Practices, validity, and challenges of online formative assessment in Algerian higher education

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Abstract

Online assessment, whether formative or summative, appears to be a problematic issue for many English as a foreign
language (EFL) university teachers. Formative assessment is crucial for improving the quality of teaching and learning.
Therefore, it is highly significant to recognize the possible trends of online formative assessment offered in the Algerian
university context. In this regard, this paper aims at exploring the online formative assessment practices of EFL university
teachers including the type of formative assessment experienced, assessment and feedback techniques, and the validity of
the assessment strategies employed virtually. It further seeks to identify the challenges faced in the process. To achieve this,
a qualitative approach based on exploratory and descriptive research design was adopted. An online questionnaire was
administered to 16 EFL teachers from 12 Algerian universities. The findings revealed that participants employ a variety of
online formative assessment strategies for various purposes. The overall practices are, to a certain degree, valid.

Keywords: English as a foreign language (EFL); formative assessment; online assessment; university teacher.

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1. Introduction

The rapid spread of technology reshaped the educational sphere, bringing innovation in teaching and learning known as technology-based instruction (Meccawy, Meccawy & Alsobhi, 2021). This approach is based on delivering instruction via Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools, triggering the birth of new teaching pedagogies such as blended learning, online learning, and distance education. However, assessment as an essential part of instruction needs to respond to these changes and is now virtually implemented under the label of an online assessment.

The implementation of online assessment is a novel concept in the Algerian context; it was encouraged due to the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Salient research was devoted to figuring out the realities of online learning in Algeria. For instance, Bin Harzallah's paper (2021) revealed the struggles and failed attempts of the Algerian Ministry of higher education to successful e-learning programs. By the same token, Kerras and Salhi (2021) discussed the limitations and challenges regarding the Algerian university context during the pandemic. They pointed to the lack of teachers' and students' expertise within technology-based instruction as they acknowledged other problems such as networking issues and a lack of real interaction between teachers and students.

Despite the varied literature on the realities of online education in Algeria, little attention has been given to online assessment. Therefore, this study aims at investigating EFL online formative assessment (henceforth OFA) practices involved in Algerian universities. Specifically seeks to explore the strategies employed by Algerian EFL university teachers, and the extent to which such practices match the requirements and purposes of OFA (validity). The study also elaborates on the major challenges confronted in the process. To achieve these objectives, the following research questions are put forward:

1-What are EFL university teachers' practices of OFA?

2-To what extent are teachers' practices of assessment valid?

3-What are the challenges confronted in implementing OFA?

1.1. Conceptual and theoretical underpinnings

This section acquaints readers with the basic concepts related to assessment in general and highlights the possible online formative assessment strategies. It further discusses the validity of the assessment and recounts the challenges faced when practicing online assessment.

1.1.1. Formative Vs. summative assessment

Assessment is a part of instruction that reflects the progress and quality of learning delivered (Lam, 2020; Lu & Cutumisu, 2022; Holden & Tanenbaum, 2023). It is deemed a systematic process of documenting learning via measurable evidence (Koç et al, 2015). Two major types of assessment appear in the literature with different purposes: formative and summative assessment (Koç et al, 2015).

Formative assessment (henceforth FA) is based on assessing students regularly to gain insights into their progress (Kim et al., 2021). It allows teachers to identify the weaknesses and gaps for improvements and serves as a guide for instructional planning (Vanek et al, 2020). This type of assessment is known as an "assessment for learning", i.e., which is implemented to improve the learning quality. Earl (2003) explained "that assessment for learning" is employed to give an account of students' strengths and weaknesses and locate their learning needs to provide them with required scaffolding through effective feedback strategies. The purpose of formative assessment as indicated by Wiliam and Thompson (2008) is to support learning.

On the other hand, "summative assessment" (SA*)* is the type of assessment implemented by the end of a learning sequence with the aim of grading students (Koç et al, 2015). This type of

evaluation is known as an "assessment of learning". It involves judgments about students' placement and usually grading students in comparison to other students (Earl, 2003).

Both forms of assessment are significant in supporting learning and should be considered in a given learning sequence. In response to the introduction of online education in Algerian higher instruction, authorities are required to provide equipment and facilities for the practice of online assessment in general and online formative assessment in particular. In what follows, some OFA strategies are acknowledged.

