

EFL Learners' Perspective towards Online Assessments during COVID-19 Outbreak

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Abstract

As a result of the advent of the COVID-19 outbreak, online assessments are being implemented in universities and schools worldwide. Nevertheless, regardless of the extensive use of online assessments, many researchers have proposed several barriers to the effective application of this form of examination in different language learning contexts. A combined qualitative and quantitative methodological approach was used to investigate 154 Iranian English language learners' opinions of the relative benefits of online examinations in terms of pedagogy, validity, reliability, affective factors, practicality, and security during the COVID-19 pandemic. To this end, an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were employed. This study identified online assessment as having significant benefits over traditional, paper-based examinations, comprising accessibility, using cutting-edge technology, providing immediate feedback, automated grading, creating a question bank, and long-term efficiency in terms of time, effort, and costs. Nevertheless, many challenges have been identified by students while successfully implementing online exams regarding validity and reliability, emotional and security issues.

Keywords: Online Assessments; Students' Perception; COVID-19; English Language Teaching

1. Introduction

Since late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has affected the whole globe as a worldwide concern and threatened people's health and life. In response to this high-risk challenge and to minimize the adverse influence of the pandemic, most universities and schools across the world were shut down and started conducting online classes and e-learning. Neither the teachers nor the students were prepared for such a sweeping change as this worldwide shift from face-to-face education to entirely online occurred when there was no previous awareness and guidelines. Furthermore, using different internet-based resources, teachers and students were confronted with many new challenges. To illustrate the importance of educational technology in facilitating the transition from face-to-face to online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, Turnbull et al. (2021) outlined five barriers to online education that higher education institutions faced: integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning

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tools, access to technology, online literacy of teachers and students, academic dishonesty, and privacy and confidentiality. In addition, this extensive literature review has revealed many successful practices for the effective implementation of online education, such as traditional face-to-face courses. One of the challenges lies in the assessment interface, which has attracted a lot of scholarly interest in the field of assessment and education systems (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). It affects learners' understanding of the subject matter and their propensity to improve (Mohammadkhah et al., 2022). Additionally, instructor perception has a significant impact on the teaching process, especially in EFL environments.

Due to the emergence of this pandemic, online assessment experienced substantial growth, getting adjusted universally among universities and schools. Online exams have been considered a proper means of assessment when combined with the traditional form. Nevertheless, employed as the sole mode of evaluation, online assessments have been revealed to be more favorable to learners.

Furthermore, over the past decades, there has been a significant increase in the use of digital technology in different EFL (English as a foreign language) / ESL (English as a second language) learning settings (Hafner & Miller, 2011; Mompean, 2010; Ros et al., 2010; Wu et al., 2010). Nonetheless, regardless of the extensive application of technology in different language learning settings, some barriers have been proposed to the efficient implementation of technology (Burke, 2000; Egbert et al., 2002; Hedayati & Marandi, 2014; Jahanban-Isfahan et al., 2017; Marandi, 2010).

Meyen et al. (2002) suggest that different valuations can be conducted by digital equipment, and online examination is one of them. Online examination has become a recent issue concerning its progress in assessing students' learning (Sebastianelli & Tamimi, 2011). It is an efficient technique for assessing students' educational achievement and progress. Additionally, researchers have used this mode of assessment for gathering data. Online assessment has been widely utilized by universities and schools since it offers more trusting outcomes by using different question modes such as audio, video, text, ... (Daramola et al., 2017). Online assessments are primarily helpful for large classes, facilitating planning and conducting tests. Furthermore, it encompasses grading and informing of the results, saving the outcomes, and using statistics (Osuji, 2012; Farzin & Dahlan, 2016).

In addition, they establish a completely electronic procedure that enhances the validity of the test by demanding a deeper level of understanding through applying various forms of questions. Online assessments also improve the authenticity of grading and provide immediate feedback. Although online assessment is opted, all in all, learners' views on their usage are not explored sufficiently. Thus, the present study set out to examine the perception of EFL students concerning online assessments. This study should, therefore, be of value to teachers wishing to design and implement online assessments properly.

