ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Undergraduates' Perceptions of Online Assessment in Tertiary Education: A Case Study at Tra Vinh University, Vietnam

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to examine university students' perceptions of online assessment and the challenges they encountered when experiencing online tests or exams. The participants were 51 senior English majors at Tra Vinh University. The questionnaire was the only instrument in use. The findings reveal that the participants had positive attitudes towards online assessment because of easy accessibility and submission, the inclusion of a variety of tasks or questions, effectiveness in enhancing self-learning, immediate feedback, as well as the confidentiality of the test materials and results. In terms of the obstacles, the students encountered a great deal of difficulties including weak Internet signals, fatigue due to long hours of looking at the computer's screen, discomfort when being asked to turn on the camera, distractions during online exams at home, lack of technology literacy and time pressure for each test section. Consequently, some recommendations are made for the administrators and undergraduates in Tra Vinh University in particular and neighboring universities in general to assist students in overcoming their challenges and achieving better results in their future online tests or exams.

1. INTRODUCTION

Assessment is a mandatory and regular task at all educational levels. According to Alsadoon (2017), assessment is a core element in the educational system to measure students' learning performance throughout their courses. Due to the significance of assessment, Roccor (2007) claims that the aim of assessment is to help instructors be aware of students' strengths and shortcomings. Subsequently, instructors can apply appropriate teaching approaches and methods in order to achieve teaching and learning goals.

It is evident that traditional assessment has been employed in most educational institutions all over the world. Gradually, with the rapid development of 4.0 digital technology, there has been a shift from traditional assessment to online assessment forms. This alternative form of assessment was mentioned by Brink and Lautenbach (2011), as cited in Nguyen and Nguyen (2022). Especially with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic worldwide, online assessment has become more prevalent as a result of its safety during the social distancing periods. Iskandar et al. (2021) confirm that traditional forms of classes and assessment have been substituted by online learning and testing through websites and online meeting platforms such as Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Team, Google Classroom, etc. At present, while the pandemic has been gradually controlled in many countries, online assessment is still maintained because of its convenience, flexibility and efficiency.

In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training has organized many workshops to provide educators with access to online assessments with the aim of dealing with the disadvantaged situation of education during the Covid-

19 pandemic. This form of assessment contributed to preventing the interruption of teaching, learning and assessment in local schools.

Given the guidance of the Ministry of Education and Training, Tra Vinh University has developed online test items banks for general subjects such as Philosophy, Psychology, Informatics, General English, etc. to assess students of all majors. In recent years, online assessment has also been encouraged in some specialized subjects with different task types including multiple choice questions, matching, filling in the blanks, true and false statements, and essay writing tasks. Online assessment has been used for some time; hence, the researchers aimed to conduct a survey to investigate students' satisfaction levels towards this form of assessment. As a result, the benefits and drawbacks of online assessments that students gain and face will be explored. Also, some recommendations for test item writers, the board of assessment, and teaching staff will be proposed to improve students' learning achievements with this form of assessment.

The study seeks to answer two research questions: (1) What are undergraduates' perceptions of the benefits of online assessments?; (2) What challenges do undergraduates face while undertaking online assessments?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Online assessment

Assessment is an essential task in the process of teaching and learning at all levels of education. According to Huba and Freed (2000), assessment in teaching and learning is a process of collecting instructional information and reviewing the instructional process by using various methods. Cronbach (1971), as cited in Boualem and Mohamed (2021), emphasizes that assessment is a process of measuring someone's knowledge, comprehension, ability, and skills. However, Yambi (2018) affirms that assessment is a process involving four components: (1) measuring students' improvement over time; (2) motivating students to study; (3) evaluating teaching methods; and (4) ranking students' ability. Among those authors, Yambi introduces the most grounded standpoint towards assessment in teaching and learning.

