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Shifting Trends in Business English Assessments: A Comparative Study of Pre- and Post-Pandemic Outcomes

Abstract

This study compares online and onsite final exams for the Business English Course at the University of Lodz during and post-pandemic. It aims to evaluate how testing environments influence exam outcomes. Hypothesising that online testing yields superior results, the study compares exams conducted in the summers of 2020/2021 (online) and 2021/2022 (onsite) for students who completed a three-term online Business English course. Quantitative methods were employed to analyse correlations between testing conditions, supplemented by student surveys. The findings not only shed light on student attitudes but also offer insights crucial for refining future assessment practices in Business English courses and beyond. The research underscores the imperative of meticulously crafted online tests and equitable testing conditions to ensure the integrity and validity of educational evaluations amidst the dynamic landscape of remote learning.

Keywords: Business English, COVID-19, distance learning, final assessment, online testing, onsite testing

1. Introduction

The declaration of a state of epidemic in Poland in March 2020 brought about movement restrictions that significantly impacted the operational dynamics of the Polish educational system (Męcina, Potocki 2020; Janus 2020). Within a remarkably short span, approximately 93,100 University of Lodz teachers¹ found themselves compelled to adapt their instructional approaches swiftly, transitioning to distance-based teaching and learning modalities or postponing practical sessions necessitating specialised equipment until the epidemiological situation ameliorated. Despite the countermeasures implemented to mitigate virus transmission, concerted efforts were made to sustain uninterrupted educational delivery to the nation's 1.2. million students². Consistent with practices at other Polish institutions, the University of Lodz³ facilitated access to the MS Office suite and MS Teams for both faculty and students, granting instructors the autonomy to select tools aligned with their preferences and to organise classes accordingly (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022: 8; Janus 2020: 17). However, the transition proved arduous, given that the University of Lodz had not previously conducted its classes entirely in the virtual domain (Stradiotova, Nemethova & Stefancik 2021). While the Ministry and the University of Lodz extended specialised training opportunities for educators, these sessions were made available subsequent to the adoption of distance teaching (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022; Janus 2020). Consequently, the faculty and students encountered challenges stemming from inadequate digital literacy or ICT proficiency, as well as equipment shortages, internet accessibility issues, and the provision of conducive teaching and learning environments (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022: 2). The Ministry's directive to conduct courses online subjected the entire educational apparatus to a litmus test, demanding seamless daily delivery of classes (Janus 2020: 17; Stradiotova, *et. al.* 2021). Additionally, instructors grappled with the necessity to recalibrate their pedagogical approaches and instructional materials for remote learning, harbouring hopes that their endeavours would yield effective online teaching experiences reflective of conventional classroom dynamics (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022: 11, Ejdays 2021; Plebańska 2020; Witkowski 2020; Stradiotova, *et. al.* 2021).

2. Academic Profile of the L4B BA Programme

In response to the evolving demands of the job market, the University of Lodz launched a novel Bachelor of Arts programme in 2013: Linguistics for Business⁴. This programme equips students with foundational knowledge in accounting and finance, project management, selected aspects of running a business, intercultural communication, linguistic pragmatics, and applied linguistics. Furthermore, since the programme's inception, students have had the opportunity to develop proficiency in two

1 <https://naukawpolsce.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C84586%2Cgus-w-ub-roku-akademickim-w-polsce-studiowalo-ponad-82-tys-cudzoziemcow.html>. [date of access: June 28, 2021].

2 <https://naukawpolsce.pap.pl/aktualnosci/news%2C84586%2Cgus-w-ub-roku-akademickim-w-polsce-studiowalo-ponad-82-tys-cudzoziemcow.html>. [date of access: June 28, 2021].

3 Announcement of Rector of University of Lodz of 17 March 2020 concerning the suspension of onsite classes and a shift to distance teaching, Announcement of Rector of University of Lodz of 23 April concerning special forms of assessment in the pandemic situation and Announcement of Rector of University of Lodz of 18 September 2020 concerning a hybrid model of teaching.

4 [https://irk-ects.uni.lodz.pl/en/programmes-foreign/LB/DLLB\(01\)/](https://irk-ects.uni.lodz.pl/en/programmes-foreign/LB/DLLB(01)/) [date of access: June 28, 2021].

foreign languages: English and a chosen European language (French, German, or Russian) (Bednarska, Makowska 2022).

