



## The Effect of Online Assessment on EFL Students' Anxiety and Engagement

تأثير التقييم عبر الإنترنت على قلق ومشاركة طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية

### L'effet de l'évaluation en ligne sur l'anxiété et l'engagement des étudiants de l'ALE

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#### ملخص

أصبح التقييم عبر الإنترنت شائعاً بشكل متزايد في مجال التعليم، بما في ذلك تعليم اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية. وإذا كان للتقييم عبر الإنترنت العديد من المزايا، مثل زيادة المرونة والكفاءة، فقد أثبتت مخاوف بشأن تأثيره السلبي المحتمل على قلق طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومشاركتهم الفعالة. يعد القلق والمشاركة من العوامل الحاسمة في تعلم اللغة وتقييمها، وقد وجد أنها تؤثر على أداء الطلاب وتحفيزهم وتطورهم اللغوي. يقدم هذا المقال مراجعة نقدية للأدبيات حول تأثير التقييم عبر الإنترنت على قلق طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية ومشاركتهم. ويتناول وجهات النظر المتضاربة والبحوث السابقة حول هذا الموضوع ويقدم تحليلاً للمواضيع والنتائج الرئيسية. كما يقترح توصيات للبحث والممارسة في المستقبل. بشكل عام، يسلط هذا المقال الضوء على أهمية النظر بعناية في الآثار التربوية للتقييم عبر الإنترنت، بما في ذلك الحاجة إلى تعليمات ودعم واضحين، وتوازن بين طرق التقييم، وبيئة تعليمية محفزة وتفاعلية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التقييم عبر الإنترنت؛ القلق؛ المشاركة؛ طلاب اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية؛ الآثار التربوية

#### Abstract

Online assessment has become increasingly popular in the field of education, including EFL instruction. While online assessment offers many advantages, such as increased flexibility and efficiency, concerns have been raised about its potential negative impact on EFL students' anxiety and engagement. Anxiety and engagement are critical factors in language learning and assessment, and they have

been found to affect students' performance, motivation, and language development. This paper presents a critical review of the literature on the effect of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement. The paper examines conflicting views and prior research on this topic and presents an analysis of the key themes and findings. It also proposes recommendations for future research and practice. Overall, this paper highlights the importance of careful consideration of the pedagogical implications of online assessment, including the need for clear instructions and support, a balance of assessment methods, and an engaging and interactive learning environment.

**Keywords:** online assessment; anxiety; engagement; EFL students; pedagogical implications

### Résumé

L'évaluation en ligne est devenue de plus en plus populaire dans le domaine de l'éducation, y compris dans l'enseignement de l'anglais langue étrangère. Bien que l'évaluation en ligne offre de nombreux avantages, tels qu'une flexibilité et une efficacité plus accrues, des inquiétudes ont été soulevées quant à son impact négatif potentiel sur l'anxiété et l'engagement des étudiants de l'ALE. L'anxiété et l'engagement sont des facteurs critiques dans l'apprentissage et l'évaluation des langues, et il a été démontré qu'ils affectent les performances, la motivation et le développement linguistique des étudiants. Cet article présente une analyse critique de la littérature sur l'effet de l'évaluation en ligne sur l'anxiété et l'engagement des étudiants de l'ALE. Il examine les points de vue contradictoires et les recherches antérieures sur ce sujet et présente une analyse des principaux thèmes et résultats. Il propose également des recommandations pour les futures recherches et pratiques. Dans l'ensemble, cet article souligne l'importance de considérer attentivement les implications pédagogiques de l'évaluation en ligne, y compris la nécessité d'instructions et d'un soutien clair, d'un équilibre entre les méthodes d'évaluation et d'un environnement d'apprentissage engageant et interactif.

