performance in online testing. Alternative assessment including both formative and summative assessments can be applied with interactive online teaching. Though Agarwal and Kaushik's (2020) study is not related directly to online exams, it suggests some useful tips to conduct successful online classes. Those tips can also be useful for online assessments. They also have discussed that online teaching is going to be an integral part of post- COVID-19 period. They have conducted a research on 77 medical students in India. By collecting students' feedback responses after 12 days of online sessions on Zoom, they have found online classes a good alternative to traditional teaching in the time of lockdown due to COVID-19. Their research has claimed online teaching is highly effective, interesting, easy to use and adapt teaching materials according to the needs of learners. They have also advised using the latest version of the software for the time being to deal with unprecedented technical problems. COVID-19 will be a transitional phase to change the structure of higher education setup from traditional to blended and full online pedagogies. It is going to be

an integral part of the post-COVID-19. After the application of diverse online platforms, the effectiveness and pitfalls of this drastic transformation will be measured and unprecedented technicalities of remote pedagogy and rapid changes in the education system may be overcome by interactive lectures. Interactive teaching is the key to monitor the students' performance. As teachers, we must assess students' progress instead of their passing the test for a level ahead.

3. Methodology

3.1 Background of the Research

Experiencing teaching traditional classes and a jump from traditional to digital classes arises a question of justifying students at the time of online exams. Do we teachers honestly justify our students? Do these students really deserve the grades which they get by appearing in online exams? Do we really do justice with the students who live in remote areas and do not have access to the Internet most of the time? In order to get answers for all these questions, we formulated a questionnaire regarding the justification of students' level and what measures can be taken by both students, teachers and administrators to justify students as honestly as possible. The digital classes under observation include Blackboard Collaborate, Google Classroom, Google Meet, Zoom, WhatsApp, etc.

3.2 Participants

In this study, the researchers randomly selected 25 participants from King Khalid University, Abha, Saudi Arabia and 25 participants from Cluster University, Srinagar, India. All 50 participants were female teachers from the English departments teaching undergraduate students and their teaching experience ranged from 5 to 25 years. The first group of 25 teachers teaching at King Khalid University was from different countries: Saudi Arabia, Canada, England, Egypt, Yemen, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and they also had 5 to 10 years' experience in e-Learning (Blackboard), but earlier few of them were using a full online platform. Either that was facilitative e-Learning or blended teaching on Blackboard. Whereas the second group of 25 teachers from Cluster University was only from India and these teachers did not have eLearning (Blackboard) in their university, they were applying some online applications like YouTube, Twitter, WhatsApp to facilitate their teaching. However, most of them preferred the traditional way of teaching. During the pandemic, teachers teaching in Saudi university shifted from blended to online teaching without any difficulty because of Blackboard while teachers from Indian university had to choose themselves an online platform such as Zoom, Google Classroom, etc. Due to the 2G Internet in Kashmir, they also faced poor connectivity problems. Care was taken to see what measures they employ to grade their students as fairly as possible. In addition to this, the emphasis was also given to assessing the level of those students who have almost no access to online teaching and the grading of those students is quite a challenge for teachers.

3.3 Instruments

A questionnaire comprising three open-ended questions about online testing was prepared on Google forms. The researchers formulated the questions based on either their own or their colleagues' online remote exam handling challenges that they faced in the time of COVID-19. The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated and reviewed by their two colleagues (Assistant and Associate Professors of

Linguistics). The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part had the specific variables- age, teaching experience, nationality, and the second part had three open-ended questions. Open-ended questions were included to explore the online remote assessment challenges as the researchers being teachers experienced the online testing was the most problematic part of the online shift during the pandemic. These three questions were as follows.

1. How do you test your students' progress and performance in remote online exams?
2. What is the best way to assess students?
3. How do you justify the level of performance of your students in online exams from home?

3.4 Procedures

The data was collected from 50 instructors of two universities: one from Saudi Arabia and one from India. Since the universities were closed and all teachers were conducting online classes. Therefore, it was not an easy task. The questionnaire was prepared on Google form and sent to the participants by email or by forwarding the link on WhatsApp. In addition, the researchers' colleagues who were teaching in the other campuses of King Khalid University and Cluster University also helped in collecting the data. Either they forwarded the questionnaire link to the instructors of their colleges or they gave their email addresses to the investigators to send them the questionnaire. In approximately 10 days, the data was gathered successfully.

4. Analysis

After collecting the data, it was interpreted by making inferences. All questions were open-ended, so inferences were made from the received responses. First, all responses were read thoroughly. The findings of this qualitative research indicated that most of the teachers preferred the formative assessment to assess their students' progress and performance in remote learning. Further, for the second question, most of their responses were in favour of applying different assessment ways such as the objective, subjective, speaking exams with some alternative assessment like creative writing or extempore writing. For the third question, again most of the teachers gave various methods to assess the level of performance of their students in online exams from home. A few teachers were of the view that the justification of remote online exams was almost impossible. The number of these teachers was only 5 (10%) out of 50 teachers and they clearly said that remote online exams can never be justified whatever the way you implement to evaluate your students' progress. Their responses are written below.

