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Examining Context-Based Assessment Approaches for Enhancing English Language Learning in Pakistani Higher Education



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Abstract

The incorporation of authentic and meaningful assessment practices in English language teaching and learning has been widely recognized in second language acquisition and pedagogy as essential for promoting effective language development. The present study investigates the pedagogical benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into a university-level English language course in Pakistan, conducted through a blended learning mode. Undergraduate students from intermediate and advanced proficiency levels collaborated with peers and trained mentors to complete assessment tasks designed around real-life communicative contexts, reflecting the core elements of authenticity. Data were collected from multiple sources, including students' written tasks, reflective journals, semi-structured interviews, and online discussion forums. Findings indicate that, despite certain implementation challenges, the integration of authentic assessment practices significantly enhanced students' communicative competence, learner autonomy, and motivation. The study concludes with practical recommendations for educators and policymakers on how to effectively embed authentic, context-based assessments into ESL curricula within Pakistani higher education institutions.

Keywords: Authentic Assessment, ESL Learning, Blended Learning, Pakistani Context

Introduction

In higher education, the incorporation of authentic assessment practices has been associated with enhanced learner motivation and deeper engagement in the learning process (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). Integrating meaning-focused and contextually relevant assessment tasks that mirror real-world communicative situations has been found to positively influence students' learning outcomes (Villarreal et al., 2024) and contribute to more meaningful and sustained student engagement (Quinlan et al., 2024). Within the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, authentic assessment enables learners to connect classroom activities with real-life language use, making their learning experiences more purposeful and intrinsically motivating (Pinner, 2019).

Building upon these pedagogical insights, the present study explores the design and implementation of authentic assessment tasks in an English language course at a Pakistani university. The study investigates how context-based assessments can promote language proficiency, critical thinking, and learner autonomy in hybrid (blended) ESL learning environments. It also examines the practical challenges teachers face while integrating such tasks into traditional assessment frameworks.

This paper outlines the academic context of the research, the methodology employed, and the pedagogical benefits and challenges identified through the intervention. The concluding section proposes design principles and recommendations for effectively embedding authentic assessment practices into English language teaching and learning in Pakistani higher education institutions. The next section discusses the theoretical underpinnings of the study by reviewing relevant literature on situated and authentic learning.

Problem Statement

In Pakistani higher education, traditional assessment practices in English language classrooms often emphasize rote learning and written examinations, neglecting real-world communicative competence and critical thinking. Despite growing advocacy for innovative pedagogies, authentic assessment, designed to reflect genuine language use in meaningful contexts remains underexplored in ESL teaching. There is a pressing need to examine how authentic, context-based assessment strategies can be effectively integrated into hybrid learning environments to enhance English language learning outcomes in Pakistan.

Objectives of the Study

To explore the challenges and benefits of implementing authentic assessment tasks in Pakistani university ESL classrooms.

To develop contextually relevant recommendations for designing and integrating authentic assessment practices in hybrid English language learning environments.

Research Questions

What are the challenges and benefits of integrating authentic assessment tasks into the teaching and learning of English at the university level in Pakistan?

What practical recommendations can be derived for designing authentic assessment strategies suited to Pakistani ESL contexts?

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the growing body of research on assessment innovation in English language teaching by contextualizing authentic assessment within Pakistan's higher education framework. It offers practical insights for ESL instructors, curriculum designers, and policymakers to create assessment practices that promote communicative competence, learner engagement, and meaningful learning in blended ESL classrooms.

Literature Review

The concept of authentic learning finds its theoretical foundation in the situated learning framework and the cognitive apprenticeship model proposed by Brown et al. (1989) and Collins et al. (1991). These models emphasize that genuine learning occurs when abstract knowledge is contextualized within authentic situations, allowing learners to apply their understanding through active, collaborative engagement with peers and experts in real-world contexts. Building upon these foundations, Herrington and Oliver (2000) advanced a model for technology-enhanced learning environments that incorporated nine critical design elements. They later refined this model to focus more explicitly on the pedagogical significance of authentic tasks in online and blended learning contexts, outlining ten defining characteristics for the design and implementation of such tasks. Herrington et al. (2010) further asserted that authentic assessment should be seamlessly integrated with learning activities, mirroring real-world evaluative practices rather than existing as detached, artificial procedures.

