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TO BE (PRESENT) OR NOT TO BE: THE QUESTION OF FACE-TO-FACE OR ONLINE ORAL ASSESSMENT PREFERENCE AND PERCEIVED PERFORMANCE AMONG UiTM PERLIS STUDENTS

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Abstract:

Oral skills in language learning appear to be the hardest to master among university students. This is mainly due to learners' apprehension, anxiety and lack of preparedness in speaking the language. The change that happened to the education system after the Covid pandemic has seen a shift from face-to-face class assessment to online assessment in tertiary level education. The question now is do the learners today feel that they are better prepared and more at ease to do oral assessment in English online or do they still prefer the face-to-face assessment in class? Since face-to-face oral assessments have been a norm in the past, it would be interesting to know if they are still preferred by the learners or otherwise. This study, therefore, explores whether language learners in UiTM generally prefer online or face-to-face oral assessment. It also aims to discover the learners' perceptions on their oral assessment performance online and face-to-face. The participants are 51 UiTM Perlis Branch students who enrolled in English Language Courses (LCC) at a Diploma and Degree levels. They completed a survey that investigates their level of preference, self-confidence, and perceived performance in oral assessments conducted face-to-face and online. Findings suggest that the students generally prefer online oral assessments but in terms of perceived performance, their views were mixed between the face-to-face and online assessments. The results of the study are theoretically significant as they identify the students' preference in oral assessments. They also provide insights for course developers, the policy makers and language instructors to optimize students' achievements in their oral assessments.

Introduction

Language learning has lately been shifted from the traditional approach of face-to-face learning to that of online learning. Face-to-face in class examinations have changed to online and face-to-face oral and presentation assignments have moved to an online platform. At higher education institutions like Universiti Teknologi MARA, face-to-face assessments are mixed with the online assessments for both the diploma and degree level students. Even though proponents of using technology in learning are massively encouraged for the current educational environments, concerns still arise about switching to online learning and assessments. Students and instructors may be concerned about not having a quality education especially in speaking ability. In terms of instructional pedagogy, it was hard to switch from face-to-face education to online education as students thought that they could not speak as much as they spoke in class because of different reasons (Butler, 2017 as cited in Ocel, 2022). Furthermore, students complained about not having opportunities to interact with their peers and teachers (Carter & Emerson, 2012 as cited in Ocel, 2022).

Speaking skills may appear to be the hardest to master by ESL learners. This may result from the learners' apprehension, anxiety and lack of preparedness in speaking the language. According to Aziz and Kashinathan (2021), English language learners find speaking in English to be challenging especially if they do not possess a good command of the language. Moreover, lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes when speaking in English pose critical problems for learners. Aziz and Kashinathan (2021) stated "Natural shyness, diffidence, and fear of embarrassment stymie Malaysian students' efforts to learn English" (p.987). As language learning activities require enthusiasm and participation from the learners, getting the students to be devoted to learning the language through extrinsic and intrinsic motivations can be difficult (Azlan et al., 2019 as cited in Aziz and Kashinathan, 2021).

The question now is do the learners today feel that they are better prepared and more at ease to do oral assessments in English online or do they still prefer the face-to-face assessments in class? For instance, studies on 40 Korean students studying English as a foreign language that compared synchronous online and face-to-face assessments suggested that there was no significant difference in test performance among the students between the two modes (Craig & Kim, 2010; Kim & Craig, 2012 as cited in Du & Zhang, 2022). In addition, the students were found to be comfortable and showed their interests in both online and face-to-face assessments when they were interviewed about the two modes of assessments. However, the quantitative findings indicated that the students' anxiety level was higher in face-to-face assessment.

This study aims at finding out the learners' modes of oral assessment preference whether it is via face-to-face or via online. It also aims at whether they view their performance in the speaking tests as better or worse when it was conducted face-to-face or vice versa. The objectives of the study are as follows:
    a) to examine the learners' preference for oral assessment
    b) to find out the learners' perceived performance in face-to-face and online assessment

The study would benefit the curriculum reviewer at the Academy of Language Studies of UiTM to review and improve on the future syllabus. It would also benefit the lecturers and the UiTM students in general in finding out what is best for the learners in terms of oral assessments.

