Original Research

Potentials and Challenges of E-assessment in Postgraduate TEFL Programs: Teachers' Insights about Assessment before and during the Pandemic

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Abstract

Following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, educational centres worldwide transitioned their assessment modes from face-to-face to electronic assessments (i.e., e-assessments). E-assessment offers numerous benefits, including higher accessibility, asynchronous discussions, personalised feedback, randomisation of questions, and time-saving automatic scoring. Yet, e-assessment is not without its certain limitations. This study explored two main objectives: the prevailing assessment methods of postgraduate TEFL programs before and during the pandemic period and the teachers' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of e-assessment. Following the snowball sampling technique, 38 TEFL teachers from different universities in Iran participated in the study by responding to an open-ended questionnaire. The results were as follows: (a) A combination of summative and formative assessments was used before and during the pandemic; (b) Although the use of formative assessment became limited during the pandemic, it was still prevalent; (c) While presentations were the most popular formative assessment before the pandemic, it was replaced with projects afterwards; (d) Observation was the least applicable method in e-assessment; (e) Multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-ended questions were respectively the favoured test methods in e-assessment. The major benefits of e-assessments were reducing teachers' workload and increasing familiarity with new technologies, whereas poor internet connections and a lack of monitoring of students' performance during exams were reported as the main challenges. Based on the findings, teachers are recommended to apply more than one assessment method, match the type of assessment with the students' needs and contextual exigencies, and discuss their successful experiences and practices with their peers.

Keywords: Electronic Assessment (E-Assessment), Formative Assessment, Postgraduate Programs, Summative Assessment, Teachers' Perspectives, Teaching English as Foreign Language (TEFL)

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1. Introduction

The COVID-19 virus was declared a global pandemic by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, following its rapid worldwide spread and high infectivity risk. The pandemic severely disrupted global education systems, leading to widespread closures of schools, universities, and institutions. To continue educational activities, education centres in most countries, including Iran, had to shift from face-to-face education to emergency distance education via various platforms, such as Adobe Connect, Zoom, and Google Meet (Derakhshan, 2021). The rapid shift in teaching and assessment methods significantly impacted various aspects of teaching and learning, including teaching quality, learning rates, testing, and assessment. This transition posed significant challenges, including teachers' and learners' inexperience and unpreparedness, inadequate technological infrastructure, inconsistent internet quality, and difficulties in adapting pedagogical and assessment practices to online formats (Derakhshan, 2021; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021; Prapraite & Anderiusevicine, 2021; Tomasik et al., 2021).

In the pre-pandemic period, much research investigated the potentials and challenges of two assessment methods, namely formative and summative assessments (Dixson & Worrell, 2016; Ghahari & Farokhnia, 2017, 2018). The research focus has recently shifted to the forms and features of e-assessment. According to Dixson and Worrell (2016), both traditional assessment and e-assessment can be offered in a formative, summative, or mixed manner. E-assessment offers numerous benefits, including accessibility from anywhere and anytime, asynchronous discussions, immediate and personalised feedback on tests, randomisation of questions, and time-saving automatic scoring. Despite these benefits, the efficacy of e-assessment is conditional and context-bound (Abduh, 2021). Accessibility to suitable devices, qualified Internet connection, and students' pretraining and ability to fast-typing are among the essential requisites of e-assessment and are thus assumed to be challenges of using it in different educational contexts (Aburumman, 2021; Alruwais et al., 2018).

In Iran, a number of studies have elicited TEFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) teachers' perceptions of assessment variations (e.g., Farhady & Tavassoli, 2021; Nasr et al., 2018); a few other studies have addressed the implications of digital exams (e.g., Mahmoudi-Dehaki et al, 2020, 2021) and online portfolio assessment (Rahimi et al., 2021) in undergraduate TEFL programs. Yet, few (if any) studies have critically and

comparatively investigated assessments in TEFL programs before and during the pandemic. Moreover, previous studies have not addressed the perceptions of university teachers in postgraduate programs regarding the challenges and benefits of e-assessment.

