

# Challenges and Solutions of Online Language Teaching and Assessment During Covid-19

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## Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic which began in March 2020 can be construed as the biggest change of the century, in terms of the adjustments in quality of life, economic, social, and education factors. The biggest change was seen in terms of interaction due to the lockdown, where physical interaction is no longer allowed during the early phase of the pandemic. Subsequently, all educational sectors were forced to close, and remote or online learning was the new norm. The sudden change affected all teachers and instructors from around the world, but this study is particularly interesting to know the effect towards language instructors in their online teaching and assessments. In particular, this study aims to investigate the challenges faced by language instructors during online learning and assessment amid the Covid-19 pandemic, and to provide recommendations for remote or online learning if faced by future crises. This study employs a qualitative method approach through focus group interviews. The focus group interviews were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings demonstrate that the main challenges in online teaching include technological issues, creativity, interactions, class duration, inaccessibility issues and student emotional support, whereas the challenges in conducting online assessments are in terms of the different evaluation platforms, the issue of plagiarism and authenticity, marking or grading online assessments and assessing non-verbal cues.

**Keywords:** online learning, language classroom, language assessment, language instructors, Covid-19

## 1. Introduction

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic recently has impacted every aspect of life globally, not just economically but also in the education sector. Universities are crucially burdened in terms of Teaching and Learning where both instructors and students have to opt for remote teaching and learning in a matter of days. Due to this reason, both instructors and students face difficulties and challenges regarding the shift of instructors' face-to-face teaching methods to online and the students' readiness to adapt to online lessons. This is further validated by UNESCO (2020), which announced that a total of 1,576,021,818 learners from 188 countries from all levels of learning were affected as of April 6, 2020.

All of the fundamentals of teaching and learning from schools to higher education have been greatly modified by online education. By shifting their teaching mode, present instructors face greater challenges. They must now adjust to new teaching styles, while at the same time develop strategies to keep the students involved for the entire lesson. Sustaining the students' enthusiasm and getting them engaged in each online interaction would also be a challenge beyond the novelty period of having online classes (News Straits Times [NST], 2020).

With the rapid growth of technology, a significant number of academic staff is also experiencing technological competency as well as reconstructing their teaching materials and assessments to suit remote teaching. Kumi-Yeboah (2018) notes that instructors must take into account the teaching methods that meet the needs of different students and promote intercultural interactions. Furthermore, the barriers with students in rural areas also contribute to the issue. Wong (2020) states lecturers have made several initiatives by extending students' submission dates due to the internet problem.

At universities, a complete transition to e-learning may not go as smoothly as planned. Although university students may have already practised online learning in some parts of their lessons, it does not encompass the whole teaching and learning structure. One area of focus that deserves special attention is the challenges faced by instructors in conducting students' assessments. Pertinent to this, a study by Rahim (2020) concludes there are at least 9 online assessment guidelines to be observed in the remote teaching of health professions education, namely (1) evaluate prerequisites for implementing online assessment, (2) ensure alignment of assessment activities with stated learning objectives, (3) address the diversity of students' situations, (4) maintain a good balance of formative and summative assessments, (5) stimulate student learning with online assessment, (6) consider format, (7) scheduling and timing of tests, (8) establish clear communication to students regarding assessment matters and (9) ensure high-quality feedback and address assessment validity threats. He believes that the guidelines will help the faculty in constructing online assessments.

Since language learning cannot be compared to other subjects due to its unique nature, it is critical to identify the difficulties and barriers that pertain to language acquisition. Language acquisition, by default, concerns an ideal classroom teaching environment, teaching materials, and teaching methods (Yildiz, 2020). The above-mentioned issues certainly pose a need for research to be done to understand the real

challenges faced by language instructors through online teaching and learning. Thus, this research aims to embark on the following research objectives: i) To investigate the challenges faced by language instructors during online learning amid the covid-19 pandemic, ii) To investigate the challenges faced by language instructors during online assessment amid the covid-19 pandemic, and iii) To make recommendations on the online learning and assessments for language instructors in Universiti Utara Malaysia.

## 2. Literature Review

Emerging technologies allow educators to “foster interaction and collaboration among learners” in online learning environments (Beldarrain, 2006, p. 140). Furthermore, technologies allow educators to personalise and humanise e-Learning by including rich media components in online courses that endeavour to engage students in active, meaningful learning (Lee et al., 2004).