Literature Review

Challenges of Administering Online Oral Assessments
Studies that have been carried out on online oral assessments since the COVID 19 pandemic found that technical aspects pose a major challenge. One of the main problems faced in conducting oral assessments is poor internet connectivity (Forrester, 2020; Handrayani, 2022; Lee et al., 2022 and Rachmawati, Ardin & Hendryanti, 2023) which can be from either the students' side or the instructors' or sometimes both. Poor internet connectivity caused lost connections (Forrester, 2020), unclear and even missing information causing the learners having to ask their examiners to repeat questions and the learners have to repeat their answers (Rachmawati et al., 2023). These cause distractions on the focus of both learners and examiners. These problems also lead to another problem of insufficient time for conducting assessments. More time is needed to conduct the assessments when these happen. When time is insufficient, this can affect the assessment results' validity and reliability.

Other challenges that have been identified are learners' reluctance to turn on their camera, not working web camera and not working microphone (Forrester, 2020). When microphones are switched on, echo and background noises (Starr-Egger, 2023) coming from family members, televisions and others could be heard, causing interferences during assessments. Other challenges are academic dishonesty among learners, for instance, cheating, lack of distance control, and elevated anxiety in online exams (Tengku Sharif, Shamsudin & Bakar, 2024). Large class size and also lack of materials were also found to be the challenges too when conducting online assessments (Bachore & Satenaw, 2018).

Students' Performance in Online Assessments
The study carried out by Muñoz-Alcón, Barahona-Esteban and Trullén-Galve (2023) found that 89% of the students considered the online platform used for oral assessment, Blackboard, to be a suitable platform for oral assessment. The reasons given for this were, the online method provides convenience, comfort and saves time. Being able to take the test in an environment of their choice facilitated fluent oral communication.

Nguyen, Nguyen and Hoang (2024) found a significant difference in the content scores when the students scored higher in their face-to-face speaking test compared to online. Abdullaeva, Çakmak and Abdullaev (2024) also found that English as a foreign language learners performed significantly better in online assessment because they were more motivated, had more autonomy and received higher quality feedback.

Students' Preference
In the case of students' preference between online and face-to-face assessments, the findings are varied. A study conducted by Elsalem et al. (2021) found that approximately one third of the respondents preferred online assessment. This is said to be caused by the hassle that students had to do more preparations for online exams, inappropriate questions and less favorable achievements.

In a different study by Morat, Tahir and Mansor (2024), most learners also expressed less preference toward online assessment. Technical issues contributed to the learners becoming anxious. As a result, the learners preferred face-to-face assessments since the assessment environment could be controlled, non-verbal communication could be better facilitated and the students could get immediate feedback.

Radzuan, Kamaruddin, Ramakrishnan and Arif (2023) found that the learners had mixed perceptions toward online and face-to-face oral presentations. They were able to adapt to presenting online; however, they still preferred face-to-face presentations. The reasons for this are students were able to project their voice, non-verbal cues, eye contact, gestures and professionalism better.

Methodology

The survey for the study involved 51 respondents consisting of 17 semester-four Diploma students and 34 semester-two Degree students of UiTM Perlis Branch. The Diploma students took the LCC112 (English for Communicative Competence II) and LCC113 (English for Communicative Competence III) courses in semester 2 and semester 3 respectively. They had gone through online oral assessment in semester 2 and face-to-face oral assessment in semester 3. The oral assessments were conducted in pairs and groups of four respectively. The Degree students completed both online and face-to-face oral assessments in the current semester for LCC503 (English for Business Communication). The first assessment was an individual recorded presentation and the second was a face-to-face discussion in a group of four or five students.

A questionnaire was chosen to be the research instrument for collecting the information from the respondents. A Google Form questionnaire was designed to address the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers based on their teaching knowledge of the LCC courses and discussion with students about their personal experiences with LCC courses. In addition, the researchers also based the questionnaire on published studies by researchers in local and international journals (Ibrahim, 2024; Mohd Radzuan et al., 2023; Du & Zhang, 2022; Ghershes, et al., 2021). The questionnaire employs a five-point Likert scale where 1 is a response for 'strongly disagree' and 5 for 'strongly agree'. There were three sections in the questionnaire regarding the requirements for achieving the objectives of this study. Section A was about the background of the respondents. In Section B, ten (10) questions were set to find out the preference of learners for face-to-face or online assessment. They include the questions on the comparisons of face-to-face or online oral assessment preferences, preference for individual or group assessments, preparedness for oral assessments, motivation and confidence in the use of English language in the students' oral assessments. In Section C, there were ten (10) questions that prompted the learners' perceptions of their performance in the oral assessments conducted face-to-face or online. The questions probed them on their perceived performance in the oral assessments, their level of anxiety, their perceived fairness of the assessment and their level of confidence in the oral assessments.

