Distance Learning Barriers and Bottlenecks: A Phenomenological Inquiry on the Conduct of English Language Arts (ELA) Standard Assessments

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Abstract. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of elementary English Language Arts (ELA) teachers in the United States of America concerning the distance learning barriers they faced in conducting standard assessments. Seven (7) participants were personally interviewed to gather the data using open-ended questions. Utilizing a cellular phone, all responses were recorded for transcription. Colaizzi's method for data analysis was employed. After a rigorous analysis of the transcripts, the following twelve (12) themes arose to capture the teachers' lived experiences: Frequent Absenteeism, Poor Sense of Accountability, Distracting Workspace, Insufficient Knowledge of Technology, Dearth of Motivation and Support, Glitches of Technology, Disparity in Data, Need for Backup, Perpetual Communication to Parents, Call to Differentiate Instruction, Workload Exhaustion, and Deficient Training Ground. The study concluded that the lived experiences of elementary ELA teachers are distinct and compelling. Some distance learning barriers are student absenteeism, parents' non-participation, and the reliability of scores. The teachers were only partially convinced that scores were authentic, so they adopted creative ways to gather data to determine learning goals that needed to be addressed. Teachers faced barriers and bottlenecks, causing stress. ELA teachers remained hopeful, believing in overcoming barriers with passion. Administrators should support teachers in addressing online test challenges and emphasize parental involvement. Clear communication and reminders to students are crucial, while parents should minimize distractions and encourage focus during online assessments. Future research should focus on analyzing and addressing the setbacks that teachers experience when converting from on-site to online assessments.

1. Introduction

By the time the Covid-19 pandemic hit the US, students' English Language Arts scores had dropped in most states (Mervosh & Wu, 2022). The purpose of the English Language Arts Standard Assessments in the United States is to gauge a student's readiness for college or the workforce. These assessments run parallel with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a set of academic standards for what is expected in each grade level, from kindergarten through high school (Boudett et al., 2020).

ELA includes listening, reading, speaking, and writing. Students are required to respond to open-ended questions on standardized ELA tests using literature or informational text they have read as well as multiple-choice questions. These are graded through a distributed scoring method, meaning it is not scored by a teacher from the student's school. The test scores are then categorized into three performance levels: On Target, Near Target, and Needs Support. No state significantly improved ELA, according to Mervosh and Wu (2022), who also claimed that the pandemic had further disadvantaged struggling students and that the decline in test scores was obvious and the increase in proficiency was now much more difficult to achieve.

Although state authorities called to waive the annual national assessment for 2021, assessment data are still needed to understand students' overall academic performance; thus, the annual assessment requirement was not waived (Jimenez, 2020) Likewise, Gallup McKinley County Schools in New Mexico still administer the New Mexico Measures of Student Achievement (NM-MSSA) state test, the New Mexico Interim Measures of Student Success and Achievement (NM-iMSSA), and the Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP). The conduct of these standardized tests has become more challenging for teachers, students, and parents because of the unprecedented paradigm shift to distance learning. Furthermore, it eventually led to barriers and bottlenecks, including the need for motivation, teacher readiness, lack of technological devices or stable internet, training and technical support, academic dishonesty or plagiarism, student absenteeism, and lack of reliable programs to ensure the security of assessments.

Admittedly, previous studies only focused on learning barriers that students experience, such as finding the motivation to conquer such challenges as poor internet connectivity, simultaneous agenda, and online learning anxiety (see Mannong, 2020; Muslimin & Harintama, 2020; Octaberlina & Muslimin, 2020). Other studies investigated the instructional strategies used by Reading teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic (Mahmood, 2021; Nurjanah & Pratama, 2020). However, these studies failed to directly present a vivid picture of teachers` dilemmas in the conduct of ELA standard assessments. To the researcher's knowledge, this qualitative research on the said topic is the first of its kind.

Hence, the research intends to delve into the complexities underlying the Elementary English Language Arts teachers' experiences on assessment barriers and bottlenecks in distance learning in Gallup McKinley County Schools, New Mexico. The results of this study will help determine the development needs of ELA teachers and seek opportunities so that school administrators can plan and design interventions in the conduct of standard assessments to ensure learning and reliable results.

2. Literature Review

Related literatures from various authors who have concentrated on the same problem discuss these important areas: a) the nature of distance learning; b) nature of ELA standard assessments; c) impact of distance learning on teachers, students and parents; d) challenges on how assessments should be carried out; e) factors affecting the performance of students in distance learning; and f) some strategies in conducting online assessments.

The nature of distance learning. Distance or online learning has become the new normal today. As indicated by Sadeghi (2019), teachers use electronic means to communicate with students and parents and link the gap and disseminate educational materials through distance learning programs. According to Tuah and Naing (2021), blended learning (BL), live instruction, the flipped classroom, online practice exercises, video conferences, and teleconferences are examples of common distance learning techniques. Further, Almeida and Monteiro (2021) reported that the traditional model of written tests at the end of a lesson is changed by the structure of distance learning, which promotes and supports the continuous assessment process. This enables the determination of the subsequent learning step for each student and provides immediate feedback on their performance. Automatic correction is another feature of the learning activities that are delivered virtually, which makes it easier for the teacher to work with little supervision. The progress of the student is now given more importance by the teacher than the student's grade.

The nature of ELA standard assessments. English Language Arts (ELA) Standard Assessments measure a student's readiness for college or a career and whether they are on track for success. They are parallel with the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), a set of learning standards for what is expected in each grade level, from kindergarten through high school (Boudett, 2020).

In Gallup McKinley County Schools in New Mexico, elementary students from 3rd to 5th grade take standard assessments such as the New Mexico Measures of Student Achievement (NM-MSSA), the New Mexico Interim Measures of Student Success and Achievement (NM-iMSSA), and kindergarten to 5th grade take the Istation's Indicators of Progress (ISIP). The NM-MSSA is a state-wide summative test for English Language Arts administered at the end of the school year for Grades 3-8. The iMSSA assessments are given at the beginning, middle, and end of the year to Grades 3-8, Reading, Writing & Language Usage (New Mexico Public Education Department, 2023). These standard assessments are administered using school-provided technology such as laptops and iPads. The

information gathered from those tests gives states, school districts, and teachers the data they need to identify what individual students are struggling with so they can help them to master those specific standards (Boudett et al., 2020). Thus, when Michelle Lujan Grisham became governor of New Mexico in January 2019, one of her first acts was to completely overhaul the testing system by requiring that simplified versions of the math and language arts exams be given (Pollard, 2022).

