# Reframing the Online Learning and Assessment Debate in the Age of AI

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## ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a global shift in language learning and assessment from face-to-face to online formats. This essay critically evaluates whether language learning and assessment should be conducted entirely online by weighing both the benefits and drawbacks of digital tools and platforms. While online assessment offers accessibility, efficiency, and pedagogical innovation, it also presents risks such as screen fatigue, inequality in access, and compromised validity due to generative AI use by students. Drawing on research, including case studies from Sweden and Japan, this essay proposes a hybrid model that strategically combines online and in-person methods. This model allows educators to tailor assessment modes based on context, content, and learner needs. The discussion also addresses potential challenges in standardizing hybrid models, calling for institutional coordination and learner involvement in shaping equitable learning and assessment practices. Ultimately, the essay argues that the key question is not whether online learning and assessment should replace traditional methods but how to implement it responsibly. By reframing the debate, this paper advocates for reflective decision-making and ongoing dialogue among educators, learners, and policymakers.

## INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a fundamental transformation in language learning and assessment, accelerating the shift from face-to-face instruction to digitally mediated learning. This unprecedented transition has prompted a crucial question: Should the future of language learning and assessment be entirely online? Given the inseparable link between assessment and instruction, the washback effect (the influence of assessment on teaching and learning) must not be overlooked. This essay explores both the benefits and limitations of fully online language learning and assessment and argues that a hybrid model, which incorporates both digital and physical modes, offers a more balanced and equitable approach.

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**The Advantages of Online Language Learning and Assessment**

Although many learners have been subjected to language assessment, the increasing digitization of such assessments offers several advantages. One clear benefit is the reduction of time and effort for both assessors and learners. Take the IELTS (International English Language Testing System) as an example: it used to be delivered only in physical locations, requiring both test-takers and evaluators to travel, sometimes across long distances. This model unintentionally prioritized those living in urban areas, where more test opportunities and lower travel costs were the norm. With the advent of online IELTS, rural candidates now have more equitable access, minimizing both financial and logistical burdens. In this way, digital assessment can help reduce educational disparities between urban and rural regions.

Digital tools can also enhance classroom practices, such as by enabling more meaning-focused feedback. In the pre-digital era, teachers often spent considerable time correcting grammatical and lexical errors in student writing. Today, tools such as Grammarly and ChatGPT assist learners in producing more polished texts. As a result, teachers can shift their attention toward deeper aspects of communication, such as content clarity and argument structure. This integration of digital support with human evaluation allows for a more efficient and pedagogically meaningful approach to language teaching and assessment.

**Challenges and Limitations of Fully Online Learning and Assessment**

Despite its advantages, online learning and assessment presents several challenges and limitations. Since assessment and teaching are closely interlinked, the washback effect of fully digitalized assessment must not be overlooked. If all assessments were conducted online, language instruction would likely follow suit, pushing both teachers and students toward digital environments. While this benefits many, it simultaneously disadvantages others, particularly in regions where access to digital infrastructure like Wi-Fi and laptops remains limited. There are even some areas still with limited or inconsistent access to the internet. Therefore, too much digitalization could create a pedagogical gap between those who live in digitally rich areas and those who belong to digitally under-resourced areas, such as remote areas and outer islands. If language learning and assessment shifts entirely online amid such situations, children in digitally impoverished regions could lose access to formal education and evaluation, exacerbating existing educational inequalities. Kunnan (2004) advocates the test fairness framework, which emphasizes the importance of fairness in assessment. According to this test fairness framework, there are two principles: the principle of justice and the principle of beneficence. The first advocates that "a test ought to be fair" (Kunnan, 2004, p33) to all test takers, and the latter means that "the test ought to bring about good in society" (Kunnan, 2004, p33). Amid the current time when the development of technology is much quicker than its rule establishment, this framework can be violated.

Even in highly developed countries, challenges persist. Sweden, once considered a global leader in digital education, has recently begun reversing some of its technology-centric policies in schools (The Guardian, 2023, September). Recently, the government plans to reintroduce printed textbooks and reduce reliance on screens in early childhood education, citing concerns about declining literacy rates and attention spans. These concerns underscore the importance of balancing digital innovation with traditional pedagogical methods, particularly in language development and assessment.

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According to Yan et al. (2017), extended time of screen exposure for adolescents can harm their mental health, making them anxious and less satisfied with themselves. Moreover, extended screen time is reported to increase health risks such as obesity (Hardy et al., 2010). Generally, extended exposure to digital screens can bring health risks, such as damage to eye-sight and sleep deprivation, regardless of the user's age. Sweden's policy reverse illustrates that while online learning has clear benefits, uncritical adoption may undermine both educational and health outcomes.

## Arguing for a Hybrid Learning and Assessment Model

While online learning and assessment offer considerable benefits, their potential risks, such as impaired health due to prolonged screen exposure and increased pedagogical inequality rooted in digital infrastructure, cannot be ignored. Therefore, rather than advocating exclusively for either physical or digital modes, this section proposes a hybrid model. Such a model would allow educators and learners to leverage the strengths of both systems depending on the context.