Regarding English proficiency, candidates are expected to demonstrate competence at the B2 (CEFR) level, with results from the secondary school leaving exam serving as a determining factor for admission. Additionally, students enhance their English proficiency through specialised coursework in Business and Legal English (Makowska 2017).

Proficiency in other languages (French, German or Russian) is expected to exceed the B2 level in accordance with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. Moreover, students have the option to participate in supplementary language courses, including Spanish or Dutch. Beyond training, students engage in courses exploring the cultures associated with their chosen language areas and delve into the realm of translation studies. Furthermore, students receive instruction in three specialised languages, each comprising 28 teaching hours (Bednarska, Makowska 2022). These courses encompass the language of finance and human resources, logistics, and information technology. This multidimensional curriculum is designed to address the needs of the job market by producing professionals with an interdisciplinary educational background.

3. Challenges of Face-to-Face and Remote Evaluation

In accordance with OECD guidelines pertaining to student assessment,

Evaluation and assessment serve as crucial tools for monitoring the effectiveness of educational delivery to students and for evaluating the performance of educational systems, schools, administrators, educators, and students themselves, among other stakeholders. (OECD 2013: 67)

Such assessment endeavours should transpire within a testee-friendly environment, underpinned by well-defined assessment criteria conducive to student learning (Ziółkowski 2015). These factors collectively foster self-directed learning, instil a sense of security, and engender motivation to engage in academic pursuits. It is essential to highlight that the paramount concern lies not merely in the grade obtained, but rather in the acquisition of knowledge and the experiential learning process. Moreover, providing immediate feedback is critically important, as it offers students insights into their learning methodologies and achieved outcomes, while also serving as a motivator for further knowledge acquisition.

The transition from conventional face-to-face onsite instruction to exclusively online distant teaching, precipitated by the emergence of the Sars-Cov-2 outbreak (Koris, Pal 2021; Peter, Asmawi 2023), presented a formidable challenge (Stradiotova, *et. al.* 2021; Koris, Pal 2021; Peter, Asmawi 2023). Beyond the adaptation of pedagogical approaches and materials, apprehensions surfaced regarding assessment modalities (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022). Key concerns included issues related to student integrity, educators' technological acumen, and pedagogical proficiency (Ejdys 2021). Consequently, universities opted for alternative assessment formats (Stradiotova, *et. al.* 2021). Initially, they rescheduled examination sessions or migrated traditional end-of-semester onsite assessments to virtual platforms. Secondly, in instances where feasible, institutions of higher education pivoted towards formative assessment within classroom settings, given the constraints associated with the applicability of summative assessment methods in distance education (Cicha, *et. al.* 2022). However, the Business English course, designed to augment specialised vocabulary in professional contexts, presents challenges in assessing student progress through formative criteria.

4. Data and Methodology

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The present study encompasses a comprehensive analysis of Business English examination outcomes among second-year students at Linguistic for Business, collected during the academic sessions of June 2021 and 2022 (denoted as Group X1 and X2, respectively). Notably, the course was administered over three semesters via online modalities, with consistent course content and examination duration throughout. The sole discernible variable that could potentially impact the outcomes was the environment in which the summative exams were administered: in 2021, students took the exam in an online Moodle format due to COVID-19 restrictions, whereas in 2022, the exam was conducted traditionally onsite.

The analysis is based on test outcomes derived from a sample of 129 students, consisting of two distinct groups: 69 students who participated in the online testing format and 60 students who undertook the exam in an onsite setting. Remarkably, the final examination administered to both groups was uniform, with a maximum score of 100 points. The assessment procedure adhered strictly to the policies and guidelines prescribed by the esteemed University of Lodz.

In accordance with the established examination protocols within the Faculty of Philology, should a student fail to attain a minimum grade of 51% by the scheduled assessment deadline, they are granted the opportunity to undergo a supplementary examination during the re-sit exam session by the end of the respective semester.

One of the primary objectives of this research is to investigate the influence of the testing environment on the outcomes of the final examination. The underlying hypothesis posits that students who engage in online testing will achieve superior results compared to their counterparts who undergo traditional onsite testing. Consequently, a series of statistical tests were conducted to ascertain the impact of onsite and online examination conditions on the achieved outcomes. Additionally, the results obtained from the statistical analysis are juxtaposed with selected findings from anonymous surveys administered to the testees after each examination. This comparison aims to elucidate the effects of different examination conditions on the results and identify which conditions contribute to more reliable outcomes in summative assessment, while also discerning how these conditions are perceived by the testees.

