



Insights from emergency remote language assessment for a post-pandemic world

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The COVID-19 pandemic perhaps produced the largest disturbance our educational systems have ever seen. Assessment was particularly impacted as systems and educators had to identify the most optimal and adequate accommodations to meet both external and classroom-based mandates. When in-person teaching was possible again, various assessment practices that emerged to meet the pandemic challenges were and, still, are in use. This study aims to add to the exploration of practices and competences of Higher Education teachers in the context of second language (L2) classroom assessment. Based on Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, the study attempts to unpack the abrupt albeit creative ways that teachers used when moving into a formative language assessment orientation in their practice, and explain how this worked, what the challenges were and which of these are still relevant and implemented in university systems. The paper contributes to the discussion of the tendency observed among teachers to resort mainly to formative assessment paradigms to address the challenges imposed during the pandemic and what the field of language assessment has learned from it.

Keywords: assessment perceptions, COVID-19 crisis, assessment practices, innovation theory, language assessment literacy

Introduction

The worldwide COVID-pandemic has been described as one of the major global disruptions of the 21st century (Ali et al., 2020). Affecting numerous areas of life, education included, the pandemic can be considered an exogenous shock to societies.

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Exogenous shocks are seen by Ciravegna et al. (2023) as unpredictable and unexpected events with a negative impact on communities, regions or countries. The shock and its consequences were experienced worldwide and in numerous areas, education being one of them.

The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have not only impacted teaching around the world but also the nature of assessment, with a radical move away from in-person testing and assessment to remote assessment (Guangui et al., 2020; Hodges & Barbour, 2021). COVID-19 has also challenged language assessment tasks and procedures on a large scale, including standardized testing (T. Clark et al., 2021; Muhammad & Ockey, 2021; Ockey, 2021). Online at-home language tests proved a feasible option (Isbell & Kremmel, 2020), many of which were offered in technology-enhanced assessment environments or via online proctoring systems (e.g., Green & Lung, 2021). In classroom-based language assessment, teachers had to ensure equitable and digital assessment delivery modes for their learners but were faced with numerous challenges from a need to embrace pandemic pedagogies and alternative approaches to assessment in a digital mode (Karatas et al., 2021).

The disruptions of emergency remote teaching have been reflected in emergency remote (language) assessment (ERLA), and a body of research has started to emerge, e.g., on online proctoring in testing (Purpura et al., 2021) and online high-stakes tests (Isbell & Kremmel, 2020). Research also pointed to several factors that seem to have impacted university language educators' agency in assessment such as assessment policy and assessment culture, assessment self-efficacy and assessment literacy (Maaoui et al., 2023), digital literacy, technology access, attitudinal factors, teacher well-being and academic dishonesty (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021; Tang 2023; Zhang et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, while there are preliminary results on the effect of emergency remote teaching on teachers' well-being in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs, Panadero et al., 2022), teachers' perceptions of their roles and pedagogical beliefs (Gao & Cui, 2022) and their online professional development strategies (Vogt, 2022), little is known about their views on ERLA in higher education contexts, their classroom-based assessment practices and orientations, the impact of these overtime or their students' responses to date.

The purpose of this paper is to explore language teachers' remote language assessment practices, the challenges they and their students encountered, their learning from the ERLA period and the opportunities they see for the future of language assessment in HEIs after the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on the concept of exogenous shocks and the economic theory of creative destruction (Schumpeter, 1942), a qualitative study was carried out with HEI language teachers within a research community of language assessment in 2021. A follow-up study was undertaken in 2023 using the same data collection instruments, namely a parallel qualitative questionnaire and a focus group interview. The purpose of the follow-up study was to compare the status during the pandemic with the time the world moved out of the global health crisis caused by COVID-19. The paper provides an outline of the theoretical framework, followed by a literature review on language assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic. The methodological section lays down the study design and methods used in the study before the results are presented and discussed. Implications for language assessment literacy (LAL) are briefly discussed before concluding the chapter.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework that serves as a basis of the study represents a combination of the concept of exogenous shocks from economics and the theory of creative destruction, both by economic theorist Joseph A. Schumpeter. These are applied to the situation of ERLA as a result of the exogenous shock the COVID-19 crisis had on the educational sector in general and on language assessment in particular. While applying an economic model to help understanding language teacher practices in language assessment might seem unusual, some aspects of the theory appear to be helpful in understanding and theorising the way innovations in language assessment come about after a period of global crisis.

Exogenous shocks with global repercussions have become more commonplace in recent times due to our interconnected global system (Katsos & Miklian, 2021). They are unpredictable and unexpected events with a negative impact on communities, regions or countries (Ciravegna et al., 2023). Röglinger et al. (2022, p. 671) define exogenous shocks as “unanticipated, low-likelihood, potentially high-impact events originating from an organization’s environment.” Exogenous shocks can arise from various origins, e.g., natural disasters, healthcare crises or military conflicts.

Exogenous shocks are becoming more frequent (Katsos & Miklian, 2021; Ciravegna et al., 2023) and increasingly occur in conjunction with other crises or disturbances rather than as an isolated incident (Ahlstrom et al., 2020). COVID-19 can be considered as an exogenous shock for the field of language testing and assessment (LTA), with ERLA practices and processes leading to creative destruction of language assessment practices (for a similar discussion of the impact of wartime on language assessment, see Osidak et al., this issue).

