



## EFL university instructors' perceptions of Online Assessment through Blackboard

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**Abstract:** This qualitative study investigated the perceptions of Eight EFL university instructors regarding assessing their EFL students using Blackboard. By conducting structured interviews, the study aimed to explore the benefits, challenges, frequently used techniques, and recommendations to overcome some obstacles encountered when using Blackboard for online assessment in the EFL context. The findings indicated that while the participants emphasized the Blackboard's assessment tools convenience, flexibility, and availability, they also highlighted increased cheating opportunities, difficulties in verifying student identities, and limitations in evaluating subjective aspects. Moreover, the lack of face-to-face communication was identified as a significant drawback, particularly in subjective courses where direct interaction is crucial in accurate assessment. Based on the obtained results, the study proposed several recommendations to enhance online assessment practices, particularly when using Blackboard, such as addressing technical issues, implementing robust security measures, providing support and training to EFL instructors and students, and considering the specific needs of EFL learners. Additionally, suggestions were made to improve the user interface, avoid generic questions, and conduct test trials to identify and resolve technical problems.

**Keywords:** online assessment; blackboard; perceptions; EFL; instructors.

## INTRODUCTION

The rapid advancement of technology nowadays is undeniable. Utilizing Information Communication and Technology (ICT) cannot be separated in educational fields due to its certain benefits for teachers and students (Suryani, 2010). Moreover, Yoestara et al. (2020) indicate that implementation of ICT in education facilitates achieving the goals of teaching and learning because teachers can provide their students with more online materials and evaluate their progresses online through a website or an application. In other words, EFL instructors can assess their students' work to make sure whether they have reached the goals of their courses or not. Thus, assessment is considered a valuable way to measure students' knowledge and motivation and to diagnose their achievement in the learning process (Newstead, 2004). Assessment functionally provides EFL teachers with appropriate feedback about how to enhance their teaching methods, so it is considered a core component of any formal educational system because it significantly affects the learning and teaching processes (Angus & Watson, 2009).

Developing some new technological tools has influenced the educational field. Several web-based learning systems have been utilized in higher education among which is Blackboard platform. Blackboard is a technological tool that enables people to teach, learn, and measure learning outcomes. It allows teachers and their students to interact wherever and whenever they want synchronously and asynchronously using different instructional services such as discussion board, video and audio files, private emails, self-test, quiz modules, and assignments. Moreover, it enables instructors to grade their students' performance, track their

interaction, and monitor class progress. In Saudi Arabia, most of the educational institutions have started using the technological tools. Those institutions activate the blended learning in which part of the teaching and learning instructions are delivered online. Numerous studies have investigated EFL teachers' perceptions of affordances and challenges of online teaching/learning processes and how to overcome these difficulties in the Saudi context. However, little has been researched EFL university instructors' perceptions towards online assessment. Accordingly, using online assessment still needs to be investigated, particularly on Blackboard.

In this regard, very limited studies were conducted to grasp EFL instructors' attitudes towards online assessment, specifically on Blackboard. Moreover, teachers' beliefs extremely influence the educational process in EFL contexts (Abduh, 2021). Thus, this study attempts to fill the gap by exploring the perceptions of EFL instructors towards assessing their students online using Blackboard and tries to answer the following questions: (1) Is Blackboard useful to assess EFL students online?; (2) what are the features of using Blackboard to assess EFL students online?; (3) what are the difficulties of using Blackboard to assess EFL students online? And what are the possible ways to overcome the challenge encountered when creating an online test on Blackboard?

The results of this study can help EFL teachers, educators, pedagogues, and syllabus and curriculum designers and developers to comprehend EFL students' needs when being tested online on Blackboard.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment has a vital role in every educational program. It controls the quality of education and learning process and indicates to which extent the objectives of the curriculum have been achieved. It is aimed to measure whether the outcomes of learning process match the intended learning outcomes of the pedagogical program (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). Webber (2012) defines assessment as tasks that are basically designed to promote student's learning. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2021) assert that designing and using the assessment contributes to developing teachers professionally. Assessment plays a key role in the educational field. It is considered the heart of the teaching process. It essentially boosts the quality of teaching and learning process. It enthruses students to study and provides feedback on their progress. It evaluates how much students understand the curriculum and determine their abilities to progress. In other words, it is aimed at measuring whether the actual learning outcomes meet the educational program's required learning outcomes (Abduh, 2021). According to Davis and Neitzel (2011), effective assessment is based on four elements which are (1) the effectiveness of feedback provided by teachers, (2) cognitive and metacognitive factors being used by students, (3) students' ability to work individually or in group, and (4) teachers' understanding of their daily assessment.