However, the reality is that, when it comes to online teaching and learning, the majority of Malaysia's private and public universities are underprepared (The Star, 2020). In addition, there are very few studies that seek to investigate the impact of Covid-19 on the educational system (Bao, 2020; Sintema, 2020; Yan, 2020). Students are facing difficulties while experiencing online learning and assessments. Allam et al. (2020) reported that students' learning environments were not conducive, technical destruction, lack of interaction and understanding led to poor performance in doing their assessments. Adnan and Anwar (2020) found that most of the students were having trouble with poor internet connections, and it made them feel less motivated to learn online as they did not meet their instructors face-to-face. According to Zou et al. (2021), despite students' high level of technological readiness, technical difficulties during online classes were what bothered them the most.

Instructors are also struggling with conducting online classes and assessments. Fang et al. (2021) analysed how to navigate online platforms. Firstly, their rubrics for assessments are not appropriate to conduct online. Secondly, students are not on time and do not know much about the ethics of online learning or assessments. Thirdly, instructors are not computer literate. According to Bao (2020), teachers are not adequately trained or knowledgeable about how to use online learning environments. In order to facilitate effective teaching and learning, he also emphasised the importance of teachers fully comprehending the course's objective and knowledge framework prior to conducting classes. This can be supported by Nimavat et. al (2021), they mentioned that online classes necessarily require teachers to improve their skills in three areas: teaching methods, technology, and information literacy. Among the difficulties teachers are facing, lack of technological expertise, infrastructure, and poor time management.

Moreover, certain courses need step-by-step guidelines, which are more effective when conducted face-to-face. Research by Kearns (2012) found that teachers were worried about whether or not their students could understand their lessons. This was because, in a face-to-face class, teachers could see right away if their students were having trouble. Another concern was the amount of time needed to provide feedback online. The instructors had to spend more time entering comments for essays or paperwork rather than just writing comments on the paper margin. This process was more tedious compared to hard-copy assignments. In addition, if the assessments were not graded, students would not participate. Finally, if students were unaware or missed out on information, instructors were required to repeatedly answer the same questions.

The widespread use of online learning will certainly bring forth several alternative platforms for online learning (Plaisance, 2018). Online language learning may point to various learning adjustments, such as hybrid or blended learning, full virtual or online learning. The online language learning in school settings during the COVID-19 pandemic is done fully online as both students and instructors are not able to gather face-to-face as in the classroom setting (Blake, 2011). Consequently, the correct content and assessments are essential for online language learning, as they must be able to evaluate all communicative skills, including speaking, reading, listening, and writing.

A survey and interview were conducted by Zou et al. (2021) to English instructors and students from various universities in Wuhan regarding the instructors' and students' readiness and challenges when experiencing online teaching and learning during the pandemic. The majority of respondents indicated that they utilised a variety of technological resources to ensure the smooth operation of their classes. In terms of assessments, they found out that one of the universities needed to postpone one assessment and change their assessments to adapt in the pandemic situation. However, the majority of respondents are willing to continue studying and teaching online after the pandemic if their universities eliminate technical barriers and assess their readiness prior to the beginning of each course. Moreover, universities should provide language instructors with adequate pedagogical training, as they must pay close attention to students' engagement and interaction.

Heng and Sol (2021) add to this by stating that online learning is entirely dependent on technology: gadgets and the internet. If both teachers and students lack digital skills because they do not have enough experience or training, the whole process of teaching and learning online will be at risk. Adedoyin and Soykan (2020) also stated that since the COVID-19 pandemic, the total reliance on technology in the learning process has made it difficult for both instructors and learners, particularly in assessment and supervision. Instructors have limited proxy monitoring of their students when exams are given online, making it challenging to control the problem of cheating (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014).

In this regard, the current study seeks to identify the difficulties encountered by language instructors at Universiti Utara Malaysia in conducting online assessments during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to propose the best solutions or guidelines to the problems. The data of the study will be gathered from focus group interviews and qualitatively analysed using thematic analysis as the research framework.

## Research Questions

This research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges faced by language instructors during online learning amid the covid-19 pandemic?
2. What are the challenges faced by language instructors during online assessments amid the covid-19 pandemic?