Although the pandemic interrupted education and led to upsets among many students regarding their proficiency data, state education officials tried to carry out other online assessments to gather data, one of which was Istation, an online program that uses an experimental-based curriculum and assessments to stimulate student growth. The National Reading Panel's "Big Five" foundational reading skills are covered in Istation's reading assessment and instruction: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. (Patarapichayatham & Locke, 2019). Teachers can easily identify student needs, guide instructional decisions, and quickly gather lessons and materials.

Impact of distance learning on teachers. The unforeseen shift from traditional to distance learning was not seriously planned, nor was there time for planning and training, especially on the part of the teachers having little to no technical expertise but who were still expected to carry out the program (Almeida & Monteiro, 2021). UNICEF (2020a) reported that there is a need for teachers to modify their practices, such as daily activities, responsibilities, and accountabilities as part of the new protocols of distance learning, essentially during the Covid crisis. Rahim (2020) argued that these rapid changes required teachers to have developed certain competencies, including their digital competencies, as teachers may need appropriate resources at home, training, and experience, specifically on the usage of digital learning platforms, and hence these can be challenging for both teachers and students.

As cited by Tuah and Naing (2021), due to rigid technological environments and low levels of student engagement with teachers, online assessments have negative effects, primarily psychological stress, on both teachers and students. Unclear instructions for implementing distance learning and lack of cooperation have brought anxiety, overload, and insecurity to teachers. Furthermore, these cause them to feel stressed out, wear out or become mentally exhausted, become more resistant to change, perform poorly, and have a negative impact on their job satisfaction (Duraku & Hoxha., 2020).

UNICEF (2020a) emphasized that students, parents, or guardians also need to be educated about and get familiar with the new systems. This was supported by Lui et al. (2020) who claimed that parents and teachers are primary caretakers of students, so basically their self-care is equally important so that they may continue to educate, monitor, and support students in distance learning.

Impact of distance learning on students. The shift to distance learning has also greatly affected students. According to Bijeesh (2017), there are more chances of

distraction with no teacher around; there is a high likelihood of becoming sidetracked and forgetting about deadlines. To finish their academic assignments, students need to maintain their motivation and focus (Brown, 2017).

It is also evident from studies by Firat (2016) and Jacobs et al. (2016) that autonomy is a significant factor of self-learning as needed in distance learning. This has been supported by UNICEF (2020a), which added that programs for distance learning require some degree of student autonomy for self-motivation and learning. Many students, especially younger ones, might not have yet reached an appropriate level of autonomy for distance learning.

Brown (2017) explained that any student in a distance learning program needs to provide themselves with the needed tools, comprising a computer, webcam, and reliable internet connection. Since instruction is delivered virtually, there is no physical interaction between students and teachers; as a result, students have more difficulty reaching their teachers. Although they can send chat or email messages, they won't receive the same quick response they would in a classroom (Harrison et al., 2017).

This over-reliance on technology is a great disadvantage to distance learning, as there will be an expected interruption in the teaching learning process in case of technical issues that may arise. Additionally, students may oftentimes be learning alone and so they may feel disconnected given the absence of social physical interaction that typically is present when attending a traditional classroom. Deolmi and Pisani (2020) also found that the hardship and discomfort experienced by students online might not be fully understood. Isolation while working causes many complexities and depressing moments.

Impact of distance learning on parents. Research by Daniela et al. (2021) exposed that parents lack training or background in using digital tools and learning materials. Parents need adequate knowledge during distance learning assessments. Thus, an anticipated gap in pupils' testing results will depend on parents' capability to support their children in conducting distance learning assessments, which means the students' parents' condition affects the conduct of distance learning assessments.

Efriana (2021) acknowledged the parents' struggles with distance learning. Since they generally work outside the home, some parents complain that distance learning adds stress to the many tasks they juggle. Regardless, Núñez et al. (2017) elucidated that when kids are not doing well in school, parents are more likely to get involved. This implies a need for recognition by parents that low-performing students require more supervision than successful students, who take more accountability for completing their schoolwork. To help carry out the distance learning assessments effectively, constant and clear parent-teacher communication is necessary. According to King (2021), parent-teacher communication helps improve students' academic performance, boosts parental efficacy, and, most importantly, reduces stress and anxiety in both teachers and parents. Collaboration between the home and the school can benefit teachers' and

parents' mental health as well as the effectiveness of the parents. This collaboration can include posting or sending newsletters, exchanging emails, or using other messaging apps. It is an advantageous situation for everyone, including the students.

Challenges on how assessments should be carried out. Conducting these assessments online has taken its toll on test administrators, teachers, students, and even parents. Tuah and Naing (2021) presented concerns on the development of teaching content, hardware, and software, access to a good and stable internet connection, and the need for more reliable programs to ensure the security of assessments and power supply.

Kotowicz (2020) reported that about 20% of students in basic education lack the needed technology to participate in distance learning. This becomes more serious in public schools because it increases by about 1/3 of that number. Around 21.3 million Americans still lack sufficient internet access, especially in rural areas.

Another factor that needs to be considered when it comes to online assessments is the validity and reliability of assessments. Although online assessments pave the way for persistent and immediate feedback at a time and place appropriate for teachers and students, the possible problems for assessment results include academic dishonesty or plagiarism. How or who answered the given assessments may not be carefully monitored by teachers. DeMatthews (2021) questioned if distance learning assessment scores were accurate, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when students learned less than they should in a face-to-face setup. He argued that although some states, like Texas, have chosen to move forward with assessments, no grades have yet been given to teachers and school districts based on the performance of their students. Some states, like California, have changed their tests to be shorter, and others have applied for waivers to stop all standardized testing. Georgia, Colorado, and Massachusetts ordered school districts to create academic retrieval plans, while Colorado reduced the number of tests (Olneck-Brown, 2021). If these tests are given, it is important to carefully examine the results, especially if they are administered at home.

Another challenge was the learning environment students have at home. Keser Aschenberger et al. (2023) asserted that, when students have a workspace that meets their needs, that is, having their own separate and secured place that does not require collaboration with others and is used exclusively for learning or working, most likely, their motivation and well-being will emerge positively. Additionally, students will have better learning experiences.

Factors affecting assessment scores. Various factors can impact a student's performance in any kind of learning environment, including their motivation, emotions, and cognitive process (Wichadee & Pattanapichet, 2018). Motivation is a critical issue when it comes to student progress. During distance learning, motivation is quite a challenge faced by both students and teachers. At home, there could be many distractions that keep students from staying on track during live online classes.