Given the limited space available in this paper, this report will focus on presenting the most pertinent and captivating results from our comprehensive analysis, accompanied by their relevant interpretations.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. The Comparison of the Results of Online and Onsite BE Exams

The data presented in the provided graph (see: Figure 1 below) depicts the results of the final examination taken by the second-year students at the end of the summer terms in 2021 and 2022, conducted in both online and onsite environments. The outcomes are represented by blue bars (the group on the left in each pair), indicating performance in online testing, and orange bars (the group on the right in each pair), representing performance in onsite testing. Notably, the online final exams exhibited a higher level of achievement, with 30%, 26%, and 26% of students attaining the top three grades (5, 4+, and

4, respectively) as opposed to 20%, 18%, and 13% of students in the onsite exams. However, the most remarkable discrepancy is evident in the grade 3 category, the minimum passing grade, which was obtained by only 9% of students during online testing, compared to 34% of students in the onsite format. Further analysis of the data shows that for the online exam, 99% of students successfully passed it on their first attempt, with only 1% necessitating a retake. Conversely, in the onsite testing, 93% achieved a passing grade on their initial attempt, while 7% had to undergo a re-examination.

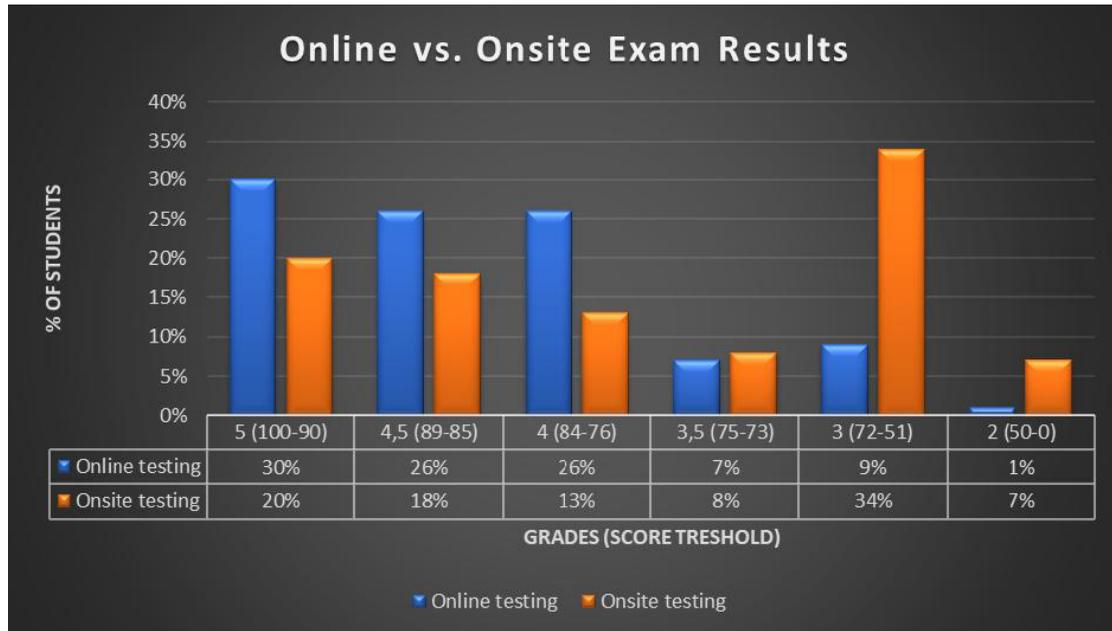


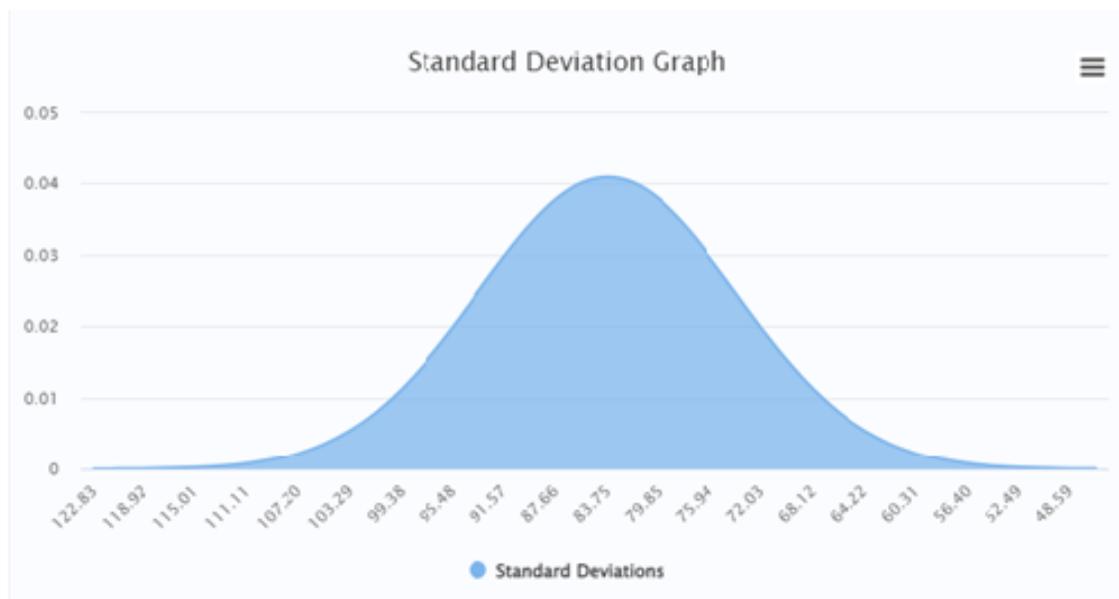
Figure 1. The comparison of online vs. onsite exam results

5.2. The Result of Exam Statistic Tests

