Research Article

English Language Assessment Tools in The Modular Distance Learning: Maintaining Academic Integrity and Validating Student Outcomes

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of English teachers in learning assessment in the modular distance learning modality provide valuable insights into the assessment trends and interventions needed to improve student learning. This study delved into the experiences of English teachers in learning assessment in the modular distance learning modality as a precursor to understanding the assessment trends and interventions in the Department of Education, Division of Bohol, and Tagbilaran City for the school year 2021–2022. A narrative research design was used to understand the experiences of ten (10) purposely selected English teachers from public schools in Bohol and Tagbilaran City Divisions in English assessment in the modular distance learning modality. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, which was then analyzed using thematic analysis. Results revealed that the selected English teachers in Bohol have been using various assessment tools, methods, and feedback mechanisms during the implementation of modular distance learning. These include diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments and traditional and alternative assessment methods. Teachers have also used multiple feedback mechanisms, including written, online, in-person, and multimodal feedback. To maintain academic integrity, teachers have been providing clear guidance and support to students, avoiding bias and favoritism, and using specific criteria for evaluation. The study also found that teachers have faced challenges in ensuring academic integrity, overcoming logistical and communication barriers, and adapting to new instructional and assessment methods. However, they have demonstrated resilience by aligning their assessment tools with the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC), utilizing innovative feedback mechanisms, and promoting academic integrity. The study concludes by recommending that teachers adopt a flexible approach to assessment, promote the alignment of assessment tools with the MELC, encourage multiple feedback mechanisms, promote academic integrity, and provide support and resources to teachers.

Keywords*: Academic integrity, ELT assessment, MELC, Validating outcomes*

Introduction

Assessment in Modular Distance Learning (MDL) is pivotal for English language acquisition and essential for global communication. It measures learners' proficiency and identifies improvement areas, guiding personalized support. As education shifts towards hybrid models post-pandemic, blending MDL with traditional classroom interaction, the role of adequate English language assessment tools becomes crucial. These tools must address online and face-to-face learning challenges, maintaining assessment integrity. However, monitoring and feedback in modular instruction present significant challenges, potentially affecting the MDL system's credibility (Acala & Castroverde, 2021).

The Global Education Monitoring Report (2020) notes MDL's impact on global education, especially in reshaping assessment practices. The Philippines' Department of Education (DepEd) adapted assessment and grading procedures for modular learning environments (DO No. 031 s, 2020). However, Filipino learners face declining English proficiency, exacerbated by the pandemic and inadequate curriculum focus on English as a Second Language (ESL) needs. Poor assessment practices contribute to this decline, underscoring a misalignment between educational objectives and evaluation methods (Santos et al., 2022; Islam et al., 2021; Menozo, 2020).

English language teaching aims to develop communication skills for diverse purposes, from global interaction to academic and professional advancement (Bernardo & Gaerlan, 2011). Theoretical frameworks like Learner-Oriented Assessment (LOA) and Task-Based Language Assessment (TBLA) emphasize continuous, learner-centered evaluation to enhance language acquisition. These approaches advocate for assessment as an integral part of learning, focusing on feedback and practical application in real-world contexts (Turner & Purpura, 2015;

Despite advances in assessment methodologies, challenges persist in modular distance learning, particularly in validating student learning and maintaining academic integrity. Teachers need help monitoring and providing feedback, exacerbated by limited access to technology and inconsistent parent involvement (Acala & Castroverde, 2021; Guangul et al., 2020). These challenges highlight the need for research on English language assessment within the MDL context, especially in the Philippine setting, to enhance language teaching and assessment practices.

In capsule, the literature review features the critical role of assessment in English language teaching within modular distance learning, highlighting the shift towards formative and learner-oriented approaches. It also identifies persistent challenges, such as academic integrity and effective learner monitoring in remote settings. Addressing these issues through a qualitative exploration will aid in refining assessment strategies, ensuring they effectively support English language learning in the evolving educational system.

Along this line, this study investigated the use of language assessment tools in English teaching within the modular distance learning framework of Bohol and Tagbilaran City divisions for the school year 2021-2022. It explored the types of assessment tools used, their alignment with learning competencies, feedback mechanisms for student performance validation, strategies for upholding academic integrity, challenges faced during assessment, and emerging trends in language assessment practices among teachers.