Student absenteeism is another critical factor. Garcia and Weiss (2020) found that there is a relatively negative effect on student performance and progress the more a student misses school days. Likewise, Gottfried and Kirksey (2017) revealed that students who are absent within 30 days from the assessment date are a crucial indicator of getting low assessment scores. This results in getting minimal opportunities for learning, which includes missing instruction time, establishing test-taking strategies, and significant review of lessons before taking assessments. This, in turn, can negatively create a domino effect on other assessments the students take throughout the year.

In distance learning, absenteeism can be tough to regulate. Some evident explanations resulting to this are the lack of technological devices or stable internet; others must watch over their younger siblings; and some families had to move because of lack of jobs. Some students might also find online learning to be so tiresome or challenging that they decide to quit (Reich et al., 2020).

In addition, the difficulty level of digital resources and access to the materials can also be a concern. Class participation and engagement are key factors in a student's success and motivation to succeed (Barana et al., 2019). Therefore, the online software and tools teachers use in distance learning should incorporate gamification, simulations, and interaction to boost student engagement (Nieto-Escamez & Roldan-Tapia, 2021).

Mullis and Martin (2019) stated that assessments are designed more to look forward rather than looking back. Assessment for learning involves an analysis of assessment results during instruction to know where the students are at with their learning goals. Then such data need to be analyzed to make necessary modifications of the teaching and learning procedures to better address the learning gaps. Most students would go for encouraging, prompt, and feedback-driven, as well as a step-by-step transition in online assessments (Tuah & Naing, 2021).

Due to the changes brought by Covid-19, students demand support to address any challenges and they should have the time and space for their feelings about the shift to be heard and acknowledged (Liu et al., 2020). UNICEF (2020a) held the idea that unrealistic expectations about what students can accomplish through distance learning may also exist among schools, teachers, and parents, so there is a need to manage those expectations. Thus, assessments' nature, content, and the like should be reflective and considerate of the crisis we have today. Students should not be pressured and expected to learn to the same extent as traditional learning.

3. Statement of the Problem
The research aimed to explore the lived experience of elementary teachers as to the barriers and bottlenecks they faced in the conduct of ELA standard assessments in distance learning. It basically intended to answer the grand question: "What are the lived experiences of elementary teachers as to the barriers

and bottlenecks they face in the conduct of English Language Arts (ELA) standard assessments in distance learning?"

4. Methodology
This section provides a description of the method that was used in the study, the environment or locale where the research was conducted, the study participants, and the research instrument. The data analysis procedure is also included.

4.1 Research Design
Husserl believed that phenomenology could serve as a legitimate substitute for traditional scientific research methods (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Polit and Beck (2020) also added that phenomenology's characteristic is exploratory and descriptive at the same time. Phenomenology aims not to create generalization out of the findings but to understand the experiences of the study participants based on their perspectives. In depth-interviews with the participants were conducted, allowing the researcher to enter into the participants' lives and gain access to their experiences. Deterding and Waters (2021) emphasized that this type of research design greatly helps in describing the lived experiences of the participants, focusing on the description, and making meanings of the critical, interested, or not well-understood concepts.

4.2 Research Participants and Selection Criteria
Following the steps in phenomenology, participants having the experiences of the phenomenon being studied and willing to describe it while using an audio-recorder should be selected purposively (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). In this study, the selection of the participants was based on the researcher's knowledge about the population. The participants were hand-picked whereby the researcher selected teachers whom she believed to be knowledgeable of the topic. Purposive sampling is commonly used in a qualitative research since individuals are chosen based on certain criteria (Polit & Beck, 2020).

In this research, the participants are elementary teachers who met the predetermined criteria, which are: currently employed in Gallup McKinley County School District; handling English Language Arts (ELA) subject; male or female; and speakers of the English language. A total of seven (7) elementary teachers participated in the in-depth interviews. The number of participants was determined only after data saturation was reached. To confirm data saturation, two more participants were interviewed after the seventh participant but these were not included in the data presentation.

4.3 Research Environment
The Gallup-McKinley County School District, a public school district with roughly 12,281 students in grades PK–12 and a student–teacher ratio of 20 to 1, served as the study's location. The district's minority enrolment is 90%, with 76.0% of the students economically disadvantaged and 30.3% English language learners. The English Language Arts (ELA) teachers chosen as participants are from the different schools of Gallup McKinley County School District, mainly from Crownpoint, located in Northwest New Mexico, on the east of the Navajo

Reservation. The Navajo Nation stretches into Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico. The Navajo are Native American individuals from the Southwestern United States, and it is the largest federally recognized tribe in the U.S. The interview was carried out in the respective homes of the participants or a place mutually agreed by both the respondents and the researcher. The participants were thoroughly briefed about the research and its objectives.

4.4 Research Instrument. Since the study is phenomenological in nature, the interview was utilized mainly as the data-gathering instrument. During the interview process, the researcher used guide questions to elicit significant statements pertinent to the participants' lived experiences. The questions were open-ended and were worded in English (see Appendix A). The first part asked about the participants' profiles, such as name, age, sex, educational attainment, length of experience, and school. The second part had nine open-ended questions, which aimed to extract the participants' experiences in conducting English Language Arts assessments during remote learning.

4.5 Data Analysis Procedure. Qualitative data were analyzed systematically so that content could be derived from prominent themes and patterns among themes. Typically, analysis entails dividing the data into smaller units, naming and coding those units in accordance with the content those units represent, and organizing coded materials into groups based on common concepts (Polit & Beck, 2020).

In this inquiry, Colaizzi's method, which is deemed appropriate for content analysis, was employed. Weller et al. (2018) suggested that Colaizzi's method achieves objectivity in data analysis and considers its fidelity to phenomena. The phenomenon is being respectfully listened to rather than having its identity defined for it. The following steps were taken during the data analysis:

First, using an audiotape device, a mobile phone, the researcher recorded each interview, then verbatim transcribing it. Listening to the audiotapes is significant as this creates a sense of connection, and reading the transcripts over and over can allow the researcher to acquire a sense and meaning for each of the transcripts (Cruz & Tantia, 2016).

During the listening, reading, and re-reading processes, it was noteworthy that the researcher also continued to write in her diary a journal of personal thoughts to aid in bracketing and reflexive practice.