**Mots-clés:** évaluation en ligne; anxiété; engagement; étudiants de l'ALE; implications pédagogiques.

### Introduction

In recent years, the use of online assessment has become increasingly prevalent in the field of education, including English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction. This trend has been driven by a variety of factors, including advances in technology, increased access to the Internet, and the need for flexible and efficient assessment methods, mainly in the post COVID-19 pandemic. Although online assessment has many potential advantages, concerns have been raised about its impact on EFL students' anxiety and engagement.



Anxiety and engagement are critical factors in language learning and assessment. Anxiety has been found to have a detrimental effect on students' performance, motivation, and engagement in language learning and assessment, while engagement is key to language development and academic success. Therefore, it is important to investigate the impact of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement to understand the potential benefits and drawbacks of this mode of assessment.

In essence, this paper attempts to consider the key themes, findings, and debates in the literature on the effect of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement, and the implications for best practices in language learning and assessment. This research objective requires reviewing and synthesizing existing studies on online assessment in EFL instruction, examining the different perspectives on the benefits and drawbacks of this technology. The findings of this critical review could inform the development of a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement, as well as contribute to our understanding of the potential benefits and challenges of this mode of assessment in EFL instruction. It can equally offer guidance for future research and practice in this area.

## **1. Literature review**

The first step of this research work is to provide a brief definition and overview of key concepts.

### **1.1 Defining online assessment**

The use of online assessment has been extensively studied in the literature, and various benefits and challenges have been identified. Weleschu & Dyjur (2019) define online assessment as the use of digital technologies and internet-based platforms to evaluate student learning, providing an efficient and flexible approach to evaluate student knowledge, skills, and performance. They explain that online assessments can take many forms, including quizzes, exams, assignments, and other activities that are completed and submitted online. In fact, the growing demand for online assessment has emerged in response to the need to meet the changing demands of modern education, such as accessibility, efficiency, and flexibility (Ndibalema, 2021).

Though many authors acknowledge the importance of online assessment in the teaching/learning process, they highlight the potential challenges to ensure quality and fairness, including security issues, the rapid transition to



online learning, and the need for new approaches to assessment (Barbosa & Garcia, 2005; Su, 2020). Therefore, there is agreement that careful planning and design are necessary to ensure that online assessments are reliable, valid, and fair (Weleschu & Dyjur, 2019), and to address potential challenges such as higher levels of anxiety and reduced student engagement and motivation (Ndibalema, 2021; Su, 2020).

### **1.2 Defining EFL Students' Anxiety**

EFL students' anxiety is a specific type of anxiety that is experienced by students learning English as a foreign language. It is often defined as a feeling of unease or apprehension that is related to the use or learning of the foreign language. EFL students' anxiety can manifest in different ways, such as fear of speaking, writing, or reading in English, or feeling overwhelmed or insecure about their language skills (Horwitz et al, 1986). Most studies suggest that EFL students' anxiety is a complex phenomenon resulting from personal, social, and educational factors. It can have a negative impact on students' language learning and performance, and thus, it is considered imperative for teachers and educators to understand and address EFL students' anxiety in the classroom. Recently, the shift towards online learning and assessment has particularly introduced new challenges for EFL students. Numerous studies have investigated the connection between online assessment and EFL learners' anxiety levels, with results that are rather mixed.

### **1.3 Defining students' engagement**

Student engagement is a multifaceted concept that includes students' cognitive, behavioural, and emotional involvement in the learning process. It refers to the extent to which students actively and meaningfully take part in their own learning, including their participation rate, level of interest, and motivation to learn (Axelson & Arend, 2010). According to research, student engagement is a dynamic process influenced by a variety of factors such as teaching methods, course content, teacher-student relationships and interactions, and the learning conditions in the classroom (Fredricks et al., 2004). It is commonly assumed that student engagement leads to positive learning outcomes such as improved academic performance, increased motivation, and higher retention rates. Nevertheless, online assessment has been found to have conflicting influences on students' engagement in the learning process.



To sum up, there is a need for further research on the relationship between online assessment and student anxiety and engagement in language learning. This paper aims to address this gap by gathering insights of from different educators and researchers and considering existing studies in the field. The findings can be used to create online assessment strategies that would promote engagement and reduce anxiety levels. Ultimately, this research is hoped to enhance evidence-based practices that lead to quality education in the EFL context.