Undergraduate and postgraduate programs in Iran differ structurally, pedagogically, and curricular objectives. At the undergraduate level, which typically spans four years, the primary focus is on foundational language skills, translation practices, literary reading and criticism, and introductory linguistics. Undergraduate curricula prioritise foundational language acquisition, general teaching methodologies, and standardised coursework, with a limited emphasis on independent and applied projects. In contrast, postgraduate TEFL programs over the last two years have emphasised advanced research, specialised domains such as English for Specific Purposes, and curriculum development. These programs require rigorous assessments, including comprehensive exams, thesis defences, and research-focused and project-based frameworks. Presentations and self-directed study replace lecture-heavy undergraduate models, and assessments shift from exam-centered evaluations to project outcomes. A brief review of assessment variations, along with their benefits and challenges, is presented in the following section.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Assessment Methods: Summative vs. Formative

Teachers must consider the students' needs and the impact of the tests on them when selecting the assessment method to use (Qu & Zhang, 2013). A practical assessment is characterised as follows: it helps teachers understand the student's progress and problems, decide which method and material to use, evaluate their teaching and instruction, and adjust the teaching method and material to the class conditions.

According to Jordan (2013), both assessment and e-assessment can be summative and/or formative. Traditionally, summative assessment (SA, also known as assessment of learning) has been the primary method in educational assessment for evaluating students' performance and outcomes. However, formative assessment (FA, known as assessment *for* learning) has gradually become the preferred method because it helps students improve their learning by providing feedback during the learning process (Guo & Yan, 2019). According to Dixson and Worell (2016), formative assessment (FA) gathers data during the learning process to improve students' learning, whereas summative assessment (SA)

uses data about how much students know or have learned at the end of the learning sequence.

While FAs are typically used for providing feedback, SAs are mostly high-stakes assessments that evaluate how much learners know at the end of a course, semester, or educational year and are almost always graded. Some examples of SA include final exams, state tests, and college and university entrance exams (e.g., the GRE and SAT). According to Dixson and Worrell (2016), no more learning and teaching is needed when students perform satisfactorily on the exam. SA helps to determine students' success and proficiency, whether they can advance to the next level, and assess their qualifications for awards (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). Additionally, Qu and Zhang (2013) note that SA assesses the course and the validity of educational programs and materials to classify, identify, and evaluate teaching and learning progress after the teaching program or at the end of the term. SA typically provides quantitative data for teaching analysis, allowing teachers to choose their future teaching and assessment methods by analysing the data and results gathered.

Despite the above-mentioned contributions, SAs are not without certain limitations. Most SAs focus on the results, not the process, thereby leading these tests to teach to the test and focus on surface knowledge (Lau, 2016). Another disadvantage of SA is its negative impact on students' motivation in class. When students understand that they will only be assessed at the end of the semester, they tend to focus solely on exams and final scores and are no longer intrinsically motivated to participate in class activities (Harlen, 2005). As the most notable form of SA, tests (e.g., final exams, high-stakes tests) are usually one-shot (Dolin et al., 2017). Since one-shot tests cannot be repeated and their results directly affect students' future for advancing to the next level, they are known to increase the students' stress. Lau (2016) argues that due to these disadvantages, researchers suggest a "shift" from SA to another assessment method. This shift does not mean abandoning the use of SA but rather promoting a move away from a sole focus on SA. As Dolin et al. (2017) maintain, teachers and institutes should integrate other assessment methods with SA to make teaching and learning more effective.

Formative Assessment (FA), also known as Assessment for Learning, is any assessment in which information about students' strengths and weaknesses is collected during the course (Black & Jones, 2013). According to Black and Jones (2013), assessment

becomes formative when the evidence and results are used to adapt the teaching process to meet the learning needs. Examples of FA are classroom observation, presentations, projects, portfolios, and quizzes, the primary objective of which is to improve. The main difference between SA and FA is that FA focuses not on the final result and score but on students' understanding, improvement, and effective teaching (Dixson & Worrell, 2016). FA plays a crucial role in motivating students and fostering their passion for learning. Volante and Beckett (2011) reported that learning speed increased for students who used FA techniques. Another benefit of FA is that it helps students observe, control, or self-assess their learning and become self-regulated (Guo & Yan, 2019).

Despite the benefits mentioned above, FA has certain limitations. For instance, FA is not objective, and teachers' bias can affect the evaluation of students. Another problem is that teachers cannot assess a large number of students because it is time-consuming to observe and analyse all students' performances and then provide them with feedback during the course. Another problem is that since FA is mostly informal and unsystematic, students' knowledge and progress may be misinterpreted, which can result in inappropriate feedback (Qu & Zhang, 2013).