2. Review of Literature

Testing has been considered as an essential aspect of the learning process that has an influential role in enhancing the quality of the education practice (e.g., Ahmadi et al., 2022; Fan & Jin, 2013; Sharma, 2020). Likewise, by providing immediate feedback on students' progress, it identifies the extent to which the curriculum objectives have been attained. (Samir

& Tabatabaee-Yazdi, 2020). Indeed, the goal of evaluation practices is to identify whether the real learning outcomes align with the intended educational purposes.

Regardless of the extensive use of online assessment in various contexts for many years, several problems have been reported by many researchers. As a matter of fact, different aspects of the testing process have been affected dramatically due to the fast shift from traditional paper-based exams to fully online assessments. Concerning this issue, various parts of online assessment, including the absence of face-to-face communication with the teachers, inadequacy of digital literacy, and lack of efficient interaction and feedback mechanisms, have been addressed in many studies (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Kanaan et al., 2013; Masa'deh et al., 2013; Tarhini et al., 2013). Understanding what problems the students confronted and how they managed to cope with them are among the most critical aspects of an online assessment. Some of the studies carried out to identify students' roles in online assessment are presented in the following part.

Previous inquiries on exploring students' views towards online assessment have presented several uncertainties. Nonetheless, most of these studies were done before the pandemic outbreak, and they concentrated more on students' past experiences with online tests. Therefore, the results of these studies should be applied cautiously. To investigate university students' attitudes toward online assessments, a prior work was carried out by Da'asin et al. (2016). The results demonstrated that the students held positive perceptions toward these tests; although, it was found that students experience more anxiety during online tests, and they can cheat much easier in comparison to traditional tests.

By carrying out an electronic questionnaire, Alsadoon (2017) examined students' views regarding online assessment at Saudi Electronic University in Saudi Arabia. An online survey consisting of 15 questions was conducted on 80 students attending the aforementioned university. The survey was carried out during the academic year 2015–2016. According to the results, the students perceived online tests as positive means of evaluation. Furthermore, it was revealed that the learning standards and evaluation procedures could be enhanced, provided online assessment holds a fair position. Moreover, through online exams, students' technical skills can be improved and test burdens reduced.

In another study, Jamiludin et al. (2017) explored the attitude of Indonesian high school students toward traditional and electronic assessments in Kendari, Indonesia. Interviews were conducted, and surveys comprising 20 questions were given to 34 learners. Interestingly, the results revealed that, because of their easier comprehension, traditional exams were preferred by the students. Besides, it was reported that students considered electronic tests beneficial as enhancing their technological skills, saving their time, and hindering cheating. However, it was concluded that, because of long periods of time spent watching monitors, electronic tests are harmful to students' health.

Similarly, Alruwais et al. (2018) investigated the students' views toward computer-based testing. The questionnaire, chosen from the Ladoke Akintola University of Technology in Nigeria, was given to 500 students, with a return of 400 students from the entire provided questionnaires. The study demonstrated that learners have a positive attitude toward online exams. This is because it acts as a reliable scoring system and allows effective editing of

answers. Furthermore, it was found that students do not experience any trouble logging in or out of the online exam.

In the same vein, Forrester (2020) investigated university students' views toward online assessment, the problems they faced, and the possible solutions they proposed. The findings of the survey demonstrated that the learners were unsure regarding the new online mode of discussion, while teachers had a positive perception. It was suggested that some issues, including teachers' and students' feedback and pedagogical and integrity concerns, must be considered.

Moreover, at the start of COVID-19, the perception of students concerning online assessment was examined by Hussain et al. (2020). To this end, a combined qualitative and quantitative methodological approach comprising an electronic questionnaire and an open-ended writing reflection question was used. It was found that online assessment was preferred by students with lower GPAs. However, some helpful suggestions concerning implementing online oral tests are provided from students' responses to the free reflection question.

