EFL Students' Attitudes Towards the English Online Assessments

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ABSTRACT: *Technology has been used for many years to enhance the quality of language learning and instruction. However, the introduction of technology into many contexts for language acquisition was hastened by the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak. Education professionals encountered a variety of new issues as a result of the abrupt change to online learning (Ghanbari and Nowroozi,2021). This study investigated students' opinions of an English online assessment in terms of affective, cognitive, and behavioral factors. It aims to gauge students' perspectives of the English online assessment currently employed at their institution and to find out their difficulties when taking online exams so that practical solutions can be recommended to the institution. The study recruited 110 students who have been attending General English courses at a public university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The participants responded to a questionnaire including 28 items asking mainly about the advantages and disadvantages of the English online assessment that they experienced in their last course. The results revealed that most of the students had positive attitudes toward the online assessment mode although they also experienced several shortcomings when taking the English online exams.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of 4.0, technology is becoming a necessary component of the teaching and learning process (Brink and Lautenbach, 2011). Many applications have been developed to assist students in language learning. Teachers have employed more tools in their teaching process. Especially during the Covid 19 pandemic, modes of teaching and learning process have been changed from face-to-face to online (Ghanbari and Nowroozi, 2021) and thus assessment form has also been shifted to online or e-assessment. The core of the teaching process is assessment. It assesses how well students understand the content and their capacity for advancement (Abduh, 2021).

As computer technology develops, online teaching and learning have given another opportunity for both teachers and learners, especially amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. In the context of English language teaching and learning, the online platform has received more attention. More schools and centers have chosen online as an excellent way to maintain language teaching. At the same time, tertiary institutions worldwide have also recognized the importance of e-assessment (Brink & Lautenbach, 2011). The demand for replacing e-assessments with paper-based assessments has arisen since the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic (Tadesse & Muluye, 2020). Since the

COVID-19 emergence, many higher institutions in Vietnam have used the online assessment mode to measure the learning outcomes of their students. Although the principles of Assessment in an electronic environment do not change and the same strategies for designing the tests have been maintained (Benson, 2010), many issues must be considered. Since neither teachers nor students are accustomed to this type of testing, employing it may provide extra difficulties for them. For instance, teachers and students who are not good at Informatic Technology (IT) skills may find it hard to adapt to this platform.

To have an in-depth understanding, the authors decide to conduct the current study to investigate EFL students' perspectives of Online Assessment in terms of affective, cognitive, and behavioral factors.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:
1. What do EFL students think about the English online Assessment currently employed at their institution in terms of affective, cognitive, and behavioral factors?
2. Do the students face any problems when taking the English online exams?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Assessment and types of Assessment
Assessment plays a vital role in the teaching and learning process. It provides feedback on the student's progress, and it assesses the degree to which curriculum objectives have been met Ghanbari & Nowroozi (2021).

In general, there are two main types of assessment that attract many educators. Dixon & Worrel (2016) cited formative assessment's definition by Black & William, 2010 and agreed that formative assessment includes activities undertaken by teachers and by their students in assessing themselves- that provides information to be used as feedback to modify teaching and learning activities. According to (Hargreaves, 2008), formative assessment is frequently used in classrooms as a continuous feedback mechanism to enhance teaching and learning. Gardner (2010) assumes that summative assessments are generally deployed to get a final assessment of how much learning has taken place or how much a student knows. In this study, the summative assessment is considered, and it is the evaluation conducted by the end of the course, and the results are used to determine the learning outcomes of the students after completion of one course.

Online Assessment
Online Assessment has been used for a long time following online educational modes. However, they have been more preferred since the outbreak of COVID-19. Similarly, Cook and Jenkins (2010) define e-assessment as forms that are stored, provided, answered, and mostly or entirely marked automatically using Information and Communications Technology (ICT). At the same time, Crisp (2011) defines online assessments as all assessment tasks that are conducted through a computer, a digital tool, and the web. More specifically, online assessment is defined by Jordan

(2013) as any computer-related assessment-related activity, whether summative, formative, or diagnostic.

Advantages and disadvantages of online assessment
Although online assessment has been known for several decades, one cannot deny its increasingly vital role in the digital transformation of education recently, particularly during the COVID 19 pandemic. Online Assessment has offered many advantages. It has made assessment more accurate and faster than traditional time-taking paper-based measures (Hillier, 2014; Ridgway et al., 2004; Osuji, 2012). From a practical point of view, it reduces the teacher's burden to assess many students (Nicol, 2007) and saves teachers' time (Gilbert et al., 2011). As students, they can receive feedback instantly, and their motivation is increased to enhance their performance (Gilbert et al., 2011). Despite its advantages, online Assessments can be disadvantageous. Teachers and students can lack confidence because of poor IT competence (Whitelock and Brasher, 2006). Cheating and plagiarism in the online assessment are two problems that Xu and Mahenthrian (2016); Kocdar et al. (2018) and Mellar et al. (2018) indicate in their studies.