It is pertinent to juxtapose the preceding findings with more robust statistical metrics. Notably, a substantial disparity emerges between the means of online and onsite final exam results, with values of 83.75 and 76.08, respectively, signifying a discernible advantage in favour of online testing, as shown in Table 1 below. To gain further precision, a comprehensive examination of the standard deviation is warranted, as it encapsulates the dispersion of data in relation to the mean, elucidating the variability within the dataset. Distinguishing between the population standard deviation, a parameter derived from the entire population, and the sample standard deviation, a statistic calculated from a subset of the population, is crucial. The sample standard deviation, being contingent on a specific subset, inherently exhibits greater variability compared to the population standard deviation. Consequently, the incorporation of the sample standard deviation into the following research allows for a more nuanced perspective, illuminating the inherent variability within the data.

Table 1. Comparison of online vs. onsite data

Comparison of online vs. onsite data		
	Online	Onsite
Count	69	60
Sum	5779	4565
Mean (Average)	83.753623188406	76.083333333333
Median	86	79.5
Mode	87, 86, each appeared 5 times	88, appeared 4 times
Largest	96	97
Smallest	37	34
Range	59	63
Geometric Mean	83.04563887606	74.389681553224
Standard Deviation	9.7689330067258	14.836095248488
Variance	95.432052089897	220.10972222222
Sample Standard Deviation	9.8405012382821	14.961296584194
Sample Variance	96.835464620631	223.84039548023

Figure 2. Standard deviation graph referring to the results of online exam (generated from www.standarddeviationcalc.com [date of access: November 4, 2022])