Ulgen (2013, p. 281) defines creative destruction as the “phenomenon of economic change through the creation of new ways of doing things that endogenously destroy and replace the old ways.” The theory of creative destruction originates in the field of economics and was inspired by Marxist theory. It has been applied to various related fields, e.g., tourism (Hall & Williams, 2019) and is used to emphasise the dynamic nature of the modern economic system (Ulgen, 2013).

For the cultural sector, Addis and Rurale (2020) have identified the COVID-19 crisis as having represented an existential challenge to many cultural organisations, due to the devastation that the entire industry endured. Other sectors such as education have suffered similar disruptions (Narodowski & Campetella, 2022). The disruptions can be seen as a type of creative destruction according to Schumpeter (1942), who considers creative destruction as a process that “incessantly revolutionis[es] the economic structure from within; incessantly destroying the old one, incessantly creating a new one” (p. 83). Creative destruction paves the way for creative resilience and evolving innovation of individuals, systems and organisations. Schumpeter (1942) highlights the dynamic and transformative nature of the economic system, with innovation, entrepreneurship and technological progress propelling (economic) evolution. Having said that, Schumpeter’s theory also addresses retaining and recombining elements of established structures, albeit in new relationships. Entrepreneurs are seen as transformative agents who drive innovation, invention and technological advancements (Schneider, 2017).

The concept of creative destruction has been used to analyse various transitional phases throughout history, e.g., the industrial revolution or digitisation, and it lends itself to application of ERLA. We assume that applying the theory of creative destruction to the language assessment practices in higher education will help unpack

HEI language teachers' lived ERLA experience and identify sustainable innovative and sustainable practices that have emerged as a result of the exogenous shock of the COVID-19 crisis.

ERLA during and after the COVID-19 pandemic: Research results from Higher Education Institutions

The enforced move to ERLA during the global outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic encountered departures from the existing routines in all sectors of education across the globe (Tang, 2023). This situation introduced a number of practices which were also challenged by various socio-economic and contextual factors (E. Clark et al., 2020; Ghanbari and Nowroozi, 2021).

Research results indicated a variety of assessment accommodations adopted by HEIs and teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic ranging from no adjustment to exam offerings, to employing moderate measures and to making substantial changes to assessment modalities, processes and methods. For example, cancelling or postponing exams, using previous grades/assessment results, reducing content/duration of exams, offering exams online, were among the most common ERLA accommodations (British Council, 2020; Maaoui et al., 2023). Furthermore, while in Canada all HEIs cancelled in-person assessments (El Masri & Sabzalieva, 2020), universities in other parts of the world introduced online possibilities (e.g., Ngololo, 2021). However, such practices faced counter reactions. For instance, in Kenya, South Africa, and Zimbabwe, university students protested against the use of online teaching and assessment. They argued that they were not consulted and that such practice ran the risk of exacerbating existing inequalities between urban and rural areas regarding access to technology and resources (Kigotho, 2020; Mukeredzi et al., 2020). Other challenges related to the management of scheduled assessments, including high-stakes exams.

The pandemic crisis also led to rapid innovation among language assessment developers who adapted their testing processes to address demands from governments and institutions. Test developers responded to the challenges and opportunities of the pandemic and offered various online assessment types. These can be summarised as at-home assessments that were synchronously delivered through video-mediated computer technology, synchronous test delivery in an adapted face-to-face

environment, and asynchronous assessments for at-home delivery (for case studies, see Volume 18, Issue 1 of *Language Assessment Quarterly*, 2021; Sadeghi, 2022). To maintain test security, integrity and reliability of their online exams, test providers also offered various forms of invigilation, e.g., online proctoring. However, online proctoring systems were experienced as one of the biggest challenges. Among the issues were jeopardising test security (e.g., dishonest behaviours such as plagiarism and identity fraud), and technical failure due to a lack of technological infrastructure. There were also problems related to an increase in score cancellations linked to test taker malpractice and reasonable doubt towards the trustworthiness of individuals' test results (Michel, 2020; Nicosia, 2022; Nigam et al., 2021). This is still an ongoing debated area in the field (Isbell et al., 2023).

Teachers also turned to other options to evaluate student outcomes. For example, alternative assessments were used that were process-oriented and formative in orientation. Research reported in a study conducted with 486 undergraduate students from 61 Turkish universities showed that open-ended questions, take-home exams and project-based assignments were widely used as the optimal form of assessment (Senel & Senel, 2021). Other studies reported that HEI instructors used student self-assessment, portfolios, multimodal projects, etc., or redesigned paper-based examinations (Giannikas et al., 2022; Kılıçkaya, 2021; Maaoui et al., 2023; Tsagari et al., 2023).

These forms of assessment prompted teachers to exert more teacher agency on classroom assessment. Furthermore, professional communities were formed by instructors that were engaged in regular communication and support (Chung & Choi, 2021; Tian et al. 2021). Interestingly, while students were highly satisfied with new forms of assessment, instructors' level of satisfaction towards their assessment practices were somewhat low due to technology affordances and teachers' digital competence (Chung & Choi, 2021). Online assessment, in particular, represented one of the largest concerns for instructors and became a common source of conflict throughout the pandemic. In designing online assessments, teachers were critical that their assessment content was limited to grammatical forms and vocabulary, and was less focused on communicative competences (Polisca et al., 2022). Assessment formats with multiple-choice questions and matching were not geared to communication either (Kılıçkaya, 2021). In addition, practitioners felt they received

little, if any, technical support and training in designing and using available online platforms to design or deliver their tests. Maintaining academic integrity in online exams also appeared challenging or even impossible to implement. This often led to malpractice, e.g., cheating (Kılıçkaya, 2021; Maaoui et al., 2023; Tsagari et al., 2023,).