Cognitive, affective, and behavioral aspects of attitudes
There have been many definitions of attitude in psychology and education. Gadner (1985) considered attitude as "an evaluative reaction to some referent or attitude object, inferred based on the individual's beliefs or opinions about the referent. Crystal (1997) stated that attitude is the feelings people have about their language or the languages of others. In the same way, Brown (2001) defines attitude as long-lasting psychological readiness to react in a certain way. Thus, attitude can be simply defined as an established way of thinking or feeling or behaving about something or someone. (Das et al., 2014).

Weden (1991) categorized language attitude into cognitive, affective, and behavioral. The cognitive aspect relates to one's beliefs, thoughts, and ideas about something. It could be classified into four steps: connecting the previous knowledge and the new one, creating new knowledge, checking new knowledge, and applying it in many situations (Gardner, 1972). The affective one or the emotional one is related to the feelings and emotions one has towards the objects they like or dislike. It might be a feeling of excitement, happiness, and confidence, or boredom, frustration, and anger (Smith, 1971), and the behavioral aspect refers to one's action toward an object. Gardner (1972) also points out that this aspect involves the tendency to adopt particular learning behaviors.

Related Studies
So far, not much research on students' perceptions of online Assessments has been carried out. Dermo (2009) studied how students feel about e-assessment at the University of Bradford. One hundred thirty undergraduates who had participated in an online assessment (either formative or summative) during the academic year 2007-2008 received an online questionnaire. The survey examined six primary dimensions: affective factors, validity, practical issues, reliability, security, and learning and teaching. The results revealed that the student participants had positive attitudes toward e-assessment, with the fairness of item banking receiving the most attention. Additionally,

it was discovered that students viewed the advantages that e-assessment can have for both teaching and learning as its most beneficial feature. The data further indicated that neither gender nor age significantly influenced student responses in any of the areas examined.

Similarly, to understand students' perspectives on e-assessment, Huda, Kabir & Siddiq (2020) employed 200 undergraduate and postgraduate students from Bangladesh randomly selected from various universities in Dhaka, Bangladesh. A questionnaire consisting of 27 statements in six different sets of factors - Affective Factors, Validity, Practicality, Reliability, Security, and Teaching and Learning was employed. The survey's findings indicate that students have favorable opinions about electronic testing. Participants' views on whether using a computer increases stress were diverse, though, as they are not accustomed to it. Participants acknowledged that they were not familiar with it. Because it is a new system, it can be challenging to concentrate, but they still support e-assessment in higher education.

In another study, Kundu and Bej (2021) investigated 200 Indian students' perception of e-assessment during COVID-19 in eight domains. An online questionnaire consisting of 40 questions in Google Forms was delivered to the participants. The data showed that students' perceptions of e-assessment are moderate, and their perceptions vary depending on their gender, academic level, study field, and financial situation. Students from different streams of the study were found to have different perceptions of e-assessment. For example, science and law students' perceptions are better than that of students of social sciences and humanities. Out of the eight domains examined, students demonstrated better perception in the perceived usefulness, perceived ease of use, compatibility, subjective norms, and self-efficacy domains. At the same time, they performed poorly in the awareness, resource facilitation, and information technology (IT) support parts. Their replies clarified that the COVID-19 pandemic played a crucial role in raising their interest in e-assessment.

 Fitriyah & Jannah (2021) conducted a case study to examine both EFL students' and teachers' perspectives on online Assessments. Thirty students and three EFL teachers in the Intensive English course (IC) at Islamic University in Kediri were recruited. A questionnaire was delivered to the student participants, and the results revealed that students have a positive attitude toward online Assessment administration. Additionally, the results of open-ended interviews showed four themes for positive effects, including improving assessment flexibility, increasing the versatility of evaluation, raising teachers' and students' awareness of creating assessments, and developing students' autonomy in learning. On the other hand, the online Assessment revealed three themes for unfavorable outcomes, including complicated evaluation administration, decreased teacher-student interaction, and nervousness throughout the English test. Importantly, future online testing will not be a problem for either teachers or students.

In short, several recent studies mainly investigated students 'perceptions of e-assessment in six domains, including Affective Factors, Validity, Practicality, Reliability, Security, and Teaching and Learning. Their results indicated that the students appreciated the transition from paper-based

tests to electronic-based ones. These studies also revealed some challenges students might face when e-assessment is employed. However, the current study hopes to see more perceptions of EFL students in higher education in the Vietnamese context toward the application of e-assessment in their learning process.