The questionnaires were distributed to the respondents via a few selected lecturers teaching the codes. This was to ensure that the survey was given to the right target group. The respondents had to spend about five to ten minutes answering the questionnaire. A descriptive analysis was used in analysing the data for this study. A simple percentage count was used to report the findings. One of the limitations to this method of data collection is that some students did not

answer the questionnaire because of the nature of anonymity of the survey. Therefore, out of more than one hundred forms distributed, only 51 students responded to the questionnaire. In addition, due to the small sample size, it only allowed researchers to use descriptive statistics and thus, the findings could not be generalized to the broader population of UiTM students.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the findings on students' perceptions and perceived performance in oral assessments for both face-to-face and online modes. The findings are specifically on their preference in terms of which medium is more preferred in the aspects of their preparedness, confidence and perceived performance in the oral assessments.

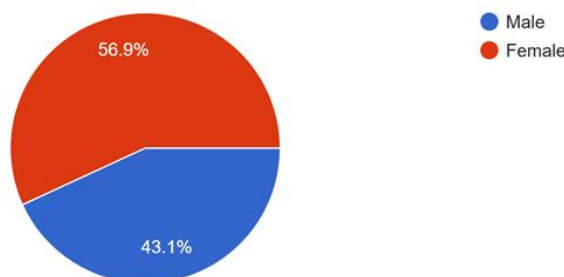*Demographic Profile of the Respondents*

A1. Level of Studies in UiTM:
51 responses

Diploma Level
Degree Level

66.7%
33.3%
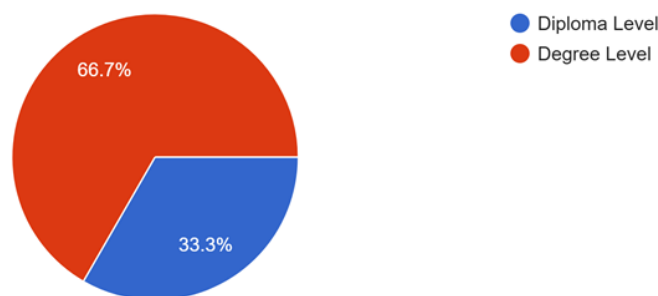
Figure 1: Respondents' Level of Studies

A3. Gender:
51 responses

Male
Female

56.9%
43.1%

Figure 2: Respondents' Gender

The study gathered responses from 51 UiTM Perlis Branch students who are currently in the Diploma and Degree level of studies. The students consist of students who are studying in the Faculties of Applied Science, Business and Management, Agriculture and Computer Science. Figure 1 shows that the Degree level students make up for the most of respondents (66.7%) and Figure 2 indicates that female respondents are slightly more than the male respondents at 56.9%.

Learners' Preference for Face-to-Face or Online Assessments

Table 1: General Preference for Oral Assessments

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
B1. I prefer to be assessed individually in oral assessments conducted face-to-face and online.	58.8	11.8
B2. I generally feel comfortable using the English language in LCC oral assessments.	66.7	7.9
B4. I prefer a scripted or prepared oral assessment than a spontaneous oral assessment.	54.9	19.6

Table 1 illustrates the overall preferences of the respondents on items related to oral presentations. It appears that the students generally prefer to be assessed individually as compared to in groups. More than half of the total respondents agreed to this statement (58.8%). This may be due to their confidence in the use of English during the assessment. 66.7% of the respondents are comfortable to use the English language during the oral assessments. However, most of the respondents prefer scripted or prepared oral assessments compared to answering the oral assessments' questions spontaneously.