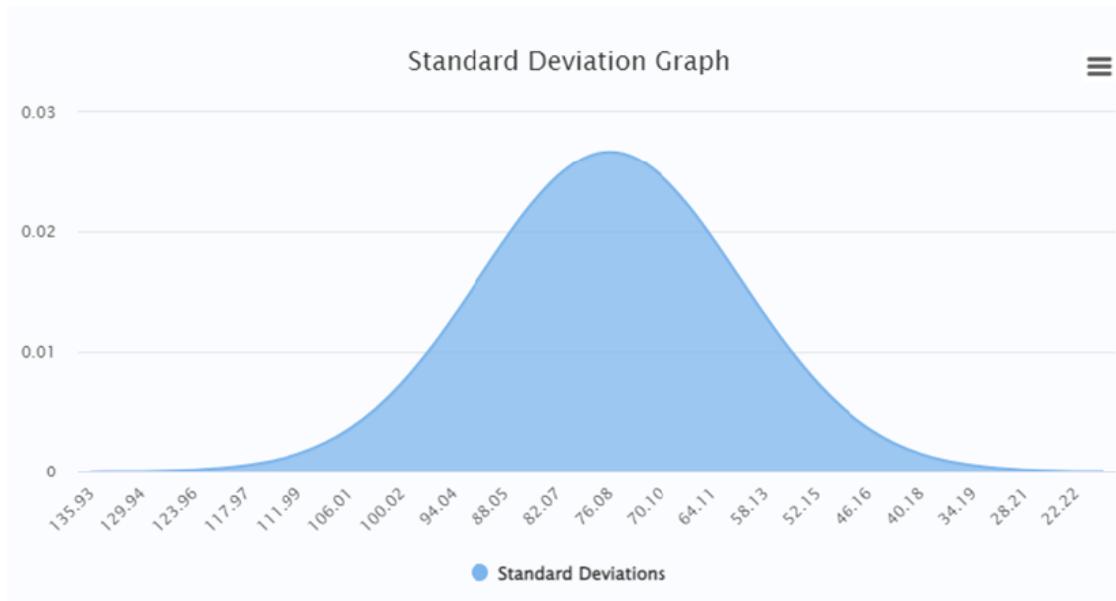


Figure 3. Standard deviation graph referring to the results of onsite exam (generated from www.standarddeviationcalc.com [date of access: November 4, 2022])

Considering the obtained data, it is evident that the standard deviation of the online testing results (see: Figure 2 above) is notably lower than that of the onsite exam results, with values of 9.84 and 14.96, respectively. A lower standard deviation implies that the data points are closely clustered around the mean, indicating a higher level of uniformity. In the case of the results obtained from online final exams (see: Figure 3 above), this clustering phenomenon can be attributed to the majority of students, approximately 82%, achieving considerably high scores, leading to grade consolidation within the 5, 4+, and 4 categories.

On the contrary, the higher standard deviation observed in the onsite final exam results signifies a more substantial spread of data points, either above or below the mean, indicating greater variability in achieved grades. These findings suggest that onsite exams are characterised by a wider range of outcomes and a more diverse distribution of results.

In light of these statistical insights, it can be inferred that onsite exams may offer certain advantages over online exams in terms of reliability, objectivity, and integrity. The higher standard deviation in onsite exams suggests that they exhibit a wider range of outcomes and a more diverse distribution of results, potentially reflecting a more comprehensive assessment of student performance. This characteristic could indicate a reduced likelihood of academic misconduct or cheating compared to the online testing environment.

5.3. Welch's T-Test

In this study, the decision was made to utilise the Student's t-test to substantiate the findings. This statistical method is commonly employed to ascertain whether the means of two independent groups exhibit statistically significant differences, thereby discerning meaningful variations beyond chance occurrences⁵. The Student's independent-sample t-test is well-suited for comparing two distinct groups based on a quantitative variable. By applying this rigorous analytical approach, valid conclusions can be drawn regarding the significance of differences between the groups under investigation.

In the context of this research, the null hypothesis (H0) posits that students who participated in online testing achieve results similar to those whose knowledge was tested onsite. In contrast, the alternative hypothesis (H1) suggests that students who underwent online testing achieved different results from those who were evaluated onsite. These hypotheses play a pivotal role as guiding statements during the statistical testing procedure, allowing for a comprehensive examination of the potential disparities in exam outcomes concerning the testing environment. Their significance lies in their ability to provide valuable insights into the impact of online versus onsite testing on students' performance and overall assessment results. By rigorously evaluating these hypotheses, we gain a deeper understanding of the implications and effects associated with the mode of testing, thereby contributing to the advancement of knowledge in this field of study.

In the event that the result of the Student's t-test achieves significance at $p < 0.05$, as depicted in Figure 4, the null hypothesis is rejected in favour of the alternative hypothesis. This outcome indicates a notable difference between students who participated in online testing and those whose knowledge was assessed onsite. By examining the descriptive statistics averages, it becomes evident whether students who engaged in online testing attained superior results compared to their onsite counterparts. The calculated p-value, which amounts to 0.00002305 ($p(x \leq T) = 1$), implies a minimal chance of Type I error (rejecting a correct H0) at 0.00002305 (0.0023%). As the p-value diminishes, it strengthens the support for H1, thereby substantiating the observed effect. The test statistic T, with a value of 4.4417, falls outside the 95% region of acceptance [-1.9839:1.9839], as does the difference $x_1 - x_2 = 10$, which lies beyond the range [-4.4666:4.4666]. The standard deviation of the difference, S' , calculated at 2.251, is employed to compute the statistic. Furthermore, the large observed effect size d of 0.81 indicates a substantial magnitude of difference between the two group averages. Despite the medium a priori power of 0.7905, the null hypothesis is ultimately rejected based on the aforementioned findings.

