

## Traditional and Online Assessment Tools for Learning English

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### Abstract

*As part of the English language teaching and learning process, assessing the students' knowledge and abilities has become challenging in this pandemic year and environment. Switching from one form to another, from “the paper-and-pencil language test” to an online devise poses questions and requires information technology-related skills. This paper aims at furnishing a whole range of sources showing how educators are considering the use of several assessment forms and how webinars and other online sources can help teachers all over the world make changes bearable, useful and enjoyable. This is a period of time when teachers need to be creative and think not only of better teaching and assessment methods, but also of starting or enhancing communication and interrelationship channels, improving the learning atmosphere in the virtual/online/remote “classroom”.*

**Key words:** ESP, business English, online teaching, assessment tools, webinars

**J.E.L. classification:** I21, I23

### 1. Introduction

In the age of globalization, being able to communicate through English (as a foreign language) is an essential requirement on the job market, at work and via social media. Teachers ask themselves about more efficient ways of training and assessing students appropriately in order to develop in them language competencies in accordance with their interests and needs. Assessing students' achievement may be difficult but rewarding since assessment provides information on the students' knowledge level, how much progress they have made, the efficiency of the teaching methods, strategies and materials, changes to be made (especially in the curriculum).

### 2. Theoretical background

#### 2.1. The role played by online teaching and learning in the development of ESP skills

Over the past few months, online ESL/ EFL teaching, learning and assessment have extensively replaced the so-called traditional, face-to-face methods and techniques, contributing to the enhancement of the learners' skills; however, this fact was acknowledged by many researchers long before the pandemics. According to Belcher (2006, p. 149), the communication mediated by computers is characterized by a wide array of hybrid genres that combine speaking and writing (for instance, blogs, vlogs); in addition, it provides ESL/ EFL learners with a great variety of accessible and interesting motivating means that, unfortunately, are underexamined. The same author (p. 135) believes that those who specialize in ESP (English for Specific Purposes) teaching are, first of all, “needs assessors” but also “designers and implementers of specialized curricula in response to identified needs”. The scholar further argues that, as far as ESP is concerned, the assessment of learners' needs underlies the other decisions taken in the teaching and learning process. Having in view that in ESP the focus falls upon the learners' needs, there are blurred lines separating “researchers and teachers, or curriculum designers, materials developers, and teachers”. More

information on ESP can be found at “<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Gatehouse-ESP.html>”.

Flowerdew (2013, p. 341) states that it is very cumbersome to sort out the learners’ needs as they are complex and usually involve an array of responses. In this regard, the scholar stresses that the “increasingly technologized and globalized environment” influences the nature of ESP but also offers some exciting prospects to ESP practitioners. From the perspective of the above-mentioned author, needs (which can be tackled in various ways) include the learners’ knowledge or the knowledge they wish to acquire and incorporate their “goals and backgrounds, their language proficiencies, their reasons for taking the course, their teaching and learning preferences, and the situations they will need to communicate in” (p. 325).

Bloch (2013, pp. 397-399) draws attention to the ever-changing technologies and to the importance of establishing the learners’ specific needs, which, in their turn, influence the teachers’ choices of the technologies that should be employed in order to meet the respective needs. According to this author, changes at the macro-economic level heavily influence the part played by technology in ESP courses and seminars. The capacity to access and employ new technology forms is paramount to the expansion of the knowledge economy. Teachers must be adaptable to the technology that provides opportunities to fulfill the needs of the students. In addition, it should be noted that the learners’ enthusiasm and interest are often enhanced by such modern, challenging and innovative contexts (Buzarna-Tihenea, 2018, p. 215).

