
**TEACHERS' CHALLENGES IN ASSESSING SPEAKING SKILLS IN
SYNCHRONOUS ONLINE DISCUSSIONS: A CASE STUDY FROM
AN INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT**

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ABSTRACT

Synchronous online discussions have become essential for speaking instruction in digital EFL contexts, however evaluating students' performance in these real-time environments remains challenges. However numerous studies emphasized the significance of digital assessment, only a few concentrated on looking at the specific challenges that teachers face while assessing students' speaking abilities during synchronous online discussions. Furthermore, the objective of this study involves looking into the challenges teachers face and the strategies they use to maintain online speaking assessments fair, reliable, and effective. In collecting the data, this study used a descriptive qualitative approach, structured interviews were conducted with three EFL teachers from the Speaking Partner Course in Pare–Kediri, and data were analyzed by thematic analysis. Findings indicate three significant challenges: technological constraints such as insufficient connectivity, time limitations during online sessions, and authenticity concerns regarding students' autonomous performance. By using institutional rubrics, conducting pre-assessment technological checks, carefully managing their time, and offering ongoing feedback, teachers were able to address these problems. The study emphasizes the need of strengthening teachers' digital competence and assessment literacy, and it encourages focused professional development and improved institutional support to improve the quality of online speaking assessments.

Keyword: *English foreign language, synchronous online discussion, speaking assessment, teachers' challenges*

INTRODUCTION

Synchronous online discussions (SODs) already grown increasingly popular in digital educational environments, enabling real-time communication and active student interaction via platforms including Zoom application. Speaking assessment is an important component of EFL education because it reveals learners' communicative proficiency and developmental requirements. The move to online learning has had a considerable impact on how teachers

observe, analyze, and interpret students' oral performance. As stated by Tarazi and Ortega-Martín (2023), effective participation in synchronous classes needs behavioural, emotional, and cognitive involvement, as well as interactive instructional design and teacher readiness. Similarly, research suggests that synchronous online learning environments might improve students' speaking skills by allowing for immediate feedback, authentic conversation, and collaborative meaning-making (Muluk et al., 2024). These results emphasize the growing importance of technology integration and active participation in designing effective speaking instruction and assessment in online learning environments.

Assessing students' speaking abilities is an essential component of EFL instruction because it reflects their communicative competence and identifies opportunities for improvement. In online learning environments, effective speaking assessment necessitates validity, fairness, and compatibility with appropriate digital tools and assessment standards. Another research stated, using technology might supported rubrics and well-designed assessment techniques can improve transparency, objectivity, and student participation in digital speaking assessments (Taylor, 2022; Andrade & Du, 2007). Further to research on online language assessment, virtual learning settings have transformed traditional evaluation into more flexible and reflective processes, requiring teachers to balance authenticity, practicality, and reliability when assessing performance online (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021; Handayani & Syarif (2021). Research indicates that synchronous online learning platforms such as Zoom may be utilized as both instructional and assessment tools, allowing for real-time observation, feedback, and interaction (Tarazi & Ortega-Martín, 2023; Muluk et al., 2024). Overall, the findings indicate that teachers' digital competency, assessment literacy, and ability to create contextually relevant online assessment activities are critical for guaranteeing meaningful and equitable speaking evaluation in synchronous digital environments.

However, studies regarding online language assessment have increased in recent years, significant gaps remained. A significant amount of the current research focuses on asynchronous assessments or generic online evaluation techniques. But, preventing synchronous speaking assessments, which require teachers to make real-time judgments under changing technological conditions unexplored (Coombe et al., 2020). Several studies have highlighted numerous obstacles associated with online assessment, such as administrative limits, accessibility, and technical issues (Forrester, 2020), nevertheless limited is known how teachers may address these issues during real-time synchronous assessments. Furthermore, the

current study focuses on formal educational contexts, such as schools and universities, despite research indicating that teachers' digital competency and assessment procedures differ greatly among institutions (Gómez-Pablos et al., 2022). Individual language courses, which may have different technology resources, institutional policies, and assessment systems, tend to be ignored in the literature. To fill these gaps, the current study investigates the challenges and strategies used by teachers to assess speaking skills in synchronous online discussions in an online English course environment.