Research Methodology

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to investigate English language assessment tools in modular distance learning in Bohol and Tagbilaran City for the 2021-2022 school year. The design's exploratory nature enabled a detailed examination of contextual factors and the capture of subjective perspectives, providing rich insights into language assessment practices in the selected educational settings.

The research was conducted in the top five performing public secondary schools in Bohol and Tagbilaran City, chosen based on their English National Achievement Test scores. These schools had implemented printed modular distance learning to maintain education quality

during the pandemic. Ten participants were purposively selected from these schools based on their English teaching experience, academic qualifications, and familiarity with modular instruction. The selection process aimed for diversity and richness of data, prioritizing participants who could provide in-depth insights into language assessment in modular distance learning.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to explore the language assessment tools, challenges, strategies, and techniques used in modular instruction. The guide, reviewed and refined by experts, facilitated in-depth discussions on language assessment practices and trends. Data gathering involved securing ethical approvals, obtaining consent from participants, and conducting virtual or face-to-face interviews based on internet availability. The saturation method guided data collection, with thematic analysis performed on the transcribed interviews to identify patterns, themes, and insights into language assessment in modular distance learning.

Results and Discussions

The results and findings of the study are sequentially presented based on the statement of the problem. Using thematic analysis as data analytic tool, the researcher discusses the findings on the utilization of language assessment tools in the teaching of English in the modular distance modality in the Department of Education, Divisions of Bohol, and Tagbilaran City in the school year 2021-2022.

Language Assessment Tools Employed in the Modular Instruction

The narratives of the participants generated two emergent themes: (1) type of assessment, and (2) assessment methods.

Theme 1: English Language Assessment (ELA). It encompasses the evaluation of comprehensive English language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and cultural competence. The online learning shift required educators to assess these skills through various methods such as video lectures, interactive activities, and digital assessments. The pandemic necessitated adaptable strategies, integrating diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments to meet individual learner needs. This approach is aligned with Anzaldo (2021), who noted the diverse assessment types used in distance learning, and De Vera (2020), who highlighted the importance of diagnostic assessment in understanding prior knowledge within modular distance learning environments.

Theme 2: Assessment Methods. It addresses the evolution of assessment methods, transitioning from traditional pen-and-paper tests to alternative, more practical assessments in online learning contexts. This shift, necessitated by the pandemic's constraints, led to a broader adoption of alternative methods that engage students in active learning through projects, research, and creative tasks. Winstone and Boud (2020) supported this trend, observing that the pandemic forced schools to rethink their assessment strategies, moving away from formal examinations to diverse tasks that offer rich feedback and insights into students' learning progress. This change signifies a shift towards more personalized and effective educational assessments, enhancing the learning experience in English language education.

Alignment of the Assessment Tools to the MELC

The following are the generated themes from the thematic analysis on the mechanisms employed by the participants to ensure alignment of the assessment tools to the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC):

Theme 1: Checking and Revisiting. In English Language Learning (ELL), Checking and Revisiting encapsulates a comprehensive approach to assessment, focusing on the critical evaluation of language components like grammar and vocabulary to align with curriculum guidelines. This process is essential for a thorough evaluation of students' language proficiency, with a strong emphasis on grammar assessment to understand grammatical rules, sentence structure, and syntax. Vocabulary assessment is equally vital, ensuring students' mastery of English vocabulary is consistently measured and aligned with educational objectives. This theme extends to evaluating listen-

ing, speaking, reading, and writing skills, ensuring a holistic view of language acquisition, and facilitating targeted instruction. The importance of aligning assessments with the curriculum is supported by Wijngaards-de Meij and Merx (2018), who note the benefits of consistent evaluations for educational progression, and Squires (n.d.), who stresses the necessity of regularly reviewing curriculum guides to maintain the relevance and accuracy of assessments in ELL.

