



# Experiences, Perceptions, and Challenges of Indonesian EFL University Students with Online Assessment in the Digital Age

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**Abstract.** Following the global outbreak of COVID-19, educational institutions worldwide have rapidly switched to online learning. As a result, online evaluation and assessment have become the norm during this period. The main aim of this research is to investigate the experiences of Indonesian English as a foreign language (EFL) university student with online emergency learning and assessment, and to compare their perceptions of online assessment to face-to-face assessment. A self-designed questionnaire was used to collect data from a sample of 150 Indonesian EFL university students. The findings indicated that students encountered technical difficulties while submitting their exams and were dissatisfied with the lack of feedback from their lecturers. In addition, students expressed concerns about academic honesty, leading to a loss of interest in their studies and doubts about reliving this unsatisfactory experience. Therefore, the study suggests that online assessment should be given more attention in higher education in Indonesia, as this unprecedented experience has had a negative impact on students and left them dissatisfied with distance learning and apprehensive about their future educational experiences.

**Keywords:** Challenges · EFL University Students · Experiences · Online Assessment · Perceptions

## 1 Introduction

Following the unexpected emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, governments worldwide, including Indonesia, have implemented strict regulations that prohibit social gatherings and encourage self-isolation. To prevent the virus from spreading, many educational institutions have quickly transitioned from traditional, in-person learning to online learning and assessment. This health crisis has significantly accelerated the digital transformation of education globally, leading to changes in teaching styles, research processes, and collaborative relationships. While online education is not new, the COVID-19 pandemic has greatly accelerated its adoption in education. The internet has become a ubiquitous interface between students and teachers, prompting educational institutions to implement preventive measures such as remote or virtual assessment. This pandemic

has affected all aspects of society, transcending national and regional boundaries, generations, and social classes. It has also highlighted the importance of higher education in generating knowledge and promoting human well-being.

It is expected that the continuous emergence of new variants of COVID-19 will lead to strict lockdowns in the future, making it necessary to prepare, especially in the educational sector. Therefore, it is crucial to investigate students' views and experiences with online assessment to effectively deal with the unpredictable situation. The readiness to learn online, known as E-learning, as mandated by the government, is almost non-existent, according to Sakkir, Dollah, and Ahmad [1].

Therefore, this paper aims to examine how students perceive online emergency learning and online evaluation. It also aims to assess the usefulness and effectiveness of online assessment from a student perspective. Finally, it aims to investigate whether students are prepared to undergo a similar experience in the future. As a result, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the perceptions of Indonesian university students learning English as a foreign language regarding online assessment?
2. From a student perspective, how successful is online assessment?
3. To what degree are Indonesian university students studying English as a foreign language prepared for a fully online learning experience in the future?

There are various reasons why online assessment is becoming more prevalent. Despite the widespread use of online assessment, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia, there is a lack of research that explores students' perceptions of online assessment in education generally and the effectiveness of online assessment systems or platforms specifically. This pandemic has highlighted the negative aspects of e-assessment in education. Therefore, examining the experiences and perceptions of Indonesian university students studying English as a foreign language with regards to the effectiveness of online assessment will have valuable implications and help alleviate concerns surrounding this topic. Consequently, the findings of this research are significant because they will provide valuable insights into the areas of online assessment that require more attention due to their importance, as well as the areas of the systems that need improvement or correction to overcome potential challenges and achieve positive outcomes.

Since late 2019 to early 2020, the world has been in a state of emergency, and in-person education has suffered significant setbacks. This has been compensated for by online learning, but the sudden shift has faced numerous challenges. One of these challenges is the lack of preparation to make it the primary mode of learning, while the other is the inability to ensure fair online assessment. According to Fajri et al. [2] and Fitriani et al. [3], there is a highly controversial debate about the effectiveness and quality of online learning in Indonesian higher education, with researchers having different perspectives on the levels of validity and credibility of this unexpected new pedagogy. Similarly, Neuwirth et al. have pointed out that the real issue with e-learning is how faculty can maintain rigor, deliver quality education, and provide support for students to engage in meaningful and interactive educational activities in the context of a crisis such as the current pandemic [4].