It is our belief (Nădrag, 2019, pp. 325-326) that by employing modern teaching approaches, activities and techniques, combined with digital media tools (such as videos and recordings) in ESP, courses and seminars can assist teachers and learners in reaching their course objectives and also help the latter acquire or develop their skills and knowledge. Due to these modern tools, teachers have developed various techniques in order to simplify and explain complex issues, to give learners the possibility to access the course or seminar materials (which can be reused or revised later by learners) and to encourage them to analyze the discussion topics or even to learn at their own pace. In her turn, Buzarna-Tihenea (2019, p. 232) states that despite the challenges they entail, new digital media tools can unleash both the teachers’ and the students’ creativity.

Bonsignori (2018, pp. 58, 68) underlines the usefulness of audiovisual products in “learning of language and culture” and in creating “useful material for ESP contexts”. The author emphasizes the abundance of audiovisual resources, including in specialized fields. Among the benefits of using this method, one can notice the importance of non-verbal elements in meaning creation; other advantages are represented by the learners’ exposure to English native speakers and to the language used in specialized contexts.

Lei Zang (2020, pp.1-2) advocates for a hybrid ESP teaching mode, combining “traditional classroom instruction and online distance instruction”, the former stimulating the learners’ motivation and the latter expanding educational coverage, as knowledge is taught by employing network distance teaching. According to Zang, the teacher uses the network to disseminate the electronic format of the seminar and course materials and afterwards s/he can teach his/her students; consequently, learners are able to save the teacher’s materials and watch them any time they want. Therefore, the learners’ acquisitions are influenced by their time planning as well as by their mental state and a hybrid ESP teaching mode would contribute to the growth of learning efficiency and to the revision of the obstacles and doubts faced by learners.

Soliman (2016, pp. 123-128) stressed the idea that the 21st century learners could be engaged more efficiently in the learning process if teachers used digital learning techniques, switching from a “knowledge disseminator to a learner coach and helper”. He describes the “Flipped Learning Approach”. This method implies that, before engaging in course or seminar content at a more profound level in the classroom, students become acquainted with it in less formal contexts, outside the classroom, using technology. Consequently, by learning course and seminar content in advance, during class students are granted more freedom and independence in the learning process, they engage actively and are encouraged to carry out “higher order thinking tasks (application, analysis and synthesis)” and to debate important problems and topics with both their teachers and classmates. The author reports that Flipped Learning Approach has increased learners’ performance, deepened their involvement, developed their problem-solving abilities and techniques, enhanced their collaboration competences and teamwork skills, and boosted their interaction with the teacher.

## 2.2. Assessments – at the center of the ESP process

Assessment has an outstanding place in the ESP teaching and learning process; on this occasion, the teaching staff can gather a large variety of pieces of information, which can assist them in boosting the efficiency and quality of the learning and teaching activities and techniques; moreover, teachers can also check whether progress has been made and spot and overcome the difficulties encountered by their learners (by analyzing the errors and mistakes and by having subsequent discussions with them). Assessment can be viewed as a process offering clues on how much students have understood and learned the concepts in English, the new terminology, the characteristic grammar structures, their ability to communicate in the target language, in general, and the application of specialized knowledge, in particular.

Tratnik (2008, pp. 6-13) believes that one solution would involve the distribution of tasks similar to real-life situations, where learners have to use ESP. This would imply the identification and thorough investigation of these situations, in order to identify the specific knowledge of the field and the specialized terminology that is likely to be used by learners in their future professional lives, enabling them to use ESP in real communication contexts. According to the author, a qualitative ESP test should be characterized by authenticity, accuracy, practicability and reliability (in particular as far as language ability scores are concerned); moreover, its effects should be beneficial also “in terms of administration, time, money and personnel”.

As Tratnik puts it, these days, employers and various educational institutions require the use of foreign languages at certain levels and it is extremely important to meet these demands. Thus, nowadays, such ESP analyses represent crucial instruments that shape the learning and teaching processes and influence our educational society.

Kavaliauskienė and Anusienė emphasize the importance of alternative assessment, specifically seen as the learners’ active involvement in the assessment of their development and performances, focused in particular on reflective thinking (2007, pp. 134-135). The authors also tackle the portfolio, “an element of authentic assessment”, seen as “an alternative to traditional testing”, a “comprehensive way to assess students’ knowledge and skills”, which ensures authentic assessments, active participation (on the learners’ behalf) in the assessment process and the enhancement of the learners’ reflective thinking.