Assessment has in general two main types of assessment in which each type occurs in different levels and different phases in the learning process. They are formative assessment and summative assessment. The former occurs before and during the course and is ongoingly used as a continuous process to enhance learning and teaching. The latter occurs to measure the students' achievement at the end of the course, the instructional content, or a specific period of time (Hargreaves, 2008). Formative assessment activities are aimed to regulate the learning process and evaluate students' performance to change the instructions using constant feedback until achieving the required level of knowledge (Gikandi et al., 2011). In addition, it enables students to understand the knowledge aspects that they have not mastered yet and the aspects that they need to study on further (Bransford et al., 2002). On the other hand, summative assessment is used to make sure that the required outcomes have been met and achieved (Challis, 2005).

The growth of technology assists EFL teachers to effectively assess their students virtually (Gikandi, 2011). Online assessment is believed to be considered an alternative to evaluate students online using a website or an application (Yoestara et al., 2020). Alruwais et al. (2018) highly asserts that online assessment provides EFL students with immediate feedback and improves their performance. Accordingly, it can minimize EFL instructors' time and effort. Moreover, it saves the educational institutions' budget. Additionally, the role of online assessment has been emphasized in increasing EFL students' high order thinking skills. Also, EFL teachers can determine the skills that their students are struggling with, the challenges that teachers themselves encounter to develop better and appropriate learning (Astiandani & Anam, 2021), the skills that EFL students are good at to be improved, or even the teaching methods that EFL teachers are successful when using.

According to many researchers (McCallum and Milner, 2020; Chen et al., 2021; Ibragimova, 2021), it enables EFL students to get feedback, make self-assessment to help them to

make decisions for enhancing their learning, assist them to better comprehend the materials, enhance their learning process, lead them to feel responsibility of their learning progress and evaluate themselves, and improve their language and digital literacy skills. Furthermore, one of the most important features of online assessment is the flexibility of time and place of the test (Baleni, 2015). Moreover, online assessment is characterized by easiness of use, improving teaching practices, enhancing students' performance, strengthening EFL students' interest to learn, and providing convenience. However, there are some cores of using online assessment which are the internet connection issues, more time needed, lack of skills, facilities lack, and motivation lack (Remmi & Hashim, 2021).

### Previous studies

Arif (2020) studied the implementation of online assessment by the English teachers and how they overcame the encountered constraints during the outbreak of COVID-19. The results identified that the participants used different social networking tools such as Google Form and Google Classroom to assess the students' online assignments. Additionally, they faced many problems such as students' misunderstanding of the provided instructions, internet connection issues, and difficulty in scoring. Forrester (2020) investigated the difficulties when assessing a group speaking task and the suggested solutions to the problems of shifting from the face-to-face mode to online one due to the lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic at a university context in Hong Kong. The findings showed mixed attitudes between teachers and students in which the teachers preferred the new one-to-one- discussion assessment while the students were ambivalent with some preferring the original group discussion.

Abduh (2021) examined teachers' attitudes towards the assessment methods utilized in full-time e-learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Saudi EFL context. The findings revealed that their perceptions of online assessment were mixed, and they faced many critical challenges when evaluating the students online. Yulianto and Mujtahin (2021) conducted a study to explore the ELT teachers' perspectives and their online assessment practices during the COVID-19 crisis. The results confirmed that the participants' views were against online assessment during that critical time because they were worried about the internet connection, the validity of the assessment process, and the students' low motivation. However, the study proved that online assessment was helpful for the participants when assessing their students' achievement.