5 The following discussion and calculations are based on "Introduction to SAS. UCLA: Statistical Consulting Group" from <https://stats.oarc.ucla.edu/sas/modules/introduction-to-the-features-of-sas/> (accessed October 4, 2022) as well as on https://www.jmp.com/en_is/statistics-knowledge-portal/t-test/two-sample-t-test.html [date of access October 4, 2022].

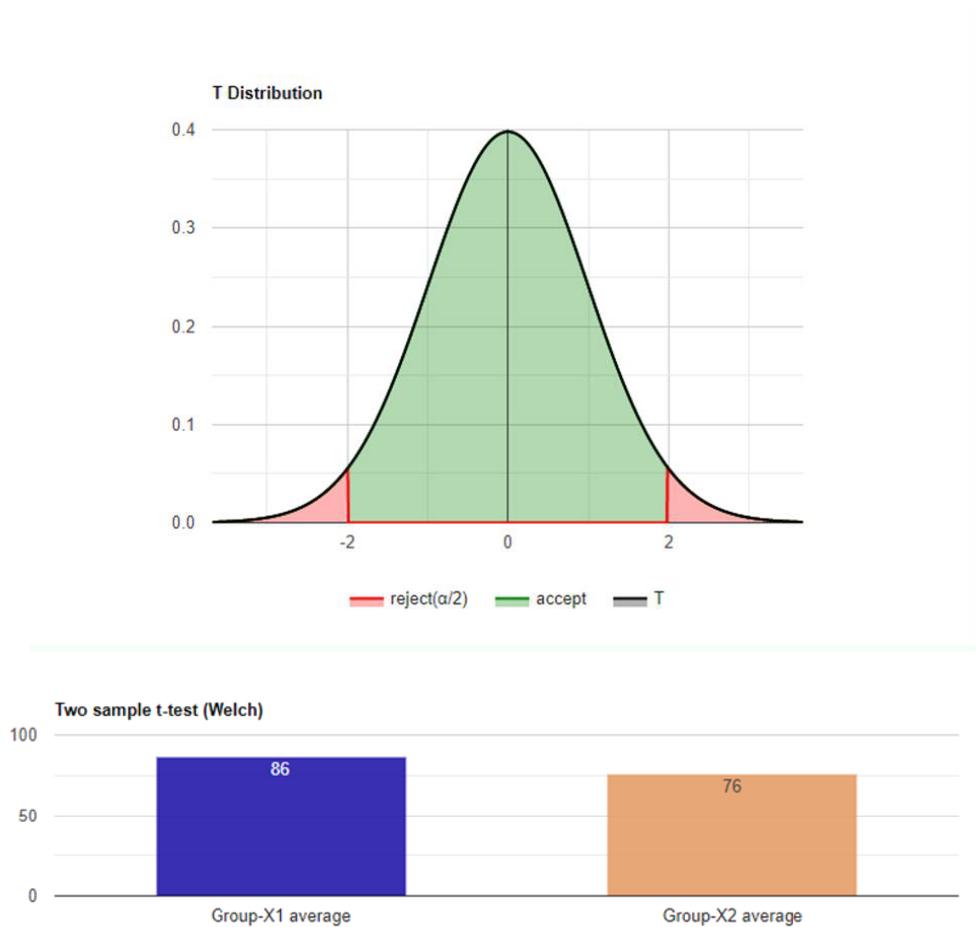


Figure 4. The results of the Student's independent-sample t-test (generated from <https://www.statskingdom.com/140MeanT2eq.html>. [date of access: November 14, 2022])

5.4. The Juxtaposition of Statistics with Survey Results

The outcomes of the statistical analysis have been juxtaposed with the results obtained from anonymous surveys conducted subsequent to each assessment procedure.

The sampling frame for surveys is based on the following criteria: the respondents needed to be current second-year students of Linguistics for Business at the University of Lodz, and had experience learning Business English remotely during the pandemic. Additionally, students needed to have undergone Business English examination procedures, conducted online in 2021 and onsite in 2022. The survey was performed using the voluntary sampling method, *i.e.* students meeting the criteria were encouraged to fill in questionnaires after the examination procedures. The details of statistical calculations for each of the surveys are presented in Table 2 below:

Table 2. The results of statistical calculations performed by authors to test the reliability of survey results.