1.1.2. Online formative assessment strategies

Online assessment is the type of assessment delivered online; it involves the use of traditional assessment methods delivered via online programs and software (McLaughlin & Yan, 2017; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021; Upchurch et al., 2022). It can be sorted into two major types; synchronously or asynchronously. Synchronicity refers to simultaneous and real-time interaction with students while asynchronicity is based on no real-time engagement. Interestingly, Okaz (2015) explained that instructors provide students with asynchronous content to explore in their own time followed by classroom discussions or debates. Vanek et al., (2020) suggested certain assessment methods that suit the requirement of distance education and reflect the online learning environment. The following sub-section outlines some of the proposed strategies:

Reviewing students' online work: Assessing students' progress requires teachers to review their work regularly and provide feedback in the process. Online work can be accessed via email or posted feedback on e-learning platforms (asynchronous feedback) (Vanek et al., 2020). Leibold and Schwarz (2015) added that online feedback could take the format of a live synchronous web-based conference. Synchronous conferencing encourages interaction among participants as it supports immediate feedback (Wilkinson & Hemby, 2000 as cited in Grant & Cheon, 2007). ''Culminating Activity'': Examples of such types of activities include involvement in online discussions, presentations, projects, and writing assignments. The latter can be submitted through emails, e-learning platforms, or websites (Vanek et al., 2020). The Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environment (Moodle) platform is the most popular e-learning platform in Algerian universities (Guemide & Maouche, 2021). It enables teachers to post materials, exchange documents, evaluate students, assess students regularly, and assign homework (Ghouali & Cecilia, 2021).

Interaction with students**:** Online interaction involves meeting students via online tools like Google Meet, Skype, or Zoom to review their work and receive feedback to broaden their understanding. Interaction with students can be synchronous or asynchronous based on the nature of the assigned task. It is encouraged to keep in contact with students and respond to their needs and inquiries (Vanek et al, 2020).

Based on the strategies discussed above, we may conclude that technology-based instruction offers a variety of techniques to facilitate interaction between teachers and students. It provides teachers with multiple platforms to assign various sorts of tasks and deliver feedback at their own pace. However, for effective implementation of the strategies, both teachers and students need to have access to the appropriate equipment and possess the necessary expertise with technological tools. It is evident that the efficiency of the implemented strategies highly depends on their validity.

1.1.3. Validity of online formative assessment

Validity in evaluation entails the accuracy of measurement. Brown and Abeywickrama (2010) argued that a test is considered valid when it measures what it claims to measure, i.e., it should reflect the objectives of the course. Given the context of OFA, validity is known as the degree to which the assessment techniques and processes support learning (Gikandi et al, 2011); in other words, the extent to which the employed strategies reflect the purpose of OFA.

Accordingly, Ramaprasad (1983) suggested three major instructional processes that indicate the teacher's role in formative assessment:

- Establishing where the learners are in their learning.
- Establishing where they are going.
- Establishing what needs to be done to get them there (Ramaprasad as cited in Black &Wiliam, 2009, p. 4)

Ramaprasad's assumption reflects the traditional view that emphasizes the role of the teacher and neglects the role of other participants who may contribute to the process (as cited in Black & Wiliam, 2009). Based on his view, Wiliam and Thompson (2008, as cited in Black & Wiliam, 2009) developed a framework that involved other agents participating in the process, adding the role of the student and other peers in formative assessment (Table 1).

Table 1

Aspects of Formative Assessment

	Where the learner is going	Where the learner is right now	How to get there
Teacher	1 Clarifying learning intentions and criteria for success	2 Engineering effective class-room discussions and other learning tasks that elicit evidence of student understanding	3 Providing feedback that moves learners forward
Peer	Understanding and sharing learning intentions and criteria for success	4 Activating students as instructional resources for one another	
Learner	Understanding learning intentions and criteria for success	5 Activating students as the owners of their own learning	

Source: Black & William, 2009, p. 5.

The suggested framework establishes the significant role of each agent in the process of formative assessment. The teacher has to be aware of the student's weaknesses by performing ongoing evaluations, planning well to improve teaching to meet their needs, employing effective strategies, and providing efficient feedback to support their learning. Additionally, this framework emphasizes the peers' contribution to the FA process. Interaction among students supports the exchange of ideas and allows for improvements and adjustments in learning. Also, the student's participation in the FA process is acknowledged and known as self-assessment. which, in return, entails the active role the students play in developing their learning. Teachers should encourage students to reflect on their work and to be more independent about their learning.

Given the context of online assessment, McLaughlin and Yan (2017) argued that OFA allows students to develop the complex cognitive processes they need to be successful. Besides, Brown (2005) accentuated the significance of involving self-assessment, peer assessment, and group assessment as they support deep learning and improve students' metacognition (students learn about their learning). Endorsing Brown's view, Kigandi (2010, as cited in Baleni, 2015) argued that OFA activities should create opportunities to construct knowledge, allow the exchange of information among peers and permit reflection (self-assessment) on their comprehension. Such statements encourage individual work, pair work, and group work as they support the use of self-assessment and peer assessment.

Based on the aforementioned considerations, the validity of OFA practices is based on the significant role of each agent involved in Wiliam and Thompson's framework. In other words, the measurement checks the extent to which teachers' online formative assessment strategies/ purposes match the aims of OFA, along with the degree to which the student and the other peers are active (involved) in the process of OFA. Correspondingly, applying effective OFA strategies while considering their validity is a challenging task in itself as the practice of OFA involves obstacles and problems along the process.

