Online Assessment in the Middle East: A Conversation with Dr. Christine Coombe[1]

Mohammad Kazemian[2], Guilan University of Medical Sciences, Guilan, Rasht, Iran

Fatemeh Khonamri[3], University of Mazandaran, Mazandaran, Babolsar, Iran

Abstract

Language assessment is a field which has been gained increasing recognition in the last few years. Because of this, in the present interview Dr. Christine Coombe shares some initiatives related to language assessment that have been carried out in the Middle East. She shares her views about the different assessment procedures/strategies she generally uses at her institution, as well as some challenges she had to face during the Covid 19 pandemic. During the interview she points out her general attitudes towards this field and reflects upon the possible future of language assessment, where flipped learning in the online classroom will be more common. Finally, she provides some suggestion for the improvement of online assessment.

Resumen

La evaluación del idioma es un campo que ha ido ganando cada vez más reconocimiento en los últimos años. Por ello, en la presente entrevista la Dra. Christine Coombe comparte algunas iniciativas relacionadas con la evaluación del lenguaje que se han llevado a cabo en Medio Oriente. Ella comparte sus puntos de vista sobre los diferentes procedimientos/estrategias de evaluación que generalmente utiliza en su institución, así como algunos desafíos que tuvo que enfrentar durante la pandemia de COVID 19. Durante la entrevista señala sus actitudes generales hacia este campo y reflexiona sobre el posible futuro de la evaluación de lenguas, donde el aprendizaje invertido en el aula online será más común. Finalmente, ofrece algunas sugerencias para mejorar la evaluación en línea.

Dr. Christine Coombe's Biographical Statement[4]

Christine Coombe has a Ph.D. in Foreign/Second Language Education from The Ohio State University. She is currently an Associate Professor of General Studies at Dubai Men's College. She is the former Testing and Measurements Supervisor at UAE University and Assessment Coordinator of Zayed University. She has published numerous articles and books (See Appendix). A list of these can be found in the Christine's most recent books are on innovation in the MENA, research questions in TESOL and Applied Linguistics and professionalism in education.

Christine has lived and worked in the Gulf for the past 30 years. In this capacity, she has served as the President and Conference Chair of one of the largest TESOL affiliates in the world and is the founder and co-chair of its Testing Special Interest Group.

During her tenure in the Middle East, she has won many awards including: 2002 Spaan Fellowship for Research in Second/Foreign Language Assessment; 2002-03 TOEFL Outstanding Young Scholar Award; TOEFL Board Grant for 2003-04, 2005-06, 2007-08 and 2009-10 for her work in delivering assessment training assessment in developing countries. She served on the TESOL Board of Directors as Convention Chair for Tampa 2006 and was the recipient of the Chancellor's Teacher of the Year for 2003-04. She served as TESOL President (2011-2012) and was a member of the TESOL Board of Directors (2010-2013). Christine received the British Council's International Assessment Award for 2013. Her most recent honor was being named to TESOL's 50@50 which "recognizes professionals who have made significant contributions to the TESOL profession within the past 50 years." Dr Coombe is the 2018 recipient of the James E. Alatis Award which recognizes exemplary service to TESOL. In 2021, she was named to the US Department of State's 30@30 list which honors the 30 top English Language specialists in the last 30 years.

Introduction

Language assessment is as an indispensable and inseparable aspect of the process of language learning and teaching, and the concepts of language assessment, learning, and teaching are so intertwined that it is hard to think of one without considering the other (Khonamri & Kazemian, 2016). Teachers cannot understand what their students have achieved in their classroom without assessing them.

Valid assessment of language learners' abilities, therefore, is an important aim of education. With the emergence of assessment, a lot of problems associated with language tests were substantially compensated through the use of formative assessments, learning-oriented assessments, and alternative assessments such as self-assessment, peer assessment, and portfolio assessment. As a result of the integration of learning and assessment and also the significance of learners' autonomy, the need was felt to combine

---

different types of assessment (Farhady, 2018). Moreover, scholars began to look for more reliable and widely applicable measures of language assessment to help them make fair and logical decisions about learners' real educational achievements. This is the reason why alternatives as it is the case of online assessment emerged.

Generally speaking, online assessment became popular with the emergence of e-learning especially recently due to the pandemic. A large number of researchers have studied this mode of assessment from different viewpoints (Abduh, 2021; Arif, 2020; Chung & Choi, 2021; Khatoony, & Nezhadmehr, 2020; Yulianto, & Mujtahin, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021).

This interview paper is a new contribution in the sense that it examines the most common problems from previous research and builds upon them through an assessment experts' viewpoints and her way of handling these challenges. Thus, the interview aims to explore Christine Coombe's experience in online assessment of students' learning behavior and see it through her lens in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Interview

Mohammed: What kinds of assessment do you generally use in your institution?