METHODOLOGY

Participants
The study recruited one hundred eleven students from four classes following General English courses at an economics university in Ho Chi Minh City. They are following a four-year undergraduate program in various majors, but they are compulsory to take English classes to gain an expected English level before their graduation. All of them have had experience in doing online tests since the outbreak of COVID-19. Their ages range from 19 to 20, and their first language is Vietnamese. In particular, the participants included 74 females and 36 males taking the second course of this university's four General English courses. They all voluntarily responded to the questionnaire.

Research instrument
This study employed only one instrument to collect the data: a questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed mainly based on the theory of Weden (1991) about attitude and other related studies about e-assessment. There are two main sections seeking the responses of the participants. The first section aims at exploring the participants' demographic information. The second section is divided into four subsections. The three first subsections had a set of questions asking the participants about their affective, cognitive, and behavioral attitudes toward the online summative assessment, which is currently employed to evaluate their learning outcomes by the end of their English course. Then, the last subsection of the survey contained another set of questions eliciting the students to perceive challenges they may face when taking the online exams in their English course. A five-point Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5) was designed for all questions about the electronic assessment application they had experienced.

Research procedures
Due to the difficulty of conducting surveys, gathering the data required for the study takes a lengthy time. Creating the questionnaire and locating the participants must be meticulously planned to ensure the study runs well. There are three primary stages to the process of gathering research data. The development of the survey questions came first. The related studies provided in the literature review section and the writers' personal beliefs and experiences served as the foundation for the questions. After modifying the questionnaire, the authors got it proofread by two colleagues. After that, they did a pilot with some students to know whether the questionnaire could be understandable or not. Then, the complete questionnaire was delivered to the participants during their break time for convenience. Finally, the researchers collected and computed all the answers. All the figures were generated by software SPSS version 22.0. The scale test was run first to check the reliability of the questionnaire and is presented in Table 1 below. The result reveals

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that the questionnaire was reliable and could be used to be delivered to the participants with a Cronbach's alpha value of .852.

Table 1. Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.852	28

The authors used the following agreement of mean score ranges to specify the scale of the data.

Table 2. Agreement on the understanding of mean score scales

Range	Level
1.0 to 1.8	Strongly disagree
1.81 to 2.60	Disagree
2.61 to 3.40	Neutral
3.41 to 4.20	Agree
4.21 to 5.00	Strongly disagree

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings
Research question 1: What do EFL students think of the current online Assessment at their institution regarding affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects?
The data used to answer the first research question were divided into three dimensions, including affective, cognitive, and behavioral aspects.

Table 3 below presents descriptive data on affective aspects, including nine items.

Table 3. Descriptive data on affective aspects

No	Items	Mean	S.D
1	I feel online assessments are more appropriate for English courses.	4.24	.753
2	I feel the questions in online exams are easier to complete.	3.86	.893
3	Sitting in online exams makes me more confident.	3.73	.887
4	I feel more comfortable and motivated when I do my online exams.	3.01	.914
5	I would like to have more online exams in the future.	3.90	.766
6	Sitting in online exams reduces my anxiety.	3.25	1.024
7	I prefer taking English online exams to paper-based exams.	3.84	.736
8	I feel that online Assessment is more secure than paper-based Assessment.	3.59	1.199
9	I like the question types in English online exams.	2.83	1.012
	Overall	**3.58**	**0.44**

As can be seen from Table 3, the overall mean score of affective factors is 3.58 which means that the respondents show rather positive feelings about the application of online assessment in their institution. Among the nine items, the mean score of the first item out of nine items is up to 4.24 (S.D=.753) shows that the EFL students highly support the online assessment and feel that this online mode is appropriate for English courses. Item 5 with a mean score of 3.90 (S.D=.766) shows that the students would like to have more online exams. Unfortunately, the mean scores of 3.01 for item 4 and 3.25 for item 6, respectively reveal that the students are of neutral opinions on motivation and anxiety reduction that online assessment may offer. For item 8, it can be seen that they agree that online assessment is more secure than paper-based assessment (M=3.59, S.D=1.199). Unfortunately, the mean score for item 9 of 2.83 indicates that the students have a neutral attitude toward the question types in the English online exams that they experienced.