Second, relevant statements or phrases pertaining directly to the research phenomenon were extracted from the participants' transcripts. Careful analysis of the statements in the transcripts was employed to identify important statements that truly tell the lived experiences of the study participants. Sohn (2017) commented that continual immersion in the data is made possible by manual transcription and analysis, and the thoughts and feelings that arise during this stage are included in the reflexive diary and used to describe some interpretive decisions.

Third, the significant statements served as the foundation for the formulated meanings. Adu (2019) stated that formulated meanings should accurately reflect the intent of each statement. This requires comparison among the original transcripts, the significant statements, and the formulated meanings generated from all the participants.

The third stage entails conscientious bracketing that acknowledges any presuppositions, as this helps in avoiding misinterpretation of the participants' views. According to Adu (2019), bracketing through reflective diary journaling is crucial because it is only after this that more focused research can start. In order to set aside preconceived notions and assumptions, the researcher can use bracketing to: (a) explore them; (b) explore ideas, themes, thoughts, and feelings throughout the data analysis process; and (c) concentrate on the researcher's line of thought.

Fourth, the formulated meanings were put into groups called cluster themes, which later developed into emergent themes. To accurately reflect the significance of the experiences, these themes underwent continuous review and improvement in comparison to the original transcripts. This required counterchecking several times.

Fifth, incorporation of the results into a rich and exhaustive description of the lived experience was done. This provided a comprehensive insight into the lived experiences of Gallup McKinley County Schools elementary teachers specializing in English Language Arts. Adu (2019) explained that an exhaustive description should do more than state what a person is doing, going beyond facts and appearances presenting "detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another… the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard." The exhaustive description should be counterchecked by the research adviser for feedback and validation.

The sixth step, which is the most important stage, is to validate the exhaustive description by going back to the study participants involved in the research. The return to the participants for validation and possible further interview allowed the researcher to ensure that the exhaustive description truly represented their experiences. Their comments were well-documented.

Lastly, the researcher incorporated any new or suitable data obtained from the participant's validation and used those to attain conformity with the lived experience of the participants. These seven steps were soundly followed along with constant review, verification, and bracketing.

5. Results and Discussions
After an in-depth analysis of the transcripts and coding, the following four emergent themes with twelve clustered themes arose to capture the lived experiences of the Elementary ELA teachers as to the distance learning barriers

and bottlenecks they faced in the conduct of ELA assessments. Figure 1 shows the themes.
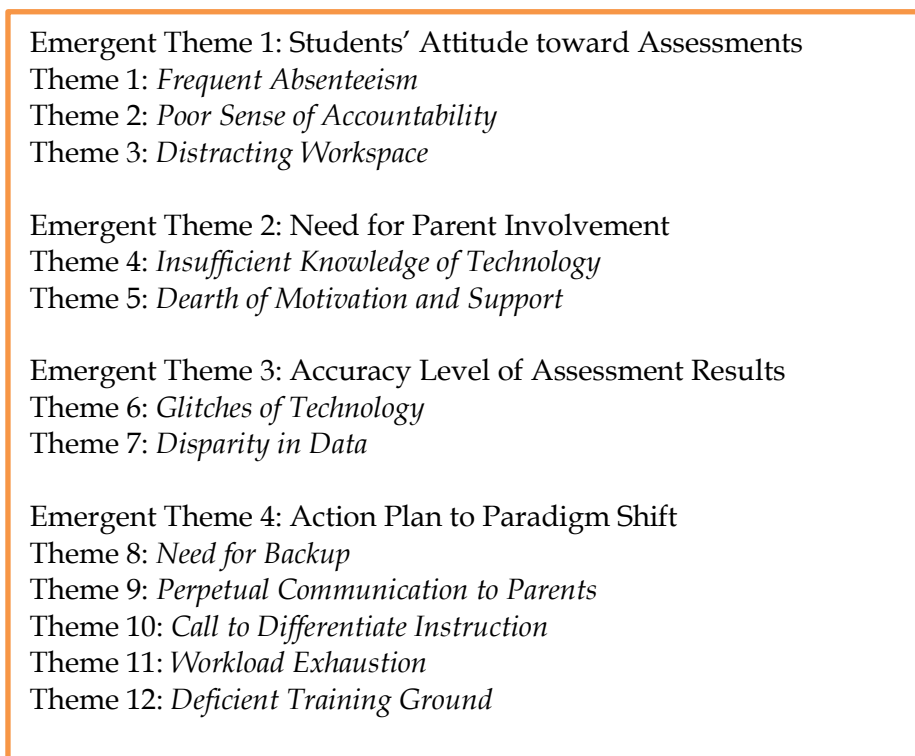
Emergent Theme 1: Students' Attitude toward Assessments
Theme 1: *Frequent Absenteeism*
Theme 2: *Poor Sense of Accountability*
Theme 3: *Distracting Workspace*

Emergent Theme 2: Need for Parent Involvement
Theme 4: *Insufficient Knowledge of Technology*
Theme 5: *Dearth of Motivation and Support*

Emergent Theme 3: Accuracy Level of Assessment Results
Theme 6: *Glitches of Technology*
Theme 7: *Disparity in Data*

Emergent Theme 4: Action Plan to Paradigm Shift
Theme 8: *Need for Backup*
Theme 9: *Perpetual Communication to Parents*
Theme 10: *Call to Differentiate Instruction*
Theme 11: *Workload Exhaustion*
Theme 12: *Deficient Training Ground*

Figure 1: Emergent and Clustered Themes

5.1 Emergent Theme 1: Students' Attitude toward Assessments
The first emergent theme explores the varying attitudes of students toward distance learning assessments. These attitudes include frequent absenteeism, poor sense of accountability, and distracting workspace. The participants believe these clustered themes appeared to be the most common barriers and bottlenecks affecting their students during online testing.

Theme 1: Frequent Absenteeism
Theme number one, frequent absenteeism, was a factor that greatly affected the conduct of ELA assessments. It created some chain reactions. For instance, if students did not attend school, ELA teachers would not be able to deliver their prepared instruction to get students prepared for any assessments. With this, students' test scores would be, without a doubt, low. Participant 7 complained:

> "I could say that 75% of our students did not attend. The barrier was again, students that were online, were not participating."

She also added:

> "Trying to teach the students a strategy to learn how to read because a lot of the students came and they could not decode [consonant-vowel-consonant] words. They were unable to utilize strategies to figure out unknown words. And being online, it was really difficult to try to utilize strategies or teach them because they weren't participating in their learning."