Another study was carried out by Khan et al. (2021) on 207 university students in two developing countries (India and Saudi Arabia) to explore their views on electronic tests. Employing a quantitative approach, the responses were recorded through online questionnaires. The results revealed that students identified different benefits of online exams in comparison with traditional paper-based exams, in terms of significant issues of reliability in scoring and long-term efficiency regarding time, effort, and cost. The study also highlighted impartiality, authenticity, and security being the main challenges in meeting the effective application of online exams.

Slack and Priestley (2022), employing a mixed-methodological approach, using a quantitative survey and 10 focus groups, conducted a study to explore the influence of online learning and assessment on undergraduate students' well-being during COVID-19. The results emphasized that whereas some students considered online learning and assessment as more effortful, other students found online learning and assessment more flexible than traditional testing methods. Moreover, no direct relationship was identified between online assessment and students' well-being. In addition, the findings propose that modern online assessment techniques, similar to their traditional counterparts, are not necessarily yielding a comprehensive resolution to the prevailing issues of student assessment.

Employing a qualitative interview method, Zhang and Wu (2022) surveyed a group of 14 English language students at a public comprehensive university in a coastal city in southern China to explore their views of online language learning, emphasizing the problems they met. The absence of a learning environment, promoting learner independence, alterations of interaction patterns and adjustment to online assessment were suggested as the four main problems of distance assessment.

Okyar (2022) recently carried out a study with Turkish EFL students to determine students' attitudes toward virtual learning during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic. For data collection, the metaphor elicitation method, semi-structured telephone interviews, and an online focus group interview were employed. The findings revealed that though most of the students perceived online learning negatively, there were some positive comments as shy students feel more comfortable during online learning. However, some challenges as practical

problems, health and concentration matters, absence of communication in the target language, low motivation, and feelings of anxiety, were reported by the students.

Similarly, Lee et al. (2022), adopting both qualitative and quantitative approaches, explored Chinese students' perceptions toward the efficiency of online assessment and the problems they encountered. An online survey was completed by 752 undergraduate and postgraduate students. Individual interviews were conducted with 43 undergraduate students. The findings showed that most students were dissatisfied with online assessments and technical problems were reported as the main problem the students faced. Furthermore, receiving timely and detailed feedback on their performance was considered crucial for learning by the students.

In spite of the fact that there are many studies on how online assessment is perceived by teachers (Abduh, 2021; Arif, 2020; Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021; Momeni, 2022; Yulianto & Mujtahin, 2021; Zhang et al., 2021) or university students, there is relatively little research into what high school students think. Furthermore, it appears that no study previously investigated Iranian high school students' perceptions of online assessment in the course of the COVID-19 outbreak. Moreover, little quality research has been conducted on Iranian EFL students' lived experiences concerning online assessment. The present study into online assessment during the COVID-19 pandemic offers insights into future research. Therefore, building on the above ground, the study addresses the following two research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of EFL learners concerning the effectiveness of online assessments in terms of pedagogy, validity, reliability, affective factors, practicality and security?
2. What are the crucial considerations required for the effective implementation of online assessments in high schools in Iran?

3. Method

3.1. Participants and Setting

One hundred fifty-four students took part in this study. All the participants were studying at the same high school in one of the northern cities of Iran. They were all female and ranged in age from 15 to 18. Participation in this study was voluntary.

3.2. Instrumentation

The instruments for this study were an electronic questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. On the basis of The Student Perceptions of e-Assessment Questionnaire (Dermo, 2009), an online questionnaire involving two main parts was developed. The first part required students to respond to several statements regarding their views of online exams, all expressed positively and grouped into six sets: pedagogy, validity, reliability, affective factors, practicality, and security. In the second part, students were requested to choose the essential considerations required for the effective application of online assessments. All the statements were designed to be rated by means of a five-point Likert scale, and the students evaluated the statements by choosing the responses among (1) strongly disagree, (2) disagree, (3) neutral, (4) agree, and (5) strongly agree. To analyze the reliability of the constructs, Cronbach's alpha was employed (0.931). All values were above 0.70, indicating a significant correlation between the statements (Sekaran, 2003). Each construct has

a coefficient alpha of more than 0.80 (Students' perceptions of online exams = 0.892 and Prerequisites of online exams = 0.914). This demonstrates that items of the scale have a strong internal consistency.