Chen *et al.* (2020, p. 1) consider peer assessment to be a beneficial tool that engages learners in comparisons and reflections. When learners review their colleagues’ work, since they integrate “the peer assessment mode”, their learning enhances. In their investigations of learners’ peer assessment, these scholars also focus on the learners’ behavior patterns and on the connections between these patterns and their learning performance. According to the findings of their study, peer assessment (that also involves scoring and comment mode) greatly influences the learners’ performance and encourages them to interact with their colleagues during the process. The scholars reach the conclusion that “both scoring and commenting tasks in peer-assessment activities could be a promising approach” (p. 19).

## 2.3. Effective training tools for teachers

In general, teachers have at their disposal various assessment tools for evaluating their students’ progress: *formative* (it looks for any instruction gaps, thus, assisting students in their learning process), *confirmative* (to see if the way one is teaching is still as good as it could be), *summative* (to check at the end of a course whether learning was efficient and effective and to tackle its long-term benefits) (see “<https://www.onlineassessmenttool.com/knowledge-center/assessment-knowledge-center/what-are-the-types-of-assessment/item10637>”), *interim* (it measures the students’ progress at different times throughout a seminar or course) (see “<https://www.english.com/blog/finding-right-assessment-tools-classroom/>”), *norm-referenced* (comparing a student’s performance to an average norm), *criterion-referenced* (dealing with the learners’ achievements in connection with pre-established criteria/ standards).

The COVID-19 pandemic has moved the education process online, with all the actors involved in the teaching and learning process struggling to face this difficult context and to adapt rapidly to these challenging circumstances. In this regard, applying online assessment tools has become

essential. According to Paramour (2020, pp.1-4), on the one hand, finding the best way to assess the students can be complex as a result of "working remotely, adjusting to an unfamiliar teaching environment, and using new technology". On the other hand, online teaching offers both teachers and learners new opportunities to use their critical and creative skills, to streamline the assessment process and to boost learning by exploring digital instruments and approaches. As Paramour puts it, when assessing students, the aim is to find accurate, beneficial and fair methods that engage them in contexts (that are practical in terms of implementation) similar to the real professional world, where they have to use their ESP skills.

As far as online Business English teaching, learning and assessment are concerned, there is a wide array of websites that can be used, such as "English Business online exercises" ("<https://www.businessenglishresources.com/learn-english-for-business/student-section/practice-exercises-new/>"), "Business English vocabulary exercises" ("<https://speakSpeak.com/english-grammar-exercises/business-vocabulary/>"), "Test Your Business English Skills" ("<https://www.globifylanguages.com/business-english-tests/>"), "9 Websites To Master Business English" ("<https://www.englishhints.com/master-business-english.html>"), "EnglishMediaLab" ("<http://www.englishmedialab.com/business.html>"), "British Council Business English" ("<https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/business-english>"), "engVid Business English video lessons" ("<https://www.engvid.com/topic/business-english/>"), "Business English Site" (for boosting the learners' communication skills in certain subject areas), "Breaking News English Lessons", "Business English Resources Free for Teachers and Students" (online library dedicated to business English learning), "Business English Pod" (business English lessons through audio podcasts), etc.

### 3. Findings

The coronavirus pandemic has made lots of teachers consider testing students in very different ways. An answer and support were provided by webinars held by Cambridge University Press and posted on YouTube (see "Assessment for online learning" – "[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66apPB32YyE&list=PLpmCHL8PnXq88RiE\\_Bc0bAaotsDC HsEay&index=18&t=136s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66apPB32YyE&list=PLpmCHL8PnXq88RiE_Bc0bAaotsDC HsEay&index=18&t=136s)"), "Assessing Reading and Listening online" – ("<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dRhu7NQEI1PQ>"), "Assessing Speaking online" ("<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5LZvkZRsgXU>"), "Assessing Writing online" – "<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=66apPB32YyE>").