Following on the gaps highlighted above, this study proposes to analyze the challenges teachers face when assessing students' speaking skills during synchronous online discussions, as well as the strategies they use to ensure fairness, dependability, and reliability in these assessments. The study was carried out at the Speaking Partner Course in Pare-Kediri, an individual English course that frequently incorporates digital platforms into classes and facilitates synchronous online assessments. This context is especially essential because individual online course frequently operate under different assessment methodologies, resources, and institutional expectations than formal educational contexts, despite being underrepresented in previous studies. The study contributes to both theory and practice by investigating assessment practices in this environment. Theoretically, it increases understanding of synchronous online speaking assessment in nonformal contexts practically. Not only that, it provides insights that can inform teacher professional development, strengthen digital assessment literacy, and contribute the development of more contextually appropriate speaking assessment rubrics.

In addressing this study, the following research questions are detailed below:

- RQ1. What are challenges do teachers face in assessing students' speaking skills during synchronous online discussions at the Speaking Partner Course in Pare-Kediri?
- RQ2. How do teachers address issues of reliability, fairness, and effectiveness when evaluating speaking performance in a synchronous online environment?
- RQ3. What are strategies do teachers employ to overcome the challenges of assessing speaking skills in synchronous online discussions?

METHOD

This study utilized a descriptive qualitative research approach to investigate the challenges teachers face while assessing students' speaking abilities in synchronous online discussions at Speaking Partner Course Pare-Kediri. The research site was selected

intentionally for its established integration of digital tools and regular execution of synchronous online speaking assessments. Three teachers were chosen through purposive sampling, following to the principle of information-rich examples and data sufficiency in descriptive qualitative research (Creswell, 2014). Despite its limited scope, the sample was considered appropriate for producing comprehensive, contextually relevant information. Participants fulfilled specific qualification criteria, including at least one year of experience evaluating speaking in synchronous online environments, active engagement in teaching online speaking courses at the institution, and readiness to participate in interviews and provide appropriate assessment documents. The chosen teachers demonstrated a range of ages (20s), teaching experience (3–12 years), and academic qualifications (bachelor's and master's degrees in English education), thereby introducing variety within a specific framework.

The data were collected through structured interview to explore participants' view. The interview around 30 to 40 minutes for each participant and conducted by Zoom or WhatsApp video call according to the preferences of the participants. Therefore, the interview guide focused on three main areas: (1) challenges teachers face in assessing students' speaking skills during synchronous online discussions, (2) strategies used to ensure reliability, fairness, and effectiveness of the assessments, and (3) solutions to overcome these challenges. In line with the aims of descriptive qualitative research. The design adapted from this research Creswell's (2014). Several stages in conducting descriptive qualitative research including; (1) identifying the research problem, (2) determining participants and data sources, (3) collecting data, (4) analyzing and interpreting the findings, (5) validating results, and (6) reporting them descriptively.

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis framework by Braun and Clarke (2006). The analytical method was used for the flexibility and appropriateness of this analytical approach in identifying, analyzing, and interpreting meaning across qualitative data. There were several steps in analysis process. First, by analyzing interview transcripts repeatedly, the researcher was familiarized with the data. Second, developed codes in order to preserve important statements and ideas preliminary. Third, gathered the related themes into the codes that were developed. Fourth, the coherence and significance of these themes to the study questions were examined. Fifth, each theme required identification and refinement in order to accurately convey its essence. The findings were then given in a descriptive story that was supported by statements from the participants to highlight their experiences. Themes such as *technical challenges*, *assessment validity*, *student participation*, and *adaptation strategies*

were identified and discussed in light of existing literature on online speaking assessment. Furthermore, document analysis was also carried out to triangulate the results in order to increase the study's credibility. To get an in-depth understanding of teachers' assessment procedures, researcher used supporting materials such as speaking rubrics, assessment guidelines, and sample scoring sheets.