This was attested by Participants 3 and 5 when they said:
> "*Many of the students didn't show up for testing. A lot of the kids didn't really participate, especially the ones you knew that you know… were already struggling with reading.*"

That being said, it was revealed that the students who were frequently absent were also the ones who needed extra help in the area of ELA. The study by Gottfried and Kirksey (2017) supports the current finding that students who are absent within 30 days from the assessment date is a crucial indicator of getting low assessment scores. This is a result of getting minimal opportunities for learning, which includes missing instruction time, establishing test-taking strategies, and significant review of lessons before taking assessments. This, in turn, can negatively create a domino effect on other assessments the students take throughout the year.

Specifics on why attendance is poor in online classes are sometimes hard to identify, but there are some evident explanations. To mention a few, there is a lack of technological devices or stable internet; others have to watch over their younger siblings; and some families had to move because of a lack of jobs. Some of these issues are basically beyond the power of school administrators to address. Some students may also find online learning to be so difficult or tedious that they simply stop attending (Reich et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Poor Sense of Accountability
Teachers disclosed that students were somehow not responsible enough to do their work independently and, subsequently, got help from their families at home. This presented teachers with difficulty in figuring out whether the assessment data they were getting were valid or not. This was emphasized when Participant 3 said:
> "*We did have parents that were actually coaching their children, but yeah… we did have those problems. I did hear like some of them… when they forgot to mute. They were actually helping their kids at home.*"

The finding is in line with that of Núñez et al. (2017), which reflects that involvement from parents is more likely when kids are not performing well in school. Parents tend to display controlling forms of involvement in that situation, implying parents' awareness that low-performing students need more supervision than successful students, who take more accountability for finishing their schoolwork. However, when parental involvement becomes extensive, children will likely be unable to experience solving challenges on their own. Henceforth, they may deprive children of feeling that they are independent, sufficient individuals. Similarly, Participant 2 shared:
> "*Sometimes I think they had help from older siblings, so it was hard for me to figure out if they were taking it or not. My students were not mature enough to do the work themselves.*"

Apart from this, teachers felt that students did not take their assessments seriously and diligently because they were at home, free to do what they wanted. Participants 1 and 2 claimed:

> *"I think it was, no matter what, it was more negative. They weren't growing, but they kind of took it as like, you know… fun. So they didn't grow as much they were home so they were in that environment where they could do things and kind of play around. And they'll have the realization like I don't have to take the time. I don't have to do my best. I felt that they don't actually care."*

The aforementioned data are, likewise, evident in studies by Firat (2016) and Jacobs et al. (2016) which revealed that autonomy is a significant factor of self-learning as needed in distance learning. Students need to become accountable for their learning. This has been supported by UNICEF (2020a) which added that in order for students to learn and be motivated on their own, distance learning programs require a certain level of autonomy. However, it's possible that many students, especially younger ones, still lack the necessary autonomy for distance learning.

Theme 3: Distracting Workspace
Some participants conceded that the distance learning environment made it harder for them to get students focused during assessments. The students' lack of a conducive and private workspace without distractions was one of the barriers to conducting tests. Indeed, Participant 5 observed this as she stated:

> *"They're distracted or something or they went someplace and I didn't know where they went. And I also saw parents playing with their kids while they were supposed to be listening."*

Participant 4 had the same experience and stated:

> *"I had a student who had six siblings in the same room. So they're all doing online. And you can hear all of the voices and other teachers. And this kid was looking so distracted."*

Participant 2 further explained:

> *"I think this was the biggest part. They're sitting on their bed they're laying down they didn't actually have area to study. They're just kind of everywhere."*

The finding runs parallel with that of Keser Aschenberger et al. (2023), who maintained that, when students have a separate workspace that meets their needs, does not require coordination with others, and is used exclusively for learning or working, their motivation and well-being will improve. Furthermore, students will have better learning experiences.

Emergent Theme 2: Need for Parent Involvement
This theme revealed that parents also encountered challenges as their children took online assessments at home. The clustered themes include insufficient knowledge of technology and a dearth of parental motivation and support. The

participants firmly believed that parent involvement in their child's education was critical in conducting ELA assessments through distance learning.

Theme 4: Insufficient Knowledge of Technology

This theme points out the parents' difficulties and frustrations during distance learning assessments. Most of the parents were not well-acquainted with technology such as computers and iPads, so they had to voice their concerns to teachers. In most cases, teachers had to walk the parents through the process, which takes away instruction time, or even cater to them outside class hours. Participant 1 revealed:

> *"Hardest part was sometimes the applications that parents didn't understand how to get there. Parents were frustrated, I suppose, getting frustrated that they weren't so tech savvy, because at the time I had grandparents who were with their first graders saying "I'm not able to do this. I don't understand this. I don't understand this device and how to get to it."*

Participant 3 further elaborated:

> *"Parents complained, frustrated about testing the kids and things like that. But they tried, and so those kinds of issues were having and some parents were helpful, but most of them were not."*

Research by Daniela et al. (2021) supports the above data that parents lack training or background in using digital tools and learning materials. Parents needed adequate knowledge during distance learning assessments. Understandably, the paradigm shift from in-person teaching to distance learning required much teacher effort. They had to prepare all the online assessments for students, and simultaneously, online materials for parents on how to support learning. Parents just composed themselves according to their understanding and supported their children to the best of their ability. Thus, the degree to which parents can assist their children in conducting assessments for distance learning will determine whether there is a gap in the results of the students' tests.

Theme 5: Dearth of Motivation and Support

Theme 5 discusses how parent motivation and support affect the students and teachers. It further elaborates how the teachers struggled with getting students to do their assessments correctly because they had little to no assistance at home.

This was verbalized by Participant 4:

> *"Only some parents participated though, some would just be a bystander. And then some of them would walk away, you know. So, parent involvement was something that we really push and press to the parents."*

This was further discussed by Participant 5 when she said:

> *"Some of the kids that were left alone, they didn't have any parents there to help them. They were just in a room. They were the ones that weren't paying attention, or they kept clicking out and they kept going."*

Participant 7 also declared that she reached out to parents, but only a few of them communicated back with her. Hence, students were not able to take their assessments. She said:

> *"They would say that they weren't able to access it. A lot of the parents did not even reply so a lot of students didn't take their interim assessments, if they were online."*

Efriana (2021) acknowledged the parents' struggles with this distance learning. The students' parents' condition also affects the conduct of distance learning assessments. They generally work outside the home, such as in government, private, and self-employed fields, so they can hardly monitor, guide, and assist their children in learning to solve their difficulties. In addition, some complain that distance learning adds stress to the many tasks they juggle.