3.3. Procedures

The questionnaire, made through Google form, was sent to 251 students, with a return of 154 students from the entire sent questionnaires. For qualitative data, interviews with ten students in Persian (to prevent any possible language hindrances) were conducted through convenient sampling. In the interview part, students were required to reply to some open-ended questions regarding their views on online assessments and the advantages and disadvantages of such exams.

4. Results and Discussion

Participants reported different views regarding online assessments. Learners showed a positive attitude toward 12 statements of the questionnaire and a negative attitude toward the remaining 6 items (Table 1). A five-point Likert scale was used as the basis of the rating. In this scale, the neutral position is characterized by a mean score of 3. While the learners' positive perceptions are shown by a mean score of more than 3, a mean score of less than 3 reveals the negative attitude of learners toward online assessment.

Whereas the accessibility of online exams was considered the most beneficial characteristic of these tests (mean = 3.69), the reliability and validity of online exams were regarded as the less favorable aspect of online examinations (mean = 2.51).

Concerning participants' comments in interviews, it was demonstrated that all interviewees -except three- had positive perceptions toward online exams. They believed that online assessment is a modern technological means of testing that needs to be used extensively throughout the country. They also viewed online assessments as more comfortable than traditional paper-based exams because they can be implemented anywhere and anytime; hence, saving time, effort, and money. Only three interviewees were against online assessment because of problems such as computer literacy, technological issues, and online test anxiety.

As Table 1 demonstrates, results for the first research question on the EFL learners' perceptions concerning the effectiveness of online assessments during the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic indicate that these students had positive perceptions towards online exams (mean= 3.36). This positive perception found in this study might mean that most of the students at this school prefer to accept the implementation of online assessment, compared to traditional paper-based exams. Findings indicated that online assessments as having significant benefits over traditional, paper-based examinations, comprising accessibility, using cutting-edge technology, providing immediate feedback, automated grading, creating a question bank, and long-term efficiency in terms of time, effort, and costs. These results align with studies conducted by Tella and Bashorun (2012) and Da'asin (2016). However, some studies (Betlej, 2013; Khan & Khan, 2019) reported students' negative views towards conducting online assessments as students felt that online assessments deteriorated their educational performance. In addition, the results of these studies confirmed that fear of internet disconnection while taking online assessments would induce great anxiety among the students.