## **2. Results presentation**

Online assessment has become a well spread method of evaluating students' performance and understanding of course material. Though numerous advantages are attributed to this method, there is concern that it may lead to increased anxiety and decreased engagement among students, especially in the case of EFL students. Many studies have investigated the relationship between online assessment and EFL learners' anxiety and engagement, and the findings have been not been conclusive.

### **2.1 Online assessment increases EFL students' anxiety**

Online assessment is becoming more prevalent in language education, and while it has many potential benefits, some studies have shown that it may increase EFL students' anxiety levels. Many factors contribute to this phenomenon. A common factor that may conduce to increased anxiety during online assessment is the perceived difficulty or unfamiliarity of the technology itself and the limited access to a reliable Internet connection or suitable devices for taking the test. In this context, Ahmad & Khan (2022) found that many students experienced test anxiety in virtual English language exams due to technical issues, lack of familiarity with the online platform, and concerns about cheating. Woldeab & Brothen (2019) add that online exams, particularly those administered with the use of online proctoring tools, where high surveillance and monitoring prevail, can increase students' anxiety levels, explaining that “the general wariness of technology combined with students’ fear of testing makes online proctored exams very difficult for some students, in particular those who already exhibit trait anxiety” (pp.8-9).

The authors also note that the lack of face-to-face interaction with instructors and the lack of immediate feedback in online learning environments can further exacerbate feelings of isolation and anxiety among students. For their part, Hillard et al (2020) report that students experience



anxiety when assigned an online collaborative project that they had to complete as part of their course assessment. They explain that online assessment increased anxiety levels in students in what relates to their own performance, their group members' performance, and the impact of assessment on their overall grade. Dawadi (2022) found similarly that the students experienced high levels of test pressure and anxiety due to factors such as the importance of the test for their future prospects and the limited opportunities to retake the test.

In short, online assessment has many potential benefits in language education, yet it may increase EFL students' anxiety levels. Factors such as perceived difficulty with technology, lack of interaction and feedback, and limited opportunities to retake the test may cause increased anxiety.

## **2.2 Online assessment reduces EFL students' anxiety**

Though research on online assessment and its impact on EFL students' anxiety is relatively limited, some studies suggest that online assessment can reduce EFL students' anxiety levels. For example, Boukhentache (2022) noted in a study conducted in Algeria that online assessment was associated with lower levels of anxiety among EFL students because of its flexibility of time and space. The author explained that online assessment can provide a more relaxed testing environment for students because of the ease of use of online assessment at home and not undergoing the pressure of taking the exam in the classroom. Besides, in a study conducted in Iran, Dastjerdi & Fatemeh (2021) found that “online assessments had a significant effect in reducing students' anxiety and boosting their motivation” (p. 77).

Stowell & Bennett (2010) equally contended that students in the online testing condition performed better on the exams and reported lower levels of test anxiety compared to those in the paper-based testing condition. The authors argued that this may be because online testing grants students a sense of control over the testing process. Students can take online exams at a time and place that is convenient for them, and they can review their answers before submitting their responses. Moreover, students can be in a more relaxed testing environment, which may help not only reduce their anxiety levels, but also improve their exam performance. Other researchers exposed the factors leading to reduced levels of anxiety during online assessment, such as the perceived usefulness of online assessments, or the perceptions of the fairness of the assessments.



In conclusion, some studies maintain that online assessment can increase EFL students' anxiety levels, whereas other studies contend that online assessment can reduce anxiety by offering convenient, flexible, and comfortable testing conditions for students. In addition, online assessment may equip students with better control over the assessment process and offer more time and opportunities to prepare for the assessment, which can reduce anxiety.

### **2.3 Online assessment reduces EFL students' engagement**

Online assessment is becoming increasingly popular in EFL classrooms, but some studies suggest that it may reduce students' engagement in the learning process. Accordingly, these studies reported lower levels of engagement in online assessment compared to traditional assessment due to many reasons.