Moreover, Cirit (2015) conducted a study to investigate the perceptions of the participants towards the alternative assessment via web 2.0. The results were positive. In their study, Khan and Khan (2019) indicated that the participants reported that they were comfortable with online assessment. Almalia (2018) examined the perceptions of 120 English Teacher Education Department students towards online assessment which were very positive. In their study to investigate 82 English Department students' attitudes towards online testing system, Yoestara et al. (2020) concluded that 37% of the participants' perceptions were negative while 63% of them viewed online assessment positively and believed that it was more interesting, could ease assessing students, was suitable for evaluating all English skills for all students, did not facilitate cheating, easy to design and implement, and saved money, time, and paper.

Astiandani and Anam (2021) investigated six Indonesian secondary EFL teachers' perceptions of implementing online formative assessment in their teaching and learning processes, its affordances and challenges, and their ways to overcome such difficulties. The findings showed that the participants overall had positive attitudes towards this online testing system. They believed that it gives immediate feedback to students, increases students' performance, provides flexibility in time and place when doing assignments, and avoiding the boredom felt by students and teachers. However, those respondents demonstrated three main difficulties that need to be into account which were they had slow/no internet connection, facilities, extra time needed to create or execute online tests. They tried to solve these problems by looking for a good place where the good internet connection was available, motivating their students to be frugal when using their internet credits, requiring the students to borrow cellphones during the exam, and preparing and training before implementing their actual presentations to save time.

However, despite the rapid advancement of online learning, various studies indicated considerable amount of the challenges that influence online assessment. Al-Nuaim (2012) demonstrates that teacher's inability to identify students' identities when submitting their assignments is one of the most significant barriers that occur when testing students online. Moreover, several researchers highly emphasize that the essential problem encountered in online exams is the cheating problem that could not monitored (Harmon & Lambrinos, 2008; King et al., 2009; Watson & Sottile, 2010; Yilmaz, 2017).

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The population of this research consisted of EFL university instructors from several Saudi universities; 75% of them were females (no. 6) while 25% were males (no. 2). They belonged to many higher educational institutions with different years of teaching experiences traditionally and online. They had the experiences of teaching and assessing their students online using Blackboard. 62.5% of them had more than 10 years of teaching experience while 37.5% had from six to 10 years of teaching experience. Moreover, 75% of them had from zero to five online assessment experience year while 25% of them had from six to ten years of online assessment experience. They answered the questions voluntarily. For ethical purposes, each participant was awarded a code from A to H.

### Instrument

To answer the questions of this research, a qualitative method was used. Thus, a structured interview was designed to examine the participants' perceptions of online assessment using Blackboard. This instrument included two parts. The first was designed to obtain the participants' demographic information while the second part was designed to know their opinions towards testing their students online using Blackboard, the features and difficulties of using Blackboard to evaluate their students online, their ways to overcome the challenges they encountered when creating an online text on Blackboard, the Blackboard assessment techniques they frequently used, and their suggestions to improve the online assessment system in the EFL context.

## RESULTS

This study examined the EFL university instructors' perceptions of online assessment on Blackboard from different Saudi universities. Qualitative results provided deep views and opinions of the participants who took part in this study were analyzed. Eight EFL instructors answered the questions. Their responses varied as below:

1. Regarding the first question which was 'Do you think that Blackboard is useful to assess EFL students online?', 62.5% of them believed that Blackboard is helpful when assessing EFL students online while 37.5% disagreed with that.
2. For the second question which was 'Do you prefer using Blackboard to assess EFL students online?', the participants E, F, and G agreed that they preferred using Blackboard to assess their students because it is faster, more accurate, and offers new tools to be used for assessment. In addition, they claimed that it is more flexible and easier as it provides a lot of potentials that make it so easy to create different forms of assessment and give effective feedback. Also, they asserted that Blackboard saves time since it is available in any time and at any place. On the other hand, A, B, C, D and H did not prefer using Blackboard for evaluating their EFL students, but rather they encouraged face-to-face communication since it is more effective. They demonstrated that, by default, Blackboard, as well as any other online software, was not, is not, and will not be a tool that can assess EFL students unless they use it in the presence of invigilators at the institution. In that case only, it can be useful. They pointed out that using Blackboard for assessing the students always increases the cheating opportunities and makes it difficult to check students' ID, and even if this is possible, it is usually impossible to confirm that the students are the ones who are examined. Using Camera for that is not always practicable. Moreover, they argued that most of the instructors tend to write objective questions that do not allow EFL students to expose their capabilities. They added that it may take long time to write a suitable, accurate test in which writing an exam that can really test EFL students is not an easy task for all the faculty members. They also proposed that the nature of the course can affect the online test in which not all courses allow for such objective exam like literary courses which are overwhelmingly subjective.
3. Regarding the third question which was 'From your point of view, what are the features of using Blackboard to assess EFL students online?', all the participants' agreed that, somehow, assessing EFL students using Blackboard has some features including questions shuffling, immediate marking, and question type variety such as quizzes, assignments, and so on. Moreover, they indicated that the various forms of assessments provided by Blackboard which can be used according to the level of the EFL students and the content, the flexibility of choosing the suitable time to assess the EFL students, the different ways that EFL teachers can use to avoid cheating and plagiarism, and the various methods to provide effective feedback for the EFL students are significant features that promote using Blackboard for EFL assessment. Furthermore, the participants agreed that EFL online assessment using Blackboard saves time and efforts, saves paper and ink (referring to the green environment), and is easy