2.2. E-Assessment: Potentials and Challenges

Recent developments in education have led to an increased use of information and communication technologies (ICT) and technology-enhanced learning (TEL) in educational activities. As a result of advancements in technology and e-learning systems, there has also been an increased demand for assessing students within these systems (Brink & Lautenbach, 2011). A new approach to assessment which uses ICT has come to be known as e-assessment. The process of e-assessment begins with design and extends to storing and analysing results with the aid of new technologies and ICT. According to Crisp (2012), e-assessment involves the use of technological instruments, such as laptops, desktop computers, smartphones, iPads, and Android tablets, to create, deliver, store, and/or report students' assessment marks, and provide them with synchronous or asynchronous feedback.

Appiah and Tonder (2018) and Aburumman (2021) state that by utilising e-assessment, a large number of students can be assessed simultaneously from different locations, and their answers can also be marked automatically.In addition to this positive

point, other pedagogical benefits include learners' and lecturers' feedback, the ability to retake the test or assessment task, and the randomisation of questions. Other advantages of e-assessment are giving synchronous or asynchronous feedback that is personalized and can help learners diagnose their weaknesses, being objective because of the automation of assessment activities, being available at any time and place that shows its flexibility, using different assessment techniques, and having a wide range of question types (e.g., multiple choice, short answer, open-ended questions, etc.) (Cook & Jenkins, 2010).

E-assessment also enables learners to identify and reflect on their learning process and results, thereby improving the quality of their learning and adjusting their study methods as needed (Appiah & Tonder, 2018). It also reduces the lecturers' workload due to features such as automated marking and feedback (Stodberg, 2012). Compared to traditional paper-based testing (PBT), e-assessment is less costly and easier to implement because it eliminates the need for question papers and an exam venue, as well as the requirement for manual marking. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, many educational systems have utilised e-assessment in their assessment cycle to obtain a faster and more accurate reflection of students' achievements.

Besides all the mentioned benefits, Aburumman (2021) also states some challenges associated with e-assessment. It requires students to possess knowledge and pretraining, the ability to type quickly, experience in using various platforms, and the ability to upload different file formats. Inexperienced teachers and students using online educational platforms or the e-assessment process require training at the beginning to become familiar with e-assessment (Alruwais et al., 2018). Another challenge in utilizing e-assessment is the unfairness of this form of assessment for lower-performing students. This challenge may be caused by a lack of or insufficient information about e-assessment tools (Noyes et al., 2004). As reported by Clariana and Wallance (2002), higher-performing students did better in e-assessments. They observed that these students can adjust to the new method of assessment better than lower-performing students.

According to Aburumman (2021), reading texts on screen during e-assessment causes individuals to feel more tired than during paper-based testing (PBT). Accessibility to suitable devices and a qualified Internet connection are other important challenges that educational systems must consider for e-assessment (Appiah & Tonder, 2018). Most e-assessment systems are not configured for marking short-answer and open-ended

questions; thus, teachers themselves have to mark the answers in the e-assessment platforms, which can cause eye strain (Stodberg, 2012). According to Brink and Lautenbach (2011), the most significant challenge in an e-assessment system is to guarantee the security of exams. Rogers (2006) states that the possibility of cheating is increased in e-assessment. All the aforementioned factors and challenges can hinder the use and integration of technology in the educational process, especially in the assessment of students, and may even decrease the validity and reliability of the assessment (Hewson & Charlton, 2018).

To sum up, e-assessment has gained popularity in recent years due to its numerous advantages, particularly following the outbreak of the pandemic in 2020. Its effectiveness, however, varies depending on the specific context and the program being utilized. While e-assessment offers benefits such as the ability to assess a large number of students simultaneously, it also presents challenges like internet connectivity issues. It is thus crucial for educators and institutions to carefully consider the context in which e-assessment is being implemented to maximize its effectiveness. Further research is needed to identify the potentials and limitations of e-assessment in different contexts and programs, particularly in postgraduate programs, which are relatively under-researched in the literature.