Digital assessment proves particularly efficient when evaluating system-based knowledge, such as grammar or vocabulary. For instance, teachers can use digital tools to automate both grading and feedback, enabling immediate responses and reducing workload. In such situations, this approach can be both time-efficient and pedagogically sound.

However, challenges emerge when assessing productive skills like writing. The widespread availability of generative AI tools has made it difficult for educators to determine the authenticity of student work. While AI checkers are developing, current methods remain insufficient. As a result, take-home writing tasks could risk losing the intention of teachers. In contrast, in-class, paper-based writing assessments can ensure greater response authenticity but are often impractical due to time and labor constraints. Arslan et al. (2024) argue that the development of AI is more rapid than the speed that humans can set the rules, and validity, reliability, and fairness can be at risk in such situations.

Given these factors, hybrid models offer a balanced approach, maximizing advantages while minimizing drawbacks. According to the study conducted by Babazawa (2024), hybrid forms of education can foster students' engagement and meet their personal needs more efficiently. Another study conducted by Abbasi, Lashari, and Golo (2025) demonstrated that the incorporation of AI-tools can facilitate learning, especially among digital-native students, and it also points out the value of traditional teaching methods. This study concluded that AI-tools should not completely replace traditional teaching methods but should be used as a complement (Abbassi et al., 2025). This conclusion implies that educators should understand both the benefits and dangers of assessment using technology and consider when and when not to incorporate it.

Moreover, as technology evolves faster than educational policy and ethical standards can adapt, educators are frequently left to navigate unregulated terrain. Rather than resisting this evolution, it may be more pragmatic to regulate how and when digital tools are integrated. For example, in regions where access to native-speaker feedback is limited, teachers might allow AI-assisted proofreading for structural and grammatical corrections. This enables educators to focus their feedback on content, organization, and logic, thus promoting meaning-focused learning, especially when teaching speaking and writing.

A successful example of such an approach can be found in Hokkaido, Japan. The local Board of Education conducts annual English assessments for all high school freshmen in the region. Given the need to test students from over 200 public schools within a limited timeframe, the

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reading and listening sections are delivered fully online with automatic feedback and scoring, while writing and speaking are assessed through traditional in-person methods. Students have to take the test with the computer that is restricted to search the web, so they are unable to access AI tools. This division, based on the nature of the skill assessed, illustrates a potential direction for post-COVID language education, where digital and physical modes can coexist effectively. Although the prefecture is still in the process of developing the appropriate use of generative AI, it plans to encourage teachers to incorporate AI tools into their teaching in order to meet the varied needs of students.

In today's educational landscape, the key question is no longer whether language assessment should be online, but rather how and when online methods can be implemented most effectively. As assessment continues to evolve alongside technological innovation in online learning, the task for educators is not to choose sides, but to ask better questions.

## Constraints and Suggestions

Although the hybrid model integrates the advantages of both digital and physical forms of language learning and assessment, and appears to address many of their challenges, there remain important areas of debate. One such issue concerns the ambiguity surrounding how much of the learning assessment should be conducted in each mode. For instance, Teacher A may prefer physical mode of teaching and assessment, while Teacher B might rely more heavily on digital formats. Within the same institution, such inconsistencies could raise questions about the fairness of evaluation standards.

Teachers' preferences are shaped by various factors, including their pedagogical background, age, and teaching philosophy. These differences should be acknowledged and respected. However, to maintain consistency, it is essential that institutions establish a shared framework, ideally through consensus among educators and program coordinators, specifying when and to what extent each mode should be used. At the same time, the framework should leave room for individual teacher discretion, especially in adapting to learners' needs.

Involving learners in these decisions could further strengthen the approach. Students also develop preferences for assessment formats, and engaging them in dialogue about these preferences can promote learner autonomy. Encouraging negotiation, among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and students, may be the key to implementing a fair and flexible hybrid format.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has aimed to explore the benefits and challenges of fully online language learning and assessment and has concluded that there is no one-size-fits-all solution. The strengths and weaknesses of each model vary depending on the teaching context. Consequently, a hybrid mode, combining digital and physical formats, has been proposed as a pragmatic compromise that maximizes the strengths of each approach. Still, even the hybrid model is not without limitations. If not implemented with clarity and consensus, it may result in unfairness or inconsistencies in assessment. Therefore, continuous discussion

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among program coordinators, language teachers, and learners is essential to ensure fairness, reliability, and contextual appropriateness.

Good language teachers are those who seek better questions, not final answers. The word *question* itself originates from *quest*, and educators are perpetually on a quest for more effective teaching, learning, and assessment practices. This journey has no final destination; critical thinkers understand that today's best practices may become tomorrow's outdated methods. When the audiolingual method emerged, it was hailed as revolutionary, only to be later challenged by alternative approaches. And yet, the audiolingual method still has its merits. As this example illustrates, no single method or assessment model is universally superior. What matters most is not the tools we use but the thoughtfulness with which we choose them.

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