to use, to assess EFL students, and to mark the tests especially with a large number of the students.

4. For the fourth question which was 'From your point of view, what are the difficulties of using Blackboard to assess EFL students online?', all the participants agreed that the most dominant obstacles while assessing EFL students online using Blackboard are the possibility of cheating problem, internet connection problems, and system-related technical problems. They added that some students/instructors do not have the full knowledge to use Blackboard and some tasks need a lot of time to be structured and scored using Blackboard.
5. Question five, which was 'how can you overcome the challenges that you encounter when creating an online test on Blackboard?', received many answers. The participants suggested that questions should not be very general and indirect questions should be asked in which this will limit the cheating chances. Also, they proposed that they overcome the problems they faced by randomizing questions for every attempt and limiting the test time according to the types of the questions/items of the exam to ensure that all EFL student are taking the equal suitable chance to present their answers without cheating because they do not have time for that. Moreover, E asserted that EFL students should be fully prepared to perform any task shown on Blackboard. She claimed that she usually provides her students with any instruction or clarifications needed before starting the test and administer the exam through Blackboard to make sure that all students start answering at the same time. Finally, F and H demonstrated that they conducted the online tests on Blackboard in the class to limit the cheating chances and trailed the test prior to the test day to avoid any technical problems.
6. The participants answered the sixth question similarly, which was 'What are the Blackboard techniques that you frequently use to assess EFL students online?'. All the participants agreed that they tend to use multiple choices (MCQs) and true/false questions because these two types are easy to be created and marked on Blackboard and take less time when preparing them. In addition, it is possible to reorder these questions for each student and even create a bank of questions during the whole semester. Moreover, D indicated that MCQs type is preferable because it cannot be memorized, and this helps to assess higher domains which move beyond merely knowledge and comprehension. F and H implied that MCQs and true/false questions are the best for the objective questions while short answer questions are more suitable for the subjective questions which they do not usually use since this type of questions takes time to review and mark.
7. For the last question which was 'What are your suggestions to improve the online assessment system?', the answers greatly varied. Some of the participants claimed that nothing is needed to improve assessing EFL students on Blackboard since it is a perfect educational system. A pointed out that questions should not be very much general. If it is an objective type test, then MCQ or Fill in the blank (FIB) is the best option to give to the students. If it is subjective, then questions should not be asked directly. D assumed that the interface should be quick, restricting time given to answer should be limited to only objective questions so as to move beyond comprehension and test higher level domains, and

proper training for shortcut techniques should be given to staff members. E suggested that it is better to train EFL students and teachers to deal with online assessment, promote dynamic online assessment, and formalize online assessment. H confirmed that the questions should be frequently changed as students usually keep copies of previous test questions. When short answer questions are used, they should not use the textbook directly.

## DISCUSSION

This study investigated the EFL university instructors' perceptions of online assessment using Blackboard. The results of this study revealed that the EFL university instructors have mixed attitudes towards assessing their EFL students online using Blackboard in which most of the participants believe that using Blackboard to assess EFL students is useful. Problems like cheating and inability of checking the identities of those who are performing online tests were emphasized by most of the participants confirming what have been mentioned by several researchers above (e.g., Harmon & Lambrinos, 2008; King, Guyette, & Piotrowski, 2009; Watson & Sottile, 2010; Al-Nuaim, 2012; Yilmaz, 2017). Most of them agreed that online exams allow the students to cheat; this leads to academic dishonesty which increases the opportunities of gaining undeserved high marks.