In conclusion, systemic disruptions caused by COVID-19 seem to have transformed the assessment landscape across the world that has witnessed rapid and, in many cases, innovative and creative – responses to these challenges triggered by the exogenous shock of the pandemic. For example, it forced language assessment developers to be creative in their approaches to the design and use of technologically delivered assessments while at the same time ensure safe testing environments and deliver construct-representative assessments despite their limitations. ERLA, being also an example of this change, seems to have created many opportunities for language teachers in HEI to acquire agency and orient their practice towards more formative assessment and the introduction of hybrid forms of (learning and) assessment.

While COVID-19 has presented an exogenous shock for language assessment, it is important to understand the impact it has had on language assessment practices during and immediately after the pandemic. Therefore, the focus of the present study is to identify teachers' lived ERLA experience and the sustainably changed language assessment practices that have emerged as a result of this experience. To this end, HEI teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language from various, mostly European contexts and assessment cultures (Norway, Greece, the UK, Germany) and some from beyond Europe (e.g., Colombia, Turkey, Tunisia) took part in a qualitative study with a questionnaire survey and/or a focus group interview, taking place during the pandemic in 2021 and just after the global health crisis in 2023.

Research questions

The research is guided by the following questions:

1. What were the language assessment measures taken by HEIs in response to the COVID-19 crisis? What were language teachers' perceptions of the ERLA measures introduced by HEIs?

2. What were the language assessment practices HEI teachers employed during the exogenous shock of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were HEI language teachers' perceived affordances and challenges of their lived ERLA experience?

Methodology

Study design

The study explored HEI language teachers' lived experience of the disruptive effects of ERLA and their impact on their language assessment practices during and after the pandemic. To address these areas, we opted for an exploratory research orientation. Exploratory research aims at analysing new research topics or generating new ideas and hypotheses on existing topics (Swedberg, 2020). It is often qualitative in nature (Stebbins, 2001). The effects of ERLA on HEI language teachers and researchers had been largely unexplored before and thus, a qualitative exploratory study design was felt to be appropriate. Therefore, we collected two types of data, i.e., responses from HEI English language teachers on assessment based on open-ended questionnaires and focus group interviews. We adopted a sequential parallel design by inviting the participants to respond to the questionnaire first and then expand on their comments and/or develop further thoughts in the questionnaire in the focus group discussion. In 2021, one focus group discussion took place (n = 14), while in 2023, another focus group discussion was conducted following the administration of the parallel questionnaire (n = 10). The questionnaire and interview protocols had a parallel design in order to better compare the two points in time, during ERLA and after the pandemic was declared to be over. In addition, the purpose of adopting a sequential procedure was to obtain in-depth data for a thick description of ERLA experience and emergent practices as a complex and situated phenomenon (Geertz, 1973).

Participants and sampling

The participants of the study were HEI teachers of English as a Second or a Foreign Language in various, mostly European educational contexts, but also in university contexts beyond Europe. Many of them were also researchers and were members of various professional networks. The participants in the study took part in a

questionnaire survey with open-ended items and a focus group interview. The groups of participants slightly changed from 2021 to 2023. Overall, the majority of the questionnaire respondents were female (77% and 56%, respectively) and had either a master's degree or a PhD. The most typical job description mentioned by the respondents was "university lecturer." More than half of the questionnaire respondents had 10+ years of teaching experience, while 23% in 2021 and 33% in 2023, respectively indicated they had more than 20 years of teaching experience. An overview of the participants in the different parts of the study is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Overview of participants' contexts

	N (2021)	N (2023)
Questionnaire	14	12
Focus group interviews	12 (contexts: Cyprus, Colombia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Norway, Spain, Tunisia, Turkey, UK)	10 (contexts: Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Norway, Turkey, UK)

Note: N = number of participants

Since the researchers activated various professional networks that they were engaged in, the sample can be termed a convenience sample. Calls for participation in the study circulated through emails and on social media among the members of the networks. The participants were properly informed about the objectives and processes of the study, and their written consent was requested for both the recording of the focus group interview and for the questionnaire responses.

Instrument

The instruments (questionnaire and focus group interview protocol) are presented in Appendix 1. For the questionnaires, the study used Google Forms, while for the recording of the focus groups Zoom recording facilities were deployed. The questions included in both instruments were adapted from various research studies (e.g., Giannikas et al., 2022; Maaoui et al., 2023; Tsagari et al., 2023). The first part of the questionnaire asked participants to provide their consent, while the second one comprised 10 open-ended questions inviting participants to comment on the ERLA measures employed in their context, their own and their students' responses to ERLA practices, assessment and feedback practices employed in the classroom. The categories the questions fall under are: ERLA accommodations and perceptions, feedback provision, and way forward for assessment after the pandemic. The remainder of the questionnaire obtained background information about the

informants, such as teaching qualifications, current institution, years of teaching experience, and other relevant details.

Adopting a sequential design, the function of the focus group interviews was to help the researchers gain a deeper understanding of the assessment measures and practices within their educational contexts employed as a result of COVID-19. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) maintain that focus groups allow for great depth in comparison to other research methods. The focus groups were conducted on zoom with one group consisting of all participants, structured by guiding questions that the researchers gave as discussion impulses. The guiding questions of the focus group interview were identical to the questions asked in the questionnaire, allowing room for additions or clarifications and greater depth of reflection.