Emergent Theme 3: Accuracy Level of Assessment Results
This third emergent theme examines the factors affecting the accuracy level of assessment results done through distance learning. This theme explores the technology issues and the data disparity that comes with it. Reliability and accuracy of test scores were the most-talked-about barriers among all the participants, leading them to take on plan B.

Theme 6: Glitches of Technology
Technology glitches were one of the reasons why test results were not giving a clear indication of student progress. Some glitches the participants experienced were unstable internet, the disappearance of online assessments, and other errors in the system that were out of the teachers' control. Participant 3 expressed her difficulty in determining where her students were at in their learning. She firmly attested:

> *"So I think the only problem I really had was not knowing if the students were actually learning because you know, most of the time they wouldn't turn on their cameras. You know, we had issues with students having limited access internet* (sighs). *We had the problem of bandwidth, I guess."*

Participant 4 also complained about the effect of glitches on her data:

> *"You know, you have your glitches sometimes, it's the internet may not work at that time. So it's really not accurate. No, not accurate. So it was hard to tell."*

Furthermore, Participant 5 stated:

> *"Another one was just building the test. Sometimes it disappeared. And so we had to tell them that we cancelled it and try to recreate it and do it the next day."*

Given that a large percentage of students cannot access the internet because of financial and technological limitations, online learning is less effective than conventional learning and cannot produce the desired results (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). UNICEF (2020b) supported the data above by saying that more than 65% of students lack internet access globally. The data have also shown that internet

access depends mainly on where these children live and the relative wealth of their households. Worldwide, students aged 25 years or below from rural areas that have internet access rate 16 percentage points lower than their urban counterparts. More particularly, internet access for students whose households belong to the poorest in their countries is 42 percentage points lower than their peers from the wealthiest households in the same countries.

In the United States, Lopres et al. (2023) also discovered that because of the erratic internet connection, teachers have found it challenging to involve students in group projects, interactive lessons, and class discussions. Some students have even claimed that they are completely unable to participate in online classes. Students frequently experience screen freezes or are kicked out of Zoom in areas with poor internet connectivity, such as reservation areas, where the issue is particularly acute.

Gallup McKinley County Schools District has 76.0% of conomically disadvantaged students. This crucially undermines the potential for students to succeed in school, work, and life in an increasingly digital world. This lack of connectivity is a barrier that will preclude students from accessing valuable and interactive forms of learning moving onwards.

Theme 7: Disparity in Data
Assessment data were the basis for teachers to plan their next instruction. However, the hindrance to this was ensuring that the data they were getting were valid and reliable. Participant 1 communicated her struggle when she said:

> *"I wasn't able to get the data where my students were at, and then where some of my students were weak in some areas. Data does matchup between the parent involvements where parents were there and then when they have to do it on their own. So you know, is just a very big gap within the data."*

Participant 7 had a similar observation when she described:

> *"I noticed the results were very high. Whereas when they came back into the classroom, more so of course, as an educator, we ask ourselves, are we assessing the students or are we assessing the parents? And, you know, but we couldn't say that and to help the parents understand that they're not helping their child."*

Sharing the same sentiments were Participants 2 and 4:

> *"It was hard to tell if they were accurate or not, like I said I could see for me in my class, it's hard to check in on all of them, especially in distance learning. Some of them score high or some score low."*

> *"But a lot of them were just passing it. Like hundreds. So that was the hard part because it didn't give us that clear indication of where we're sitting as far as standard assessments."*

DeMatthews (2021) also questioned whether assessment scores were accurate, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when students learned less than they

should in a face-to-face setup. He argued that while some states, like Texas, have chosen to move forward with assessments, they haven't yet been used to rate educators and school systems on student performance. Others have changed their tests to be shorter, like California, and still others have applied for waivers to stop all standardized testing. Georgia and Colorado reduced the number of tests, and Massachusetts directed school districts to devise academic retrieval plans (Olneck-Brown, 2021). If these tests are administered, the results should be analyzed heedfully, especially if the assessments are administered at home.

Emergent Theme 4: Action Plan to Paradigm Shift
The barriers and bottlenecks that the ELA teachers faced in conducting distance learning assessments left them with no choice but to execute plan B. This action plan includes differentiating instruction, finding better ways to assess students, and communicating more frequently with parents. In addition, this theme also discusses how these challenges are affecting the teachers solely and immensely.

Theme 8: Need for Backup
Given the challenges in ensuring the validity and reliability of assessment scores, the participants called for a backup plan to get more accurate assessment data. Most participants generally claimed that they modified some procedures when asked how they did this. According to Participant 2:

> *"I had to pull the students that were my leaders, so they had to keep their group in charge. I would have a little meeting with them and tell them you know, this is what you're supposed to do. Basically, they're becoming a teacher so they could understand it. So they were in charge of their own little group and they give me feedback."*

Participant 4 did something similar when she shared:

> *"But for small groups, I created it for our grade level. And then how we set it up was just the kids who were in our own group… they would have their own in there and I would have my own so then we told the kids you know, it's gonna pop up. When you're there when we want you to join."*

Apart from doing small-group testing rather than whole group, Participant 6 admitted that she had to reflect on her teaching and see how she could modify and improve to better teach and assess student learning. She claimed:

> *"So you know, like if my kids are not getting it then I looked at the data and I'm like, okay, something needs to change. Like if there's, you know, few of them then, of course like I know I need to change something in instruction and that was always the thing… was just looking back at data."*

The above findings correspond with that of UNICEF (2020a) that teachers need to modify their practices, such as daily activities, responsibilities, and accountabilities, as part of the new protocols of distance learning. Developing new alternative and wide-ranging approaches to monitor, assess, and modify teaching to address learning gaps during the Covid crisis was undeniably essential. Different methods were required for every grade level and subject area for individual and collective feedback and support. Nevertheless, on the contrary, teachers may need more appropriate resources at home, training, and experience,

specifically on digital learning platforms. By emphasizing students' independent learning, some online programs may have a tendency to reduce the time allotted to teacher-directed learning processes.