### 3. Method

#### 3.1 Key Informants

The respondents of the study were chosen based on purposive sampling, which consisted of six (6) language instructors teaching the English, Mandarin, French and Japanese language, from the School of Languages, Civilisation and Philosophy, Universiti Utara Malaysia. Since the main concern was to understand the challenges of online learning and assessment in a language classroom, the selection of participants was based on these criteria: All participants should be language instructors who teach a second or foreign language. They should also teach the language courses through online platforms such as Webex, Google Meet, Zoom, etc. In addition, the participants should also conduct all assessments using online tools such as Quizizz, Kahoot, etc. The six respondents in this study participated voluntarily. Although sample size considerations were initially focused on achieving the saturation point, the number of respondents was ultimately based on voluntary considerations or participants' willingness to be a part of this study.

#### 3.2 Informed Consents

All respondents were asked to participate voluntarily and were free to withdraw at any time during the study. All participants were also made aware of the research purpose and had full control over how much information from the findings could be accessible to the public. All participants in this study agreed to participate voluntarily and signed the consent form provided by the researcher.

#### 3.3 Procedures for Analysing Data

The qualitative data collected from the focus group interview were analysed to understand the actual situation from the participants' perspectives. The data analysis procedure focuses on identifying major themes and patterns (VanManen, 1997) in the transcribed interviews. In order to do this, all transcribed interview data will be uploaded to Atlas.ti, which is a computer assisted qualitative data analysis tool. The themes discovered will be further analysed through open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). To ensure objectivity in the data analysis process, the researchers use member checking by taking the final report back to participants to determine its accuracy (Creswell, 2009), which ensures that the interpretations were done accurately.

### 4. Results

The results of the focus group interviews revealed several difficulties that the language instructors encountered during three semesters of fully online learning. It was found that the transition from face-to-face to virtual classroom was both interesting and challenging; where online learning creates a more fun environment but at the same time it is not easy to administer, especially by those who are not technologically advanced. Based on the data, two themes were discovered, which specifically discuss the obstacles in terms of online teaching and online assessments:

#### 4.1 Challenges of Online Teaching

The focus interview revealed that online learning requires adaptation to new pedagogical concepts and delivery as it is a new normal for language instructors to conduct lessons online. It can be concluded that all the language instructors concur that the challenges of online teaching can be listed as follows in descending order from the most problematic to the least problematic issue during online learning: i) technological issues, ii) creativity, iii) interactions, iv) class duration, v) inaccessibility issues and vi) student emotional support.

##### 4.1.1 Technological Issues

Firstly, it is not surprising that the technological issues of online learning were the main challenges among language instructors. Teaching a language subject requires a conducive environment with appropriate tools and suitable materials. During the focus group interview, the main issues that were brought up were the platform and infrastructure of online learning. They iterated that there were "too many apps" to choose from, which multiplied each day, and with the time constraints, it was very difficult to keep up with the latest and advanced apps and tools that could be used in the classroom.

It was also debated that these challenges arose as online learning transpired overnight. Miss A explained, "we were forced into this new territory. It was not a transition...we were suddenly forced into it". Having no experience in fully online classes, language instructors found it difficult to "adapt to online delivery" and choose appropriate "digital tools" which are suitable in the language classroom (Miss S).

Due to the abundance of digital tools available, language instructors were forced to try out and experiment with a variety of apps in teaching and conducting assessments in their class in very little time. The instructors explained:

"There are just too many apps we can choose from, such as Nearpod, Flipgrid, Edmodo, Quizlet, Kahoot... and so many more" (Miss Y).

"Suddenly, we are asked to make our classes more interesting using all these methods we have never heard of before, sometimes it is just trial and error" (Miss S).

Aside from that, one of the English language instructors mentioned that it was his responsibility as a course leader to develop the Moodle (Modular Object-oriented Dynamic Learning Environment) for that specific course, and it was the most difficult challenge he faced that semester. He explained, "Technically, the setting is extremely complicated...I feel that it (Moodle) should be exposed to other language

teachers, not only the CL (Course Leader), or assistant CL, but all language instructors should know about it” (Mr. H).

Another language instructor also agreed that it was crucial that all instructors who were teaching online should be familiar with Moodle, as it resembles “food for us, we need to know the ins and outs of the online learning system, or else it would be very hard for us to carry out and upload materials in the OL (Online Learning)” (Miss S).

With all the new platforms and programs, language instructors should be properly trained on how to use digital tools for online instruction and assessment, as well as receive proper guidance on how to create online learning environments that are conducive to language learning.

On the contrary, Mr. H found that after three or four semesters of teaching, there had not been any proper training that all language instructors should have received. He elaborated, “Whether the school wants to or not, there should be proper training, especially at our school which caters to other language, there’s English language and other foreign languages, so there should be proper training for us to master, and once we have been trained, we will know how to accommodate our instructors and also the students.”