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1.1.4. Challenges of online assessment

The process of online assessment might be challenging for many instructors, especially those with limited technical skills with ICT tools (Nuruzzaman, 2016). Reed argued that the lack of staff training is among the obstacles to implementing blended and online programs in Higher Education (as cited in Bowyer & Chambers, 2017, p. 18). Beleulmi (2022) summarized the challenges that may arise while assessing online in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Online assessment challenges

Source: Beleulmi, 2022, p. 53.

Accordingly, many factors can affect the implementation of online assessment, which appear at different levels, including students' unethical practices and engagement problems, teachers lacking technological skills, technical issues related to the Internet or infrastructure and equipment, and lack of reliable assessment software. In effect, the successful practice of online assessment requires introducing training, equipping institutions, and owning a strong technical infrastructure. It also involves familiarity with students' engagement problems as well as awareness of their unethical practices.

Owing to the transition to online education and given the importance of online assessment, it is highly significant to uncover the realities underlying the practice of online formative assessment in the Algerian higher education context. Literature is very limited as far as OFA is concerned. Hence, this research is undertaken to bring insights into OFA strategies, their validity, and the challenges confronted. Subsequently, the following section will discuss the methodology adopted to reach the objectives of the study.

2. Materials and methods

The subsequent section sheds light on the research design followed in undertaking this empirical study. It describes the method and procedure employed to gather data, the participants under study, and the ethical issues considered throughout the research work.

2.1. Data collection instrument

Given the nature of the variables under study, this inquiry adheres to a qualitative research design as its main purpose is to explore and describe the practices and challenges regarding OFA in the Algerian EFL university context. To gather data and answer our research questions, an online questionnaire was administered through *Google Forms* to the target teachers. Online questionnaires are easy to administer, provide fast data collection and enable reaching different respondents from diverse locations. In the context of this study, data could be generated from EFL teachers belonging to different Algerian universities.

The questionnaire comprises four (4) major sections. The first section, entitled background information, aims to gain insights into the profile of the participants under study. The second section explores participants' experiences with online assessment. The third section addresses online

formative assessment practices experienced in the Algerian context. The last section provides an account of the challenges confronted in the process and discusses the suggested solutions.

2.2. Analysis

A mixture of open-ended and closed-ended questions was used. Multiple choice questions were employed, and some justifications and elaborations were required. Therefore, the findings are analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively.

2.3. Participants

The study targeted 16 EFL university teachers from 12 Algerian universities based on a purposeful sampling procedure. The questionnaire was delivered to EFL university teachers who were employing online formative assessment in their formal instruction, and the data gathered is not meant to form generalizations.

2.4. Ethical considerations

It is worth mentioning that the researchers obtained the consent of the respondents at the onset as their identities remained anonymous throughout the research work. The researchers were also aware of plagiarism issues and acknowledged all the consulted sources in the text and the reference list, using summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting techniques. Additionally, the researchers aimed for objectivity by avoiding subjective bias and personal judgments in data analysis and interpretation.

3. Results

3.1. Section 01: Background information

The first section provided a general background about the target teachers, revealing their gender, degree, university affiliation, their teaching experience, and t subject matters. Notably, the sample involves nine (9) females and seven (7) males. The majority of participants hold a doctorate (10 teachers), while the remaining others (6) hold a magister's degree. Participants of the study are from twelve (12) different Algerian universities and the majority have extensive teaching experience; fourteen (14) teachers have been teaching at the university for more than five years, while two (2) participants are newly recruited. All participants reported teaching different subject matters from different specialties.

3.2. Section 02: Experience with online assessment

3.2.1. How do you rate your competence with ICTs?
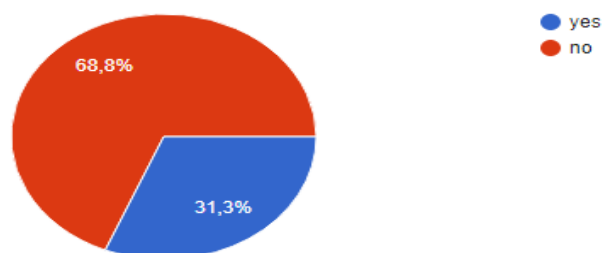
Figure 2
Competence with ICTs
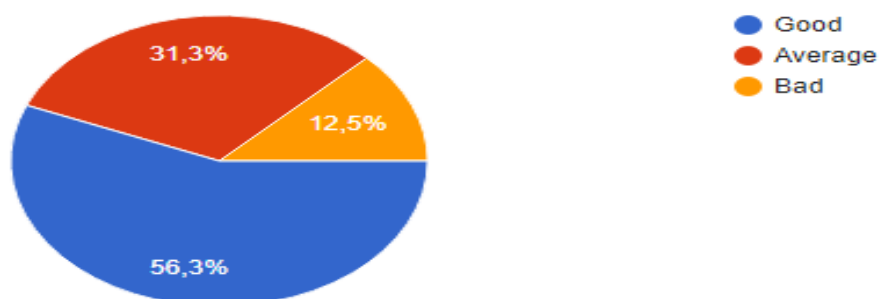
As far as competence with ICTs is concerned (Figure 2), the majority (9 teachers) claimed to be competent enough, five (5) others showed humble competence, while two (2) participants indicated their poor mastery of ICT tools.