Theme 9: Constant Communication to Parents
The participants highly capitalized on constant and clear communication to get parents and students on the right track. It includes communicating to them the nature of distance learning assessments, especially the dos and don'ts of conducting assessments. Participant 4 explained:

> *"Every Friday morning, we would always check in with our parents online. And that's when we explained to them this is our intervention. This is what we're going to do. This is our purpose. Because it's going to help us to work with the kids individually and, you know, meet their learning needs."*

She further elaborated:

> *"We would really press to the parents, they have to do this on their own… Just to show them and tell them okay, so this is how I would give it. You're just gonna read the question. That's all you're prompting the child to do. But you're not giving them the hint."*

Most of the participants reiterated to parents the importance of letting the students answer the assessments independently. This was supported by Participant 6, who said:

> *"As always you're the one that's checking the work you're the one who's you know… made constant reminder. I stopped the test and just tell the parent you know, like I know you want to help. But the indicator of where the child is you kind of need to just… it's okay if they get it wrong. Like this is gonna give me information to know where I could support them."*

The data validate the findings of King (2021) that parent-teacher interaction benefits kids' academic performance, boosts parental effectiveness, and, most importantly, reduces stress and anxiety in both teachers and parents. Stress and anxiety related to distance learning suggest useful, directed, and helpful communication. Collaboration between the home and the school can help teachers and parents feel better about themselves and increase the effectiveness of parents. This collaboration can include posting or sending newsletters, exchanging emails, or using other messaging apps. It is an advantageous situation for everyone, including the students.

UNICEF (2020a) also emphasized that the new systems need to be adapted to by students, parents, or guardians, who also need to be informed. Beyond their necessary participation in the learning and assessment culture of schools, parental education and counseling are essential during the Covid crisis for the wellbeing, preservation of learning motivation, and safety of their children. This was supported by Lui et al. (2020) who supposed that parents and teachers are primary caretakers of the students, so, basically, their self-care is equally important in order that they may continue to educate, monitor, and support students in distance learning.

Theme 10: Call to Differentiate Instruction

The call to differentiate instruction was the plan B of the participants to get more accurate assessment data. Most participants admitted that it was a learning experience to find creative ways to measure student learning accurately.

Participants 2 and 4 reported that online practice drills, such as I Excel (IXL) and Kahoot, that gave real-time results were some of their alternatives. They said:

> "And a lot of it was websites. They do this on IXL reading. They finish the story and submit it take their quiz." "Kahoot was one thing we use, and then we would have them get a whiteboard and a marker and show it and their response on here. So that would help me to do quick checks to see."

Participant 6 similarly did the same when she emphasized:

> "So I was able to pick through kids after those informal checks within lessons to know whether or not kids were getting it. So and that's kind of where you know, it just got to the point where I was purposely like messing with the popsicle sticks."

As a result of this paradigm shift, the participants became more resourceful, especially regarding technology. Participant 4 proved this true when she revealed:

> "I had to really configure it… I am configuring my mind to think, okay, how can I teach this? So they understand it for this. So I stopped using anchor charts. I just did individual papers like to display. My document camera became my best friend. You know, I learned how to use YouTube video clips outside of the images so I just stuck to everything on the computer. You became more resourceful with technology."

Undeniably, teachers faced challenges in assessing whether students are on track, and seeing if there are learning gaps resulting from the paradigm shift of education. Nevertheless, Barana et al. (2019) acknowledged that class participation and engagement are key factors in a student's success and motivation to succeed. Many studies held the idea that, if students are actively engaged in a lesson or activity, they are more likely to achieve better results and enjoy instruction time. Therefore, the online software and tools that teachers use in distance learning should incorporate gamification, simulations, and interaction to boost student engagement (Nieto-Escamez & Roldan-Tapia, 2021).

Mullis and Martin (2019) postulated that assessments are designed to look forward rather than looking back. Assessment for learning involves an analysis of assessment results during instruction to know where the students are at with their learning goals. Such data then need to be analyzed to make necessary modifications of the teaching and learning procedures to better address the learning gaps.

Theme 11: Workload Exhaustion

For a teacher who is new to the nature of conducting assessments online, frustrations can come into play. Learning something new requires hard work and can be stressful. This was affirmed when Participant 6 said:

"I really don't want to go back. It was really hard as it was and it was just a relief to get it over with because it was kind of more like a helpless situation. It was really hard to just find creative ways."

Sharing the same sentiment was Participant 7, who stated:
"The learning impact that it had on education was as teachers, we tried to do something we had never done before. So we were not as knowledgeable as we should have been. But we all did, and try the best we could."

Along with the workload exhaustion that the teachers experienced was its disastrous effect on their health. Both Participants 5 and 6 disclosed:
"I know that during the time when we were doing online I sat so much that I injured my leg, the nerve to my leg here. So I had a hard time. My leg was just swelling up and everything… so the nerves were being pinched off. And I had to go to a hospital. It affected my health."

"I think that's probably where I got the most sick. That's the time when I really suffered with migraines. So I was out a lot. Just to the point where it was just too much screen time."

The findings show that teachers' perspectives on change are influenced by their lack of distance learning experience, their lack of technological knowledge and proficiency, their unclear implementation instructions, and their lack of cooperation. These factors have brought anxiety, overload, and insecurity to teachers. Additionally, this results in increased stress levels, physical and mental fatigue, an increase in resistance to change, performance issues, and a decrease in job satisfaction (Duraku & Hoxha, 2020).

Furthermore, Tuah and Naing (2021) found that due to the strict technological constraints and low levels of student engagement with teachers, online assessments have negative effects, primarily psychological stress, on both teachers and students. Students' grades are also affected by them. The degree of student readiness for the test format and content, the test's quality, lengthy test loading times, inexperienced teachers, and slow test login times are all potential influences on students' grades and scores in online assessments.

Theme 12: Deficient Training Ground
At the start of distance learning, teachers experienced challenges due to insufficient background and training in conducting assessments online and getting accurate data. This theme explores the participants' struggles on the matter at hand.

Participant 6 mentioned:
"Like first off, I've never done teaching that had to be in that way. So there was so much like there was… was everything was completely brand new. I had to learn. I have to learn literally how to start all over."

She also added:

> *"I think it was really an eye opener for not only the school but the district to know that our technology was not up to par as to where it should. So I mean, even for them to come at us and say, guess what you're doing online teaching. It was not like we were trained, it was just like go."*

Besides teachers' lacking background in distance learning assessments, the participant argued that students and parents must be trained, too. She suggested:

> *"The other thing, too, is training the kids a little bit more and the parents I wish we had a way of just having a training session for the parents. And then talking about the policy, about assessment, talking about what each grade is expected to do, you know, just doing those a list of things of dos and don'ts before we started."*

Evidently, one big challenge at the beginning of the shift to distance learning was that most teachers were unprepared and caught off guard. The unforeseen shift from traditional to distance learning was not planned, nor was there time for planning and training, especially on the part of the teachers having little to no technical expertise but who were still expected to carry out the program (Almeida & Monteiro, 2021).