Table 2: Perceptions for Face-to-Face Assessment and Online Assessment

| Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
B5. I usually spend more time preparing and rehearsing for an online oral assessment than for a face-to-face assessment.	39.2	23.5
B6. I have less materials to prepare (examples: notes, slides, visual aids, cue cards, etc) for a face-to-face oral assessment than for an online assessment.	39.2	15.7
B7. I find it easier to interact with my lecturer and my audience in a face-to-face oral assessment setting.	64.8	3.9
B8. I am more motivated to prepare for a face-to-face presentation rather than an online presentation.	45.1	17.6
B9. I feel more relaxed when presenting orally or taking an oral assessment in front of my lecturer and classmates in a classroom setting.	33.3	29.4
B10. Face-to-face oral assessment encourages me to practise my speaking skills more.	66.7	5.9

Table 2 displays the respondents' responses on items that compare between online and face-to-face oral assessments. The respondents indicate that they are encouraged to practise their speaking skills more when being assessed face-to-face rather than online (66.7%). In addition, the respondents think that they do not have to prepare a lot for a face-to-face oral assessment (39.2%). However, it seems that in terms of being nervous for being assessed in a classroom context, it is quite similar to when they do online assessment (29.4% for face-to-face assessment as compared to 33.3% for online assessment). Despite this, most of the respondents

(64.8%) feel that they can easily interact with their lecturers and audience when being assessed face-to-face as compared to being assessed via online.
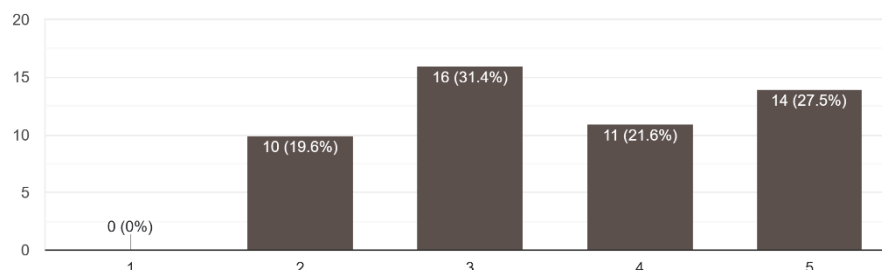
Figure 3: Preference of Online Assessment over Face-to-Face Assessment

Despite positive responses for the benefits gained for face-to-face oral assessments in terms of interactivity with the lectures and audience, fewer materials to be prepared and the ability to practise speaking skills more, Figure 3 displays that almost half of the respondents (49.1%) prefer the online oral assessments rather than the face-to-face oral assessments.

Learners' Perceptions on Their Performance

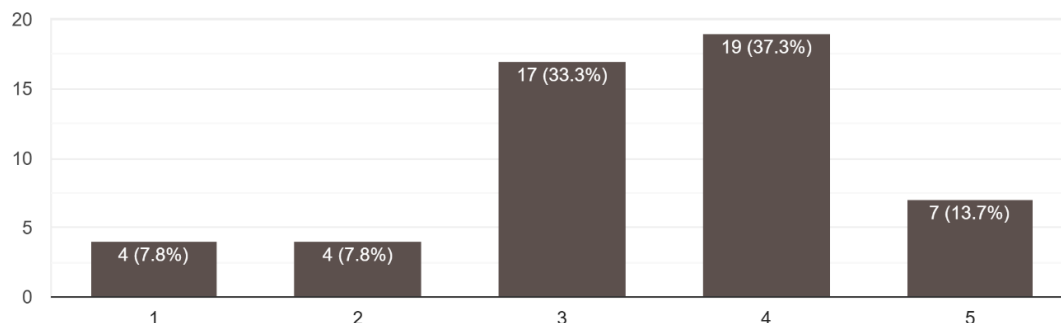**Table 3: Perceived Performance in Online Oral Assessments**

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
C1. I feel more confident when doing an oral assessment online.	54.9	11.8
C3. Doing oral assessment online reduces my anxiety compared to face-to-face assessment.	66.6	7.8
C8. I feel that I performed better in an online oral assessment than in a face-to-face assessment.	52.9	13.8
C9. I feel more comfortable using the English language in an online oral assessment than in a face-to-face assessment.	52.9	5.9
C10. I feel less anxious or nervous taking an online oral assessment than face-to-face oral assessment.	52.9	13.7

Table 3 illustrates the students' responses on how they perceived their performance on online oral assessments. Most of the students feel positive about their performance in the online oral assessments. 52.9% of the students feel that they perform better in online oral assessments as compared to in face-to-face assessments. This supports the earlier finding about their preference for the online assessments as compared to the face-to-face assessments. The students seem to be more confident, less nervous in their assessments and more comfortable to use English.

C4. I feel that doing oral assessment via online reduces my ability to perform effectively.