The literature review in this research paper will be specifically related to the study objectives. This means that the main focus will be on online assessment, including its methods, significance, constraints, and possible solutions, as well as examining students' viewpoints on the subject.

After reviewing previous literature, it can be seen that the definition of assessment is not straightforward. Bachman [5] notes that due to its multifaceted interpretations and the various ways it has been used in language and educational testing, there is no consensus on what assessment technically means. Therefore, the concept of assessment varies from person to person and it is crucial to define it when writing or speaking about it. Suskie [6] defines assessment as the interpretation of information about student performance collected through various means or practices, while Benson and Brack [7] equate assessment with examinations, assignments, and grading to determine if students are eligible to pass a particular subject or part of it. Banta and Palomba [8] provide a more precise definition of assessment, stating that it is the systematic collection, review, and use of information about educational programs aimed at improving student learning and development. In relation to online assessment, Weleschuk et al. [9] define it as any process or action that assesses students' learning performance, provides feedback, or supports their learning in fully online credit courses.

Due to the diverse interpretations of assessment, it is important to differentiate between formative and summative assessment. Formative assessment is primarily focused on monitoring students' progress and learning process. Similarly, Eysink and Schildkamp [10] have defined formative assessment as a cyclical process that involves determining what, how much, and how well students are learning with respect to learning goals and expected outcomes. This process aims to provide personalized feedback and support to promote further learning. It is a pedagogical strategy that is more effective when the teacher, peers, and individual learner collaborate in the process.

Differentiating between formative and summative assessment is crucial since the former focuses on tracking students' progress and learning process, providing them with tailored formative feedback that helps them identify their strengths and weaknesses and target areas that require improvement. As Senel and Senel [11] have pointed out, feedback is especially essential in distance education since it ensures interaction between faculty members and students. On the other hand, the goal of summative assessment is to compare students' learning at the end of an instructional course to a benchmark. Griffin and Townsley [12] as highlighted the directing influence of summative evaluation, which drives important decisions such as passing a course, enrolling in a higher education institution, and receiving a diploma or certificate. Vero and Chukwuemeka [13] have also discussed the two types of assessments: summative, which grades students against a set of standards or criteria, and formative, which tracks their progress.

Consequently, the way assessments are carried out impacts students by directing their attention towards particular aspects of the course content and by determining how they should approach information [14]. Hence, assessment holds a crucial place in education, not only for accreditation purposes but also to facilitate learning [15].

Considering the differences between traditional and online assessment settings, it is necessary to develop new techniques to address the challenges of online assessment and

assess learning outcomes as accurately as possible. To achieve this, experts recommend the use of a range of assessment techniques that are suitable for online environments.

Palloff and Pratt [16] recommended the following methods for online assessment:

1. Integrating assessment into the course through regular communication and feedback to students.
2. Encouraging dynamic interaction among students through collaborative group work and discussions.
3. Adapting traditional assessment tools like essays, discussion questions, and projects to measure skill acquisition and problem-solving abilities.
4. Utilizing alternative forms of assessment such as performance-based assessments, authentic assessments, and e-portfolios.

Banta and Palomba have categorized assessment methods into two types: direct and indirect. Direct methods aim to assess what students have learned and include objective tests, where students select the correct answer, and performance measures, where they create their own content such as essays and comprehensive portfolios. Indirect methods, on the other hand, require students to reflect on their learning instead of demonstrating it, and examples of these include questionnaires and interviews.