Miss S echoed that “teacher training in remote instruction” is very important. And this is agreed by Miss A, who indicated that “speaking from the English unit, because we have so many (instructors) under us, we need to have a standardised version, which is why we need training. The requirements for English are quite different from the foreign language.-So, that’s why we need that kind of training”.

Miss Y suggested that language instructors should have workshops to learn how to use more creative tools like Kahoot, Nearpod, and Quizlet. “At the very least, we can learn and use it in the online class so that students do not get bored listening to us talk for an hour and fifteen minutes. They can get very sleepy if they really do not understand, especially in foreign languages. If the students do not understand from the beginning, they will not understand what you are saying later. Therefore, we can use games to capture their attention during our online class. At least they will not be afraid of the topic. Therefore, the instructor must first be familiar with these applications or tools”.

#### 4.1.2 Creativity

Aside from technological issues, most language instructors believe that creativity is a crucial element in fostering a more conducive learning environment. However, it is not an easy feat. They expressed that:

“Students are sitting too long; we need to find a way to motivate our students” (Miss S).

“Language instructors have to be creative, since there are many platforms that can be used” (Mr. F).

However, there should be precautions for using different apps and tools in the classroom. The instructors advised:

“We need to choose one, then master that platform. It does not mean that we have to take all of them to be included in our class, we can just choose one and from there we can adapt to make it appropriate” (Mr. F).

“We cannot be too greedy. We want to learn so many methods, but in the end, we do not even use it, so I think that instructors should know what their students are like and what is suitable for them. This means that every instructor is different, and their students are different” (Miss Z).

Aside from digital skills and tools, language instructors must also consider creativity in terms of course content that is appropriate for online teaching and learning. Miss S elaborated, “In terms of resources, we have to change the syllabus...because the syllabus we are teaching right now does not tally with the online teaching and learning perspectives.”

Miss A proposed a curriculum review, as “the problem when we move to online is that each course becomes like an isolated course. That’s why we need to do this curriculum review again, so that we can understand that the changes have to be standardised, we have to understand the aspiration of the course again”.

#### 4.1.3 Interactions

Another challenge of online teaching is the interactions between instructors and students, as well as among the students themselves. All the instructors felt that in a language classroom, interactions online could be very limited. Miss S shared that sometimes “my students, they just log in, but they are not there”. This sentiment was elaborated by Miss A as follows:

“In terms of interactions with students, especially if the course is a higher-level course, when it is not about you talking, especially in a language class, it requires two-way interactions...It is important for me to see the students' body language and facial expressions, so I know they understand, but they don’t want to open their video. Another thing is that they do not want to interact, but in a language class, it is not just me giving input, I need to hear input too”.

Miss A also suggested that to lower students' shyness and anxiety, instructors should “create a relaxed environment in which they feel comfortable talking in... You must think on your feet in order to engage them, and that’s not an easy thing to do”. She also finds it difficult to provide feedback online. where “for a class with 30 students, providing feedback is really a struggle. But feedback in language, in assessment, is important to provide, so this is something we should review”.

#### 4.1.4 Class Duration

From the focus group interview, the instructors shared that one of the challenges is in relation to the class duration. As compared to face-to-face platforms, it is no longer suitable to have a long duration of class. They iterated:

“I think that the upper management should give us more freedom. The syllabus does not have to be too strict since we

are no longer face-to-face. Also, with the teaching hours, we can't continue with 1 hour and 20-minute classes. The university should give us freedom because we are the ones teaching. We know when it is too long, we become tired, and students don't get anything. At least give us freedom to conduct class at any time, with agreement from both sides, not only during class time as provided in the timetable" (Miss Z).

"When I attended a webinar for online teaching, it should be only 15 - 30 minutes, (which) is supposed to be the most effective way to teach online, especially for language learning" (Mr. H).

With longer class times, both students and the instructors would also face inaccessibility issues. Although the connection issues are uncontrollable, they have an impact on the class flow, as explained below:

"I see the challenges are in terms of the connection. Better facility *lah*, the provider, the government should provide better facilities, such as more transmitter substations. As we see on the TV, students must make a hut in the middle of the forest to get a better connection" (Mr. F).

"In terms of the deficiency, their phone data may be insufficient at times to join Webex." This can be a problem. How can you justify it if your students do not have a good connection? So, I must accommodate my time to be flexible, and he or she (student) needs to sacrifice as well" (Mr. H).