3.2.2.   Have you been prepared for the use of online assessment? If yes, explain how?

Figure 3
Readiness to online assessment

As seen in Figure 3**,** the majority (11 teachers) were not prepared to use online assessments. However, five participants reported receiving training on how to assess online. The newly recruited teachers explained that it was a part of the training they received after being recruited. Others indicated that the university e-platform staff provided them with some training sessions on how to assess online through video conferencing.

3.2.3.   For how many years have you been integrating online assessment into your instruction?

Table 2
Experience with online assessment

Online assessment	Frequency
1 year	4
2 years	6
3 years	4
5 years	1
10 years	1

The majority of participants reported integrating online assessment for the past two years. They explained that it was due to the pandemic situation that imposed distance instruction and assessment. Surprisingly, one participant reported using online assessments for ten years. This fact indicates that online assessment is not an innovative technique in Algeria; it existed before the pandemic.

### 3.3. Section 03: Online formative assessment practices

3.3.1.   In which module(s) do you apply online formative assessment?

Teachers reported applying online formative assessment with different content subjects such as linguistics, literature, and psychology and some other skill-based subjects like writing and speaking.

3.3.2.   Which Internet applications do you use to interact with your students? (You can cite others)
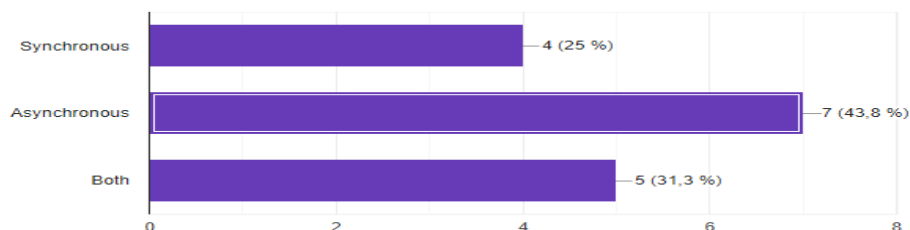
Figure 4
Online tools of interaction used
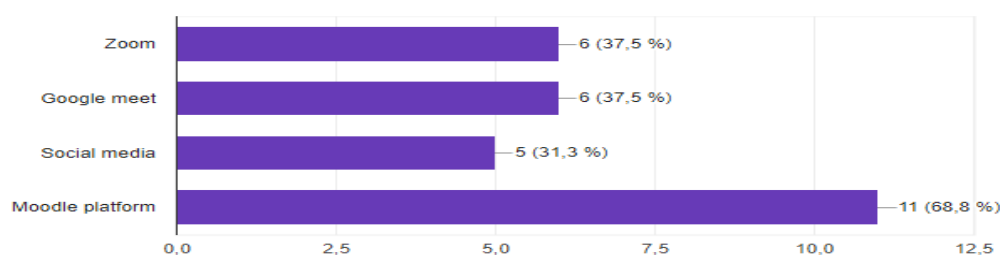
It appears that participants are using a variety of applications to interact with their students (Figure 4). The Moodle platform is widely used among participants. In addition to that, they also use Zoom, Google Meet, and social media. Teachers cited Emails, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and Google Drive apps as other applications used.

3.3.3.   Which mode of online formative assessment do you use? Justify your choice(s)
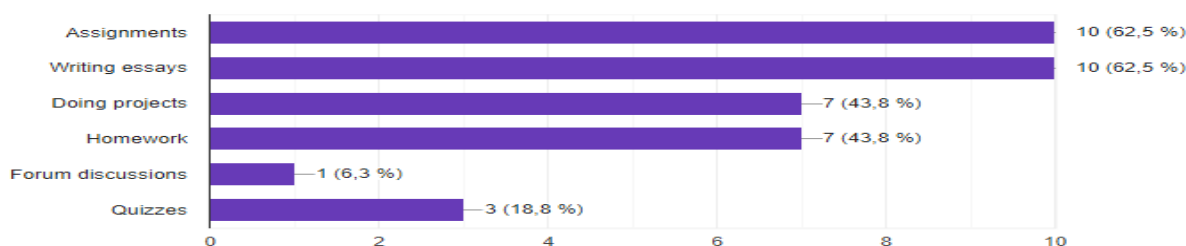
Figure 5
Online formative assessment modes

As seen in Figure 5, asynchronous formative assessment is mostly adopted by the participants in the study. The informants explained that it provides students with time to explore and understand the material, before responding to it. They also mentioned that technical Internet issues affect the feasibility of synchronous assessment.

Few teachers prefer synchronous assessment and believe in its appropriateness in assessing students' progress. While respondents who use both types explained that the nature of the subject matter requires the use of both techniques.