Data collection

Data collection was undertaken in two rounds: at the height of the pandemic in spring 2021 and towards its end in fall 2023, albeit with slightly different respondents. This was done to investigate tendencies in changes of assessment practices persisting over time. The data collection consisted of parallel open questionnaires that were administered online to members of the group (2021: n = 14, 2023: n = 12) and online focus group interviews with the same participants (2021: n = 14; 2023: n = 10).

Data analysis

The parallel questionnaires and the interviews were content analysed deductively and inductively. The deductive categories were derived from the research questions and the inductive categories originated from emergent themes and patterns arising from the data, constituting a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2021; 2022). The analysis of the data was undertaken separately by the researchers in order to enhance cross-verification of data by way of investigator triangulation. The coders discussed differences and analysed them, arriving at a common category system reported below. Due to the explorative and interpretive quality of the data in the study, an intercoder agreement coefficient was not determined.

Results

The results of the data analysis from the open-ended questionnaire and the focus group interviews will be presented along categories of analysis. These were language assessment measures taken by HEI, language teachers' perceptions of ERLA measures, language teachers' assessment practices, and challenges and affordances of HEI language teachers' ERLA experience, with subcategories for challenges (lack of LAL for ERLA, academic integrity) and affordances (freedom to experiment, movement towards more formative assessment cultures). Teachers' identities have been anonymised and codes will be used to refer to years and question numbers. The coding consists of the year (21 for 2021, 23 for 2023) the data were collected. Q signifies "questionnaire" and I signifies "interviews" as the data collection instruments.

Language assessment measures taken by HEI and language teachers' perceptions of them

In the first round of data collection from 2021, teachers described a wide range of ERLA measures ranging from an absence of institutional measures (e.g., 21Q3: "No concrete measures were taken; each institution dealt with it in its own way") to systematic institutional support to help teachers implement the drastic changes that were mandated by the administration systems. In order to prevent disruptions in educational services such as universities, an immediate transition to various types of online language assessment was required (Jalilzadeh et al., 2023), e.g., written or oral language exams via MS Teams, Zoom, or other e-class platforms. According to the respondents in our study, HEIs introduced various tools and strategies, e.g., "controlling cheating by using video cameras, using open-ended types of assessment, using application questions rather than those requiring simple reasoning and many more..." (21Q5).

As a result, conflicting tendencies can be discerned in institutional strategies. In a psychometric tradition, summative written tests moved online with tools like online proctoring or other invigilation mechanisms, trying to enforce academic integrity. Another tendency was to afford HEI language teachers more freedom to develop alternative forms of language assessment such as e-portfolios or formative forms of

complex, task-based language assessment in general, e.g., student conferences or projects.

The majority of teachers faced difficulties integrating technology into their assessment practices, e.g., lack of time for preparation or lacking institutional support. However, in some cases, institutional support did take place, as a teacher (21Q2) confirmed for their university: “Teachers have been briefed about lockdown browser systems (e.g., Respondus) for online exams.” The 2021 data suggest that this kind of support arrived gradually, and in different forms alongside with support from other services. One young university teacher based in Cyprus with a rather testing-oriented context, stated in the questionnaire (21Q10):

During the first phase of the pandemic, the process of assessment became, due to the circumstances, e-assessment suddenly, and I say suddenly because there was no prior preparation or training of teachers in higher education for this process. Videos were posted with examples of quiz design from the e-learning center of the University and the employees answered via e-mail and, if necessary, a telephone communication followed.

In terms of teachers’ perceptions of ERLA measures introduced by their HEIs to evaluate their foreign language students online, teachers felt that the impact of the pandemic was very strong at the outset of the pandemic although they thought that the measures were unavoidable. Due to the abrupt nature of the transition to online language assessment, they felt the burden of this transition fell on students and staff alike, with limited access to hardware and software, connectivity issues and a consciousness of a lack of digital competence on the part of both. All of these factors resulted in high stress levels.

In various contexts, written summative language assessment was transferred online using online proctoring tools that could not previously be tried out. This gave rise to concerns as expressed in the 2021 focus group by a HEI language teacher from testing-oriented Greece (21F3): “The online proctoring did not work and there were serious concerns related to privacy but also to academic integrity.” The same teacher, however, differentiated between written and oral language assessment: “The online oral exams [of spoken English] were a good option and almost went without any disruptions. They were important to provide a smooth functioning of exams and gave some sort of security to the students.”

The role of technical and organisational support that was crucial to ease the psychological burden of the situation for teachers, as one UK-based teacher (21Q9) suggested: “When my school provided technical assistance and guidance (e.g., procedures to conduct an online writing exam on Zoom by asking students to share their screens all at once), I felt comfortable.” It is obvious that favourable institutional conditions in the HEIs regarding institutional support might pave the way for sustainable innovative language assessment procedures.

The 2023 data reflect the varying impact of the measures taken. Responses ranged from no impact (e.g., 23Q10: “We returned to the traditional way of [language] assessment”) to a more sustainable impact on institutional mandates. One UK-based HEI language teacher confirmed that her Scottish university was reviewing programmes to include online language assessment as a new option (23F2). The inclusion of online assessment as a further option was confirmed by other participants of the focus group interview for summative as well as formative assessment formats.