Incorporating authentic assessment across diverse educational contexts has been shown to enhance higher-order cognitive skills (Akbari et al., 2022; (Zaman, Jawad, & Buriro, 2025) and develop essential workplace competencies such as problem-

solving, collaboration, communication, and self-regulation (Zaman, Chandio, and Noor, 2025; Sokhanvar et al., 2021; Villarroel et al., 2024). Moreover, authentic assessment has been linked to increased student engagement (Quinlan et al., 2024), motivation and commitment to learning (James & Casidy, 2018), creativity and learner satisfaction (Jopp, 2020; van Rensburg et al., 2022), and improved academic integrity (Ellis et al., 2024; Openo, 2024).

In the specific domain of English language teaching and learning, the development of authentic learning environments and assessment tasks rooted in real-life communication has been recognized as essential for effective language acquisition (Ellis et al., 2020; Pinner, 2019) and for fostering intrinsic motivation (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2021). The Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) approach, grounded in Bruner's (1971) experiential "learning-by-doing" philosophy, offers a robust pedagogical framework for creating authentic, meaning-focused activities that promote language performance and learner engagement (Bryfonski & McKay, 2019; Jackson, 2022). According to leading TBLT scholars, such tasks should expose students to meaningful and authentic use of the target language (Bygate et al., 2021; Ellis et al., 2020), align with learners' communicative needs (Long, 2015), and follow a progression of increasing task complexity (Robinson, 2022).

Recent studies have explored how TBLT principles can be effectively adapted for technology-mediated environments (Chong et al., 2020; Ellis, 2021). Research highlights the potential of integrating digital tools and online platforms to enhance language practice, learner autonomy, and sustained motivation (Gonzales-Lloret & Ziegler, 2021; Smith & Gonzales-Lloret, 2020).

In the context of Pakistani higher education, where blended learning is increasingly adopted in ESL classrooms, integrating TBLT with situated and authentic learning principles offers a promising approach to designing interactive and context-based assessment tasks. These tasks can encourage collaborative communication and promote authentic language use through both synchronous and asynchronous interactions. The present study applies Herrington et al.'s (2010) ten elements of authentic learning to the design of assessment activities delivered through a learning management system (LMS), combining online tools and in-person instruction to foster real-world communicative competence among Pakistani ESL learners.

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a Design-Based Research (DBR) approach (Reeves, 2006), which emphasizes iterative cycles of design, implementation, evaluation, and refinement. DBR is particularly suited for educational interventions because it allows researchers to develop practical solutions to real-world pedagogical challenges while simultaneously generating theoretical insights. The qualitative nature of this research, incorporating interviews, observations, and portfolio analysis, facilitated ongoing feedback and adaptation of assessment tasks in the ESL classroom context.

The study was conducted in four phases over two successive six-week iterations, corresponding to one academic semester in a Pakistani university ESL course delivered in hybrid (blended) learning mode.

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Targeted Population

The targeted population comprised undergraduate ESL students enrolled in intermediate and advanced English language courses at a Pakistani university. Additionally, ESL instructors and trained peer mentors involved in supporting collaborative assessment tasks formed part of the population.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

A **purposive sampling** technique was employed to select participants who could provide rich insights into authentic assessment practices in ESL learning. The sample included 16 students, 7 trained peer mentors, and the course instructor. The peer mentors were selected based on their proficiency in English and prior experience supporting collaborative learning activities.

Data Collection Tools

Multiple data sources were used to ensure triangulation and comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon:

Collaborative assessable projects developed by students during authentic assessment tasks.