3.3.4.   What online formative assessment activities do you employ?

Figure 6
*Online formative assessment activities*

As seen in Figure 6, assignments and writing essays are the most commonly used in assessing students regularly. Homework and projects are also used for the same purpose. Only one participant acknowledged the use of forum discussions for assessment, while quizzes are occasionally employed.

3.3.5.   How do you assess your students? justify your choice(s)

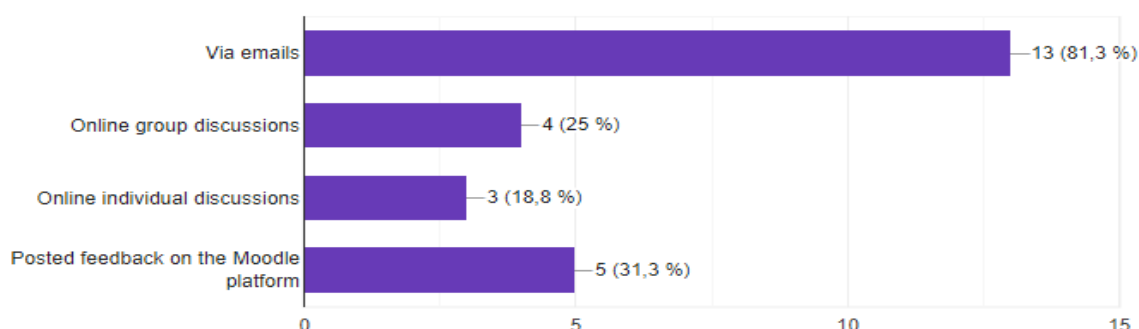**Figure 7**
Techniques of assessment
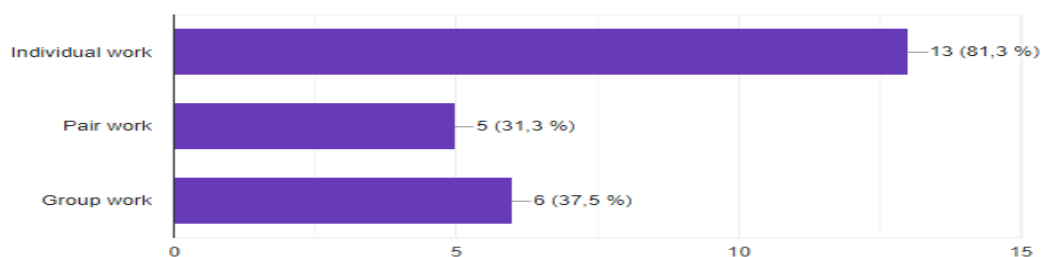
As seen in Figure 7, the majority of respondents rely on individual work, with some also incorporating group work and pair work. Individual work is highly valued by teachers due to its credibility in reflecting students' real level and enabling teachers to identify each individual's problems. Additionally, some teachers indicated that it enhances students' personal and critical thinking skills and supports autonomy. Proponents of pair work believe that certain ideas should be discussed first with peers before being shared with the teacher. While teachers who encourage group work explained that it is due to a large number of students and group work also helps develop higher-order skills. Interestingly, some teachers use a combination of all techniques and state that the type of assignment determines the strategy used.

3.3.6.   How do you provide online feedback?

Figure 8
*Online tools for feedback delivery*

As seen in Figure 8, most of the time, teachers' feedback is delivered via email. Other times, they post it on the Moodle platform. They occasionally opt for online group discussions, and they rarely discuss them individually. One participant added that his feedback is delivered via Google Docs.

3.3.7.   To what extent do you use the following strategies? justify your choices?

 Figure 9
Techniques of feedback
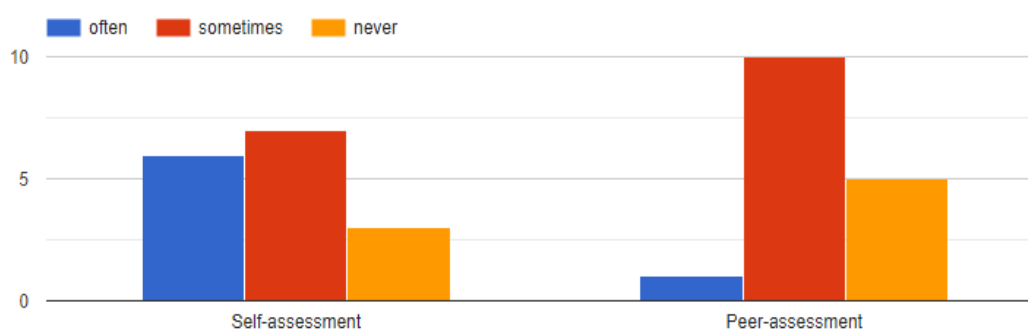
Self-assessment. Participants encouraging self-assessment explained that the latter supports developing self-reflection, critical thinking, self-monitoring strategies, and autonomy (figure 9). Some appreciated the fact that students should be trained to be aware of their problems. The informants occasionally employing self-assessment claimed that the type of assessment is determined by pedagogical needs, content, and time restrictions*.* Few participants appear not using this aforementioned technique due to the large number of students.