Thus, this study primarily aimed to identify the assessment methods employed by TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) teachers in postgraduate programs for online education during the pandemic and compare them with those that prevailed before the pandemic. Secondly, it aimed to gather the teachers' perspectives on the strengths and weaknesses of assessment and scoring procedures during the pandemic. The following questions defined the present research:

1. What assessment methods were used in the postgraduate TEFL program before the pandemic period?
2. What assessment methods were used in the postgraduate TEFL program during the pandemic period?
3. What are the benefits and challenges of e-assessment in the postgraduate TEFL program?

3. Method

3.1. Research Design and Context

The study employed a qualitative and thematic analysis research approach. The population included TEFL teachers who had experience teaching postgraduate courses before and during the pandemic. To ensure the diversity of the participants, they were selected from different state-run and nonprofit universities in Iran.

3.2. Sample

Following the snowball sampling technique, a total of 38 male and female university teachers who taught postgraduate TEFL courses at various universities in Iran participated in the study. Their age ranged from 37 to 57 years old. Their teaching experience in MA courses ranged from 5 to 17 years, and in Ph.D. courses from 2 to 15 years.

The link to the online questionnaires was sent to 120 university teachers via email. Their e-mail addresses were obtained from the universities' websites. From 120 e-mails, 41 teachers answered the questionnaires in the Google form. After collecting the data, three of them were excluded from the data pool due to incomplete and inadequate answers to some of the open-ended questions. Therefore, the number of participants whose answers were used in this study was 38, comprising 19 male and 19 female participants. To ensure the anonymity of the participants, codes were used instead of names. Table 1 summarises the demographic information of the participants, including their gender, age, and affiliated university.

Table 1
Participants' Distribution (n=38).

University	Gender		Age	
	Male	Female	Min	Max
Tehran	4	3	39	50
Beheshti	3	3	42	51
Kharazmi (Karaj)	3	2	42	46
Islamic Azad (Tehran branches)	9	8	40	50
Islamic Azad (Kerman)	2	1	43	57

3.3. Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

An online unstructured questionnaire was used as the qualitative data collection tool (Appendix A). The questions were originally adapted from the studies of Farhady and Tavassoly (2021) and Nasr et al. (2018) and further revised for this study. The open-ended questions sought the participants' viewpoints on assessment before and during the pandemic, as well as their suggestions for improving e-assessment.

The checklist had four separate parts: the first part asked participants about their age, university, teaching experience at different levels (BA, MA, and PhD), and gender. In the second part, a summary of the research aims was given. In the third part, questions were asked about assessment methods prior to the pandemic period. In the last part, questions about assessment during the pandemic period were asked. The last two sections contained open-ended questions. The questionnaire was written in Google form, and the link was sent via e-mails to teachers in different cities. The data collection was carried out from April to June 2022.

3.4. Data Analysis Procedure

Thematic analysis was employed to identify the main patterns within the open-ended questions. The data were first transcribed and repeatedly reviewed in Persian to identify patterns and main themes. The frequent words and phrases were coded and analyzed on a semantic level to find and form the themes and sub-themes. The themes, sub-themes, and important quotes were translated into English for reporting the results. Two authors reviewed the extracted themes, and areas of disagreement and ambiguity were discussed until a full consensus was achieved.

4. Results

4.1. Assessment Procedures in the Pre-pandemic Period

4.1.1. Combination of Summative and Formative Assessment

Almost all the teachers stated that they used a combination of SA and FA methods for assessing students in MA and PhD courses before the pandemic. They stated that, due to face-to-face education and assessment prior to the pandemic, the combination of SA and FA was more effective in preparing postgraduate students for their thesis and dissertation. They also believed that when they used FA methods in their courses, students' participation

and motivation increased. Some teachers mentioned that because the nature of MA and Ph.D. courses is more practical than that of BA courses, it is not a good method to focus solely on the final exam and ignore class activities and projects. Some of the reasons that teachers stated for using a combination of SA and FA for their MA and PhD courses are as follow:

(7). M.BU: "*Despite the BA courses, the number of students in MA and Ph.D. courses was less, and assigning projects for each student was easier for me. Also because of the less population of classes of postgraduate courses, observing, evaluating, and giving feedback to students separately were easier and more effective.*"

(11). M.KhU: "*I always asked my postgraduate students to do research and give them projects to work on to prepare them for doing their thesis and dissertation.*"

4.1.2. Presentation as the Most Frequent Formative Assessment

Teachers who used FA stated that the most frequent FA method they used before the pandemic was the presentation (85%). And then came a term project. They said that they usually divided some parts of the course book and asked students to research it on the Internet, then present that part of the book with the gathered information to the class.