The features of Blackboard for online assessment were generally well-received by participants. The availability of question shuffling, immediate marking (as it was concluded by Alruwais et al., 2018; Astiandani and Anam, 2021), a variety of question types, and flexibility in choosing assessment time (as it was asserted by Baleni, 2015) were considered beneficial. Additionally, the platform provides methods to prevent cheating and plagiarism in only questions that require written responses and offers various ways to provide effective feedback to students. These features contribute to the efficiency and effectiveness of online assessment, aligning with the needs of instructors in evaluating EFL students' progress. Moreover, some of the participants claimed that using Blackboard to assess their EFL students is more accurate, faster, easier to assess and grade EFL students especially when dealing with a sizable student population, saves time and efforts due to its availability in any time and at any place, and contributes to environmental sustainability since it reduces the consumption of ink and papers, as Yoestara et al. (2020) concluded.

Conversely, the participants in the study expressed concerns about the limitations and challenges of using Blackboard to assess EFL students. They highlighted issues such as increased cheating opportunities, difficulties in verifying students' identities, and the inability to effectively assess subjective aspects through objective questions. These are in line with what some researchers (e.g., Harmon & Lambrinos, 2008; King, Guyette, & Piotrowski, 2009; Watson & Sottile, 2010; Al-Nuaim, 2012; Yilmaz, 2017) asserted. The lack of face-to-face communication was seen as a drawback as well, particularly in subjective courses where direct interaction with students is crucial for effective assessment. In other words, they reported that Blackboard cannot be an effective assessment tool unless it is used in the presence of invigilators at the institution. Furthermore, they identified technical problems, internet connection issues, system-related challenges, and lack of sufficient knowledge of using Blackboard (either by the students or

the instructors) as common obstacles in using Blackboard for online assessment. This confirms the findings of the studies of Arif (2020), Remmi and Hashim (2021), Yulianto and Mujtahin (2021), and Astiandani and Anam (2021). Additionally, some of the participants claimed that the process of creating and scoring subjective tasks through Blackboard is time-consuming since it requires a significant amount of time and effort. They emphasized the need for overcoming these challenges through providing technical support, training, and implementing strong security measures to ensure a reliable and effective online assessment experience for both students and instructors.

Furthermore, the study highlighted the assessment techniques frequently used on Blackboard. The participants agreed that multiple-choice questions (MCQs), Fill in the Blank (FIB), and true/false questions were the most common tools utilized since these question types are easy to create, grade, and reorder. Moreover, most of the participants asserted that MCQ questions are suitable to assess higher-level thinking skills. On the other hand, they confirmed that they use short answer questions less commonly since these questions need more time to review and score.

To tackle the obstacles encountered when creating EFL online tests on Blackboard, the participants provided valuable suggestions to be implemented. These suggestions included avoiding general questions, using indirect questions to limit cheating opportunities, randomizing questions for each attempt, setting appropriate test time limits, providing students with clear and necessary instructions before the test, conducting tests in the classroom to minimize cheating chances, and conducting test trials to identify and fix technical problems.

## CONCLUSION

To sum up, this study investigated the perceptions of EFL university instructors regarding using Blackboard to assess their EFL students. The findings of this study revealed that the opinions on Blackboard's usefulness for assessing EFL students varied. Furthermore, the results highlighted the beneficial features as well as the difficulties and challenges encountered in the EFL assessment context. Moreover, Blackboard was perceived as an effective tool because it is easy to use, flexible, and always accessible if the internet is available. On the other hand, it was emphasized that Blackboard may increase cheating chances, make it difficult to check the examinee's identity and to grade subjective tasks, and be unable to foster face-to-face communication especially for subjects where talking is important. The study emphasizes the need to consider specific EFL assessment requirements and circumstances when using Blackboard. By addressing the identified challenges and implementing the suggested improvements, Blackboard can be considered a valuable tool for assessing EFL students online, providing instructors with effective means of following up students' language proficiency and progress.

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