1. Online tests are not valid tools and students do not show their best performance.
2. Online testing cannot be justified. Every way of online exams gives full chance to cheating.
3. I do not think online tests can help me in assessing the level of my students. The sudden shift to online from the traditional structure has put students as well as teachers in a tight situation, and it will take much time for students and teachers to fully understand the potential of online teaching and how it can benefit both.
4. Online tests are like open book exams. Cheating chances are much more than normal situation exams.
5. Online tests from home are not up to the mark, students do not take these tests seriously like traditional tests and as the result, they do not show their best performance.

These responses were from their experiences of online exams from home. In addition to this, we would like to catch your attention towards teachers' efforts and disappointment because of online testing. As teachers prepare the study material and they send it to their students. Every day, they must deliver lectures, try to reach their students and finish their course, but teachers do not have a clear idea of whether their classes are taken seriously or not. Students know that online exams are being conducted and who knows how much fair students are in their tests. Internal/External exams are conducted online and teachers have to give them grades according to "What is in front of them?", "How they did it and how much justice have students done to their papers is a big question?"

As we mentioned above that the questionnaire had three open-ended questions, and different responses were collected from the teachers. Around 45 (90%) out of 50 wrote a variety of ways to assess, apply assessment strategies and justify the performance of their students in online exams. The mixed responses to all three questions were as follows.

1. I set different types of questions in synchronous online assessments within the same limited time as pen and paper tests. Random blocks are created to avoid cheating.
2. By interactive online class and interactive assessments, I observe their performances in online sessions.
3. Their performance is justified by speaking tests. I provide my students the objective, subjective and speaking tests together at one-time.
4. I assess them by justifying their performance in online classes and exams together.
5. I justify them by seeing their performance in interactive online sessions and given exams.
6. I observe their level by continuous assessment.
7. I justify my students through interactive online teaching and establishing active participation in regular assessments.
8. I use online exam with post-exam discussion of questions and answers to tests in class.
9. Their level is justified based on their active participation in online classes.
10. Regular and continuous assessment with post-test discussions can be good ways to assess and see the performance of students.
11. I often give them a question which is creative and by looking at their answers, I get satisfaction about their attentiveness in the class and justify them accordingly.
12. I blend formative and summative assessment through online testing. In summative assessment, I mix different types of questions within the limited time.
13. The level of students cannot be justified in only one component whether online tests or offline exams. Presently, we are forced by the pandemic situation to switch to an online system otherwise it needs to be blended learning in normal situations. There must be a pre-planned system to cope up with any unpredictable situation. If the faculty and the students are lacking in resources and conducive environment, assessment cannot be effective and justified even in traditional exams.
14. It is imperative to add concept based applied questions and creative writing to evaluate the understanding of the course and its basics.
15. I prefer transparent and participatory assessment during the live virtual classes.

We would like to mention here that many teachers gave the same responses, and we took only one into consideration to avoid repetition. According to their responses given above, the level of justification and type of assessment vary. The way they justify can be taken as measures to assess the students' level.

5. Discussion

It is satisfying that how the students perform in their online exams and how they perform in speaking test when they don't know what kind of questions will be asked, post-exam discussion with students also satisfies a teacher and the most important point is the interactive sessions with the students where you come to know about the placement of the student in a particular course you are teaching. As far as continuous assessment is concerned, it is difficult to justify a student because he/she can consult study material, and other sources to write an answer and it hardly matters whether a student is good enough or not, but it will keep students engaged. What teacher assesses is the paper of his student in front of him whether descriptive or objective. With continuous assessment, other assessment tools must be applied such as synchronous way with multiple types of questions and multiple sets of papers. Alternative assessment tools can also be an effective way to assess the students throughout the semester. Most teachers were of the view that interactive, synchronous and live online sessions would be the best way to assess the students' progress. Further, most of them added that in live virtual sessions, teachers must use interactive and student-engaging approaches. Based on their online class performance, online exams must be a mixed way of different types of questions followed by post-test discussion. Including all these points, teachers provide their students with creative activities to reflect on their own progress in learning. Therefore, we can say that interactive sessions and surprise tests are satisfactory and giving them something creative to write where they can creatively think and give answers which will help teachers to justify their students honestly.