The teachers who said they used term projects explained that they gave students some general topics related to the materials. Then they asked students to choose among the topics and do research on that topic.

The third method that teachers frequently used was the midterm exam. They said that by having midterm exams, their students had less stress about the final exam. Other FA methods, such as observations (both scored and unscored), quizzes (both scored and unscored), and portfolios or anecdotal records, were not frequently used by teachers. Additionally, the results indicate that none of the participants utilised portfolios as an assessment method. Figure 1 illustrates the order of FA methods used, as stated by teachers, according to their frequency. Some of the reasons that teachers stated for using each FA method are as follows:

(2). M.TaU: "*I usually had the main source for my exams and another source that asked students to present it to class. By doing so, my students participated in class activities, and in my opinion, their learning was increased.*"

(4). M.TU: "*Term project is an activity which helps students to increase their ability for doing larger research. So, I always gave my students (my MA and PhD students) different projects during their courses to help them do research easily and also prepare them for writing their thesis in the next semesters*."

Fig 1.
Most frequent FA methods in the pre-pandemic period

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Presentation  >>  Term project  >>  Midterm exam  >>  Observation  >>  Quizzes
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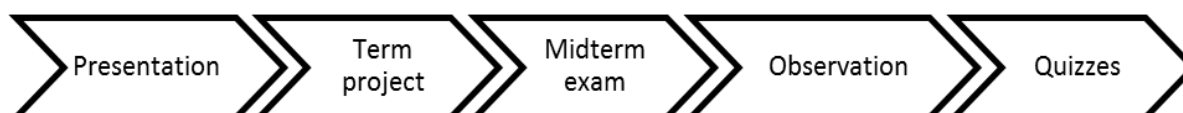
To answer the second research question and indicate what assessment methods were used for postgraduate TEFL students during the pandemic period, the following themes were uncovered:

4.2. Assessment Procedures as of the Pandemic

4.2.1. Combination of Summative and Formative Assessments

Almost all teachers agreed that a combination of FA and SA was the best method for postgraduate students. Most of their reasons were similar to the reasons they mentioned about using a combination of FA and SA in the previous part, but some reasons they mentioned were new, such as:

(10). F.UU: "*I preferred the combination of both methods because it made my students participate in the online class. Due to the difficulty of controlling students in the online systems, I couldn't be sure that students were present during the online session. So, I chose FA for assessing my students and told them that their class activities, participation in discussions, and doing projects were parts of their final score to force them to attend the class*."

(18). M.AUT: "*During the pandemic period, the assessment method changed from f-f-t to e-assessment. In final exams, as SA methods, students could cheat during the exam, which affected the validity and reliability of the scores, so I decided to use both FA and SA to decrease the effect of the final exam on the final score of students*."

### *4.2.2. Project as the Most Frequent Formative Assessment*

The majority of teachers (80%) stated that their feedback and assessment (FA) methods for assessing students during the pandemic period were the same as those in the pre-pandemic period, but their priorities had changed. They said that before the pandemic, they used presentations more than term projects. However, during the pandemic period, they decided not to require students to give presentations because some students lacked the proper tools for attending online sessions and might face technical issues during their presentations. So, the most frequent method used during the pandemic period was the term project, followed by a presentation. Figure 2 illustrates the most frequently used methods of FA by participants during the pandemic period. Some teachers explained their reasons that are as follows:

(15). F.AUT: "*I usually asked my students to have presentations in the class and evaluate each other's presentations. However, in the online classes, some students were unfamiliar with the technology and could not activate their microphones or present their PowerPoint files, which was time-consuming for the class. So, I decided to give students term projects, and if students themselves wanted to have a presentation, I allowed them to present some parts in class.*"

(18). F.GU: "*Some of my classes were held offline in which students could not have presentations so I gave them term projects instead.*"

Fig 2.