Professional development opportunities offered by universities themselves and other organisations seemed to systematise in the course of the pandemic. Teachers were eventually “invited to participate in the training of online assessment” (21F6) in some places, providing necessary development for LAL. At the same time, this professional development potentially created conditions for (further) innovative assessment formats. In this sense, the institutions provided support for teachers’ internal ERLA-related decisions and enabled innovative online assessment formats as a result of the disruptive COVID-19 crisis.

However, data from 2023 showed that teachers were more positively disposed towards the ERLA measures taken by their tertiary institutions, e.g. “I think these are sensible measures and I believe there now is enough scientific evidence to support this view too” (23Q6). This became particularly easier with institutional support. When teachers felt supported by their institutions, they were more likely to support external decisions as part of an all-organisational policy: “I agree with the measures. They facilitated the teacher’s job” (23Q1). Teachers also felt that the pandemic geared teachers towards more inclusive assessment with a focus on individual students, e.g. “...more focus now on the pupils’ background and needs” (23Q6).

Language teachers' assessment practices

Two tendencies were visible in the data, namely (mostly summative) assessment procedures that were mandated by respondents' university and forced upon teachers (teachers as "consumers of assessment"), and practices that teachers themselves developed and made their own decisions (teachers as "agents of assessment").

The 2021 respondents reported the use of technology that helped implement summative exams in digital space. Universities had teachers use platforms for (closed-ended) assessment formats like Moodle and lockdown browsers. In order to prevent cheating, time restrictions were put on tests. The latter aspect is illustrative of academic integrity as a major concern guiding teachers' summative assessment practices particularly in 2021 where teachers' role was that of "consumers of assessment" with occasional flexibility and freedom to initiate, innovate or create inclusive and culturally-responsive assessments.

The other, conflicting, tendency is related to the internal decisions on assessment practices that the teachers took themselves and where teachers are portrayed as active "agents of assessment." Innovations need a favourable institutional environment in which they have the space to try out various assessment formats (Aghion et al., 2021). This was the case in the data when teachers found conditions in their contexts that were conducive to teacher agency. One teacher observed that they were grateful for "an opportunity to experiment with alternative assessment" presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, a "focus on classroom on-going assessment than final assessment" was highlighted, with teachers "[having] decreased the role of summative assessment as a single predictor of learners' achievement." Summative assessment had become more formative. Tasks tended to include higher-order thinking skills, such as critical thinking as one of the 21st-century skills: "[We were] using application questions rather than those requiring simple reasoning" or "exam questions that required critical thinking to be answered," as one respondent observed.

The analysis of feedback practices revealed two tendencies again. Summative assessment feedback concerned mostly grades, written feedback or the assessment rubric of a test or assessment that was used for feedback (in line with Vogt et al., 2020). When formative assessment was used as an innovative procedure in language

assessment, both the quantity and quality of feedback changed. The more formatively teachers assessed, the more feedback they gave, and students were dependent on more feedback in an online learning and assessment environment (“A lot of formative assessment, a lot of synchronous teaching and feedback on Zoom” (21Q2); “Much more frequent. Students received feedback on all their oral and written performances and were given possibilities to improve,” 21Q6). In addition, the types of formative assessment diversified, exploiting different modalities (oral, written (text/ e-mail), video) and using digital space for it with conferences, audio and video feedback being named as new types of assessment feedback. So based on a comparison of the results in 2021 and 2023, we can observe a trend towards an increase in assessment feedback and, on a qualitative level, more personalised feedback in teachers’ assessment feedback practices. As another innovation, peer feedback was (re)discovered and practiced as a collaborative endeavour.

In general, respondents named online assessment, alternative assessment and project-based assessment, e-portfolios as common formats, displaying a tendency for diversified formats in digital space, as e.g. respondent 21Q11 confirmed: “[Oral] online exams are now an officially recognised exam format at my university.” Assessment feedback had become much more important in the teaching and assessment process. One HEI teacher reported: “I find myself to be giving more feedback than before, also thanks to the digital tools that I have in my teaching repertoire now” (23Q11). In this way, teachers supported change and innovation in language assessment towards more formative assessment (see Figure 1). The destruction associated with the COVID-19 pandemic created innovation only if teachers had been given real agency. Teacher agency and spaces created were a precondition for creativity (cf. Wang & East, 2023) and consequently, a precondition for innovations in Schumpeter’s theory of creative destruction.