51 responses

Figure 4: Perceived Performance in Online Oral Assessment

In spite of all the positive responses about the students' performance in an online oral assessment, item C4 in Figure 4 shows otherwise. 51% of the respondents felt that online assessments reduce their ability to perform effectively in the tests. This finding does not match with the response for item C8 in Table 4 where the students felt that they do better in online assessments than in face-to-face assessments. The students may feel that during online assessments, they could not perform to the best of their abilities due to external factors like poor internet connectivity, unsuitable environment during the test-taking and noise from their surroundings.

Table 4: Perceived Performance in Face-to-Face Oral Assessments

Item	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)
C2. I feel more connected to my lecturer and audience in a face-to-face oral assessment setting.	60.8	5.9
C5. I feel that my lecturers evaluate me more fairly in a face-to-face assessment than online.	56.9	7.8
C6. Taking a face-to-face oral assessment has helped me improve my language skills more.	58.8	13.7
C7. I received more useful feedback from my lecturer and peers in a face-to-face oral assessment than in an online assessment.	60.8	5.9

In terms of students' perceived performance in a face-to-face oral assessment, more than half of the respondents answered positively for the items in Table 4. The respondents felt that they could communicate well with their lecturers and peers in the oral assessments. Moreover, they felt that they could improve their language skills better in a face-to-face assessment. This response correlates with item B10 in Table 2 where the students felt that they could practise speaking skill better in a face-to-face assessment. More importantly, they perceived that they had received fair evaluation from their lecturers in a face-to-face oral assessment.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Recommendations

Like many universities around the world, UiTM has opted for online assessments as a means to evaluate its students since the pandemic. Now, online assessment has become an integral part of assessing its diploma and degree levels students' speaking skills for some of the English language courses, such as LCC112, LCC113 and LCC503.

According to the findings of this study, students prefer individual oral assessment rather than group, in contrast to a study carried out by Reiser (2017). Perhaps, high dependency on technical matters that can affect the stability of communication among group members during assessment caused the students to disfavor group oral assessment (Glushkova, 2021). They also prefer oral assessments that allow them to prepare beforehand. This shows that the students are not confident to speak spontaneously, a skill that is vital in everyday life, including in communication at the workplace. These two preferences are the characteristics of oral assessment of the degree level students, which is individual recorded presentations.

In another aspect, the students claimed that they practice more when they have face-to-face oral assessment. They also claimed that their feeling of nervousness is almost the same for both online and face-to-face oral assessments. These contradicting revelations of the students support the overall finding of this study whereby, only almost half prefer online speaking assessment, while the rest prefer to do it face-to-face. Based on this, it is important to take into consideration that when planning for oral assessments, the syllabus developers must allow for a balance between online and face-to-face modes in terms of weightage.

In terms of perceived performance, only half of the respondents claimed that they perform better when they do tests online. This supports that almost half of the students prefer online assessment. Interestingly, half of the students felt that they cannot perform to their best ability when doing oral tests online. The university management needs to ensure good and stable internet coverage on campus so that students who sit for their online assessments while on campus will be able to have smooth presentations and discussions.

Lecturers can remind students to ensure that they are at a place where the internet connectivity is good when doing online assessments. Students must be proactive too. Whether they are staying on campus or outside campus, they must take the initiative to find the most suitable place where they will be able to receive good internet connectivity and have minimal disturbances like noises when they are taking online tests. To ensure validity of assessment results, it is important that students sit for their tests in a conducive environment for both online and face-to-face assessments.

Conclusion

This study has clearly revealed the students' preference toward online and face-to-face speaking assessments are divided between the two mediums. Their preferences reflect their previous experiences and perceived performance in both methods of assessment were a mixture of positive and not so positive ones. Those who preferred online acknowledged the benefits of feeling less anxious and more comfortable using English, while those who preferred face-to-face felt more at ease in communicating with the examiner and audience and felt that they were fairly evaluated.

Thus, course developers should emphasise balance in the weightage between online and face-to-face oral assessments within a course, especially for language courses that heavily focus on oral skills and competency. There also needs to be a balance between group and individual assessment tasks. In these ways, students will have the opportunities to perform in both contexts, and this will give a more valid representation of their oral language competency that is shown in their oral assessment grades. When they work, they need to be able to converse well online as well as in person.

Due to the fact that assessing students' oral abilities through online has become an integral part of their language course assessments, future studies should analyze further into more specific reasons that affect students' preference toward a particular method of oral assessment.

Acknowledgements

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