In an article published on *Chalky Papers* (2023, February 21), the author discusses the issue of lack of student engagement in online learning environments, which has become more prominent due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The author argues that the lack of face-to-face interaction and the difficulty of building a sense of community in online classes can contribute to decreased student engagement. In addition, while exploring students' experiences with online assessments, Khan & Khan (2019) found that students generally "do not understand the usefulness of the transition to online assessments" (p. 673), and they preferred online assessments to traditional paper-based assessments due to their convenience and flexibility.

Students equally appreciated the immediate feedback and the ability to revisit assessments after submission. However, the study found that technical difficulties and limited time to complete assessments were challenges associated with online assessments. Additionally, some students expressed concerns about the validity and reliability of online assessments, and the potential for cheating. Similarly, Beleulmi (2022) posits that "It is challenging to develop appropriate methods of students' engagement in online environment because this latter does not really guarantee students' interaction and collaborative learning." (p.57). Beleulmi's study revealed that some students lacked motivation and did not participate fully in online assessments, which affected their academic performance.

To conclude, while some studies suggest that online assessment can reduce EFL students' anxiety levels, other studies suggest that it may reduce students' engagement in the learning process. The lack of immediate



interaction, personalised feedback, social interaction and collaboration, as well as technical problems, and the pressure of limited time may all add to students' low engagement in online assessment.

#### **2.4 Online assessment increases EFL students' engagement**

Online assessment is becoming increasingly popular in EFL classrooms due to its convenience and flexibility. Some studies suggest that it may reduce EFL students' engagement; however, there are also studies that suggest it can increase or encourage engagement.

Hillman (2021), for instance, reports that online quizzes can have a positive effect on student engagement because they provide students with regular feedback on their progress; they encourage them to engage more actively with the course materials, as well as to stay motivated and focused on their learning goals. Regular feedback, the author explains, allows students to monitor their own learning and identify their strengths and weaknesses. The design and implementation of online quizzes, such as the frequency and timing of quizzes, the types of questions used, and the availability of feedback, can all affect student engagement.

Likewise, Sebbah, (2021) investigated EFL students' perceptions of continuous formative assessment in a blended learning writing class. The study found that the students had positive perceptions of continuous formative assessment which was seen as helpful for improving their writing skills and providing feedback on their progress “claiming that this assessment method provided them with adequate monitoring, and continuous scaffolding and honed their engagement in the learning process” (p. 309). The author maintains that considering students' preferences for feedback delivery, such as the use of rubrics, audio feedback, and peer feedback gives appropriate support to help students engage with the assessment process successfully.

Likewise, Beauchamp & Monk (2021) suggest that optional assessments can have a positive impact on student engagement and perceptions of online learning. They found that students who chose to complete optional assessments reported higher levels of engagement, more positive perceptions of online learning, and lower levels of stress compared to those who did not complete optional assessments.

It is also important to note that Fitriyah & Jannah (2021) believe that online assessments can have a positive effect in EFL classrooms by improving the





quality of feedback and increasing student motivation and autonomy. The authors highlight the importance of addressing technical difficulties and concerns about the validity and reliability of online assessments to ensure that this assessment format is practical and reliable.

In other words, though some studies suggest that online assessment can reduce EFL students' engagement, many other studies suggest that it can increase or encourage engagement. The use of continuous formative assessment, regular feedback, optional online assessments, and considering students' feedback preferences may all contribute to students' increased engagement in online assessment. Therefore, it is crucial for instructors to be aware of these factors and to support and guide students during online assessment to minimize anxiety and promote engagement for successful learning outcomes.

### **3. Results discussion**

The reviewed literature on the impact of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement has revealed opposing views that can, nevertheless, enlighten our understanding and future practices in the teaching/learning process.