As likewise stated by Rahim (2020), these rapid changes required teachers to have developed certain competencies, including their digital competencies. Given that some educational systems are lagging in the development of these teacher competencies, a focus should be put on fostering not only teachers' general assessment skills but also those particular skills that would allow them to work in a variety of learning environments.

Teacher readiness is truly significant. Extremely good infrastructure and convenient software and hardware are useless without persuading teachers about the necessity and advantages of the shift. Besides training teachers on how to use digital platforms, there is also a need to train them on how to carry out sound assessment practices and the use of available online assessment programs (Rahim, 2020).

6. Scope and Limitations of the Study
The participants of this study were the elementary teachers who met these predetermined criteria: a) currently employed in Gallup McKinley County School District; b) handling English Language Arts (ELA) subject; c) male or female; and; d) speakers of the English language. All of the criteria were set to meet the data saturation of the phenomenon. The participants were interviewed at their most convenient time and place. This study was delimited to the lived experiences of the elementary ELA teachers. The research only focused on the description of the teachers' lived experiences.

7. Conclusion
In light of the obtained findings, this research concludes that the phenomenal transition in conducting assessments from face-to-face to distance learning has

yielded several barriers and bottlenecks for teachers. Among these was dealing with student absenteeism, non-participation, and accountability issues when teachers were not physically present with students. The teachers constantly reminded students to listen attentively, participate, and take their assessments honestly, but distractions at home were out of the teachers' control. Parent involvement and support was a significant factor in conducting online assessments. Teachers encouraged parents to be involved in their child's education but not in a way that they do the work for their children. Teachers were hopeful that parents would be there at home to motivate the students and often communicate with them if parents had concerns or needed any help in navigating testing websites, applications, and the like. On the other hand, teachers need more convincing that they are indeed getting their students' actual scores even though parents have been reminded of the dos and don'ts of executing online assessments. They assumed some students received help from their parents, which is why they scored hundreds. As an action step, teachers carried out creative ways to continue teaching and gather data from assessments to determine which learning goals ought to be addressed. Small-group testing, document cameras, distributing packets, online ELA practice, drills that give real-time scores, and other quick check strategies are some of the things they applied to obtain more accurate and reliable assessment results. Having to face these challenges simultaneously, teachers felt inadequate and suffered from work stress. Despite all the barriers and bottlenecks, ELA teachers remained hopeful that all these could be minimized with greater dedication and commitment to making students successful.

8. Recommendations

Based on the research findings, recommendations for school district heads, teachers, parents, and students are articulated below:

School District Heads. It is advised that school district administrators take proactive steps to assist teachers in overcoming the challenges and bottlenecks related to the switch from in-person to online assessments in light of the research findings. Prioritizing strategies that encourage parent involvement and support without allowing excessive parental intervention is essential given the difficulties of student absenteeism, non-participation, and accountability issues in the absence of a physical teacher presence. District administrators should stress the value of parents encouraging communication between students and teachers and making sure teachers have faith in the validity of assessment results. Increasing accuracy and reliability can help address these issues by giving teachers more instruction and materials on efficient online assessment strategies, like small-group testing, document cameras, and real-time scoring tools. Additionally, district administrators ought to put teacher well-being first by providing resources and support systems for easing work-related stress. School district leaders can reduce obstacles and encourage successful student outcomes in the distance learning environment by showing commitment and dedication to addressing these issues.

Teachers. It is recommended that teachers take a proactive stance to address the challenges and bottlenecks related to the switch from in-person to online assessments. Teachers should continue to place a high priority on clear communication and reminders to students about attention and honest assessment participation, even though they are aware of the difficulties posed by student absenteeism, non-participation, and accountability issues in a remote setting. It's critical to encourage active parent involvement and support for online assessments without sacrificing the quality of student work. While making sure that parents are aware of the value of independent student effort, teachers should advise parents on how to encourage students and help them navigate testing platforms. Teachers should use innovative techniques like small-group testing, document cameras, distributed packets, online ELA practice, and drills with real-time scoring to collect accurate and trustworthy assessment data. Teachers should also ask their school or district for assistance if they are feeling inadequate or stressed out at work. In the context of distance learning, teachers can lessen difficulties and foster student success by remaining committed and dedicated to their work.

Parents and Students. Both parents and students should take a proactive role in assisting the switch from in-person to online assessments. Parents must create a conducive learning environment at home by reducing distractions and supporting their child's focus during online assessments while also acknowledging the difficulties teachers face. While refraining from doing the work on their child's behalf, parents should be involved in their education by encouraging and communicating with them. The importance of independent effort in preserving the integrity of online assessments must be understood by parents. Students should also approach assessments honestly and diligently, realizing that their performance reflects their true abilities. For the purpose of ensuring accurate assessment results, teachers have used a variety of strategies, including small-group testing, document cameras, distributed packets, and real-time scoring drills. Parents, students, and other participants in the learning process can minimize obstacles and foster success in the distance learning environment by appreciating and respecting the efforts of the teachers.

Future Research. Future studies should concentrate on examining and resolving the challenges and bottlenecks that teachers encounter when switching from in-person to online assessments. The complexities of student absenteeism, non-participation, and accountability issues in the absence of a physical teacher presence require further study. It is important to look more closely at the role of parental involvement and support in online assessments, as well as how it may affect students' motivation and result in unintended parental support. Researchers should investigate and assess the efficacy of various strategies, including small-group testing, document cameras, distributed packets, and real-time scoring drills, to improve the reliability and accuracy of online assessments. Further research is needed to determine how these difficulties affect teachers' well-being and workplace stress. Future researchers can contribute to the creation of comprehensive solutions and strategies that minimize obstacles and maximize

success in the distance learning assessment environment by conducting thorough research and filling in these gaps.

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Appendix A
Research Questions

1. What are the barriers and bottlenecks you faced during standard assessment?
2. How do these barriers and bottlenecks affect you as an ELA teacher?
3. How do these barriers and bottlenecks affect your students?
4. How do these barriers and bottlenecks affect your parents?
5. How do you ensure reliability of assessment results?
6. How does parent involvement affect reliability of assessment results?
7. What was the impact of distance learning in ELA assessment results?
8. Were the scores more reliable or valid during face-to-face learning than distance learning?
9. What else would you like to share?