Peer assessment. The majority appear to using it occasionally and shared similar reasons for using self-assessment occasionally (figure 9). Other participants indicated the significance of

peer assessment and seem to appreciate the role of other peers in enhancing learning. However, one participant admitted that assessment is done by the teacher most of the time.

Both. Many appear to use a mixture of both strategies and consider them as effective in developing overall competence as they accentuated the importance of eclectic assessment (figure 9). It is worth mentioning that few teachers admitted not using both strategies and explained that it is due to time constraints and a lack of students' encouragement and engagement. One asserted that students are not competent enough for both self and peer assessment.

3.3.8.   What is your aim in employing formative assessment?

Figure 10
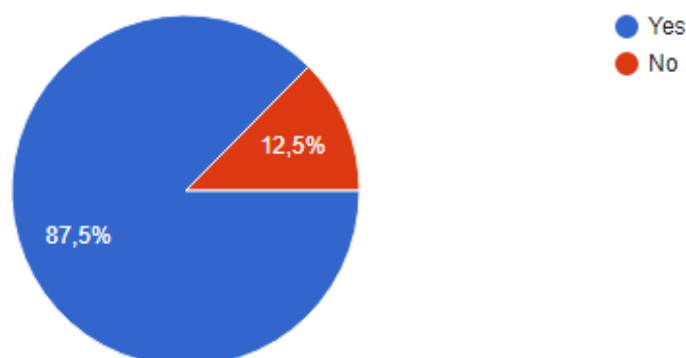*Aims of formative assessment*
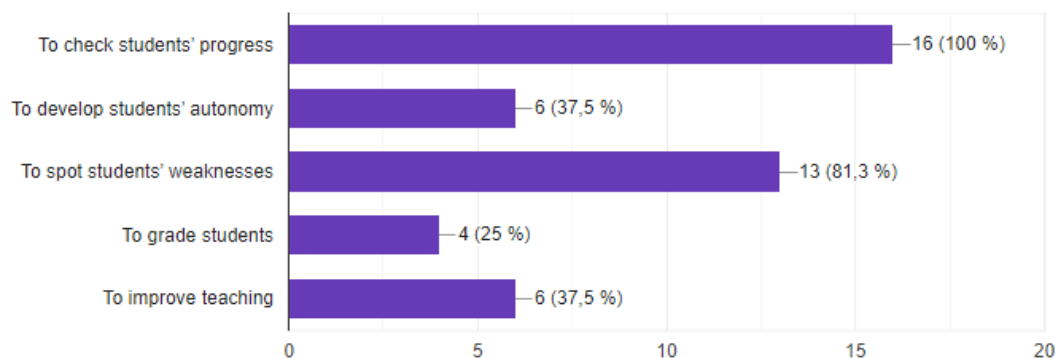
As seen in Figure 10, all participants agreed that formative assessment aims to check students' progress. Additionally, the majority added the purpose of spotting students' weaknesses. Besides, others mentioned the importance of developing students' autonomy and improving teaching practices through formative assessment. However, four participants claimed that formative assessment is meant for grading students. Accordingly, formative assessment contributes to the final grade of subjects- based on the summative evaluation.

3.4. Section 04: Challenges of online formative assessment
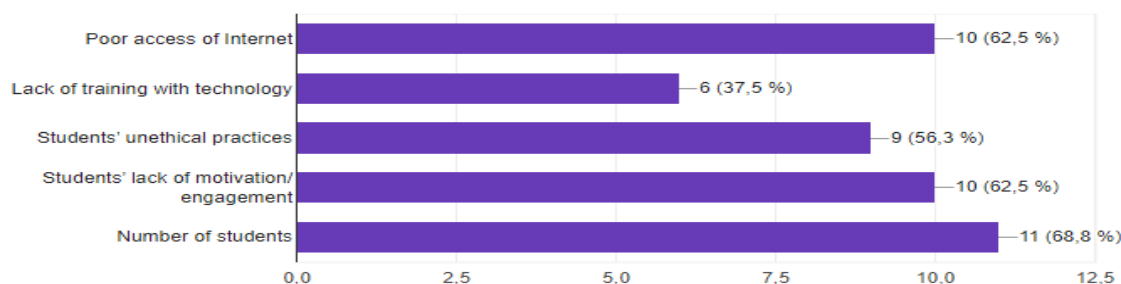*3.4.1.   Do you find it challenging to assess online?*

Figure 11
Attitude toward online assessment

From Figure 11, the majority (14 participants) find it a challenging task to assess online.

3.4.2.   What are the challenges faced while using online formative assessment strategies?

Figure 12

Challenges of online formative assessment

From Figure 12, the majority complained about the number of students especially when it is huge; it becomes quite impossible to handle assessing it. In addition, poor access to the Internet and students' lack of motivation/ engagement appears to be problematic issues for many teachers (10). Nine teachers mentioned students' unethical practices. Moreover, six participants claimed that a lack of training in technology makes the task challenging for them. Besides the stated problems, some participants indicated that the validity and reliability of the evaluation are shaken due to plagiarism issues and submission beyond deadlines. Some informants complained about students' unfamiliarity with online modes of evaluation.