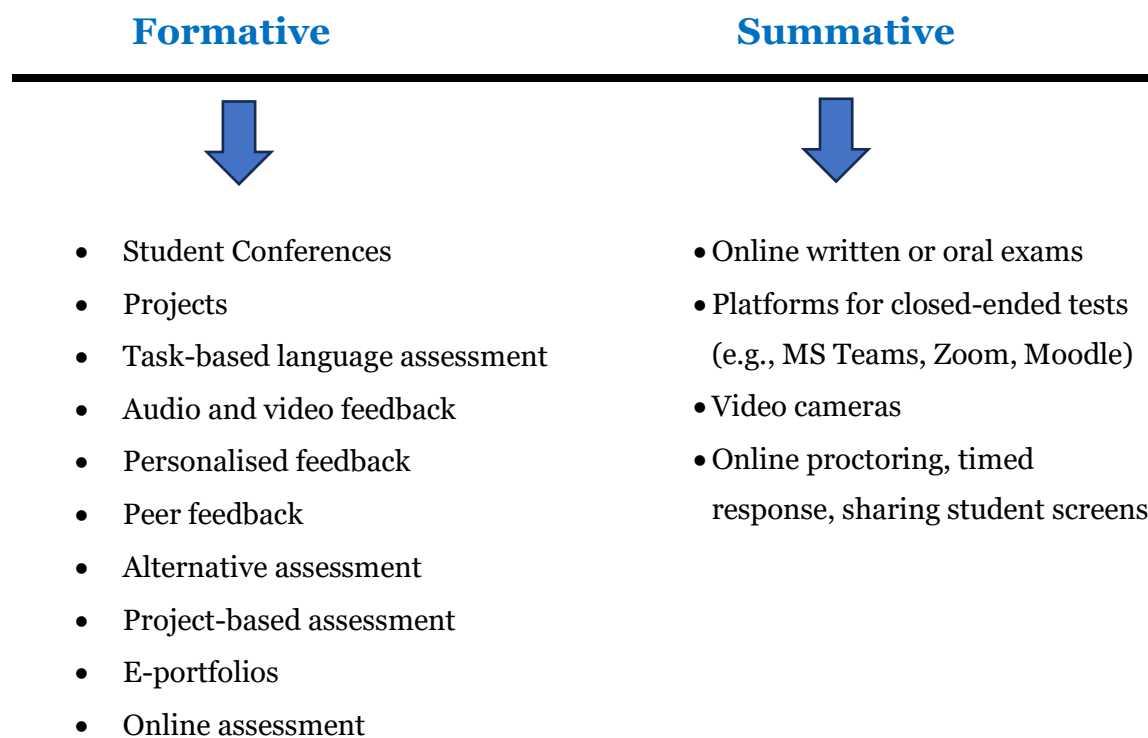


Figure 1. Formative and summative assessment formats used by the respondents

Challenges and affordances of HEI language teachers' ERLA experience

The data from 2021 yield a clear picture of HEI teachers' subjective ERLA experiences in the sense of perceived affordances and challenges. Respondents identified numerous challenges that can be grouped under language assessment literacy and professionalisation of language teachers, quality assurance concerns, concerns regarding equity, diversity and inclusion as well as social justice issues and academic integrity.

The COVID-19 pandemic caught most HEI language teachers unprepared. When teachers were left to their own devices regarding the development of language assessment procedures in ERLA, they felt that they lacked language assessment literacy (LAL), particularly in digital space and at the onset of the pandemic. Several teachers framed the need for professionalisation in 2021: "Teachers are changing their assessment habits; they are in need of LAL and want to know more about the procedures" (21F13). The struggle with technology resulted in forced professionalisation on the job in order to respond to the educational assessment emergency at hand. This way, LAL related to e-assessment was felt as a burden and as a chance at the same time.

In connection with a perceived lack of teacher LAL, the respondents had concerns regarding the quality assurance of their ERLA procedures. Concerns persisted with regard to validity and reliability of language assessment. Due to the move from summative to formative assessment in many cases, processes became more dominant and were reflected in the assessment result whereas with previous cohorts, they had not been. Concerns about threats to validity worked the other way round as well, as a respondent from Turkey with substantial teaching experience (21Q12) observed: “We had presentation task[s] during online teaching, and students expressed that some of the descriptors of the presentation criteria challenged them (e.g., having eye contact, body language).” Reliability issues presented themselves on various levels. When developing assessment tasks for online administration, teachers had to balance task difficulty with resources available, mostly time resources. Test formats that were developed for the first time could not be piloted due to the pressure of the emergency situation, which equally posed reliability issues. Reliability concerns are also related to infrastructure, e.g., internet connectivity, which was a major issue and mentioned by numerous respondents. One teacher based in Colombia connected the reliability issue with issues of equity, diversity and inclusion as well as social justice: “[Online assessment] has been a challenge with students who have poor internet connection or who live in rural areas in the country” (21Q3). In some educational contexts, access to hardware, software and internet connectivity was such a social justice concern that it drove university students on the streets to protest. With vulnerable student populations like refugees or learners with special educational needs, access to online education and assessment were not given and “equity and fairness of assessment are under threat here,” as one respondent from Greece observed (21F9). Likewise, in areas of the Global South, students staged protests to make educational authorities aware of the problem.

One of the biggest challenges among the issues brought up by the respondents was academic integrity. Students who would fraudulently obtain credits or even degrees because they exploited gaps in the non-trialled online examination systems were a considerable worry voiced by the respondents.

In terms of benefits of the pandemic, respondents highlighted the double-faced nature of the forced professional development they had undergone related to online language assessment. On the one hand, the abrupt need to professionalise was felt as a burden,

on the other hand it was seen as an opportunity. One teacher observed: “COVID has made it possible to begin to realize uses of technology that I felt I never had time to develop before” (21Q7). Teachers were grateful for the opportunity to experiment with alternative assessment and gained more e-assessment literacy on the job. In summary, many teachers saw ERLA as a rewarding experience at the end of the day if they had been able to develop agency as assessors and had been given the space to experiment freely, as one respondent related in terms of the assessment practices they had adopted, also including digital space: “I have tried to diversify the assessment instruments. Students have worked on projects, carried out online discussions, wrote texts, edited those texts, etc.” Language programmes were modified in some places and included a strong formative assessment component with diversified assessment instruments. There seemed to be a move towards online assessment that is more formative, more inclusive, more individualised and more feedback-based, often against the background of a more summative testing culture that is imposed by institutions.