Table 1
Perception of Students towards Online Exams

Questionnaire items	SA	A	N	DA	SDA	Mean
	%	%	%	%	%	%
1. Pedagogy						
1.1. Immediate feedback in online exams helps learners to get a deeper understanding of the subject.	19.5	35.7	31.8	12.3	2.6	3.53
1.2. Using cutting-edge technology in online exams enables students to take a new learning approach, i.e., online learning.	22.1	34.4	23.4	16.2	3.9	3.55
1.3. Online exams facilitate a more adaptive learning approach than pen–paper-based ones.	5.9	18.8	27.9	31.2	16.2	2.67
2. Validity and Reliability						
2.1. Online exams are appropriate for any subject area.	9.7	15.6	20.1	37.7	16.9	2.64
2.2. Online exams are felicitous to test the learners' level of knowledge.	11.7	27.9	29.2	23.4	7.8	3.12
2.3. Online exams facilitate more authentic assessment than traditional methods through the integration of multimedia, simulations, etc.	11.7	34.4	26	17.5	10.4	3.19
2.4. Automated grading in the online examination system is more convenient and authentic than the standard grading method.	22.1	35.1	18.8	18.2	5.8	3.49
2.5. Online exams are more valid and reliable than pen–paper-based exams.	9.7	11.7	21.4	33.8	23.4	2.51
2.6. Online exam system offers speedy and accurate solutions within the desired time limit compared to pen–paper tests.	16.2	28.6	32.5	16.9	5.8	3.32
3. Affective Factors						
3.1. Online examinations reduce stress and exam anxiety.	14.9	27.3	10.4	26	21.4	2.88
3.2. Using online exams allows students to focus and concentrate more on the question.	11.7	22.7	13.6	27.9	22.7	2.75
3.3. Students feel more comfortable while appearing in an online exam than a pen–paper-based one.	16.9	35.7	11	23.4	13	3.20
4. Practicality						
4.1. Online exams are more efficient in terms of time, effort, and money spent.	20.8	33.1	22.7	18.8	4.6	3.47
4.2. Creating a question bank will act as a ready reckoner from an exam point of view.	13	31.2	50	3.7	2.1	3.49
4.3. Online exams are more accessible than pen–paper-based exams.	16.9	52.6	14.9	14.3	1.3	3.69

5. Security

5.1. Test materials and results of online exams are more secure than traditional methods.	14. 9	30.5	31.2	16.9	6.5	3.31
5.2. The technology used in online exams is sufficiently effective in dealing with cheating and plagiarism.	10. 4	20.1	29.9	26	13.6	2.88
5.3. Setting up an automated timer for the whole exam or per question means that online exams are more secure than pen–paper-based ones.	14. 3	29.9	26	20.1	9.7	3.19
Total						
3.36						

Note: SA: Strongly agree, A: Agree, N: Neutral, DA: Disagree, SDA: Strongly disagree

Pedagogy: The first three statements in the questionnaire asked students to express their views on the procedures of teaching. Students believed that getting immediate feedback on online tests assists them to learn the subject matter.

In this respect, in the interview, immediate feedback was considered as a chance to correct and learn from the mistakes by two students:

“Getting the results immediately after the online exam is very productive and can help improve my learning by reviewing mistakes. “

“I prefer online exams. Because I learn my score immediately after I take the exam online. I learn my incorrect answers and those questions I haven’t answered. We used to wait for a very long time to learn our exam scores. In the past, we couldn’t learn anything about the questions we answered incorrectly and the questions we skipped.”

Previous studies (Bayerlein, 2014; Debusse & Lawley, 2016; Maier, Wolf, & Randler, 2016; Worrell et al., 2016) have also demonstrated students’ positive opinions to immediate feedback in online exams as it assists them to enhance their learning and comprehension of the material compared to traditional paper exams.

Furthermore, through the cutting-edge technology employed in online tests, students can adapt easier to online learning than the traditional methods. These two statements have mean scores greater than 3, that confirms the results of Chin et al. (1990). In fact, the new generation of students tends to use modern technology compared to traditional methods. The flexibility of online exams to satisfy the various needs of students has been considered as an important characteristic of these tests. However, only 24.7% of participants believed virtual assessments promote a more flexible approach than traditional techniques. On the other hand, students may not be familiar with the concept of adaptive learning, and this may be one possible reason for the students’ negative view regarding this item.

Students’ positive attitude toward using cutting-edge technology in online exams is also reflected in one of the students’ opinions in the interview:

“In my opinion, online exams can be an appropriate substitute for traditional testing techniques because online exams are a modern technological technique of testing that should be used widely throughout the country. Therefore, it can be said that online assessments are preferable to traditional methods of testing in terms of time, cost, and energy.”

Validity and Reliability: As Table 1 reveals, online exams were thought invalid by the students (mean=2.64). Students considered online exams inappropriate for different subject areas.

Additionally, it was suggested that online exams could not be employed as an influential method for evaluating students' level of knowledge. This is in line with the findings of Daramola et al. (2017). One reason for this claim is that students who have well prepared for the exam are able to reply to any questions in any forms.