Theme 2: Quality Assurance. This theme highlights the critical role of following standardized guides and procedures in ensuring the quality and alignment of assessment tools with competencies in education. Educators and institutions adhere to these standards to guarantee the effectiveness of their evaluations. In places like the Division of Bohol, assessments undergo rigorous quality assurance processes, including reviews by subject coordinators or the use of pre-validated materials, which are then customized to the learning pace of individual schools. Teachers who lack access to such resources proactively develop their own, adhering to the Department of Education's (DepEd) standards, including the Comprehensive Guidelines (CG) and constructing a Table of Specifications. This meticulous approach underlines the importance of holistic student assessment across various learning domains. The initiative of teachers to align their assessment tools with the necessary competencies is underscored by studies like those of Chan et al (2021), who advocate for quality-assured learning materials for effective modular remote teaching, and Reimers et al (2020), who stress the need to revise and prioritize curriculum objectives to remove non-essential competencies, thereby facilitating students' timely completion of learning modules and preventing potential setbacks in distance learning modalities.

Theme 3: Modification and Adaptation. This theme emphasizes the necessity of modifying and personalizing assessment materials to align with educational competencies, ensuring they meet curriculum goals. Valenzuela (2022) supports this by asserting that well-designed assessments, in alignment with standards, are crucial for effective instruction,

particularly in English education where they guide teaching strategies across grammar, vocabulary, and other language skills. Wijngaards-de Meij & Merx highlight the importance of integrating the curriculum with teaching, advocating for transparency that allows assessments to inform and enhance instruction. This approach, adopted by public school teachers, involves using the Curriculum Guide to ensure that assessments and daily lessons cohesively support holistic English language learning objectives.

Theme 4: Research and Benchmarking. It captures the proactive role of teachers in English language education, focusing on refining assessment tools to match specific language competencies through research and collaboration. Teachers actively engage in online platforms like group chats and forums to exchange best practices and align their assessment strategies with the diverse competencies required for English language learning, from grammar to communication skills. This collaborative effort is supported by resources from the national office and educational divisions, ensuring assessments are comprehensive and current. The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines further aids this initiative by providing Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) and launching the DepEd Teaches program to support teachers during the pandemic, alongside a Professional Development Program on Assessment and Emerging Literacies, targeting improvements in teaching strategies and alignment with international standards like PISA.

Feedback Mechanisms to Validate Students' Performance

A feedback mechanism is a process or system through which information about a learner's performance is communicated to the learner in relation to their learning goals or outcomes.

Theme 1: Written Feedback. The theme revolves around the traditional method of written feedback in English language learning assessments, where educators provide detailed comments on students' work to enhance their writing skills and overall competency. This approach, involving direct annotation on performance task sheets or answer sheets, allows for

specific, personalized guidance on strengths and areas for improvement. Although digital methods like email or messenger are sometimes used, the focus remains on the tangible, direct feedback on physical documents, which is especially beneficial for assessing written assignments and problem-solving tasks. This method aligns with Agayon et al. (2022) in their study among Palawan teachers, who describe a similar approach named "Moni-tour," focusing on monitoring student progress through written work, particularly when face-to-face interaction is not possible. This ensures a thorough validation of student engagement and authenticity in their submissions, highlighting the ongoing dedication of teachers to assess and support student learning effectively.

Theme 2: Online Feedback. The theme centers on leveraging digital platforms and tools for providing immediate and tailored feedback in English language learning, crucial for developing core skills such as reading, writing, listening, speaking, and viewing. Educators utilize online environments like Google Classroom and video conferencing to offer real-time feedback, enhancing communication and language proficiency. This digital approach, vital during the pandemic's educational shifts, allowed for flexible, efficient feedback processes, enabling personalized instruction and timely support. Notably, online feedback mechanisms, as highlighted by Baryam (2021) in Agayon et al. (2022) and Chandler-Grevatt (2020), facilitated ongoing student assessment amidst lockdowns, ensuring feedback was specific, timely, and constructive, thus maintaining the continuity and effectiveness of language learning and assessment.

Theme 3: In-Person Feedback. The theme underscores the significance of traditional face-to-face feedback in English language learning, especially during the pandemic. Teachers utilized in-person meetings in community spaces like barangay halls to provide direct, personalized feedback, enhancing the learning experience and addressing individual student needs. Despite the rise of online platforms, this approach maintained its value, offering nuanced insights into student performance and fostering a personal connection that complemented digital feedback methods. The study by Castroverde Acala (2021) highlights how teachers navigated challenges in modular distance learning by integrating in-person feedback with online methods, employing home visits and other strategies to maintain effective communication and support for students amidst limited technology access and face-to-face restrictions.