Regarding types of assessments, Dixon and Worrell (2016) mention formative and summative assessment forms. The former is to monitor students' progress, and the latter focuses on evaluating students by using a certain rubric or criteria. Rosa (2018) clarifies these two forms of assessment. For this author, formative assessment takes place during the learning process to guide the progress of each student and help educators to adjust the curriculum. In addition, this type of assessment allows students to receive feedback for self-recovering after the test. By comparison, summative assessment is held in the middle or end of the program and used for evaluation and classification. Rosa mentions one more form called diagnostic assessment, which aims at identifying learners' strengths and weaknesses. More importantly, this initial assessment also aids teachers in designing appropriate courses for learners. Mulia (2019) also agrees that formative and summative assessments are the most prevalent modes. Besides, he introduces two others: informal and formal assessments. Informal assessment tests students' knowledge and skills without recording results and making fixed judgments while formal assessment is a grading system-based evaluation to monitor students' skills and knowledge.

It can be concluded that different authors have different classifications of assessments. However, summative and formative assessments are shared by the above authors as popular forms of assessment in teaching and learning. These two genres of assessment can be conducted in the forms of conventional assessment (paper-based) or online assessment (internet-based).

With the integration of the 4.0 technological era, online assessment has been embraced widely in many institutions at all levels. This concept has attracted numerous authors who give different viewpoints. Refik (2003) considers online assessment as a method to assess students' learning performance in an online environment. Tests are handled by computer programs and feedback is given by teachers to help students make progress. Similarly, Iskandar et al. (2021) indicate that online assessment is an effective way of assessing the students' performance in an online environment. It can also be considered as a tool for measuring the students' academic achievement and progress throughout their learning process. Weleschuk et al. (2019) supplement that these assessments can be completely online (such as online exams) or just require online submission (such as essays or projects) for a longer duration without the observation of proctors.

Even though online assessment has been gradually replacing paper-based assessment, this new form also holds both benefits and drawbacks which are mentioned in the next section.

2.2. Advantages and disadvantages of online assessment

It can be undeniable that online assessment brings about advantages. Özden (2004) and Baleni (2015) agree that most surveyed students preferred receiving scores and feedback immediately when taking online exams since they recognized their competence in order to improve their learning achievements. Also, delivering online tests can save more time and money than paper tests. Sharing the same ideas, Alsadoon (2017) affirms that online assessment would benefit students, educators and educational institutions compared to the traditional paper-based assessment regarding immediate feedback, unbiased grading and enhancing the habit of self-study. In addition, Fitriyah and Jannah (2021) figure out some advantages that teachers and students could gain in terms of enhancing the flexibility of assessment, building awareness of preparing online language assessment, exploring students' autonomous learning abilities, improving language assessment knowledge and reducing students' anxiety when taking English tests. Moreover, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) claim that online exams help students save time, money, improve their IT skills and become more concentrated.

Despite its numerous benefits, online assessment has some drawbacks that might hinder its application. Rowe (2004) discovers three major issues derived from online assessment: (1) knowing test answer keys in advance if all students don't take the exam at the same time, (2) retaking the assessment many times until students are satisfied with their answers and (3) illegal help during the assessment by exchanging emails or hiring someone to take the exam. Rastgoo et al. (2010, as cited in Alsadoon, 2017) state that online-assessment is time-consuming in preparing tests, requires technology, and undermines control of tests. Khan and Khan (2019) underline several issues of online assessment including students' feeling of not being well prepared when changing to this new form; concerns regarding students' technological competence since they usually use electronic devices for social networking instead of educational purposes; grading and assessment feedback due to reduced interaction with the teachers; assessment layout, cheating and disciplines. According to Nguyen and Nguyen (2022), some students think their English skills, especially listening and writing skills, couldn't be improved via this new form of assessment due to technical issues or internet connection.