Ratio	Survey conducted in 2021	Survey conducted in 2022
Sampling unit	69	60
Response rate ⁶	42.03%	71.67%
Margin of error ⁷ (at the confidence level 95%)	13.96% ⁸	8.02%

The survey data presented in this study make a significant contribution to understanding examination environments. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the limitations of the dataset. Specifically, the sample sizes and their representativeness reveal notable differences between the surveys conducted in 2021 and 2022.

The response rate for the 2021 survey is relatively low compared to the 2022 survey. This disparity can be attributed to the absence of direct teacher contact caused by lockdown restrictions during the pandemic. Consequently, the margin of error for the 2021 survey is considerably higher than that of the 2022 survey, which is within an optimal level of acceptability⁸.

According to the questionnaire findings, a significant proportion of examinees perceive online examinations to be either more challenging (41% of responses) or equally challenging (35% of responses) compared to onsite examinations. Conversely, 56% of examinees find the onsite testing process easier, with 35% considering it equally difficult. These trends may be attributed to the greater familiarity of L4B students with the conventional mode of assessment (see: Figure 5 below).

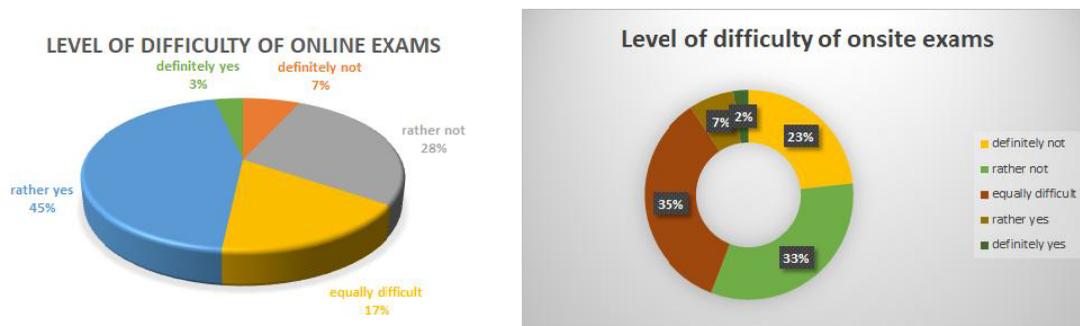


Figure 5. The results of the level of difficulty of online vs. onsite exams

Regarding exam reliability, L4B students exhibit consistent opinions: 72% deem onsite exams to be the most reliable, while 41% prefer the online alternative. However, a consensus is lacking regarding the equivalence of reliability. While 35% of students who undertook the online-proctored test perceive

6 <https://theonlineadvertisingguide.com/ad-calculators/response-rate-calculator/> [date of access October 4, 2022].

7 <https://www.smartsurvey.co.uk/resources/calculators/margin-of-error-calculator> [date of access October 4, 2022].

8 The margin of error ranges from 13.96% at the 95% confidence level for 2021 student cohort to approximately 8% for the 2022 student cohort.

both testing environments to be equal, only 14% of respondents who completed the onsite paper-based exam share this viewpoint.

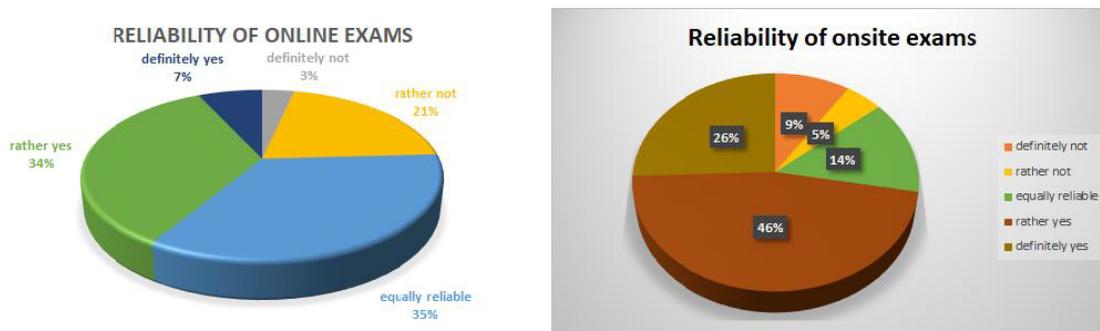


Figure 6. The results of the level of reliability of online vs. onsite exams

These observations are mirrored in responses to open-ended questions. Following the online-proctored procedure, respondents highlighted integrity concerns, as some examinees attempted to deceive examiners and/or the software by using notes or plug-ins to achieve higher scores. Additionally, L4B students noted technical challenges, such as spelling errors and difficulties with rapid typing, along with the constraints of a one-attempt policy. Some respondents emphasised the stress of relying solely on one's knowledge without resorting to dishonest exam practices. Consequently, a suggestion was made for oral examinations as an alternative to written ones.