Likewise, online exams were shown to support more reliable evaluation than old systems of testing via the combined use of multimedia and simulations (mean= 3.19). This is along with the results of Kuikka et al. (2014). This study suggested that new technologies make online exams more engaging than traditional testing modes by enabling students to be accustomed to multimedia questions.

Moreover, once students were questioned whether they believed the accuracy of results could be improved through online exams, most of them held positive views. They thought automatic grading was more truthful than conventional marking (mean = 3.49). This finding is in line with the results of Baleni (2015), suggesting that students feel more confident when they become aware of their grades immediately after taking online tests.

Regarding the validity and reliability of online tests, most students perceived online exams as less valid and reliable than traditional paper-based exams (mean = 2.51). Nevertheless, students believed that online exams present immediate and trustful feedback.

The interview results were also consistent with these quantitative findings. For instance, one of the students concerning the validity of online exams stated:

"Sometimes, there is no consistency between the topics and questions in online exams. Moreover, the questions in online exams are much more difficult than in paper-based exams. Thus, what can be said about the validity of these exams?"

Furthermore, regarding the accuracy of results, another student revealed:

"I believe that online exams are objective, fair, and accurate when assessing students' performance because automatic marking is more accurate than the traditional paper-based marking."

Affective Factors: When students were asked if online tests decrease stress and anxiety, 47.4 % disagreed. To some extent, this is in line with the study conducted by Bernik and Jereb (2006) and Whitelock (2006).

Besides, students reported that in online exams, they could not concentrate comfortably on the questions (mean = 2.75).

However, students perceived online exams as more comfortable than old testing methods (mean=3.20), confirming the findings of Bernik and Jereb (2006).

These findings were also supported by the interview results. For example, three students regarding the affective factors related to online exams remarked:

"Indeed, I am very stressed before I take the online exam. I don't think I will be able to do without a paper and pencil. Furthermore, due to the home environment, I cannot focus on online exams, so it causes test anxiety for me."

“I feel stressed when taking exams online. I think that technical problems, disconnection from the internet, and power cuts in the time of online exams affect me negatively, so I cannot participate in online exams effectively.”

“Taking exams online makes me anxious. Online exams require efficiency in information technologies. Unfortunately, I cannot use the keyboard and communication skills efficiently. I spent some extra time writing the answers. So, I cannot often finish my exam on time. So, I think this will adversely affect my performance on these tests.”

Practicality: Concerning time, effort, and cost, online exams were considered preferable to traditional paper-based exams by the students (mean = 3.47). These results confirm the studies conducted by Dermo (2009) and Baleni (2015). Printing, marking, and staff workload can be reduced through the automatic process of online exams.

Creating a question bank is another significant benefit of online exams from students' points of view (mean = 3.49). Nonetheless, to reduce the possibility of cheating, teachers need to change test items frequently.

When asked about the convenience of online examinations, most students believed that online exams are more accessible than traditional paper-based tests (mean = 3.69). One reason for this superiority of online exams can be related to the fact that these exams can be conducted at any place and at any time, including during online lectures, with smartphones.

“In general, I am positive toward online exams. Online exams are more rapidly accessible to remote students than paper-based exams. I believe that using online exams is a good idea. Because online exams are more time-saving and economical than paper-based exams.”

“Online exams are more comfortable as they are available everywhere and at any time. This makes students avoid travel problems and, consequently, saves time, effort, and money.”

Security: Security has been considered as a critical characteristic of any test. The participants of the present research thought that the results and materials of online exams are more secure than traditional tests (means=3.31, 3.19). Setting up an automatic timer for the entire test or individual test items can enhance test security.

Besides, the students' responses revealed that cheating and plagiarism are not effectively dealt with in online assessments (mean = 2.88). The accessibility of various technologies makes it difficult to prevent cheating during online exams. Students are provided with many different ways to gain Internet access and have connections with others while taking online exams.