3.4.3. What do you do to overcome the challenges?

Teachers suggested some solutions to overcome certain challenges. The majority suggested penalizing students for their unethical practices and yet proposed using plagiarism checkers to detect copy-and-paste answers, avoid asking cheatable questions, and make them improvise with what they have done. One participant claimed the fact of not depending on the results obtained from online assessment only, hence the inclusion of extra in-person assessment strategies to be aware of the unethical practices. Another proposed the use of online synchronous contact. Interestingly, two participants reported their failure in overcoming Internet issues challenges, and others admitted the need for more training.

4. Discussion

The first section revealed that the majority are experienced teachers holding a doctorate, belonging to twelve Algerian universities, and teaching different subject matters. The second section reported that most teachers are competent enough with ICTs; however, they claimed their unreadiness to online assessment due to not receiving training on that concern. This lack of training implies that problems may appear in the process, which, in turn, may affect the quality of their practices. The following subsections will shed light on teachers' major practices, their validity, as well as the challenges encountered in the process.

The second section tackles informants' practices in terms of the set of strategies involved in the process of OFA. Such practices include the tools of interaction used, the modes of assessment employed, strategies of assigning work to be assessed, types of online activities assigned, as well as tools and techniques of feedback delivery along with the purpose of OFA.

Teachers make use of diverse applications to keep in touch with their students; they reported using Zoom, Google Meet, social media, Emails, Skype, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, and Google Drive apps. However, according to Guemide and Maouche (2021), the Moodle platform is more widely used and encouraged in the Algerian higher education system than the other tools. Overall, such practices reflect the online learning environment and support the assessment methods suggested by Vanek et al., (2020). The latter explained that teachers can make use of a variety of e-learning platforms, and websites to keep in contact with their students.

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Online formative assessment can be synchronous (based on real-time interaction) and asynchronous (no real-time interaction) assessment. Findings revealed that the *asynchronous* mode of assessment is widely acknowledged among our research respondents for its feasibility whereas *synchronous* assessment is limited due to technical conditions and Internet issues.

Vanek et al., (2020) suggested the use of culminating activities such as involvement in online discussions/ quizzes, assignments, and projects to assess students in virtual environments. Most of the teachers seem to encourage such culminating activities. They appear using assignments, essay writing, homework, and projects in the process of OFA. However, quizzes and online/forum discussions are appreciated by only a few teachers. This diversity is expected given that the participants teach different subject matters.

Besides, the majority favor individual work for its credibility and explained that the ultimate goal of formative assessment is checking individuals' ongoing progress. Group work and pair work are encouraged too by some participants. Such practices seem to contradict Kigandi's ideas, which argued that OFA activities should create opportunities to construct knowledge and allow the exchange of information among peers. Wiliam and Thompson's framework (2007) emphasizes the importance of involving peers and individuals in the process of formative assessment through peer and self-assessment. Brown (2005) also highlights the significance of involving self/peer/group assessments as they support deep learning and improve students' metacognition. Interestingly, teachers seem to be aware of the indispensable role of self-and peer assessment, with self-assessment being more acknowledged. They explained that both techniques are efficient in developing critical thinking, reaching autonomy, and supporting learning in general.

Vanek et al., (2020) suggested reviewing online work and providing online feedback, which can be delivered through emailing students, or posting it on e-learning platforms (asynchronous feedback). Leibold and Schwarz (2015) added that online feedback is also possible through synchronous conferencing. Accordingly, the findings reveal that teachers' feedback is delivered via email, and some post it on the Moodle platform or Google Docs. Online feedback discussions are encouraged by a few teachers. Such findings reveal that feedback is delivered asynchronously and there is a lack of synchronous feedback.

The majority of participants reported different aims for implementing OFA. They stated: awareness of students' weaknesses, developing autonomy, and improving teaching, while all participants agreed that the ultimate goal of OFA is checking students' progress. Such statements reflect the aims of FA as indicated by Vanek et al*.,* (2020), and Earl (2003), and respond to the aspects of FA suggested in Wiliam and Thompson's Framework (2008). The suggested framework emphasized teachers' awareness of students' weaknesses through ongoing evaluation, planning well to improve teaching to meet their needs and support their learning. Additionally, it accentuated the importance of individual reflection in achieving autonomy. However, some respondents admitted to using OFA to grade students. In this context, Koç et al., (2015) and Earl (2003) argued that judgments about students' placement or grading students in comparison to others reflect rather the aims of summative evaluation. It is necessary then to consider the validity of such practices.