#### 4.1.5 Emotional Support

Finally, the challenges in online teaching are in terms of providing students' emotional support. Miss S explained, "we need to support students' social and emotional learning...they do not have emotional support like in face-to-face class".

Miss Z agreed that it is one of the challenges for the students, "we are no longer face-to-face, there are a lot of things that we do not know about our students, and we cannot tackle their problems."

Although online teaching has its challenges, some of the language instructors found that it is a new approach that should be embraced. Mr. F described online learning as "interesting", he mentioned that "previously, classes were conducted face-to-face, and we didn't expect that OL would be the new normal. There are many tools, and a lot of things we can explore for teaching. Even students are more creative in using these tools".

#### 4.2 Challenges of Online Assessments

Aside from the challenges of teaching online, the language instructors shared that conducting assessments online is just as challenging, or perhaps more daunting. These challenges come in the form of the different evaluation platforms, the issue of plagiarism and authenticity, marking or grading online assessments and assessing non-verbal cues.

##### 4.2.1 Different Evaluation Platforms

Like teaching, conducting assessments online can be done on numerous platforms, such as Socrative, Google Form, Mentimeter, and Kahoot. However, without proper training, it will become very problematic to apply in the classroom. Miss A explained that "everybody (lecturers and language instructors) is expected to move towards online assessments. But did we get any instructions on how to design and develop? No. You know, you ask all to jump into it without giving proper training...If you do not provide the necessary training to our teachers, they cannot prepare or develop tests that are suitable in terms of the construct and how to develop this type of test."

With all these new technologies, Mr. F rationalised that "if we are not good at using technology, it will boomerang and cause problems for us in the future". Therefore, it is essential to have a fundamental understanding of the various online assessment tools, particularly in language learning.

Miss Y added that the transition from face-to-face to online assessments comes with several hardships. She clarified, "when we are developing the assessment, we must adjust the question format from face-to-face to online. For instance, a Google form cannot have so many types (of questions), it can have short answers and ABC (objective questions). So that has limited our ways of asking questions. That is the challenge".

Additionally, the instructors found that when it comes to the assessment platforms, it is very important to have good supporting infrastructure and facilities. Miss S believed that perhaps it is related to the IT department, "sometimes students face problems in terms of uploading their assignments, there is a problem when they carry out the OL (online learning) assessment, suddenly the system is lifted or rejected". She suggested an improvement to the system, "because when we conduct OL, we need to make sure that everything is in proper order, especially UUM OL. If we conduct exams and too many people are on the platform at the same time, there will be students that are left out, and we will receive so many unwanted messages during the test".

##### 4.2.2 Plagiarism and Authenticity

The second challenge in terms of assessments is the issue of plagiarism and authenticity. All the instructors agreed that dealing with plagiarism or cheating during quizzes or exams is a difficult problem to solve. Mr. F explained, "we can see copying happening during online (classes), the students do more copying than doing the assessments themselves. For example, during a French language quiz, which is done online, we can see the amount of time it takes them to answer. If the quiz is 30 minutes, and they finish in 27 minutes, then we can see that they did it by themselves, but if they are copying or cheating, they only did it in 5 minutes? So, there must be something wrong there".

Regarding the issue of copying or cheating, Miss Y shared that it was surprising and that “we (the language instructors) did not expect that students would come up with many different ideas to cheat.” She explained:

“For instance, during oral tests, we would ask students to open their cameras, but the students would read their notes from the screen. So, the next semester, we asked the students to share their screens, so they were not reading from the screen, but the students would paste notes on the front of their laptops. Then, the following semester, we would ask students not to read from the notes, but then they would wear earphones so that they could get the answer from their friends. Those are some of the ways the students would find to cheat during oral tests.”

Similarly, Mr. F also shared the same experience during oral tests, he disclosed, “during oral assessments, we can see that they are reading notes, they are reading slides. Before this I have never asked them to open their video (camera), but now when they open their video (camera)...we only see their face, so we do not know what they have on their lap, on the table, what they open during the assessment, and so on”.