Christine: The assessment in my institution follows what I consider to be best practice and the term for it is multiple-measures assessment. That is, it is basically the realization on the part of educators that there is no one single best type of assessment. Thus, to be fair we need to use a variety of different types of assessment, and we do so in my institution. We have a percentage of our assessment in traditional tests and quizzes that are delivered online through our course management system which is called BB Learn. They are objectively scored. Then, we have another percentage of our assessment that are alternative types of assessment like performance based, competency-based projects, portfolios, etc. Basically, we have a good mix of online vs. face-to-face types of assessment. We also have a mixture of objectively scored traditional types of assessment as well as subjectively scored alternative assessments.

Fatima: What is your opinion about online assessment and to what extent was it successful during the pandemic?

Christine: We have been doing online assessment for many years because I work at the Higher Colleges of Technology and we are a highly technical environment where all teachers and students have not only laptops, but also iPads and plenty of devices. Thus, we have been doing different types of assessment through our course management system, through Respondus Lock Down Browser for security purposes for many years. However, when we sent students home at the beginning of the pandemic, when we put them under lockdown, we had two days to prepare to take whatever curricula was not in a digital format to put it online and then the assessment had to be followed. For security purposes we used a lockdown browser which is a program installed in all our students' computers and they enter the task under the lockdown browser which is supposed to prevent them from accessing any other documents such as emails, documents under computer class notes and the internet. As a result, I believe we are doing a pretty good job. However, there are some challenges and some issues with online assessment.

Mohammed: What are the main challenges with assessment in your context?

Christine: You need to remember about my context which is Dubai in the UAE. Although we are highly technological, when all students were sent home with the lockdown, certain parts of the city, especially when you have houses where five or six children of all different ages were taking online courses and online assessment, sometimes the technology was either not strong enough or was problematic. Thus, we had some technological problems at the beginning. Now all is getting a lot better. I personally think that the main challenge, I hate to mention that, but I know other countries around the world are experiencing it too, is that cheating and academic dishonesty is present. We are finding that this behavior is coming into play. I believe that is one of our biggest challenges for the most part.

Mohammed: What do you think about cheating as an academically dishonest behavior? How do you control students' cheating during the online assessment?

Christine: We try to do a number of different things. In our traditional tests, we have a lockdown browser. It prevents them from entering or accessing anything like the internet or other documents on their laptops or in the cloud. We do that and when the students are home, they have lockdown browser monitor which is the same type of program, but because they are alone, they have to have something which is similar to check in when they open the program, the computer program is an eye type of protecting program. As a result, the computer asks them to show their IDs to the camera so that it can read their IDs. Then, it takes a picture of their face. As it uses a kind of facial recognition students are not allowed to wear baseball caps or any kind of head gear because they will be flagged during the test and then they have to stand up from their chairs so that the computer can read their environment. As a matter of fact, it records them taking the test and if they make any sudden or strange movements that is, getting up from other chairs, or any kind of talking in the background, the computer will flag it as suspicious behavior. Then, the role of the teacher starts.

Teachers go and watch the video of our students to see if there is indeed any type of cheating going on. Despite the fact that we do a great deal of things, during the pandemic they studied at home online and we brought them into campus for their assessments. Accordingly, they took the online assessment, but there were physical proctors watching. The students are always tricky; they are always finding out a short cut. As a result, they keep teachers on their toes! Unfortunately, for exam projects and similar activities, there is also plagiarism or they use other students' work. Nowadays they even commission someone to do a project for them from scratch. We have those issues and we need to contend with as well.

Fatima: What is your idea about implementing flipped learning in general and in online classroom in particular? Do you utilize it in your classes?