Theme 4: Multimodal Feedback. The theme centers on a holistic approach to language assessment in the new normal, utilizing multimodal feedback methods to improve students' speaking and writing skills. Educators embraced a variety of feedback channels, including online, verbal, and written forms, to provide personalized and comprehensive assessments that cater to individual learning preferences. During the pandemic, tools like Google Classroom, Zoom, and instant messaging became crucial in delivering diverse forms of feedback, enhancing the learning experience and facilitating immediate interaction. Froehlich and Guias (2021) highlight the effectiveness of multimodal feedback in virtual education environments, while Polluna and Gorriceta (2021) acknowledge the shift towards multimodal and flexible instructional methods in public education, underscoring the adaptability and resourcefulness of teachers in maintaining educational quality through varied feedback mechanisms.

Strategies in Maintaining Academic Integrity

The following themes emerge from the participants' responses under the topic on the strategies employed to maintain academic integrity during the new normal. Academic integrity refers to maintaining honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility in the educational environment that has shifted to online and remote learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Sonajo, 2022).

Theme 1: Providing clear guidance and support. This theme emphasizes the importance of clear guidance and support in fostering academic integrity, comprising categories like instructions and guidelines, rubrics, and responding to student queries. Teachers ensure students understand expectations through precise instructions and guidelines for assessing outputs and performance tasks,

while rubrics provide specific criteria for grading, enabling self-assessment and improvement. Prompt responses to student queries further aid in offering support and guidance. The effectiveness of such feedback in improving student performance and engagement is supported by Bijami et al. (2016), who found that active teacher feedback promotes student engagement and performance. Cavalcanti et al. (2020) also noted that feedback helps students evaluate their learning and pinpoint areas for growth, underlining the role of clear instructions and support in upholding academic integrity and enhancing achievement.

Theme 2: Promoting fairness and objectivity. This theme focuses on the efforts of teachers to maintain fairness and objectivity in student assessments, emphasizing the elimination of biases and the consistent application of grading systems and rubrics. Teachers use specific rubric criteria to evaluate student work, promote academic integrity, and prioritize developmental feedback over numerical scores, recognizing the formative nature of pandemic-era activities. The shift to cloud-computing technology has facilitated efficient feedback delivery, ensuring equitable assessment practices despite the varied access to resources highlighted by EdWeek (2020) during the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach aligns with UNESCO's (n.d.) advocacy for digital formative assessments, which provide deeper insights into student learning and emphasize the quality of knowledge acquired over the method of acquisition.

Theme 3: Fostering a culture of academic integrity. This theme delves into the strategies used by teachers to uphold academic integrity in English language assessments, focusing on integrating values and virtues and adhering to the Department of Education (DepEd) guidelines. Teachers embed DepEd Core values like honesty and fairness into lessons, linking academic integrity with the development of competence and critical thinking skills. Additionally, they follow established DepEd standards for assessment, ensuring a consistent and lawful approach. This approach aligns with Leus's (n.d.) research, which advocates for using incidents of academic

dishonesty as opportunities for positive discipline and values formation, allowing students to reflect on and rectify their actions, thus fostering a constructive and non-punitive learning environment.

Challenges Encountered in Conducting Assessment

Theme 1: Ensuring Learners' Academic Integrity. The theme of "Ensuring Learners' Academic Integrity" highlights the challenges educators encounter in verifying the authenticity of students' responses, especially in the context of remote learning and digital assessments in English Language Teaching (ELT). Teachers strive to differentiate between genuine and falsified responses, with the risk of plagiarism heightened in virtual environments. This challenge necessitates the development of effective strategies to uphold honesty, the clear communication of academic policies, and diligent assessment monitoring to maintain the integrity of ELT outcomes. The increasing dependency on digital tools for remote learning amplifies these challenges, as noted by Sonajo (2022), who acknowledges the rise in plagiarism and cheating in online exams and the need for comprehensive intervention plans to safeguard academic integrity.