Students' comments in the interview further supported the results regarding the efficiency of the technology of online exams in dealing with cheating or plagiarism. For instance, one student declared that:

“I think that technology used in online exams isn't sufficiently effective. Because It is easier to cheat in online exams than in paper-based exams, students can open the book, search google, or ask someone else for the answer.”

Pre-requisites of an Online Assessment

Some considerations are further suggested by the present study that can be helpful in enhancing the application of online exams (Table 2). Students were requested to identify their views on the requirements of online exam procedures in high schools in Iran. To elicit students' opinions, a five-point scale ranging from "strongly disagree (1)" to "strongly agree (5)" was used. To grasp the results more easily, the two terms "strongly agree" and "agree" were combined to the collective response of "agree", and similarly, the two expressions "strongly disagree" and "disagree" constituted a collective response of "disagree". However, the "neutral" term was not changed.

Table 2

Considerations for the Effective Implementation of Online Exams

Considerations	SA 1 %	A 2 %	N 3 %	DA 4 %	SDA 5 %	Total (1+2) %	Mean %
1. Online Exam Design							
1.1. Maintaining an item bank including different sets of validated questions for adaptive testing.	20.8	36.4	38.3	2.4	2.1	57.2	3.71
1.2. Developing the different essential questioning techniques while conducting online exams.	19.5	43.5	22.7	11.7	2.6	63	3.66
1.3. Providing immediate, meaningful feedback.	13.6	42.9	30.5	8.4	4.6	56.5	3.55
2. Online Exam Security							
2.1. Maintaining confidentiality	21.4	47.4	20.1	5.5	5.5	68.8	3.71
2.2. Minimizing cheating	27.9	40.9	15.6	9.1	6.5	68.7	3.75
2.3. Authentication	18.8	42.2	24.7	9.7	4.6	61	3.61
3. Online Exam Purpose							
3.1. Evaluation of student learning progress and achievement during the ongoing lesson, unit, or course.	19.5	43.5	23.4	9.7	3.9	63	3.65
3.2. Linking online exams to intended learning outcomes.	14.3	46.1	25.3	9.1	5.2	60.4	3.55
3.3. Linking analysis of results to quality assurance criteria.	14.3	42.2	33.1	6.1	4.3	56.5	3.56
4. Institutional Support							
4.1. Integrating the online exam within the strategic plan.	13	32.5	44.2	7.2	3.1	45.5	3.45
4.2. Providing resources and facilitating procedures.	14.9	45.5	29.2	7.3	3.1	60.4	3.62
4.3. Providing support for teachers and students.	33.1	40.9	19.5	2.2	4.3	74	3.97

The second research question focused on identifying students' views on the requirements of online exam procedures in high schools in Iran. As Table 2 demonstrates, many challenges have been identified by students while successfully implementing online exams regarding validity and reliability, emotional and security issues.

Online Exam Design: 57.2 % of the students believed that to perform online exams effectively, having an item bank comprising various questions is essential for high schools. However, 38.3 % of the students had no specific idea concerning this item.

Additionally, 63 % of the participants agreed with developing different necessary questioning techniques in online exams, and 22.7% had no opinion. Yet, 12% of the students did not accept the idea of using different types of questions in online exams.

Moreover, more than half of the students (56.5 %) believed that presenting immediate feedback should be considered in designing online exams.

Online Exam Security: Concerning online exam confidentiality, 68.8% of the students believed that such exams should be kept confidential by the teachers. Whereas 11% of the participants disagreed with this statement, 20.1% were neutral.

Furthermore, 61% of the participants perceived authenticity as an essential aspect of online exams. 68.7 % of the students believed that students should not have any opportunity to cheat. Nevertheless, 15% of the participants got a negative position regarding authentication and cheating features.

Online Exam Purpose: 63% of the participants believed to perform online exams effectively, students' learning progress needs to be regularly assessed. Though 23.4% of the participants had no idea, the remaining 13.6 % thought that frequently evaluating students' learning achievement was unnecessary.