Christine: We were in a flipped learning classroom environment even before pandemic. The courses I teach are research methods. It is a kind of opportunity for administration to raise the cap. At the beginning I had sixty students in one class. Then, fifty students came (We had a class that was four hours a week). For the first two hours and then before they came to the class, they did two hours flipped work which was archived work through the classroom management system. The general idea of that was that they had come to class prepared and then they were with me in their classroom where we do the activities to exploit the content that they have already learned. In general, that is a great idea. However, I suspect when we were completely online before as a classroom teacher, I was not able to know fully when my students knew something. I could read the physical classroom better because I could actually see them and read their body language. You know how teachers ask a question and we know who knows the answer and we know who is trying to look down and pretend to take the notes and not answer the question. Nevertheless, the way it works here with my students, they do not even turn on their cameras when they are online. As a result, I am in the class with fifty or so students and first of all I do not know if they are even there because I suspect that some of the students log in so that they can be counted as present, but they are not really there. For the first few months I would be on Collaborate, the university's platform, on BB Learn and I would look at my own face and talk to myself for the whole two hours and then maybe one or two students would say something or answer the questions. As such, I never had any idea if students understood. I did not find out whether they understood until I saw their test scores. Now I am getting to know how to read the (online) room better and know whether the students understand something or not. Now what I do is every once in a while, is I put up a poll that is, a question, and the question will be "Are you in class right now?" This is one way you can see whether they are there or not because whether they answer Yes or No, they are listening to you. I developed little strategies and skills so that I can read the room better. I still am not as proficient as reading everybody as I was when we were in the face-to-face environment. Flipped learning is potentially really successful but students have to buy into it. No matter what level you are going to teach, there will always be some individuals who will try to fake that they have done the work. We use attendance quizzes and the students have to take them when they finish their flipped work. They have to get above 60% on that quiz which is based on their flipped materials and if they do not, they are marked absent for two hours of flipped learning. It is unfortunate that we have to do these things, but we have to make it clear that you have to come prepared already knowing the content and then you come to class and you ask questions we exploit and extend it. Thus, I like the idea and I would be a good flipped student, I believe, because I was always preparing in advance and doing homework, etc.

Fatima: I absolutely agree that doing flipped learning in online classes is really hard, it might be good for those unique motivated students. You need to make sure that they have gone through the materials before coming to the class and in a face-to-face classroom it is easier to check students. For checking on students, as you mentioned, there are a lot of ways to know who is prepared and who is not, while in an online classroom it is really hard and these strategies you mentioned I believe somehow every teacher has developed her/his own way of figuring out who is prepared and who is not. However, your strategies are attractive and I may use them in my classroom from now on.

Christine: Even just having the students turn on their mics, you poll up the role of students and if you say turn on your mics, you will understand that they are listening to you. You can see the number of mics that go on.

Fatima: In terms of turning on mics, I used this strategy, but it was not successful because a lot of students have excuses. They say that there is something wrong with the mic! They cannot turn on their mics right now.

Christine: What we have done is we say to the students if you agree to study online, then you have to have the requisite tools for success which means a functioning laptop and/or other devices. The excuse of a non-functioning mic or camera only works once when the students say computer does not work.

Mohammed: How do you see the future of online assessment? Do you believe that it will evolve or will it have to be replaced with face-to face assessment?

Christine: I hope to see more innovative test formats developed for our tests. They may be objective, but I would like to see more formats on the test. I believe we are going to keep online assessments because they have a lot of advantages. I believe that we need to work on mitigating the disadvantages of online assessments. We need to train

teachers and make sure that we remain one step ahead of our students in terms of online cheating. If we have item banks and we use them on online assessments, we will not worry about leaking questions due to students taking pictures of some items with their phones. We also need to look for ways to expand the way we do projects and alternative assessments online because I see a lot of advancements in that type of assessment.

I believe there will be online assessment. We have gone back to more face-to-face assessments at my institution, but we have always had online assessment for as long as I can remember because we use it in a course management system. However, that is not the only type of assessment we have; I would hope that highly technological or artificial intelligence could assist in promoting online assessment. I would hope that teachers and administrators would keep in mind that multiple measure assessments are really important because students need to have more than one opportunity to show how much they know. We also need to keep in mind the cornerstones of testing which are validity, reliability, practicality, washback, authenticity, transparency, and security will be even more important in the future. As we are going to develop different ways of assessment, whether they be online or face-to-face, we need to conform to these cornerstones of assessments. I see a bright future of online assessment, but we need to keep moving forward. There are some big research agendas ideas in this regard and we need to do more research on this.

I believe online assessment is going to evolve and will not be completely erased by face-to-face assessment. One of the areas of online assessments is online presentations. They are working just fine online. I also consider it as evolving on the part of test administrators, the test developers, and the administrations. The individuals who are there to try to circumvent the academic dishonesty and this is an unfortunate part of online assessment. However, with the development of technology, that is currently going on with Respondus Lock Down Browser, [the cheating problem has been resolved to some extent]. This is only one of the examples of lockdown browser. There are plenty of other ones that are being utilized as well. There is a lot of anti-plagiarism software out there. When it gets better and when we train students to use it, they will know before submitting the assignments if there is a plagiarism or not. I argue that online assessment will be developed as well. People have been using online assessment for many years and I believe it is going to continue and I hope it is going to continue to be out there because I really would hate to go back to marking objectively scored papers by hand like we used to do ten years ago. Thus, I contend there will be a great deal of development. I hope there will be development on the part of test developers who I hope will come up with other formats other than the usual objectively scored, multiple choice questions, true/false, matching, and fill in the blanks. I hope there will be more sophisticated item formats for students in the future. As a result, I see it as a positive development, but I also hope that we can do some assessment of the face-to-face variety because I miss it.