Individual learning portfolios documenting students' reflections, progress, and learning strategies

Contributions to online discussion forums (asynchronous and synchronous) facilitated via the university's Learning Management System (LMS).

Focus group interviews conducted at the end of the first iteration (50–60 minutes per group).

Individual interviews with students and peer mentors after the second iteration (45–60 minutes each)

Researcher's observational notes documenting classroom interactions, task completion, and collaboration dynamics

The interviews followed Patton's (2014) standardized open-ended format, allowing for follow-up questions to clarify participants' experiences regarding the challenges and benefits of authentic assessment.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data were analyzed using qualitative analysis methods recommended by Miles et al. (2018) and Patton (2014), incorporating both template organizing and constant comparative approaches:

Template Organizing Approach: Data were coded according to **10 pre-determined categories** derived from authentic learning principles (Herrington et al., 2010),

including real-world relevance, complexity, collaboration, reflection, integration with assessment, and diversity of outcomes.

Constant Comparative Method: This method (Glaser & Strauss, 2017) was applied to identify emerging themes and sub-categories from students' projects, portfolios, discussion contributions, and interview transcripts.

Data were subsequently organized into displays, interpreted for patterns and meaning, and conclusions were drawn regarding the effectiveness and challenges of integrating authentic assessment in a Pakistani ESL context.

Findings

The primary outcome of this design-based research study was the identification of challenges and benefits associated with integrating authentic assessment tasks into university-level English language learning. Analysis of students' reflective portfolios, online and in-class discussions, and teacher observations and interviews revealed insights into learners' experiences with non-traditional, context-based assessments.

Challenges

Initially, several students reported finding the authentic assessment tasks **unfamiliar and unexpected**, as they differed from conventional assessments such as tests or quizzes. Some students noted that traditional assessments felt more straightforward and predictable:

"It wasn't exactly the type of assessment you normally have in a language course... it certainly wasn't what I expected... it would have been much more straightforward to sit tests and quizzes the usual way." Other participants highlighted the **reassuring nature of traditional assessment**, where expectations and learning targets are clearly defined:

"Typically, we know in advance that a test is coming and what material to study, so we have clear expectations of what we need to learn to achieve a good grade." Students' initial anxiety was often driven by the **open-ended and complex nature** of authentic tasks, which required them to consider multiple aspects beyond grammatical accuracy:

"I felt anxious about achieving a good result because the assessment wasn't only about scoring 100% on grammar tests; it involved many other components of the tasks and overall evaluation." Several learners reported difficulty coping with the **lack of specific guidelines** and the requirement to make independent decisions about task completion:

"The project was demanding as it required planning and development over an extended period of time." Some students also indicated that it took **considerable time and effort** to understand the task requirements and decide on the appropriate steps to complete them:

"It took us a while to understand what it was and work out what we had to do, and it took us time to make decisions and define the whole thing and then put it all together. It was quite demanding... we couldn't have done it in a couple of weeks." (Student interview)

Despite these initial difficulties, by the end of the semester, many students **recognized the value** of authentic assessment tasks. They reported that engaging with non-traditional, real-world tasks fostered deeper understanding and appreciation for

meaningful language use:

““It required a change in perspective since the assessment was unlike what we were accustomed to, but as I engaged more with the tasks and understood the expectations, I came to appreciate the rationale behind the assessment—it made sense.”)

Advantages

Increasing Linguistic Ability

Several students highlighted that authentic assessment tasks provided opportunities to **regularly interact and communicate with native speakers**, exposing them to the target language as it is used in real-life social situations and helping them understand authentic expressions typical of everyday communication. One student reflected:

“It was good that we got to look at how real people communicate... the kinds of expressions and colloquialisms that people use every day when they talk.” (Student interview)

Another advantage of these tasks was that they allowed students to apply the language structures and expressions learned in class in various communicative contexts, beyond the confines of classroom practice:

“The fact that we had to use the language in different real-life situations was definitely a plus because when you go to Pakistan you have to talk to the people there; you have to use the structures that you’ve learned in class to have a conversation.” (Student interview)