2.3. Undergraduates' perceptions and difficulties related to online assessment

Students' perceptions and difficulties related to online assessment have been researched by various authors. Many studies have proved that undergraduates are in favor of online assessment. Alsadoon (2017) reveals that students have positive attitudes towards e-assessment thanks to immediate feedback, unbiased grading, enhanced self-learning, not requiring advanced technical skills and not facilitating cheating. Howe (2020) indicates that students are familiar with the online learning management system. The surveyed students highlighted a number of advantages when using Col-Campus including downloading study materials, doing online assignments, checking their results, saving their money when using online books and getting their grades on tests quickly. However, they complained about weak signals of school wi-fi, failure to log in to the system in peak times and the authenticity of marking. Fitriyah and Jannah (2021) discover some positive effects of online assessment including increasing the flexibility of assessment, building teachers and students' awareness of preparing for evaluations, improving language assessment knowledge, and enhancing students' autonomous learning. However, there are some negative effects of online assessment such as complex evaluation administration, reduced teachers-students interaction, and students' anxiety in English tests. Similarly, Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) indicate that students are in favor of the online assessment form. They underline some advantages of online assessment such as being appropriate for English courses, being more secure than paper-based assessments, making students more confident, helping students improve IT skills, being time-saving and economical, and being fairer than paper-based exams. On the other hand, they mention some obstacles with online exams such as poor Internet connection, technical issues and reduced concentration due to looking at the screen for too long.

Meanwhile, some other studies reveal that students have not widely accepted this new form of assessment in education. Particularly, Hussain et al. (2020) found out that the examined students with higher GPAs became less satisfied with the online assessment form and the pass or fail option. They mentioned some issues related to the online assessment such as high possibility of cheating without being caught, anxiety and discomfort during online exams with the camera switched on, lack of familiarity to this form of assessment and lack of fairness between competent

and less competent students with similar grades. Ayyoub and Jabali (2021) also found out that the students in their study did not have a favorable attitude towards online assessment. They reported some difficulties when experiencing e-assessment such as the lack of adequate infrastructure for online assessment, poor internet connection, and lack of academic honesty. Moreover, Maryansyah and Danim (2023) indicate that students have a negative attitude towards online assessment due to their unsatisfactory experiences. The students reported that they faced many difficulties such as lack of academic honesty, lack of feedback, work overload, connectivity issues, and increased stress which led to a loss of interest in their studies.

The studies above have proven that students gain certain benefits as well as encounter some obstacles with this new form of assessment. Therefore, they have varied attitudes towards the implementation of online assessment. This present study continues to explore more opinions from students at Tra Vinh University, where online assessment has been applied in recent years in order to improve the online assessment system, thereby promoting the quality of teaching and learning.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The participants involved in the current study were 51 senior English majors at Tra Vinh university. The reason for choosing these participants to complete the questionnaire is that they have experienced online assessments in some subjects such as Philosophy, Psychology, Informatics, English Grammar, etc. Therefore, they have recognized some benefits and challenges when using this form of assessment.

To answer the research questions of the current study, the researchers employed a questionnaire. It focuses on the participants' perceptions of the benefits and their challenges encountered when experiencing online assessment. In the questionnaire, 23 items were designed by using a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The questionnaire was adapted from Iskandar et al. (2021) who mentions some benefits and obstacles related to online assessment.

To collect the data for the study, the researchers designed and piloted the questionnaire with a small group of 10 English majors to check if it was clear enough to respondents. The data collected from the questionnaire was analyzed with the software SPSS version 25 (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences).

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Results

4.1.1. The reliability of the questionnaire

Table 1. Reliability of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.918	23

A sample of 51 students completed the questionnaires. All the data collected from the questionnaires were computed to check the frequency and the internal reliability coefficient. The results showed that the questionnaire used in this research study was reliable with high significant Cronbach Alpha's coefficient of .918 for 23 statements in total.

4.1.2. Students' perceptions of benefits of online assessment

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of benefits of online assessment

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Online assessment gives me immediate feedback about my performance.	3.85	.72
The technology used in online assessments is reliable.	3.77	.67
Online assessment is easy for me to access and submit.	3.94	.80
Online assessment does not require advanced technical skills from students.	3.73	.74

Online examinations reduce stress and exam anxiety.	3.56	.94
Online assessment provides unbiased grading.	3.52	.85
Online assessment does not facilitate cheating and plagiarism.	3.46	.87
Online assessment promotes the use of a variety of tasks/questions.	3.90	.66
Online assessment enhances self-learning.	3.89	.81
It is easy for students to correct their work when doing the tests or exams.	3.65	.86
Randomized questions from a bank means that sometimes students get easier questions.	3.63	.84
Test materials and results of online exams are more secure than traditional methods.	3.79	.85
It is possible for students to monitor their academic progress.	3.67	.76
Overall mean	3.71	.56