In general, teachers seemed to have many insights related to a changing assessment culture, as one respondent stressed: “We have learned that we should move from testing culture to assessment culture by involving learners in more assessment tasks rather than a single test for decision making” (21Q6). The fact that teachers were allowed to transition from testing to assessment culture in their respective professional contexts was seen as a privilege. Many teachers were given the possibility to introduce innovative, progressive assessment formats and even develop assessment paradigms further as a result of the exogenous shock of the pandemic, which was possible only by affording them agency in ERLA contexts. In line with Schumpeter’s (1942) theory of innovation, this agency seems to be crucial for change and innovation in language assessment contexts as well.

When asked about the future of language assessment in 2023, one European respondent made the following comment: “I do not see that the future of assessment is digital, but I think that the staff has been professionalised in this domain by COVID-19. So there are more options available, particularly in alternative assessment. I see formative assessment as the future of assessment anyway, given the omnipresence of AI-powered tools” (23Q11).

Discussion

In the present paper, we have attempted to showcase how teachers became have become creative because of the exogenous shock represented by COVID-19. Being far more than a critical incident (Tian et al., 2021) because it is not limited to a single incident, it represents a global crisis, the consequences of which we are still experiencing.

Throughout the pandemic, online assessment formats were adopted. Although there was a movement back to in-person language assessment on campus in 2023, data from the study indicate sustainable changes in language assessment that seem to have their origin in the health crisis. These include the use of technology in language assessment, evolved assessment feedback, and a transition to more formative, individualised language assessment in classroom-based language assessment contexts. After the forced professionalisation that the global crisis brought with it, the use of technology in language assessment seems to come more naturally to many teachers in our study who continued to use online assessment options in 2023 if they saw an added value. In this way, the creative destruction of the pandemic, which brought severe collateral damage with it, e.g., regarding social justice issues, paved the way for innovation in Schumpeter's (1942, 2003) sense. Similarly, respondents in the study report a higher frequency of assessment feedback and a more diversified nature of feedback that used digital space. In general, teachers brought in a plethora of ideas and practices in order to innovate language assessment. Many comments indicate a transition to more varied, formative assessment formats that take into account students' individual needs.

However, the tendencies described for the end of the pandemic are also characterised by contrast, which is visible in both datasets from 2021 and 2023. When all assessment transitioned to online assessment, two types of institutional strategies were discernible in the 2021 data: keeping mainly summative assessment formats with online proctoring or developing assessment formats to fit the new situation (e.g., projects, open-ended formats, "application questions"). In other words, these strategies involved innovative formative assessment formats for ERLA, with little or no summative assessment. The first strategy afforded teachers little agency and did not allow for much innovation in terms of assessment formats or contents. The 2023

data also revealed two different tendencies. Much language assessment went back on campus, also due to resources, perpetuating a testing culture in many contexts. At the same time, (summative) online assessment options were kept if they had proved useful or successful, but usually not as a default option.

In terms of HEI teachers' assessment practices in ERLA pertaining to online assessment practices including assessment feedback, conflicting tendencies were equally visible. When decisions, e.g., about summative online assessment were mandated by their institutions, teachers were not able to assume agency and had to accept the decisions made by the institutions (e.g., about on-campus summative exams). In this case, teachers would act as consumers of language assessment. In other cases, teachers might not have been motivated to assume agency and take up innovative ideas that might have come from e.g., administration authorities. There is no indication in our data for this, however, which might be explained by the respondents in our sample. The biographical data shows that more than 40% of the respondents had over 15 years of experience in their role as HEI language teacher. In the focus group discussions, it also became obvious that the informants were not only very experienced in their teaching role, but also seemed dedicated and open for innovation and change. Agency seemed to be a precondition for innovation in ERLA. When teachers were able to assume agency e.g., in formative contexts, they proved creative and were able to initiate change as innovative formative assessment formats. They also developed more awareness for equity in language assessment. Destruction like the COVID-19 pandemic resulted in innovation and creativity if teachers as one important group of stakeholders had been given agency. Teacher agency and the room for creativity functioned as a precondition. This finding is in line with Wang and East (2023). In their study, teachers adopted pedagogical translanguaging as a creative assessment format. In the present study, diversified formative assessment tasks and individualised, formative feedback using digital space were examples of innovations according to Schumpeter's (1942) theory of innovation. As a precondition of innovations in Schumpeter's theory of creative destruction, the innovations need a favourable institutional environment (Aghion et al., 2021). Favourable institutional environments were ensured, for example, when teachers reported that they were free to adapt or review assessment formats and procedures that had been proven successful and worthwhile during the pandemic. In these cases, these opportunities given to

teachers enabled innovations which proved sustainable when they were maintained after the educational and health crisis. It should be noted, however, that in our study only the perspective of teachers was considered. The point of view of other stakeholder groups such as university administrators was not part of the study design but would possibly yield interesting insights from a different perspective, also in combination with teachers.