Based on the aforementioned practices, the majority of EFL teachers appear applying OFA for different subject matters, mainly through asynchronous assessment, though others prefer synchronous assessment. They further admitted using different ICT tools to assign a variety of OFA activities and provide feedback via various applications. Importantly, online assessment involves the use of traditional assessment methods delivered via online programs and software (McLaughlin & Yan, 2017). Subsequently, such practices, to a certain degree, reflect the requirements of OFA environments.

Accordingly, all teachers agreed upon the aims of implementing FA and explained its effectiveness in improving teaching and hence supporting learning. However, some teachers use FA for grading students, which goes against its core principle.

Findings also revealed that most participants acknowledged the credibility of individual work, but others admitted using peer and group work for their effectiveness in developing learning. In general, participants use self and peer assessment, with self-assessment being more acknowledged. Although some teachers admitted not using any of the aforementioned techniques, they advocated their significance in developing critical thinking, reaching autonomy, and promoting learning. Overall, most participants seem to be aware of the crucial role of the student and the other peers in developing learning. Such findings approximately support the ideas suggested in Wiliam and Thompson's (2008) framework, but only to a certain extent respond to the requirements and purposes of OFA.

Correspondingly, OFA practices involved in Algerian universities are not fully valid due to the lack of synchronous assessment and the absence of synchronous feedback. Furthermore, some participants use OFA for grading students, which does not match FA purposes, reflecting the purpose of summative evaluation instead (Koç et al., 2015; Earl, 2003). Additionally, some participants support peer assessment, and pair/group work, and other participants admitted not opting for self/peer assessment techniques. Hence, individuals and peers' contribution emphasized in Wiliam and Thompson's (2008) framework is neglected by some teachers. Such statements weaken the validity of the overall practices.

Most teachers consider online formative assessment as a challenging task due to many problems related to students, teachers, and Internet issues. Participants reported that the huge number of students makes it challenging to perform online formative assessments. Additionally, they added students' unethical practices (cheating, plagiarism, submission beyond the deadline) that question the validity and reliability of the results. Others complained about students' lack of motivation and engagement in virtual environments.

Lack of training on ICTs in general and online assessment in specific affect the teachers' performance in virtual environments. Many admitted their unreadiness to online modes of delivery due to not receiving any training about such concerns. Informants cited Internet problems and technical issues (poor access to the Internet on the part of students and teachers) as obstacles hindering the OFA delivery process.

The challenges confronted while implementing OFA appear to be similar to the ones confronted in online learning in general (Bin Harzallah, 2021; Kerras & Salhi, 2021) and online assessment in specific. Accordingly, Beleulmi (2022) indicated that students' engagement problems, academic dishonesty, lack of technological skills, and poor technical infrastructure are among the problems experienced while implementing online assessment in general. Interestingly, our study revealed that the large number of students assigned appears to be a problematic issue in implementing OFA in specific. The majority admitted that OFA is meant to check individuals' ongoing progress; therefore, the huge number of students makes the process challenging and quite impossible to handle assessing each formatively. It is needless to say that the overall stated challenges may affect the quality of the practices and weaken their validity.

For the raised challenges, participants under study proposed penalizing students for their unethical practices. They suggested using special software to detect plagiarism, opting for synchronous contact, and assigning extra in-person tasks to avoid all sorts of cheating and add more validity to the overall evaluation. Additionally, they recommended introducing training for teachers and students to familiarize them with an online mode of evaluation and set effective regulations about this concern. Some participants honestly declared their stumble in overcoming the problems raised. Therefore, future research is motivated to dig into this area and propose effective solutions.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed at investigating EFL online formative assessment practices involved in twelve (12) Algerian universities and checking the validity of certain practices, as well as identifying

the major challenges faced. It revealed that though the majority of EFL teachers were not prepared for the use of online assessment, many could handle the challenge and employ different strategies in the process, which are varied among each other. Teachers seem to be aware of the purpose of OFA, and appreciate the contribution of the individual and the other peers in the process; however, they do not appear to involve them due to time constraints, and technical issues.

Also, the lack of synchronous assessment, the absence of synchronous feedback, and the fact that some OFA purposes respond to the aims of summative assessment weaken the validity of the overall practices. Therefore, we can say that, to a certain degree, the teachers' practices are valid. Many challenges appear to hinder the process of OFA at different levels (in relation with teachers, students, and Internet issues). It is needless to say that certain challenges appear to affect the validity of certain practices and shake the quality of the overall process.

For this reason, future research is recommended to address the following inquiries:

- ✓ Explore deeply the practices involved in OFA (like effective feedback strategies)
- ✓ Check the quality (validity and reliability) of OFA.
- ✓ Devote more studies to investigating the challenges arising from OFA environments as far as the Algerian context is concerned.
- ✓ Identify solutions for the OFA problems experienced in Algerian universities.

Stakeholders are further recommended to:

- ✓ Familiarize students and teachers with the nature of online assessment mode of evaluation.
- ✓ Introduce training for teachers on how to perform effectively in virtual environments and how to handle the challenges that may appear.
- ✓ Set new and appropriate regulations addressing unethical practices experienced by students.

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