However, during the focus group interview, the instructors also shared that cheating also happens during online quizzes, as Miss Y shared:

“For quizzes, we would do one on online learning and one in Google form. So, sometimes the students might finish a quiz with 30 questions in 3 minutes, which logically is not possible. Then, we would add more questions to the question bank, so it randomly picks the questions. At least all the students might get different questions, but this also has some fallback, because if we want to check which questions students cannot handle, understand, that part is difficult for us to find, since there are so many questions in the question bank. Previously, we tried to ask students to answer 30 questions in 20 minutes for the Google form, so they had less than a minute to answer one question. Actually, they can answer if they know the answer because it is only one sentence long, the answer is ABC (objective), and we don't want them to look at books or notes. But then we would hear students complain about how difficult the Mandarin test is, so we changed it so that students could answer 30 questions in 30 minutes, or 1 question per minute. Students who can answer, however, can complete the test in ten minutes, giving them sufficient time to assist students who are not as proficient, thereby preventing us from catching them.”

It is quite different in the Japanese language classroom, where most assessments are done using characters. Therefore, it is easier for students to cheat using laptops or computers. Miss Z said, “the problem with assessing writing is that the students use computers, so we don't know if they're copying or not, or if they know how to use the characters they've been taught (or not)”.

In terms of language assessments, which involve characters, Miss Z proposed that all submissions should be written by hand (not typed). She clarified, “all answers must be in handwriting, but there is one thing, if in handwriting, students still need to snap, screenshot, and send, so the problem is to check one by one, whereas in Google form straight away you get all the data”.

Another issue that was brought up regarding plagiarism is the unavailability of a software such as Turnitin to check the amount of plagiarism in students' work in other languages. Miss Z explained, “when we reach level three, where the students need to write long, long essays, it would be easier with Turnitin, because sometimes they (the students) just copy from wherever...”.

In terms of authenticity, most language instructors discovered that assessing students' actual proficiency through online assessments is difficult. Miss S found it particularly challenging to evaluate the authenticity of students' work, she explained:

“For my class in EPC (English Professional Communication), we have a project report. Sometimes students can copy paste from someone else...So we do not know the originality of their work. Because when we come to the presentation, you can see whether these students really do the work or not because when you ask them ‘what does this mean? They don't know, so we can catch them there”.

Authenticity is also difficult to access during assessment, as Miss S elaborated:

“During an interview assessment, students will be given time to prepare. They will have enough time to Google at that point, and if you compare their answers to the answers provided by Google, you will find that they are identical. If we do it in person, the students might not get the same grades as when they did it online because they won't have access to the content. This will have an impact on the assessment because it doesn't actually demonstrate the students' language proficiency.”

The other instructors agreed that authenticity problems are a common problem when assessing students online. They commented that students were found to communicate with friends and share answers during tests or exams (Mr. F, Miss Y, Mr. H and Miss Z), they copied and pasted information from textbooks and the internet (Miss S, Mr. H and Mr. F) and they identified students who were more proficient in the language to do all the work in group assignments, while the others were free-riding (Miss S and Miss A). These are troubling issues that should be investigated, as the assessments do not reflect students' true ability in language proficiency, whether in English, French, Mandarin, or Japanese.

#### 4.2.3 Marking or Grading Online Assessments

Aside from ensuring the authenticity of students' work during assessment, another challenge for instructors is marking tests, quizzes, or exams, particularly in large classes of 30 to 40 students. It is very difficult to do the marking online, and it is also considered tedious to print all assessments to be graded. Mr. F explained, “it is very difficult to mark students' work, especially those in the form of essays. It is very tedious to mark the papers when we do not have a digital pen”. As a result, it is necessary to consider how to resolve this issue without

increasing the cost of online learning. As we know, a large sum of money must be spent on online learning, which requires a good internet connection, a laptop with a built-in webcam, and excellent audio quality, some even fork out for lighting accessories to have better lighting for online classes. It is also common to have more than one laptop or a tablet as it makes classroom management easier using more than one equipment. All the extra equipment and technologies, however, are at the expense of the instructors themselves.

#### 4.2.4 Assessing Non-verbal Cues

Lastly, the challenges of online assessment can take the form of language testing, such as the question of how to evaluate nonverbal communication and how to evaluate students with high or low proficiency levels. Miss A stated:

“When we talk about language, it is more than just verbal. There are other things, like non-verbal, that we have trouble with when we move up to a higher level. A lot is being said about lower levels of proficiency, but it is a different challenge for higher levels of proficiency. For instance, in terms of group discussion, group interaction, it is difficult to do this online. I have tried Webex, I have tried breakout rooms, but the problem with the breakout rooms is that you cannot monitor all the breakout rooms, so if you are not in that particular room, then you do not know what they are really discussing.”