To ensure the trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was established through participant checking, with participants assessing and confirming previous interpretations, and through discussions with experienced qualitative research colleagues. Reliability and confirmability were ensured through data transcripts, coding files, and research notes. In these, researchers noted assumptions, positions, and potential biases throughout the research process. Collectively, these approaches ensured that the analysis was thorough, transparent, and methodologically.

This section presents the results of preliminary research and the collection of information from participants according to the procedures mentioned in the previous point. This study aims to analyse the use of formative assessments by teachers in assessing the speaking ability in synchronous online discussion. Research data was obtained through interviews with teachers. The interviews were conducted with teachers.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of preliminary research and the collection of information from participants according to the procedures mentioned in the previous point. This study aims to analyse the use of formative assessments by teachers in assessing the speaking ability in synchronous online discussion. Research data was obtained through interviews with teachers. The interviews were conducted with teachers.

Findings

Adapting to Online Speaking

Based on the data, it can be collected some information in it. The first section, focused on all participants stated they had experiences teaching speaking in offline classroom before the transition to synchronous online classroom. The participant stated that speaking assessments were conducted through conferencing platform (zoom) during the formal assessment.

“I evaluate the examination of synchronous discussions using the Zoom application, and this usually occurs during final exams.” (T1)

Similarly, another participant stated:

“All the speaking assessments are now conducted through online, especially for mini and final test” (T2)

Another participant also emphasized that speaking assessment procedures are aligned with the institutional guidelines.

“Even though the classes are online, but all the assessment process should follow the institutional guidelines”

From the data above, indicated the speaking assessment (mini and final test) are conducted formally during the synchronous online discussion and it should align to the institutional guideline procedures.

Assessment Technical and Pedagogical Challenges

After analyzing the teachers' adaptation by using online platform, the second section concerned the technical and pedagogical challenges that teachers faced when assessing speaking skills in an online setting. All participants identified unstable internet connectivity as one of the most frequent and disruptive problems. This issue affected both teachers and students, highlighting how technical conditions can directly influence the reliability of assessment outcomes.

All participants identified unstable internet connection as the main obstacle during the online speaking assessment. So, it caused delay responses and unclear audio which disturbed the assessment process.

“It might happen because both teacher's and students' internet connection. So, it bit delayed and unclear result”. (T1)

“When the internet connection is unstable, it makes the students' voice unclear”. (T2)

“The cause of weak internet connection can affect to the assessment fluency” (T3)

Another significant challenge involved time constraints during online sessions. With limited class durations, teachers found it difficult to allocate sufficient time for each student's speaking test, particularly in large classes.

“Because only one hour, sometimes it needs more than one hour to conduct speaking assessment if the students more than fifteen in a class”. (T1)

“The time session is only an hour, so it makes difficult to assess students properly”. (T2)

From the data above, indicated that online speaking assessments faced an external challenge during the process and the classes were limited to an hour session.

Ensuring Fairness and Reliability

Furthermore, the third aspect completed the data which focused on teachers’ efforts to maintain fairness, reliability, and transparency throughout the assessment process. All participants emphasized that they used institutional rubrics as the primary reference in evaluating students’ speaking performance.

“We use the same rubrics for both mini and final examination” (T1)

“The speaking rubric assessment focus on fluency, coherence, grammatical range, lexical source, and pronunciation” (T2)

“Because it conducts in both mini and final exam, so we can see the students’ progress from the effectiveness feedback that we give from mini test to final test”. (T3)

From the data above indicated there are several rubric components such as fluency, coherence, grammatical range, lexical resource, and pronunciation. By following these standardized criteria, teachers ensured that scoring was objective and consistent across students that fairness in online speaking assessment is achieved not only through standardized rubrics but also through flexible, empathetic teacher judgment.

Adaptive Strategies for Improvement

This section addressed the strategies teachers employed to overcome challenges and ensure effective assessment practices. Teachers developed several strategies to overcome synchronous online speaking assessment challenges. The common strategies are assessment preparation, time management, and focused on rubric assessment feedback.