In contrast, students who underwent the onsite examination identified stress as the primary drawback of the traditional procedure, particularly associated with the logistics of arrival at the faculty building on time, and the altered learning/testing environment following an extended period of remote learning. Other respondents highlighted the exam atmosphere as a factor influencing their performance, aligning with principles of assessment procedures outlined in the literature (Ziółkowski 2015).

5.5. Interpretation of Results and Implications of the Study for the Future

The present study provides compelling evidence that the summative exam procedure conducted onsite at the University of Lodz yields more reliable results, a conclusion substantiated by rigorous statistical analyses and survey responses from the testees. Remarkably, the onsite exam results demonstrate greater diversity, while a substantial 82% of online exam outcomes fall within the 4–5 grade range. The statistical tests effectively validate the initial hypothesis that online exam results would surpass those obtained through onsite testing. This phenomenon was expected, given concerns raised by the respondents regarding the questionable honesty of some students during online exams. The pervasiveness of such dishonest practices may be attributed to cultural factors and social tolerance prevalent in Poland. Notably, the lack of investment in exam proctoring software at the University of Lodz may have contributed to the facilitation of these irregularities.

Interestingly, the research outcomes reveal a contrast with an earlier investigation by Stradiotova *et al.* (2021), wherein they reported a 41% failure rate in online exams, compared to a 16% retake rate

in traditional onsite exams. The intriguing aspect lies in the fact that despite both groups being taught online and achieving comparable progress test outcomes, our study findings differ from Stradiotova *et al.*'s (2021) assertion that the educational process in the online environment lacks parity with the onsite educational process. As in their research, respondents in our study emphasised technical issues and insufficient digital skills, potentially influencing the final evaluation.

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that onsite administration of summative assessment procedures, whether in paper-based or computer-based formats, is preferable. The statistical analyses and the results of the student survey collectively support the notion that onsite tests yield more reliable outcomes, primarily due to the uniform conditions provided to the testees, despite the higher stress level associated with this approach. Despite observing higher results in online exams and students expressing a positive attitude towards distance learning, the testees still exhibit a preference for the traditional onsite form of progress verification. Respondents emphasise the importance of teachers creating a friendly and supportive atmosphere during onsite exams, aligning with the existing literature on this subject (Ziółkowski 2015).

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic “caused perhaps the most serious disruption to global education and training systems in history” (Stradiotova, *et. al.* 2021: 80). However, the University of Lodz demonstrated swift adaptability during the crisis by promptly suspending traditional onsite classes and transitioning to distance learning (Janus 2020: 17). Despite the challenging circumstances, the University of Lodz authorities efficiently adjusted the education and assessment processes to the new reality.

This study reveals that there is room for improvement in online testing procedures at the University of Lodz, as the results of online exams are not equally reliable compared to onsite procedures. Respondents perceive onsite exams as easier and more dependable than digital and remote forms of assessment. Interestingly, both computer-based online exams and paper-based onsite exams were identical in content, yet the exam environment significantly impacted the perception of the assessment procedure. Additionally, the absence of exam proctoring software appears to have facilitated dishonest practices during online exams, potentially explaining the higher scores obtained by exam takers. Moreover, the assessment policies only partially fulfil their intended objectives, as students find them inadequate and perceive them as a source of stress. In contrast, the results of onsite exams demonstrate appropriate dispersion, leading to enhanced reliability. Although the onsite exam process is perceived as more stressful, it is considered impartial. As a result, the study successfully confirms the initial hypothesis through both statistical analyses and the results of the student survey.

In light of the existing literature on this subject, the findings may suggest considering a shift from summative to formative assessment in extraordinary circumstances like COVID-19 lockdown restrictions. However, there remains a dilemma concerning the evaluation of students' progress in specialised courses such as Business English, where a final exam is integral to the programme of the L4B studies. Ultimately, this research contributes to the ongoing discussions about the appropriate assessment procedures during exceptional situations, providing valuable insights for educational institutions, including the University of Lodz, in optimising their assessment strategies during challenging times.

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