Now, the question is about the students who have no access to Internet, how teachers can justify them. Here, governmental and institutional support is very much required to run online teaching and testing successfully. First, teachers should make sure that their students have been receiving the study material provided by teachers or institutions and make sure that they are going through that e-content by asking them questions regarding that content. While assessing them, this thing should be taken into consideration that they do have Internet facility and their answers should be justified accordingly if the exam is descriptive and if it is objective then the assessment should be from that material that is accessible to all students. The time limit must also be followed within a one-time attempt. Teachers can apply safe assign to avoid plagiarism and most of the questions must be based on creative and critical thinking including post-exam discussion and feedback. Hence, students can also evaluate themselves in further online exams. For Internet disruption and poor connectivity, students must get social and financial support from their governments, institutions and parents.

This work further implies that continuous assessment using different formative assessment tools can be a quality parameter. Through continuous assessment, teachers might be able to justify the quality of their students' performance in online exams. This research also recommends that online alternative assessment can be employed to assess the students' performance continuously such as peer assessment, project writing, poster making and peer discussion over given topics related to the course. Universal design should be followed (Dickinson & Gronseth, 2020).

6. Recommendations

Based on the results drawn from the data, the researchers have offered some recommendations to set the quality of online assessment and check or justify the level of learners' progress and performance in the online evaluation. They are listed.

1. It is mandatory to have live online classes instead of recorded sessions. Recorded classes are of no use because learners do not feel interested in listening to them as they can find the answers to their exams in books or on the internet.
2. It is also required to mark attendance of students up to 50 percent in online classes as well to encourage students to attend the virtual lectures.
3. The online classes should be synchronous and interactive. By interactive online instructional strategies, teachers may be able to assess the performance of their students. The interactive classrooms must have various activities to engage students actively. It is better to have synchronous exams in order to justify the level of students honestly. Giving one minute for one multiple choice question will suffice for an online exam and there will be no room for cheating.
4. Positive reinforcement after accomplishing any task would motivate learners to do more. This technique must be practiced.
5. Throughout the online pedagogy, formative assessment tools can be applied with summative assessment tools to check the learners' progress.
6. Alternative assessments such as assignments, reports, surveys, projects, etc. are also recommended.
7. Graded assessment must include a variety of different types of questions. It was seen that mostly exams were objective. A good quality online exam must have not only objective questions but also subjective (descriptive, explanatory, argumentative, creative) and speaking questions (viva, extempore, assigned speaking tasks). Oral exams should be preferred but should include 25 percent marks and emphasis should be given to comprehensive exams with the inclusion of some creative lead.
8. For fair assessment, different sets/random blocks of one question paper must be essentially prepared. Questions should be set in such a way where the instructor can find that the student has really understood the topic and has done justice with an answer.
9. Giving feedback and showing their grades or progress on time after the semester exams is a great way to let the students understand their mistakes and improve them.
10. Outside the virtual classroom, communication between teacher and student must be built using different tools like course message on Blackboard, email, WhatsApp, telegram, etc. Students must be given enough room to communicate their queries freely.
11. Fast and stable internet and advanced versions of online classroom platforms are necessarily required to run any online teaching and exam successfully.
12. Institutional support and cooperation among colleagues also play a big role in conducting successful online exams.
13. Poor students should get some financial support from central and state government bodies and institutions to bear extra expenses for online settings. Professional development programs and trainings should be organized for students and teachers by their institutions and government to enhance their efficacy and competency of using new online platforms.

7. Limitations of the Study

This research is limited only to one Saudi and one Indian university. The researchers themselves have faced challenges in the remote online exams. Hence, the formed questions are based on their experiences and their colleagues' experiences. Further research can investigate other tools of formative assessment to be applied in online testing. This study is limited to only summative assessment that is not enough to assess students. In the times of COVID-19, the performance of students throughout the semester is a quality indicator and not only passing online tests. Therefore, further works can explore the best ways to assess students' performance during online teaching.

8. Conclusion

It is concluded that the way of assessment and level of justification or quality differs from teacher to teacher and different measures can be used to assess students. Most of the teachers assess students based on their performance in the online interactive sessions. In addition to it, they give multiple tests including the objective, written and speaking tests and surprise tests to know whether the students are aware of the topic or the course and also ask them to write about something where they can use their creative thinking. Formative assessment throughout the semester in online teaching also facilitates the interaction between teacher and students and the justification of online summative testing. Through, these ways, teachers can assess, justify and check the quality of the students' performance and their progress in learning otherwise it is quite impossible to assess and justify their results at online platforms. To meet the desirable results of online testing, efficient teachers and effective interactive and reflective teaching approaches are required to engage students and check the quality of students' performance during online sessions. Teachers must be skilled in the applications of various advanced software and assessment tools. Synchrony is also a quality indicator of an online assessment. Moreover, institutions have also the responsibility to support their students and teachers socially through developing motivation and coordination among their employees, then financially by providing sufficient funds, and professionally by conducting faculty development training sessions and courses.

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