Conclusion

In this interview paper, online assessment in general and in the Middle East in particular were discussed with Dr. Christine Coombe. Our conversation was based on some inquiries concentrating on several issues on online assessment. The first was to know what kinds of assessment Christine generally uses in her university. The conclusion drawn was the multiple measures assessment regarding the understanding of the students' needs was utilized.

The second, the third and the fourth questions were related to Coombe's perspective on online assessment; the extent it was successful during the pandemic, and the main challenges with assessment in her context. The fact is that online assessment has been practiced in her institution for a long time since they have advanced technological facilities. As the institution is equipped with lock down browser for security objectives, the online assessment in the UAE has been successful to a great extent. The fifth question dealt with the future of online assessment and whether it would evolve or would it be replaced with face-to-face assessment.

The conclusion indicated that face-to-face assessment has not been completely replaced. Yet, it was said that there would be developments on the part of test developers in such a way that despite having common item formats such as multiple choice questions, true/false, matching, and fill in the blanks, there would be more advanced item formats for the students in the future.

The sixth question tackled implementing flipped learning in general and in the online classroom in particular. Flipped learning has been practiced in Coombe's institution for a long time even before the pandemic. As Christine teaches research methods in her institution, she has the chance to administer such a class environment. Finally, she believes that there is a bright future for online assessment and in order to update it, research should focus on this area and explore it in further depth.

References

Abduh, M. Y. M. (2021). Full-time online assessment during COVID-19 lockdown: EFL teachers' perceptions. *Asian EFL Journal, 28*(1), 26-46.

Arif, Z. (2020). *Online assessment implemented by English teachers at SMA Al-Islam 1 Surakarta during pandemic COVID-19* [Unpublished master's thesis], Islamic Institute of Surakarta.

Chung, S.-J., & Choi, L.-J. (2021). The development of sustainable assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic: The case of the English language program in South Korea. *Sustainability, 13*(8). https://doi.org/10.3390/su13084499

Farhady, H. (2018). History of language testing and assessment. *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching.* https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0343

Khatoony, S., & Nezhadmehr, M. (2020). EFL teachers' challenges in integration of technology for online classrooms during Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in Iran. *AJELP: Asian Journal of English Language and Pedagogy, 8*(2), 89-104. https://doi.org/10.37134/ajelp.vol8.2.7.2020

Khonamri, F., & Kazemian, M. (2016). The effect of dynamic assessment on Iranian EFL students' critical reading performance. *Malaysian Journal of Education, 41*(2), 115-123. https://ejournal.ukm.my/jpend/article/view/16015

Yulianto, D., & Mujtahid, N. M. (2021). Online assessment during COVID-19 pandemic: EFL teachers' perspectives and their practices. *Journal of English Teaching, 7*(2), 229-242. https://doi.org/10.33541/jet.v7i2.2770

Zhang, C., Yan, X., & Wang, J. (2021). EFL teachers' online assessment practices during the COVID-19 pandemic: Changes and mediating factors. *Asia-Pacific Education Researcher, 30*(1), 499–507 https://doi.org/10.1007/s40299-021-00589-3

Appendix

Christine Coombe's Publications

Brown, J. D., & Coombe, C. (Eds.). (2015). *The Cambridge guide to research in language teaching and learning*. Cambridge University Press.

Coombe, C. A., Anderson, N. J., McCloskey, M. L., & Stephenson, L. (Eds.) (2008). *Leadership in English language teaching and learning*. University of Michigan Press.

Coombe, C., Anderson, N. J., & Stephenson, L. (Eds.). (2020). *Professionalizing your English language teaching*. Springer.

Coombe, C., & Barlow, L. (2007). *Language teacher research in the Middle East*. TESOL International Association.

Coombe, C., Davidson, P., O'Sullivan, B., & Stoynoff, S. (2012). *The Cambridge guide to second language assessment*. Cambridge University Press.

Coombe, C. A., England, E., & Schmidt, J. (Eds.). (2012). *Reigniting, retooling, and retiring in English language teaching*. University of Michigan Press.

Coombe, C. A., Folse, K. S., & Hubley, N. J. (2007). *A practical guide to assessing English language learners*. University of Michigan Press.

Coombe, C. A., & Hubley, N. J. (Eds.). (2003). *Assessment practices*. TESOL Publications.

Coombe, C., Wiens, B., & Marshall, L. (2018). Objectively scored test items. *The TESOL encyclopedia of English language teaching*. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0370

Elsheikh, A., Coombe, C., & Effiong, O. (Eds.) (2018). *The role of language teacher associations in professional development*. Springer.

Shehadeh, A., & Coombe, C. (2010). *Applications of task-based learning in TESOL*. TESOL