Table 4. **Descriptive data on cognitive factors**

No	Items	Mean	S.D
10	I think the contents of the online Assessment are appropriate for the outcomes of my General English courses.	3.88	.739
11	Online exams help me improve my I.T skills.	4.25	.652
12	I make fewer mistakes when doing English online exams.	3.97	.710
13	I can learn more English when taking online exams.	2.46	.983
14	I have better marks in online exams compared to paper-based exams.	3.50	.763
15	Online exams are easy to access and easy to do.	3.91	.863
16	All questions in online exams are appropriate to evaluate my English proficiency.	3.41	.961
17	My English skills can be improved more when taking English online exams.	2.28	.987
	Overall	**3.46**	**0.72**

In general, the overall mean score of the cognitive factors is not high (M=3.46). From Table 4, it can be clearly seen that item 11 gained the highest mean score of 4.25. It is indicated that the students admitted that the online exams improve their IT skills. Other items such as 12 and 15 almost reached four on the five-point scale (M=3.97 and M=3.91 respectively). The results demonstrate the respondents have positive beliefs about the online form of assessment. However, the respondents had a low agreement on items 13 and 17 of 2.46 and 2.28. The results reveal that these students perceive that language skills cannot be well evaluated by this new mode of assessment at their university.

Table 5. Descriptive data on behavioral attitudes of the English online assessments

No	Items	Mean	S.D
18	Taking the online English exams makes me more rigorous.	2.12	.810
19	I can make myself more concentrated when sitting in online exams.	4.15	.744
20	Online exams help me improve my personality.	3.89	.989
21	Online exams helped me become more interested in learning English	3.87	.791
22	I can get marks fast when taking online exams.	3.14	.883
23	Online exams are time-saving and economical because I can sit and do exams at home.	4.04	.676
24	I think online exams are fairer than paper-based exams.	4.10	.605
	Overall	**3.62**	**0.74**

Table 5 represents the data on behavioral aspects of attitudes of the English online assessments. The results also reveal that the respondents do not have high agreement on the behavioral aspects with M=3.62. Items 19, 23, and 24 each obtained a mean score of 4.15, 4.04, and 4.10, respectively, for the three items with the highest mean scores. This means that the respondents could gain some benefits from the online assessment such as being more concentrated or saving time and money. However, the respondents reported that they don't agree with item 18 "Taking the online English exams makes me more rigorous" with a mean score of 2.12.

Research question 2: Do the students face any problems when taking the English online exams?

To get the respondents' opinions about some problems they may face when taking the English online exams, four questions on the five-point Likert scale and an open-ended question were designed. The results of the four questions are presented in Table 6 below.

Table 6. Descriptive data on Problems with online exams

No	Items	Mean	S.D
25	I have problems with the listening sections due to several poor Internet connections.	4.37	.619
26	I have problems with the writing sections due to some technical issues.	4.11	.682
27	Reading via a screen reduces my concentration.	3.10	1.108
28	I have pressure sitting alone in online exams.	4.53	.520

Table 6 presents several problems that the EFL may face when experiencing the English online assessment. It can be clear the students mainly have problems with listening and writing sections due to poor Internet connection and technical issues (M=4.37 and M=4.11). They highly acknowledged being under pressure when sitting alone in online exams with a mean score of 4.53.

Besides the four problems mentioned in Table 6, the open-ended question reveals some other problems such as being distracted from the surrounding sounds, being demotivated from language learning, or feeling unfair marks.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings of the first research question indicated that the students could adapt to the English online assessment currently employed at their university though their attitudes were not high level. The survey demonstrated that the students benefit from this online assessment. They reported that taking online exams helps them save time and money. In addition, they also believed that online assessment could improve their IT skills, and they became more concentrated. The study also demonstrates that the students expect to have more online assessments. The results are in line with the study of Dermo (2009) and Kundu and Bej (2021) who also uncovered several advantages of the online-based assessment. The study also supports the results of other researchers such as Hillier (2014), Ridgway et al., (2004), and Osuji (2012) who explored several advantages that online assessment brings to students. Importantly, the study focused on finding out EFL students of the English online assessment deployed at their university so the data found could be beneficial to their teachers of English as well. It could be seen that the attitudes towards the question types of the students are not high. They do not think that their English skills could be improved thanks to this new mode of assessment. Besides the good points that they could gain from online assessment, the students report several problems they may face when taking online exams. For instance, the assessment of listening and writing skills is found to be problematic. It can be explained that these problems arose due to technical issues or Internet connection. The results of the current study are in line with the findings of Kundu and Bej (2021) whose results identified the usefulness of online assessment that the students perceived.

It can be concluded that the students are aware of the transition of assessment and could well adapt to the online-based though they complained about several shortcomings that they faced when taking the English online exams. However, the current study only explored the perspective of the students so it could be further researched to identify their teachers or other stakeholders' perspectives to have a better understanding of the trend and improve the quality of online assessment for English courses as well as other courses in higher education.

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