Similar to Schumpeter's entrepreneurs, teachers can be seen as educational entrepreneurs who have driven change and innovation during the exogenous shock that COVID-19 represented. Here, Schumpeter's concept of the entrepreneur is central and can be applied to educational contexts. In order to implement innovations, the entrepreneur requires the intuition to act within a new field for which there are no guidelines or empirical insights, the openness and energy to break away from the familiar and finally the ability to overcome adversity (Schumpeter, 2003). Along the same lines, teachers can be seen as "disruption agents" (Dewi, 2023, p. 134) who act as catalysts by introducing novel ideas and technologies with a view to developing flexible, adaptive assessment systems, provided they have a favourable institutional environment that gives them room for this agency. Agency might also entail implementing gradual innovation, e.g., by teachers taking over innovations in language assessment that others have generated, thus acting as followers but still implementing innovations in their respective contexts. This would indicate a continuum of innovations with educational entrepreneurs as influencers leading the way and implementing massive innovations and others who are creative and implement little changes to fit their institutional contexts.

Being incorporated in previous innovations is another precondition for innovation to take place (standing on the shoulders of giants, Aghion et al., 2021, p. 33). In the context of our study, the technological infrastructure available in many educational contexts, along with the digital upskilling of teachers, facilitated innovations in language assessment. For example, teachers used their expertise and infrastructure to experiment with digital tools e.g., for feedback in digital space and thus contributed to more diversified feedback practices compared to a pre-pandemic level. Amidst this transformation, however, the 2023 data shows that not everything adopted during the pandemic was done so on a permanent basis. The return to in-person summative exams is indicative of retaining an established exam format that had previously

worked within many educational systems, which is in also line with Schumpeter's theory (Block et al., 2016).

Stockwell and Wang (2023) report negative implications for technology use and for teachers' views on technology as a result of teachers' forced professionalisation. The findings by Stockwell and Wang (2023), however, could not be corroborated in our study. At the same time, this might indicate a limitation of this study. Due to its convenience sampling, respondents who are open to innovations such as using digital technology, might have been focused on in our study, as has been pointed out before. Additionally, the sample size was small and respondents came from various educational systems in Europe, with testing-oriented contexts like Greece or more assessment-oriented contexts such as Finland.

Overall, the findings of the study highlight the importance of teacher agency as a precondition for change and innovation. Agency thus needs to be taken into consideration when designing LAL professional development activities. Teachers' agency has to be seen as an asset and can be considered a starting point that programmes in education should capitalise on. Creativity could be considered as an important aspect of LAL, as we have seen in the present study where teachers were taking on the burden of trying to implement high-quality, worthwhile and effective language assessment in the difficult situation that the COVID-19 pandemic represented. Creativity as a soft skill does not usually count among the core components of LAL and is thus not covered in LAL courses. When framing LAL professional development that is to prepare teachers for assessing languages in a multicrisis environment, so-called soft skills might need to be included in language assessment courses. Training in language assessment is mostly input-based and skills-related. However, we need to develop competences in LAL courses that are in line with 21st-century skills in today's VUCA (i.e., volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world (cf. Mack et al., 2016). With regard to future crises, teachers need to quickly adapt to change. In a more holistic vision of LAL, agility is vital to develop the ability to quickly learn, adapt, change and succeed in a highly dynamic environment. Therefore, in our understanding, LAL needs to move outside of components like knowledge/skills/principles and possibly embrace more general elements. These would include soft skills like the ability to adapt to change as part of critical thinking

or the ability to operate under dynamic conditions and situations of rapid change like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

COVID-19 caused disruption to educational systems in general and to language assessment in particular. On the basis of our small qualitative study with HEI language teachers and researchers, we have attempted to show that COVID-19 was an exogenous shock for the language assessment field. Adapting Schumpeter's (1942) theory of creative destruction to ERLA, we maintain that despite conflicting tendencies in various practices and procedures, the pandemic represented a chance for systemic change of assessment practices towards a more formative, more inclusive, more individualised and more digitised assessment culture. On condition that teachers as agents of change and educational entrepreneurs can engender real, sustainable innovations on a continuum in Schumpeter's (1942) sense. Having to deal with the long-term effects of the pandemic as exogenous shocks in a multicrisis environment, the language assessment community as well as teachers as an important stakeholder group for CBLA need to respond to significant changes. The field of language testing and assessment has to embrace these changes as well, hopefully enabling sustainable innovations this way.

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Appendix 1. Teachers' questionnaire

COVID and Assessment: Experiences, Practices, Challenges, Prospects (Questions included in the online survey)

1. What are the measures taken in your context regarding assessment under COVID-19?
2. What is your opinion of these measures?
3. How do students find them?
4. What are the assessment measures you have taken under COVID-19?
5. What kind of assessment feedback have you provided under COVID-19?
6. What are your biggest concerns of students taking exams from home? How have you dealt with them?
7. Have you conducted any type of online assessment during COVID-19? How and what did you do?
8. How have your students responded to these?
9. In what ways have you benefited or been challenged by online assessment during COVID 19?
10. How do you see the future of assessment in and after COVID-19?

If you wish to make additional comments on any aspect of assessment during COVID-19, please use the space below:

**Questions about COVID-informed assessment
(Questions asked during the focus groups)**

1. What are the measures taken in your context regarding assessment under COVID-19?
2. What is your opinion of these measures?
3. How do students find these new assessment measures?
4. What are the assessment measures you have taken under COVID-19?
5. What are the assessment feedback measures you have taken under COVID-19?
6. What are your biggest concerns of students taking exams from home? How have you dealt with them?
7. Have you conducted any type of online assessment during COVID-19?
8. How have your students responded to these?
9. In what ways have you benefited or been challenged by online assessment during COVID 19?
10. How do your students find online assessment?