Most Frequent FA Methods (Sub-Themes) During the Pandemic Period
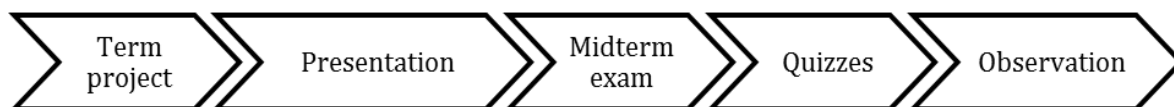
4.2.3. Final Exam as the Only E-Assessment Method

Nineteen teachers stated that their FA methods for assessing students remained unchanged, but the form of their SA (final exam) transitioned from face-to-face to online. For example, one teacher said that "*the only change was that the final exam was held online in the university systems designed for online education.*" ((3). F.YU)

4.2.4. Multiple-choice Questions Most Favored for Final Exams

About half of the teachers stated that they used multiple-choice questions for the final exam because the exam system offered auto-correction and auto-scoring options.

(1). M.HU: "*I designed questions in the form of multiple choice questions because correcting open-ended questions was difficult for me. Also, it saved my time with the help of machine correcting.*"

4.2.5. Short-answer and Open-ended as Alternative Questions for Final Exams

The other half of teachers believed that multiple-choice questions increased the possibility of cheating in online exams. They said that to prevent students from cheating during the online exam, they designed short-answer and open-ended questions for students and assessed the students' explanations and answers. One of the participants' explanations about using short answers and open-ended questions is as follows:

(16). F.AUT: "*Before the pandemic, because the exams were* face-to-face, *I usually used both multiple-choice and open-ended questions for my postgraduate students in addition to FA methods. After the outbreak of the pandemic, I still used FA methods but decided not to use multiple-choice questions because the possibility of cheating for such questions was more.*"

4.2.6. Formative Assessment more Limited but still prevalent

Among the participating teachers, approximately 29 teachers noted that the main difference between assessments before and during the pandemic was allocating more scores to FA methods, such as term projects, presentations, and class participation. For instance, two teachers' answers are stated below:

(10). M.AUK: "*Because some students faced problems regarding the system of online assessment or their answers were not submitted in the system, I decided to allocate more scores to the FA methods and students' activities during the course.*"

(5). F.TU: "*I allocate fewer scores to the final exam during the pandemic because there was no control and observation during the online exam, and in my opinion, the student's grades might lack validity.*"

Teachers' answers to the third question of the study regarding their ideas toward remote assessment during the pandemic period were divided into three main themes: 1)

potentials and positive points about assessment during the pandemic period, 2) the weakness of assessment during the pandemic period, 3) teachers' suggestions for improving e-assessment. Some sub-themes also follow each theme. More details about each theme are as follows:

4.3. Potentials of Assessment During the Pandemic Period

Almost all teachers mentioned that e-assessment during the pandemic had its own positive points. They believed that despite some problems with the e-assessment, there were still some positive points about it that made it useful. Some of these positive points were more frequent and shaped the sub-themes of this part, which are as follows:

4.3.1. Reduction of Teachers ' Workload

Many teachers reported that their workload was reduced because the multiple-choice exams included an autocorrect option in the system. The machine correction and scoring helped teachers save time because they no longer needed to manually mark their students' answers. Below are some teachers' ideas regarding this positive point:

(6). F.FU: "*Using e-assessment systems' different options such as autocorrect and question randomize helped me to save my time and focus more on assessing my students' class activities and giving them feedback.*"

(8). F.KhU: "*Designing multiple-choice exams in the e-assessment systems made the teachers' job easier in marking students' answers.*"

(6). F.FU: "*E-assessment during the pandemic period reduced many teachers' workload in marking short-answer and multiple-choice questions.*"

4.3.2. Opportunities for More Familiarity with New Technologies

Many teachers in their answers stated that during online education, they were somehow forced to learn by working with different platforms. For example, two participants' ideas are mentioned below:

(5). F.TU: "*Using technology in this period was useful because it prepared teachers and students for the future when technology has a greater role in education.*"

(20). M.AUT: "*Knowing new technologies for education and e-assessment is very useful.*"

4.3.3. Reduction of Students' Stress

Some teachers maintained that because there was no control over students during e-assessment, they didn't experience as much stress.