Researchers applying **Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory** to second language acquisition have emphasized that language learning occurs best when embedded in social and cultural contexts. Authentic, goal-oriented communicative activities allow learners to connect formal classroom knowledge with real-life language use, motivating them to apply their skills in open-ended situations that reflect the variety and spontaneity of genuine communication (Lantolf et al., 2020; Poehner et al., 2024). The authentic tasks also enabled students to **access a wide range of written resources**, including print and web-based materials and communications from native speakers, which further supported the development of their **reading comprehension skills**. Several participants reported notable improvement over the semester:

“The majority of the websites I found were in Italian, with no way to translate them into English... all of the emails and forum posts were written in Italian, so I had to read and understand a lot of information. It was a bit of a struggle at the beginning, but as I kept reading I came to understand more and more of the content... I think my comprehension skills improved a lot just by spending time reading and trying to figure out the information.” (Student interview)

Interaction with different written resources also exposed learners to **various linguistic registers**, helping them understand how language changes depending on the context and interlocutors. One native speaker e-mentor commented:

“The variety of authentic resources that students encountered while working on the tasks gave them the chance to be exposed to different linguistic registers and experience the types of language that people use in particular situations or when communicating with a particular group. This is valuable because it encourages students to draw on different registers in their own language use.” ((Student interview)

All students and e-mentors noted that sustained communicative practice through these tasks enhanced **oral and written language skills**. One student remarked:

“My language skills improved a lot just because I practised talking and writing in Italian as much as I could. I was actually quite surprised that by the end of the session I felt much more comfortable communicating in Italian. At the beginning, trying to formulate three sentences that would make sense was a struggle... I think the collaboration and constant interaction with everyone really helped me develop my ability to communicate more clearly.” (Student interview)

Similarly, a native speaker e-mentor observed:

“I noticed a definite improvement in students’ linguistic proficiency in both written and oral production as they learned to integrate more sophisticated and authentic forms and expressions and to communicate with a higher level of fluency and grammatical correctness.” Analysis of students’ written discussion contributions and oral presentations throughout the course confirmed substantial improvement in both receptive and productive language skills, aligning with research showing that authentic social interaction and active participation are critical for developing target language competence (Lantolf et al., 2020; Poehner, 2022).

Increasing Cultural Awareness

The authentic assessment tasks also allowed students to gain knowledge about the geography, natural environment, history, arts, and culture of the countries they were studying. Many students reported the value of engaging with these tasks, for example: “I learned a lot about the geography of Pakistan. ”I got a much better idea of some aspects of the landscape. ”We became more familiar with things like locations and distances.”

One exchange student reflected on the opportunity to explore Pakistan history and culture, stating:

“I found it very interesting and relevant to learn about some aspects of Pakistan history and culture... I had the opportunity to deepen my knowledge about Aboriginal rock art and Indigenous music, which are unique.” (Student interview)

Another student, while planning her itinerary in Umbria, highlighted the benefits of learning about historical, cultural, and religious significance of various sites and contemporary events:

“I got to learn a lot of interesting things about some of the most important sites and monuments in Umbria... their historical and cultural value and their religious meaning. I also learned about Umbria’s famous festivals, which celebrate different medieval rituals and traditions.” (Student interview)

Increasing Exchangeable Skills

In addition to enhancing language proficiency and cultural knowledge, the authentic tasks encouraged students to develop practical, transferable skills applicable to the tasks and to future situations. One student noted:

“We got to learn some more practical skills... like finding information about how to get around, where to stay... I think all these skills can be pretty useful if some of us go and study or work in Pakistan next year... because we’re going to have to know how to do these sorts of things.” (Student interview)

Students also valued the opportunity to demonstrate multiple skills and be assessed holistically:

“I realised that this type of assessment was much more holistic... it was good to be assessed on different skills because we could express ourselves in more than one way

and show our strengths in different areas.” (Student interview)

This holistic and integrative approach aligns with situated learning theory, emphasizing that authentic tasks can foster learning across disciplines and support outcomes beyond domain-specific knowledge, such as practical and transferable skills (Herrington et al., 2010).