Another useful source could be "Online Assessment Strategies for Distance Teachers and Learners" ("<https://www.3plearning.com/blog/online-assessment-strategies-distance-teachers-learners/>"). It mentions peer assessment (students show their work and discuss it), independent projects (based on a topic, using brainstorming, research, problem-solving "or a mix of different learning opportunities"), jigsaw projects (a collaborative approach involving taking responsibilities), self-assessment (which involves scaffolding, followed by the administration of a Google Forms survey/ questionnaire and, afterwards, by "a self-assessment rubric"), online learning journals (a Word document, or accessing certain free blogging platforms, "video diaries or voice recordings for greater interactivity and engagement"), portfolios (see "cloud software such as OneNote or Google Classroom", "portfolio platforms such as Seesaw", video presentations and podcasts, online discussion).

The teachers interested in using *Microsoft Teams* can go to "<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z4I-bg2KgIA>", in order to learn "How to create assignments and Grades in Microsoft Teams".

High school teachers, for example, can use *Google Forms* (released in 2008). Google Forms is a survey administration app included in the Google Drive Office suite along with Google Docs, Google Sheets and Google Slides and it is normally available through G-Suite with Google Chrome. It should be noted that various pieces of information can be collected from users by using Google Forms; this tool can take the shape of a personalized survey/ quiz. Once the information has been collected, it is automatically linked to a spreadsheet containing the answer key of the respective survey/ quiz. From this perspective, Google forms is an outstanding tool for assessing students. However, teachers need to have IT skills, while another condition is that both teachers

and students must have G-suite accounts granted by the school.

As usual, when preparing an assessment activity, a certain pattern should be followed: to assess the situation by setting the objectives, the online platform, the type of exercises or activities, the time allotted to each exercise, the ways of marking them (in this case they are automatically marked). The results are shown instantaneously, so that the students can find out the score right away. Afterwards, the teacher has the possibility to provide feedback in the form of comments and urge them to pay more attention to certain aspects.

When designing the assessment form, the teacher has to balance the test items, taking into consideration criteria such as type (i.e. direct or indirect), number, order of test items and time allocated to each section. It should be noted that online assessments by forms provide both students and teachers with the opportunity to save time for solving or marking and multiple-choice items entail accurate scores. However, teachers should be careful if they include items that require students to type words, phrases or paragraphs, as some online assessment forms are sensitive and the students' answers should be checked manually. Doing a weighting score should also be taken into consideration; for instance, more difficult tasks (such as the writing ones) should be associated with more points, while multiple choice items should bring fewer points. Before administering the test to real students, teachers should try it out, in order to make sure that it can be accessed and solved properly; on this occasion, the teaching staff members are also able to pinpoint and redress any possible errors and check whether the test timing has been set correctly, in accordance with the number of tasks and with the difficulty level.

In order to avoid cheating, teachers can adopt some strategies, such as setting time limits (if not for each assessment task or section, at least for the entire test), restricting the entire form to only one response (i.e. once a task is solved, students cannot go back and redo it), designing tasks whose answers cannot be easily found on the internet or in the textbook, demanding learners to keep their cameras and microphones on during the test.

#### 4. Conclusions

The information provided throughout the article has shown alternative ways of performing various types of assessment in the pandemic, including formative or summative ones. Although the teaching and learning conditions have changed, there are methods and strategies which can bring learners together, developing their communication and team working skills as well as their capacity to turn threats and hardships into learning opportunities.

We live in an era dominated by technology and every minute brings into the limelight new online assessment possibilities and creative solutions to various drawbacks. Having in view advantages such as flexibility, time saving and cost effectiveness/ efficiency, online assessment might represent the future that has been unexpectedly speeded up by the SARS-COV 2 pandemic.

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