4.4. Challenges of Assessment During the Pandemic Period

All participants agreed that, although using e-assessment had its own advantages, as a new assessment method, it was not without certain weaknesses and challenges. The following sub-themes were the most recurrent weaknesses of assessment during the pandemic period:

4.4.1. Limited Monitoring of Students During the Exams

All the teachers stated that this problem with e-assessment was their main challenge during the pandemic. They believed that lack of control during online exams increased the possibility of cheating. The following quotations represent the teachers' ideas toward this problem:

(14). M.AUT: "*In my opinion, the main challenge was the lack of control over students during the classes and exams. For those courses which used SA methods such as final exams, the possibility of cheating and having high grades was so high.*"

(3). F.YU: "*I was not sure about the validity and reliability of the student's scores because I had no control over my students during the exam.*"

4.4.2. Internet Connection Problems During the Exams

The participants believed that, due to the low quality of the Internet connection in Iran, not only students but also teachers themselves experienced problems with e-assessment. Some of them also claimed that Internet connection problems posed too much mental pressure on students. Some teachers argued that some of their students were unable to submit their answers in the exam system and, therefore, lost their exam. Some teachers' experiences and ideas regarding this problem are mentioned below:

(8). F.KhU: "Many students and teachers faced problems with the system or Internet connection during the exam, which caused stress to the students and teachers."

(10). F.UU: "Lack of appropriate technological devices and qualified Internet connection posed many problems to teachers and students during the classes and online exams."

4.5. Teachers' Suggestions for Improving E-assessment

Teachers suggested techniques to improve assessment in online education. Some teachers suggested that integrating both face-to-face assessment and E-assessment is so useful. Another suggestion mentioned by many participants was to focus more on FA methods, especially for postgraduate courses. Some teachers also suggested using video cameras during e-assessments to have more control over students. Table 2 summarises the study's main findings.

Table 2

Assessments as of the Pandemic: Summary of the Results.

Characteristics	Benefits	Challenges	Suggestions
- Both summative and formative assessments	- Reduction of teachers ' workload	- Limited monitoring of students during the exams	- Integrating both face-to-face assessment and e-assessment
- Project as the most popular formative assessment	- More familiarity with new technologies	- Internet connection problems during the exams	- Focusing more on FA methods
- Final exam as the only e-assessment	- Reduction of students' stress		- Using video cams during e-assessments
- Multiple choice as the most favored test method			
- Short-answer and open-ended as the second-ranked test method			
- Formative assessment more limited but still prevalent			

5. Discussion

The present study investigated the assessment methods used by postgraduate TEFL students before and during the pandemic-related closures. It also investigated the perspectives of TEFL teachers toward assessment in postgraduate programs during the pandemic. The major results were as follows: (a) A combination of summative and formative assessments was used before and during the pandemic; (b) Although the use of formative assessment became limited during the pandemic, it was still prevalent; (c) While

presentation was the most popular formative assessment before the pandemic, it was replaced with projects afterwards; (d) Observation was the least applicable FA method in e-assessment; (e) Multiple-choice, short-answer, and open-ended questions were respectively the favored test methods in e-assessment. The major benefits of e-assessments were reducing teachers' workload and increasing familiarity with new technologies, whereas poor internet connections and a lack of monitoring over students' performance during exams were reported as the main challenges.

First, the results of the present study showed that education and assessment as a branch of it were affected by the pandemic. In the questionnaires, teachers acknowledged that after the pandemic, they had to reconsider their assessment mode. The use of e-assessment was promoted during the pandemic compared to the pre-pandemic period. This shift from face-to-face assessment was inevitable because, without it, teaching and assessment would have been impossible due to the international and national closures of educational centres. The above-mentioned results, in the context of the postgraduate TEFL program, confirm previous studies (e.g., Prapraite & Anderiouseviciene, 2021) and align with changes in many other educational programs worldwide.

One of the objectives of the present study was to identify assessment methods used by postgraduate TEFL students during the pandemic period and compare them with those used in the pre-pandemic period. The results showed that almost all the teachers used a combination of SA and FA as their method of assessment before and during the pandemic. It can be suggested that the general methods of assessment did not change; however, according to the self-reports, the amount of use of each method in the final grading of postgraduate students varied. Some teachers preferred to allocate more grades to students' class activities and projects as formative assessment (FA) methods. They believed that because the nature of postgraduate courses is more practical, focusing more on FA was more reasonable. These results align with the ideas presented in the work by Dolin et al. (2017), which suggest that a sole focus on SA is not reasonable and that a combination of methods is a more effective approach.