Therefore, more research is required to comprehend how online assessments can be improved in a language classroom, particularly in evaluating students with varying levels of proficiency.

### 5. Discussions

The aim of this study was to address the two main research questions, which aimed to discover the challenges of online teaching and online assessment among language instructors, which will be used to propose several recommendations on how to curb these challenges and embrace online language teaching and learning.

The findings of the focus group interview revealed that language instructors face a number of challenges when teaching online. The most problematic was in terms of technological issues, as most of the instructors are not accustomed to using technology during their lessons. There were a large number of apps and tools that were available, but it was not the norm to use these apps during face-to-face lessons. Thus, the instructors were forced to learn each of the different apps, such as Flipgrid, Mentimeter, Padlet, Nearpod and many more. Nevertheless, not all the apps are appropriate to use when teaching language skills. Therefore, it was advised that proper training should be provided to all language instructors to standardise the method in teaching, especially in exposing instructors to the best apps or tools to be used in teaching the different language skills, such as speaking, reading, listening, and writing. Additionally, each instructor should also be able to choose which platform/apps/tools that are the most appropriate to be used in their class, as certain apps or tools may not be appropriate for students of varying proficiency.

In terms of classroom creativity, instructors are advised to concentrate on one or two technological tools only, as this will allow the instructor to learn the tools thoroughly and adapt them as best as possible into their lesson. Instructors should not be too greedy and use too many apps/tools, which may hinder the learning process. This finding is in line with Nimavat et al. (2021). They stated that online classes necessitate teachers' improvement in three areas: teaching methods, technology, and information literacy.

Another issue that was brought up was the interaction during class, as it is very difficult to promote interaction among low proficiency students in an online setting. It was advised that instructors should be familiar with current topics that students enjoy discussing and be more active in encouraging student participation. It is much easier to simply give a lecture during class, but it takes a really good teacher or instructor to make students want to participate in the lesson. Thus, instructors should encourage interaction in the classroom. Interaction between the instructor and the students is also very important as it creates a sense of connectedness. Increased learning, motivation, and achievement among online students are some of the advantages of ensuring proper instructor-learner engagement (Dennen et al., 2007, LaBarbera, 2013; Wlodkowski, 2010). In extension to this, it is also suggested that class lectures be limited to a maximum of 30 minutes, and the rest of the lesson should include activities that can be done during or outside class time. This suggestion may also reduce the problem the students have with inaccessibility issues, as they are able to conduct the activities when they have stable internet connections.

Finally, when conducting online lessons, it can be very impersonal and students may feel disconnected, which is why it is very important that instructors provide them with sufficient emotional support. Although we are connecting with students through technological apparatus, we are still dealing with human beings. A study on students' psychological impact of online learning found that although students found online learning to be acceptable at first, its long-term effect is inevitable, where they are troubled by boredom, financial anxiety, and emotional disturbances (Irawan et al., 2020). Thus, it is highly advised that instructors be more empathetic towards the students and be more considerate towards their needs.

The focus group interview also uncovers several challenges in terms of online assessments. At the beginning of the transition period from face-to-face to online assessments, it was very difficult for the instructors to develop the tests and quizzes, as there were many assessment platforms to choose from, such as Kahoot, Google Forms, Socrative, etc. In addition, the questions must also be adjusted to suit online assessment as it is incompatible to face-to-face assessments. As Jackson (2017) argues, developing online course materials can be difficult, despite major technological developments in online education platforms. Salamon et al. (2016) agree that determining the best technology to create online course materials for a variety of disciplines can be very challenging. Since the needs for digital resources can range greatly between fields. Thus, it is advisable that the language instructors are exposed to suitable online evaluation platforms and proper techniques

in producing questions that are suitable to be conducted online through workshops or training courses.

Furthermore, the findings also demonstrated that a major issue of plagiarism and authenticity was one of the main challenges during online assessments. All the instructors found that the number of students cheating, and copying had increased tremendously when conducted online, students were more prone to plagiarise others' work, as well as using notes when delivering oral speeches during speaking assessments. Online tests are also very problematic for language subjects which use characters such as Japanese or Korean, as it is easier to copy online than having the test in a physical classroom. A study by Šprajc et al., (2017) concur that the main reason which motivated the students to cheat is due to the ease in finding material to copy, as well as pressure to complete on time. Apart from that, students also cheat due to their fear of failure (Sheard & Dick, 2012; Sheard et al., 2003). In terms of authenticity, the instructors found that it was very challenging to evaluate students' actual capabilities and proficiency during online assessments. This stems from the fact that the students cannot be monitored during the tests or quizzes, where they may obtain assistance from friends or even family members. Therefore, it is encouraged that online assessments should be done in real-time. In other words, the students must complete the speaking, reading, listening, writing assessment instantaneously. For instance, if students were given some time to provide their answers, most likely than not, they will google the answers or get help from friends. Therefore, to avoid this predicament, all assessments should be conducted in real-time to allow students to provide answers spontaneously, where they will not be able to practice or cheat during the assessments. It is also advisable that instructors conduct assessments that evaluate students' understanding rather than memorising, which can help reduce dishonesty during tests, quizzes, and exams.