“Teachers ask students to prepare the test by their own self, inform them to make sure their connection, and try to manage the speech exam before the examination.” (T1)

“To minimize the obstacles, the students may consult the speaking text before the examination whether teachers understand their speech when facing low connection” (T2)

“Teacher should manage the examination time. So, each student can perform effectively without overlap” (T3)

From the findings above, suggest that teachers’ strategies focused on maintaining practicality and professionalism rather than altering institutional policies. The teachers’ ability to plan, organize, and adapt under challenging circumstances illustrates their resilience and evolving competence in conducting valid and fair speaking assessments online.

Discussion

The findings indicate that teachers demonstrated considerable adaptability when transitioning from face-to-face speaking assessments to synchronous online formats. Drawing on their prior teaching experience, teachers were able to transfer established assessment practices to digital platforms such as Zoom while maintaining core assessment procedures. This adaptability reflects an advancement in teachers’ digital competence, which has been identified as a critical component of effective online assessment practices. These results align with earlier studies highlighting the importance of technological readiness and professional flexibility in online assessment contexts (Forrester, 2020). Gómez-Pablos et al. (2022) similarly argue that teachers’ digital competence directly influences both instructional effectiveness and assessment reliability.

Beyond technical adjustment, the present study shows that adaptability in online speaking assessment involves broader pedagogical and institutional considerations. Consistent with Xu and Brown (2016), the findings suggest that online assessment competence extends beyond the acquisition of technical skills. In the nonformal English course context examined, teachers were required to align institutional assessment systems with synchronous online environments. This finding contributes to language assessment theory by proposing that online assessment literacy should be conceptualized as a multidimensional construct encompassing technological proficiency, pedagogical coherence, and institutional awareness. While traditional language assessment frameworks have emphasized alignment between test design and learning objectives (Brown, 2004; Fulcher, 2010), this study highlights the importance of teachers’ adaptive decision-making in real-time online assessment settings, particularly in nonformal educational contexts where institutional regulations may be more flexible than in formal education.

From a critical assessment perspective, this adaptability plays a central role in maintaining assessment validity in synchronous online environments. The findings

demonstrate that assessment quality is shaped not only by the digital tools employed but also by teachers' capacity to uphold assessment standards amid changing instructional conditions. Teachers emerge as key agents in safeguarding assessment integrity, reinforcing their role as responsible facilitators rather than passive implementers of technology.

Despite this adaptability, the study identifies persistent technological and pedagogical challenges that affect synchronous online speaking assessments. Unstable internet connections and limited assessment time were reported as major constraints, often reducing the clarity of students' spoken performance and complicating teachers' ability to evaluate pronunciation, fluency, and coherence consistently. These challenges reflect broader concerns in online language assessment research, where technological infrastructure is widely recognized as a determinant of assessment equity (Coombe et al., 2020). From a theoretical standpoint, these findings reinforce Brown's (2004) assertion that reliability in language assessment depends on uniform testing conditions. In synchronous online settings, variability in internet quality creates unequal assessment conditions, increasing the risk of scoring inconsistency and construct-irrelevant variance. The present study extends this theoretical concern by illustrating how reliability issues are intensified in real-time speaking assessments, where audio delays and interactional disruptions directly interfere with the evaluation of spoken language.

In addition to technical limitations, concerns regarding assessment authenticity emerged as a significant pedagogical challenge. Teachers expressed uncertainty about whether students' speaking performances reflected independent ability or external assistance. This concern resonates with previous research highlighting the difficulty of verifying task authenticity and learner autonomy in online assessment contexts (Chapelle & Douglas, 2006; Kormos & Michel, 2017). However, the findings of this study add nuance by demonstrating that authenticity concerns are not solely linked to student behavior but are also shaped by the limited observational capacity inherent in synchronous digital environments. Contextual factors such as large class sizes, strict time constraints, and institutional expectations further influence teachers' ability to verify performance authenticity. In nonformal educational settings, where assessments are often conducted within compressed schedules, teachers may prioritize procedural completion over detailed verification of learner independence. This suggests that challenges to authenticity in online speaking assessment should be understood as systemic issues rather than individual shortcomings of teachers.