Besides, having an appropriate online assessment of students requires associating these exams with intended learning outcomes. In this survey, 60.4% of the students insisted that learning outcomes should be included in online exams, 25.3% were undecided, and 14.4% had unfavorable opinions.

In addition, 56.5% of the students believed to have an effective administering of online exams, analysis of outcomes needs to be connected to quality standards. However, only 11.4% of the participants disagreed with this statement, and 33.1% were unsure.

Institutional Support: Based on the findings, 45.5% of the participants thought that schools should integrate online exams with their long-term predetermined policies. Yet, 44.2% of the students were unsure, and 10.3% did not accept this concept.

The results, furthermore, demonstrated that 60.4 % of the participants believed that to attend the online exams successfully, students should be made aware of the required rules and procedures.

Moreover, students need to be supplied with the necessary resources. However, 29.2% of the participants remained neutral, and the rest, 10.4 %, held negative opinions regarding this aspect.

And finally, 74% of the participants had an opinion that efficient implementation of online exams requires teachers and students to be provided with appropriate assistance and support. Yet, 19.5% of the students had no clear opinion, and 6.5% disapproved it.

5. Conclusion

The present study aimed to investigate the perceptions of EFL learners concerning the efficiency of online assessments in the course of the COVID-19 outbreak. Furthermore, to support the effective implementation of online exams, the practicalities of online assessments

were explored. Study results indicated that students found online exams more advantageous to traditional methods of testing in terms of accessibility, using cutting-edge technology, providing immediate feedback, automated grading, creating a question bank, and long-term efficacy in terms of time, effort, and costs. The result of the study is in agreement with previous studies such as Richards-Babb et al. (2015), Chen et al. (2021), and Fitriyah and Jannah (2021). However, these studies were conducted to demonstrate the university students' views concerning online assessment, while the current study is carried out to investigate high school students' perceptions. The findings of the survey further revealed that the effective implementation of online exams is confronted with some challenges, such as validity and reliability, affective and security matters.

On the other hand, the result of the interview part of the study demonstrates more honest responses from students. They held that cheating in online exams is much easier than in paper-based exams; because students can open the book, search Google or ask someone else for the answer. Similar results were demonstrated in the work of Meccawy, Meccawy and Alsobhi (2021), in which they reported the problem of cheating and plagiarism. Furthermore, King and his colleagues (2009) stated that students cheat more easily in online exams. Besides, in the study by Cerimagic and Hasan (2019), it was reported that most learners cheated or made an effort to cheat during online exams. To enhance the effectiveness of online exams and prevent cheating, it is recommended that various types of questions be included in online exams. In addition, teachers should give students new and more demanding questions. Furthermore, evaluating learners' participation in other online activities is suggested. Assigning less time for students to complete the exam is another suggestion that teachers should take into account. Related to the interview result, students also pointed to the difficulties of online exams, such as inefficiency in information technologies, technical problems, disconnection from the internet, and power cuts during online exams. Therefore, appropriate solutions need to be found for technical problems and internet interruptions confronted during performing online assessments.

New directions for future works have been offered by the present study, as well. Further studies need to be carried out to examine different aspects of online exams. To develop a deeper understanding of the function of the various stakeholders involved in online exams, more research is needed to account for the assessment practices of both teachers and students. A future study using a large-scale survey might shed more light on multiple aspects of online exams.

The findings in this report are also subject to some limitations. First, it is unfortunate that the study included just a single public high school. Covering both public and private schools, and also institutions and universities, are suggested for future research. With a small sample of 154 students, caution must be taken, as the findings might not be transferable to new situations. Third, the lack of male students in the sample adds further caution regarding the generalizability of these findings. Besides, an issue which was ignored in this study was the exploration of how teachers perceive online exams. Thus, there is a need for future research to examine whether research with more participants, with male learners and also teachers, would provide different results.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors of this paper declare no conflict of interest relevant to the content of this paper.

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