Theme 2: Overcoming logistical and communication barriers. This theme addresses the logistical and instructional challenges teachers face in English Language Teaching (ELT) due to the pandemic-induced shift to remote learning. Issues such as delayed module submissions, logistical difficulties in providing timely feedback, and the lack of learner identification on submitted work impede effective teaching and assessment in ELT. Communication barriers, including delayed interactions and poor internet connectivity, further complicate the timely evaluation and feedback processes, impacting the quality of education. These challenges, highlighted in the study "Teaching and Learning Continuity Amid and Beyond the Pandemic" by Dayagbil et al. (2021), illustrate the significant impact of infrastructural and communication limitations on students' ability to engage with and complete learning activities during the pandemic,

underscoring the need for adaptive solutions in educational delivery and assessment in the context of ELT.

Theme 3: Adapting to new instructional and assessment methods. This theme underscores the substantial challenges teachers encountered in shifting from traditional to remote teaching modalities, especially in English Language Assessment. Educators faced the daunting task of evaluating students' writing and speaking skills remotely, necessitating the development of new assessment strategies and a deep understanding of their implications. The transition to modular distance learning required teachers to adapt to innovative instructional and evaluative methods, striving to maintain educational quality despite the limitations of remote learning environments. Studies by Hodges et al. (2020) and Baticulon et al. (2021) validate these challenges, highlighting the need for educators to evolve their practices and employ creative tools to effectively assess language skills, thereby ensuring continued high standards of education in the new normal of pandemic-induced remote learning.

Assessment Trends Based on Teachers' Practices

Analyzing the assessment trends in teachers' practices highlights three main themes represented in the simulacrum.

The study revealed three key themes in assessment practices. The first theme involves the diverse methods teachers used, including diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, tailored to meet instructional goals and learners' needs, blending traditional exams with innovative approaches like project work. The second theme centers on aligning assessments with the Modular English Language Curriculum (MELC), ensuring accurate evaluations of language proficiency through careful material review, quality assurance, and continuous adaptation of teaching strategies. The third theme underscores the role of feedback in ELL, with teachers utilizing various methods, from written annotations to digital platforms and face-to-face interactions, to provide personalized guidance and promote skill development in writing, reading, speaking, and vocabulary.

Moreover, the study highlights the overarching challenges of maintaining academic integrity, addressing logistical and communication hurdles, and adopting new instructional and assessment techniques amid the shift to remote learning. Teachers' efforts to cross these issues underscore the importance of adaptability and innovative assessment tools in fostering effective English language acquisition, ensuring that teaching and assessment practices remain aligned and responsive to students' learning needs.
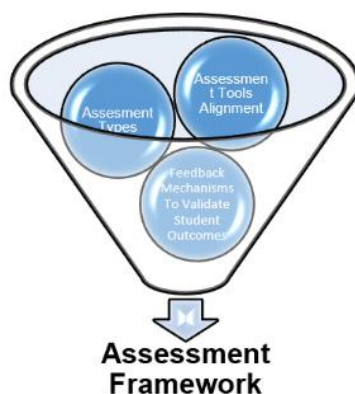
Figure 2. Teachers 'Assessment Trends

Conclusion

Based on the findings, the English teachers manifest the adaptability and ingenuity in employing various assessment tools, methods, and feedback mechanisms during the Covid-19 pandemic. They have faced challenges in ensuring academic integrity, overcoming logistical and communication barriers, and adapting to new instructional and assessment methods. Despite these challenges, English teachers

demonstrated resilience by aligning their assessment tools with the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC), utilizing innovative feedback mechanisms, and promoting academic integrity.

Recommendations

Based on the salient findings of the study, the following recommendations are given:

1. Prioritize the continuous refinement of assessment methods to ensure alignment between instruction and evaluation, thereby enhancing student learning outcomes.
2. Adapt to the evolving landscape of remote and online learning by improving assessment practices to meet the unique needs of students.
3. Utilize flexible assessment strategies in modular instruction, including diagnostic, formative, and summative assessments, to address diverse educational requirements effectively.
4. Align assessment tools with the Modular English Language Curriculum (MELC) through rigorous quality assurance and adaptive strategies, ensuring relevant and accurate measurement of student proficiency.
5. Implement multiple feedback mechanisms in remote learning environments to accommodate the varied learning styles and preferences of students, facilitating a more personalized and effective educational experience.

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