#### **3.1 The Effect of Online Assessment on EFL Students' Anxiety**

Online assessment in language education has been found to have both positive and negative effects on EFL students' anxiety levels. On the positive side, online assessment offers flexibility and convenience to learners, as they can take the assessment at a time and place that suits them. This can reduce the pressure on EFL learners, who may be anxious about taking an assessment in a traditional classroom setting. Additionally, online assessment can offer immediate feedback to learners, which can help to reduce anxiety by giving learners a clear understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and can help them feel more confident in their abilities. Furthermore, with online assessment students may gain more control over the testing process and more time and opportunities to prepare for the assessment, which can reduce anxiety.

Thus, there is ample evidence to suggest that online assessment can help reduce EFL students' anxiety. This constitutes a considerable development in the field of language learning, as it is likely to make testing less stressful and more beneficial for students.



Nonetheless, technological difficulties such as Internet connectivity issues or problems with the online platform, and the lack of familiarity with the testing platform can cause anxiety. Another potential negative impact of online assessment on EFL anxiety is related to the lack of interaction and support from instructors. In traditional classroom settings, instructors can support and guide students before and after the assessment. However, with online assessments, EFL learners may feel more isolated and unsupported, which can increase their anxiety levels. Anxiety may also emerge when there are concerns about validity and reliability of the assessments, such as in the case of cheating.

Furthermore, a fact that is often overlooked by many authors is that students' anxiety levels may vary according to their individual characteristics and learning contexts. Students may experience different forms and levels of anxiety during online assessment, depending on their confidence in their language skills and their familiarity with the online platforms. It follows that teachers and educators should take steps to ensure that students have access to the necessary resources and support to help reduce their anxiety and make the online assessment experience as positive as possible.

Overall, it is important to recognize that online assessment can have different effects on student anxiety and that multiple factors are at play. The literature suggests that providing clear instructions, varied opportunities for practice, and familiarizing students with online assessment methods can help alleviate anxiety. In addition, factors such as the perceived usefulness and fairness of online assessments can influence EFL students' anxiety levels. It is important that educators and institutions consider these factors when designing and implementing online assessments for EFL students, in order to minimize their anxiety and maximize their learning outcomes. More research is needed, though, to better understand the complex relationship between online assessment and EFL students' anxiety and to develop effective strategies for reducing anxiety in online assessment contexts.

### **3.2 The effect of online assessment on EFL students' engagement**

The topic of online assessment and its impact on EFL students' engagement is complex and controversial, with studies showing mixed results. Based on the studies reviewed, it appears that online assessment has the potential to both increase and reduce EFL students' engagement levels.



On the one hand, online assessment can suggest more interactive and engaging tasks through continuous formative assessment or optional assessments, which can help students stay motivated and engaged in their learning. One of the main arguments supporting the use of online assessment is that it can provide a more dynamic learning experience by incorporating interactive activities, and immediate feedback, which can meet students' preferences and enhance their interest and involvement. Furthermore, online assessment can offer a more flexible and personalized approach, where students can monitor their own progress, thus encouraging not only their engagement and participation but also their autonomy.

On the other hand, online assessment reduces EFL students' engagement levels. The lack of face-to-face interaction students are used to have with teachers in traditional assessment causes students to be less motivated. Besides, the lack of social interaction and support that the classroom generally offers is likely to add to these students' disengagement. The absence of immediate and personal feedback may as well contribute to students' lower levels of engagement in online assessment.

Some students may feel disengaged or unmotivated by online assessment practices that lack relevance to their learning goals, mainly that this type of assessment does not offer them opportunities for collaborative learning. It is equally noteworthy that contextual factors also play an important role in online assessment. For example, the availability of technology, the level of access to reliable Internet connectivity, and the availability of support systems for online learning can all impact the engagement levels of EFL students. Moreover, the individual characteristics and learning contexts of students are crucial too. For example, students who are already highly motivated and engaged in their learning may respond positively to online assessment, while those who struggle with self-directed learning may require additional support and guidance to preserve their engagement.