By calculating the descriptive statistics for all the items related to benefits, the data shown in Table 2 indicate that most participants believed that online assessment is easy to access and submit with the highest mean score (M = 3.94, SD = 0.80). It is evident that this form of assessment facilitated the students' testing process. Next, the participants affirmed that online assessment promotes applying a variety of tasks/questions (M = 3.90, SD = 0.66). This can stimulate test takers because they can experience diverse activities. The two other outstanding benefits are that online assessment enhances self-learning (M = 3.89, SD = 0.81) and online assessment gives me immediate feedback about my performance (M = 3.85, SD = 0.72). There is no doubt that receiving instant results can help students recognize their mistakes right after the exams. As a consequence, they can have an appropriate study plan to overcome their weaknesses and have better results in further tests or exams. Moreover, the participants also agreed that test materials and results of online exams are more secure than traditional methods (M = 3.79, SD = 0.85). Clearly, all exam contents are stored in an online exam system which is highly secure, which ensures fairness for all test takers. In addition, the students received their exam results privately, so they were not under the pressure of getting undesirable marks compared to others. The overall mean score of the benefits is (M = 3.71, SD = 0.56), which is rather high, so it can be concluded that the participants had positive attitudes towards online assessment.

4.1.3. Students' difficulties when undertaking online assessment

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of difficulties related to online assessment

Statements	Mean	Std. Deviation
Students lack physical space or proper facilities.	3.79	.67
Weak Internet signals can affect students' exam results.	4.21	.72
Students are distracted when taking online exams at home.	3.98	.70
Students feel uncomfortable when being asked to turn on the camera.	4.00	.82
Students face technological issues.	3.83	.76
Students feel isolated and not supported.	3.60	.85
Seeing the computer's screen for many hours makes students tired.	4.06	.73
It's impossible for students to take notes or highlight their exam questions or reading passages.	3.71	.80
Time distribution for each section causes pressure for students.	3.83	.76
Overall mean	3.89	.49

In addition to some benefits the students gained with online assessment, they also faced some challenges when experiencing online assessment. The data illustrated in Table 3 show that the overall mean score of their difficulties is also rather high (M = 3.89, SD = 0.49).

In particular, the most outstanding difficulty is that weak Internet signals can affect students' exam results (M = 4.21, SD = 0.72). This interrupted their testing process and influenced their psychology. Students may feel nervous if they can not complete the test in time. Seeing the computer's screen for many hours makes students tired is the next obstacle related to online testing (M = 4.06, SD = 0.73). This is completely true for some subjects with long texts.

In addition to the problems above, students also claimed that they felt uncomfortable when being asked to switch on the camera and they were distracted when taking online exams at home (M = 4.00 and M = 3.98 respectively). It is understandable that being observed when taking online exams at home makes them feel unpleasant. Moreover, they can be easily neglected by some external factors such as noise, weather, surrounding people, etc. The last two difficulties that the students faced are related to poor technology literacy and pressure from time distribution for each section with M = 3.83 each. It is evident that students with poor technology skills may encounter problems while setting up and signing up the software for online assessment. Besides, some less competent students felt stressed and lost attention when they kept looking at the time on the screen.

4.1.4. Benefits and challenges in comparison

Table 4. The benefits and challenges related to online assessment in comparison

Total mean		Mean	Std. Deviation
Mean	Benefits	3.71	.56
	Challenges	3.89	.49

Table 5. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Mean	Equal variances assumed	.749	.389	-1.727	102	.087	-.17735	.10271	-.38108	.02637
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.727	100.399	.087	-.17735	.10271	-.38111	.02641

The data in Table 4 reveals that the overall mean score for benefits is (M = 3.71, SD = 0.56) while the overall mean score for challenges is (M = 3.89, SD = 0.49). Then, an independent-sample t-test (Table 5) was conducted to compare the benefits and challenges related to online assessment. The finding in Table 5 proves that there is a statistically insignificant difference in the mean scores for benefits (M = 3.71, SD = 0.56) and challenges (M = 3.89, SD = 0.49); t(102) = -1.727, p = 0.087. These results show that the learners gained benefits and faced challenges related to online assessment at equal levels.