Importantly, the findings show that technological and pedagogical challenges are deeply interconnected. Time constraints exacerbate connectivity issues, and together these limitations restrict teachers' opportunities to use follow-up questions or interactional checks that could support authenticity verification. This reinforces contemporary views of assessment reliability and authenticity as dynamic constructs influenced by technological, pedagogical, and contextual factors rather than fixed properties of assessment instruments (Fulcher, 2010; Giraldo, 2018; Kremmel & Harding, 2020).

The study further demonstrates that fairness and reliability in synchronous online speaking assessments are primarily supported through the consistent use of institutional rubrics. All participating teachers relied on standardized criteria—including fluency, coherence, grammatical range, lexical resource, and pronunciation—to guide their assessment decisions. The use of such standardized criteria is widely recognized as fundamental to equitable language assessment, particularly in contexts where testing conditions may vary (Brown, 2004). This practice aligns with Taylor's (2013, 2022) argument that contextually grounded digital rubrics enhance assessor consistency and improve students' understanding of performance expectations. The findings confirm that rubrics play a crucial role in promoting transparency and uniformity in online speaking assessment.

However, the study also reveals that rubrics alone are insufficient to ensure fairness. Teachers' professional judgment remained essential, particularly when technical disruptions or time limitations affected students' performance. This supports contemporary perspectives that conceptualize fairness as a socially situated and ethically informed practice rather than a purely procedural one (Fulcher, 2010; Ross, 2006). Teachers in this study demonstrated an ability to balance adherence to institutional criteria with sensitivity to students' technical constraints, reflecting an ethical approach to assessment decision-making. In nonformal educational contexts, where institutional regulations may be less rigid, consistent rubric use also serves to legitimize assessment outcomes for both students and administrators, strengthening institutional trust.

The findings further indicate that teachers employed a range of adaptive strategies to address challenges in synchronous online speaking assessment. These strategies included pre-assessment preparation, clear communication of expectations, structured time management, and strict adherence to institutional rubrics. Such practices align with established principles of speaking assessment that emphasize transparency, preparation, and examiner flexibility as essential to maintaining validity (Luoma, 2004). Encouraging students to prepare

independently and ensure stable internet connectivity prior to assessment reflects proactive classroom management aimed at minimizing construct-irrelevant interference. Previous studies have shown that clear communication and systematic preparation can reduce technological disruptions and learner anxiety in online assessment environments (Coombe et al., 2020; Ockey et al., 2016). The present findings extend this literature by demonstrating that these strategies serve not only administrative purposes but also pedagogical functions in preserving assessment integrity.

From a theoretical perspective, these adaptive practices support contemporary interpretations of language assessment literacy as a context-sensitive and dynamic competence. As argued by Giraldo (2018) and Taylor (2022), assessment literacy involves reflective judgment, ethical awareness, and responsiveness to contextual constraints, in addition to technical expertise. The findings of this study reinforce this view by illustrating how teachers' assessment decisions were shaped by considerations of fairness, student motivation, and technological limitations. Overall, the study contributes to ongoing discussions in online language assessment by emphasizing that fairness and reliability in synchronous speaking assessment emerge from the interaction of standardized instruments, contextual conditions, and teachers' adaptive professional judgment. This perspective challenges purely technology-driven views of online assessment and underscores the continued centrality of teacher agency in maintaining assessment quality.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

This study demonstrates that effective synchronous online speaking assessment relies more on teachers' adaptive assessment literacy than only on technological capabilities. This study's primary contribution is the identification of teacher adaptability manifested in ethical judgment, contextual decision-making, and principled rubric application as a crucial element in maintaining fairness, reliability, and validity in technically limited online environments. The findings further indicate that assessment literacy in synchronous online contexts involves not only technological proficiency but also pedagogical awareness and professional responsibility. Building on these findings, institutions require to offer specialized professional development on synchronous speech assessment, emphasizing real-time scoring, rubric interpretation, and feedback methodologies regard to dependable technological support during online evaluations. Future research could investigate the evolution of instructors' assessment

literacy over time and analyze online speaking assessment procedures across various institutional contexts.

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