In conclusion, online assessment may increase EFL students' engagement through interactive, collaborative, and engaging tasks, without neglecting individualised support. However, educators should carefully design and implement online assessment that aligns with students' learning goals and interests. Furthermore, it is important to consider students' individual, cultural, and contextual factors. By so doing, educators can have a clearer insight on the impact of online assessment on EFL students, and can develop more effective strategies for supporting their learning and engagement.



Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between online assessment and EFL students' engagement if better learning outcomes are to be attained.

### 3.3 Main Findings and Pedagogical Implications

The studies reviewed suggest that online assessment can have both positive and negative effects on EFL students' anxiety and engagement. On the one side, online assessment can ensure a more flexible and comfortable testing environment, with engaging and interactive tasks that can enhance students' motivation and engagement in the learning process. On the other side, some students may experience increased anxiety due to technical difficulties or lack of familiarity with the testing platform, and may feel disengaged or unmotivated by online assessments that are perceived as difficult or lacking in relevance to their learning goals and study preferences.

Educators should carefully design and implement online assessments that take into consideration students' individual differences and learning contexts, and to supply them with necessary support and resources to help reduce anxiety and promote engagement in the online assessment process. With such a personalized approach to online assessment, educators can ensure that EFL students feel comfortable, motivated, and engaged in the learning process.

On the basis of the reviewed studies and resulting findings, there are several pedagogical implications that can be drawn for educators using online assessment in EFL contexts:

- Use multimedia-based assessment to enhance engagement and motivation in EFL students. By providing interactive and engaging assessment tasks, educators can help to promote a more engaging and interactive learning experience for students.
- Develop more effective and equitable approaches to assessment in online and remote learning environments (Woldeab & Brothen, 2019).
- Use online assessment as a tool for formative assessment and feedback, rather than solely for summative assessment. By providing frequent and constructive feedback to students, educators can help to promote a more positive and engaging learning experience, and help students to stay motivated and engaged in the learning process (Sebbah, 2021).



- Design assessment tasks and use flexible assessment approaches that are relevant and engaging to EFL students' learning experiences, goals and interests. By so doing, educators can help to promote engagement and motivation in the learning process (Annamalai et al, 2022).
- Provide students with clear instructions and guidelines for online assessment, and familiarize them with the testing platform before the assessment. By doing so, educators can help to reduce anxiety and promote a more confident and comfortable testing experience (Ahmad & Khan, 2022).
- Use different techniques to enhance student engagement, such as creating interactive assessments, encouraging student collaboration, communicating regularly with students, and creating a supportive and engaging online learning environment (Beleulmi, 2022).
- Implement strategies to prevent academic dishonesty, such as the use of plagiarism detection software and proctoring services. And most importantly, offer teachers training and support to ensure they have the necessary skills and knowledge to design and implement efficacious online assessments (Ndibalema, 2021).

Further research is needed to better understand the relationship between online assessment and EFL students' anxiety and engagement, and to develop constructive strategies for alleviating anxiety and promoting engagement in online assessment contexts.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the selected studies suggest that online assessment has both positive and negative effects on EFL students' anxiety and engagement. On the one hand, online assessment can provide a more flexible and efficient testing environment, increase engagement through interactive activities, and grant students more control over their learning process. On the other hand, online assessment can intensify anxiety as a result of technical issues, unclear instructions, and a lack of face-to-face interaction with the teacher, and can lead to lower engagement rates in some students. In order to take advantage from online assessment while avoiding its negative effects, it is important to give students clear instructions and support and apply a variety of assessment methods. It is similarly significant to create an engaging and interactive learning environment where students are actively involved. Teachers should also be aware of EFL students' different needs and



preferences and they should be adequately trained for this challenging assessment method. The findings of this review highlight equally the need for further research on the effect of online assessment on EFL students' anxiety and engagement. Ultimately, the use of online assessment in EFL instruction should be guided by careful consideration of its pedagogical implications so as to alleviate students' anxiety and level up their engagement for better learning outcomes.

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