4.2. Discussion

From the findings above, it can be concluded that the students had positive attitudes towards online assessment. In particular, most participants believed that online assessment gave students immediate feedback about their performance. This finding is in accordance with the studies conducted by Alsadoon (2017), Baleni (2015), Baleni (2015), Iskandar et al. (2021), Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) and Özden (2004). Furthermore, the participants admitted that online assessment enhanced self-learning. This factor was also found by Alsadoon (2017) and Fitriyah and Jannah (2021). Moreover, it facilitated the students to access the online testing system since it did not require students'

advanced technical skills. The finding of this study is aligned with that found by Alsadoon (2017). In addition to those benefits, the advantages such as easy accessibility and submission, inclusion of a variety of tasks or questions, and the confidentiality of the test materials and results are discovered in this study. In comparison, Alsadoon (2017) found out other advantages including unbiased grading and not facilitating cheating while Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) explored some positive effects of online assessment including saving time and money due to doing the exams at home, enhancing concentration, and ensuring greater fairness than the traditional assessment. By comparison, Howe (2020) indicates that students are familiar with the online assessment system. They gained some benefits when using the e-assessment such as downloading study materials, dealing with online assignments, checking their results quickly and saving money by getting online books.

In terms of difficulties, it was revealed that the participants encountered problems related to technical skills and Internet connection. This common issue was investigated by Ayyoub and Jabali (2021), Howe (2020), Iskandar et al. (2021), Khan (2019), Nguyen and Nguyen (2022), Maryansyah and Danim (2023) and Rastgoo et al. (2010). In addition, Fitriyah and Jannah (2021) present other issues including reducing teacher-student interaction, and causing students' anxiety in English tests. Another challenge is related to tiredness due to looking at the screen for many hours. This finding is aligned with the study conducted by Nguyen and Nguyen (2022) who also found that students lost their concentration as a result of looking at the screen for too long. Besides, the learners in this study faced some other obstacles such as discomfort when being asked to turn on the camera, distraction when taking online exams at home, and time pressure for each section. Similarly, Hussain et al. (2020) also discover that students feel worried and uncomfortable when taking exams in front of the camera. Moreover, they also reveal that some students are not familiar with this new form of assessment. Some competent students felt unfair when they received similar grades as less competent students. Ayyoub and Jabali (2021) and Maryansyah and Danim (2023) also mentioned the issue of academic dishonesty when taking online exams.

5. CONCLUSION

This present study aims to investigate students' benefits and difficulties when undertaking online assessment. The results show that the participants gained some benefits such as easy accessibility and submission, inclusion of a variety of tasks or questions, enhanced self-learning, immediate feedback, confidentiality of the test materials and results. However, they also encountered a number of difficulties including weak Internet Signals, tiredness due to looking at the computer's screen for many hours, discomfort when being asked to turn on the camera, distractions when taking online exams at home, poor technology literacy and time distribution pressure for each section.

Based on the findings above, the researchers propose some suggestions for the school administrators and students. In addition, these recommendations can be considered a significant reference for neighboring universities with similar backgrounds in terms of geographical locations, foundation, and the duration of online assessment implementation.

As for school administrators, they should install a reliable Internet system to ensure that it can effectively support test-takers. In addition, regular maintenance of facilities such as computers, headphones, computer mice, and keyboards should be implemented so that students are not interrupted while taking online tests or exams. Consequently, they can concentrate on their tests or exams and achieve better results.

Concerning students, they should read the instructions for online assessment carefully to avoid issues when signing up the system, taking and submitting the tests or exams. In case students lack technical skills, they can get assistance from teachers or friends to receive detailed guidance. Another suggestion is that students should register for some online courses to get experience and be familiar with the online testing systems. Besides, they should not pay too much attention to the timer on the screen. Instead, they had better concentrate on doing the tests to reduce the pressure in the exam rooms. Most importantly, those who take exams at home should prepare a quiet room to avoid distracting factors and check the wifi signals before the online exams.

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