Finally, when conducting online assessments, it is very challenging to evaluate group discussions or interactions, especially among students of different proficiency levels. In addition, when evaluating communication skills online, it is also difficult to assess non-verbal cues, as it includes more than body language and facial expressions. The distinctions between an online and a face-to-face talk are relatively clear, for instance, Blum (2020) explains that during face-to-face interactions, participants may notice when a speaker is getting ready to speak as they have an intake of air that shows preparedness to speak. However, this is complicated to ascertain during online platforms. Therefore, more research is needed on the characteristics of online group discussions, to help inform the appropriate materials needed in developing student's verbal and non-verbal communication through online settings.

Based on the challenges posed, it is advised that each instructor be able to situate technology knowledge within content and pedagogical knowledge, as proposed in the TPACK (Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge) theoretical framework (Mishra & Koehler, 2006). In the TPACK framework (see Figure 1), the elements show the "knowledge required by teachers for integrating technology into their teaching in any content area. Teachers, who have TPACK, act with an intuitive understanding of the complex interplay between the three basic components of knowledge" (Mishra & Koehler, 2006, p. 1028).

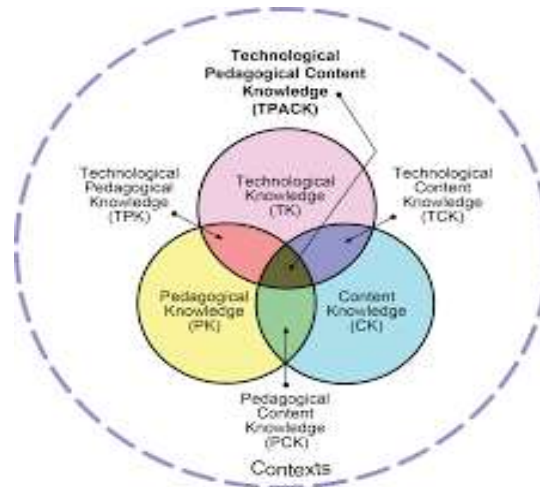


Figure 1. Technological Pedagogical Content Knowledge (TPACK)

The integration of TPACK in language classrooms can help instructors to use their knowledge of the language subject, the pedagogical aspect of teaching courses, with the integration of technology. Using technology effectively can help students to learn autonomously. The instructors need proper instruction to develop the activities using appropriate software for learning and assessment. Through the use of technological knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, the instructors would be able to design activities which are interactive and engaging. Although the TPACK framework has many advantages, one of its limitations is in terms of ethics in using technology. The high number of students plagiarising and copying during quizzes and tests, leaves room for improvement in online learning.

## 6. Conclusion

The research findings show that due to the quick transition from face-to-face to online classes, there were several challenges that language instructors faced in terms of online teaching and online assessment. The findings demonstrate that the main challenges in online teaching include technological issues, creativity, interactions, class duration, inaccessibility issues and student emotional support, whereas the



challenges in conducting online assessments are in terms of the different evaluation platforms, the issue of plagiarism and authenticity, marking or grading online assessments and assessing non-verbal cues. The recommendations for language instructors when conducting online classes and assessments are to attend workshops or training courses which will expose them to the different apps or technological tools which are suitable for language subjects, as they require different materials and tools to teach and assess speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Instructors are also encouraged to be more flexible and sympathetic towards students, as online learning can have psychological effects on them. To reduce plagiarism and dishonesty during assessments, it is recommended that all tests and quizzes be administered in real time. Subsequently, instructors should also conduct assessments that evaluate students' understanding rather than memorising, which can help reduce dishonesty during assessments. Finally, the issue of classroom interactions as well as communication assessment should be investigated, as further research is needed to understand the issue of classroom interaction during online learning, where there are very limited studies conducted in the area.

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