Another result of the current study is that teachers employed different types or methods of FA in their classes. Before the pandemic, the most frequent FA method was the presentation in face-to-face classes, while during the pandemic period, they decided to use term projects more often than presentations. One of the reasons teachers presented for their

decision was that in online classes, students might not have the necessary equipment to participate in online presentations. For example, they might not be in a quiet location or have a reliable internet connection. All these problems might waste the class's time and bore the students. So, teachers preferred to assign term projects for students. These teachers believed that term projects were easier to handle during online education. Presentation cannot be done in offline classes, but term projects are among the few FA methods that can be completed in both online and offline classes. Observation (whether scored or not) of students during the course is another method of formative assessment (FA). The results show that some teachers used this method more frequently before the pandemic than during the pandemic. Monitoring and observing students online was difficult. They stated that many students did not attend online classes which made the observation very hard. So, they decided not to use observation as their main method of FA. The above-mentioned results indicate that during the pandemic, a change occurred in the assessment and evaluation of students. This change in method was due to factors such as a lack of knowledge about new technologies, the absence of suitable technological instruments, or non-conducive environments for students at home. These problems align with the issues identified in the work of Prokhrel and Chhetri (2021).

Another objective of this study was to seek teachers' perspectives on e-assessment. It was indicated that assessment during the pandemic had both advantages and disadvantages. Some assessment methods reduced their workload during the pandemic. They said that multiple-choice exams had an option that automatically marked the students' answers. This option is approved in the work of Stodberg (2012).

Another positive point they asserted was that using different platforms for both teaching and assessing students helped teachers and students to learn more about new technologies in the field of education. During the pandemic, many teachers who had not previously integrated technology into their classes were forced to use these technologies. One of the participants argued that learning new technologies increased teachers' innovations in teaching, material development, and assessment alternatives.

Some teachers claimed that e-assessment decreased their students' stress compared to face-to-face exams; however, this claim was not supported by other researchers. For instance, Appiah and Tonder (2018) stated that e-assessment, due to the cost of internet

access, may put extra pressure on students. Additionally, Hewson (2012) believed that e-assessment appears to be a source of stress for examinees due to the challenges it presents.

Some teachers believed that the pandemic increased the potential of using FA. Teachers were supposed to assess students throughout the course rather than relying solely on a final exam. This finding aligns with research that emphasises the importance of combining other methods, such as FA, with SA for assessing students. Many teachers found SA insufficient for truly assessing students and thus used FA in combination with SA. Moreover, according to the teachers, the possibility of cheating was high in the final exam (SA) due to the lack of teacher monitoring and observation. The participants proposed two solutions: a greater focus on FA and the use of webcams. Rogers (2006) and Crisp (2012) share the same idea regarding e-assessment, stating that the main weakness of e-assessment relates to the lack of monitoring and the possibility of cheating. Thus, the data showed a preference for FA over SA, which is in agreement with other studies, such as those by Lau (2016) and Dolin et al. (2017).

Many participants also reported experiencing internet connection problems during the exams. Low quality of the Internet connection imposed too much stress and pressure on both teachers and students. Some students' responses were lost or not submitted due to internet disconnection. This problem led some teachers to assign an alternative exam for students who encountered difficulties during the original exam or administer it on an alternative platform. This weakness is mentioned in several articles, including those by Monster et al. (2021), Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), and Appiah and Tonder (2018).

6. Conclusion

Two main groups can benefit from the findings of this study: teachers and educational institutions. Teachers can get familiar with the strategies and methods other teachers use for assessing learners in e-assessment. They can utilise the experiences and suggestions of the participants in this study to select the most effective method for assessing learners. Applying more than one assessment method in classes seems to be more helpful. Teachers are recommended to use more than one method for assessing their learners and choose different types of assessment according to the condition of their classes.

Educational centres can also enhance their e-assessment systems to mitigate the challenges and problems associated with e-assessment by considering the positive and

negative points highlighted in this study. One line of research for future study could be to explore the perspectives of postgraduate TEFL students toward e-assessment alongside those of teachers. This study only investigated the effect of e-assessment in postgraduate TEFL programs. One possible line of research for further study could be examining the impact of the pandemic on language courses in schools, institutes, and universities.

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