Arrangement with Context

Several students highlighted that the authentic nature of the tasks encouraged deep engagement with the context of the scenarios presented. One student reflected:

“The whole idea of planning the details of travel was so close to reality... I really got into it as if I was a real traveller planning a real trip.”

Another student described becoming so involved in developing the itineraries that it almost felt real, despite the activities being simulated:

“We planned every single aspect of the trips so carefully, always thinking that someone would have followed our itineraries... it didn’t even occur to us that it was a pretend thing and that there would be no one doing it.”

This type of immersion reflects the concept of a “willing suspension of disbelief” (Coleridge, as cited in Herrington et al., 2003), where students accept the learning context as real, allowing them to engage fully and meaningfully. According to Csikszentmihalyi (2020), this state of total engagement, or flow, is essential for meaningful learning.

Linking to Former Understandings

The authentic tasks were also relevant to students’ life experiences, as they involved researching areas where students had previously lived or travelled. Many students were able to apply prior knowledge to new tasks, consistent with situated learning theory (Brown et al., 1989; Collins, 2006).

One student explained how the experience of a group member who had lived in Sicily enhanced her own engagement:

“I liked that one of the students had lived in Sicily for a while and [had] visited so many places, because she was able to share her experience with us and give us suggestions and then motivate us as well to explore as much as possible about the places she’d seen. It was a great experience for her... and it was a big motivation for me.”

This illustrates how sociocultural context and peers’ prior experiences can positively influence learners’ motivation and engagement (Nolen, 2020; Renninger & Hidi, 2017; Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020).

Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that integrating **authentic assessment tasks** into foreign language learning provides significant pedagogical benefits while presenting certain challenges. Students initially experienced **uncertainty and discomfort** due to the departure from traditional assessments, such as quizzes and grammar-based tests. However, as they engaged with the tasks, they recognized their **value for meaningful learning**. The iterative nature of the tasks encouraged students to **develop linguistic proficiency**, enhance **reading comprehension skills**, and engage in **sustained oral and written communication**, supporting Vygotsky’s (2020) sociocultural perspective that language develops most effectively in authentic, socially mediated contexts.

Moreover, the tasks promoted **cultural knowledge and awareness**, exposing students

to real-world contexts, historical and geographical content, and varied linguistic registers. The open-ended and collaborative nature of the tasks fostered **creativity, problem-solving, and transferable skills**, while students' prior experiences and peer interactions enhanced motivation and engagement. These findings align with the principles of **situated learning** and **design-based research**, demonstrating that **contextually relevant and meaningful tasks** improve both cognitive and affective dimensions of language learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study highlights that authentic assessment tasks in a hybrid university language course can enhance students' linguistic, cultural, and cognitive skills while also fostering motivation and engagement. Despite initial challenges, such as unfamiliarity with non-traditional assessments and the complexity of long-term projects, students valued the opportunity to apply language in meaningful contexts and produce tangible outcomes. The results suggest that educators in Pakistan and similar ESL contexts can benefit from integrating authentic, task-based assessments to promote holistic and practical language learning experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Broader Contexts: Future studies could explore authentic assessment in different university courses or language programs across Pakistan to assess generalizability.

Longitudinal Studies: Research could examine the **long-term impact** of authentic tasks on learners' language proficiency and cultural competence.

Digital Tools Integration: Investigating the role of online platforms and e-mentorship in enhancing authentic task performance may offer insights for blended learning strategies.

Comparative Studies: Comparing the effects of traditional versus authentic assessments on motivation, engagement, and learning outcomes could provide robust empirical evidence for pedagogical decision-making.

Teacher Perspectives: Future research may also examine instructors' experiences and challenges in designing and implementing authentic assessments in Pakistani ESL contexts

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