Research on students' perceptions of online assessment is limited, and there are significant differences in how students perceive online assessment. Some students view online assessment favourably and support its use, while others do not. For example, Lee et al. [17] found that both students and instructors accept online assessment positively for its accessibility. Similarly, Maison et al. [18] have suggested that the future of e-assessment is promising as most students were enthusiastic about its adoption during the pandemic era. Additionally, Huda et al. [19] reported that learners generally view online assessment positively, but some students feel both comfortable and anxious about it. Alsalthi, et al. [20] found that students were generally in favour of online assessment, but their perspectives varied based on gender, college, and academic year.

According to Khan and Khan's [21] research conducted in the United Arab Emirates, the crucial factor that matters the most to students with regards to online assessment is a well-planned transition. The study highlighted that one of the key factors in the acceptance of online assessments is how the transition from traditional assessments is executed. Additionally, the study found that students highly value meaningful interactions with their instructors, as well as constructive and timely feedback. The research suggests that for online assessment to be more acceptable to students, instructors must ensure that their interactions with students remain personalized, active, and meaningful. These findings are consistent with the results of another study conducted by Cranfield et al. [22] in the UK, South Africa, and Hungary, which revealed that students preferred physical interaction and face-to-face delivery of information.

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented significant challenges in terms of online assessment, with one of the most serious being the lack of preparedness among teachers and students. Many teachers were not familiar with online assessment and did not have sufficient time to create effective online assessments as the pandemic caught them off guard [23]. Although institutions of higher education likely have contingency plans for the short term, many were not adequately prepared for the transition from in-person courses to online learning in the long term [24]. Faculty members were struggling to

redesign courses to fit the online modality that they may have never taught in before. Moreover, the issue of plagiarism and cheating is a major concern, given that many higher education institutions lack the necessary online and physical security to safeguard assessments [25]. Therefore, the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 may require compromises in assessing intended learning outcomes. Lastly, the pandemic has highlighted existing disparities among students. The lack of a national response to the public health crisis has widened the digital gap, exacerbating economic and structural inequalities in ICT access (such as the internet, electricity, and computers) among historically vulnerable populations, such as rural children, families of colour, students with disabilities, and students of refugee status.

Since the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent shift to online education and assessment, many researchers have sought to shed light on various aspects of this issue to provide a foundation for stakeholders to manage and address this new educational trend. According to Senel and Senel, their study on remote assessment found that quick assessment and feedback were inadequate for effective learning, and students reported that online test scores may not accurately reflect their academic abilities. Despite the availability of remote assessment, traditional exams were still preferred by students. Another study by Montenegro-Rueda et al. [26] revealed that online assessment was fraught with various challenges that adversely affected both students and teachers, including a lack of platforms designed specifically for online assessment that could facilitate academic dishonesty, connectivity issues, technical difficulties, and privacy concerns. Anasse and Rhandy [27] discovered that EFL teachers preferred paper-based assessments over online ones due to their lack of prior experience with online assessment and digital literacy. While many studies have defined assessment, examined online assessment techniques and practices, and explored the impact of online education on students and teachers, few have investigated online assessment from the perspective of students' experiences and perceptions. Since students play a crucial role in the learning process, it is important to consider their experiences with online assessment to improve the educational process.

## 2 Methods

The following section will provide a thorough description and analysis of the research methodology and design employed in this particular study, including details on the population, sample, and geographic regions involved. Additionally, the section will cover the data collection instrument and procedures for data analysis. The study utilized exploratory research design to investigate various aspects of online assessment in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically focusing on students' attitudes towards online assessment, its efficacy, and the difficulties encountered.

This research was focused on Indonesian EFL university students, specifically targeting second and third-year students from Muhammadiyah University of Bengkulu (UMB), Universitas Islam Negeri Fatmawati Soekarno Bengkulu (UINFAS), Universitas Bengkulu (UNIB), and Universitas Dehasen Bengkulu. The sample consisted of 150 participants, including both male and female students between the ages of 18 and 20. The research design used in this study was exploratory research, utilizing a questionnaire as the data collection instrument. The questionnaire was designed based on a

comprehensive review of the literature and was distributed online via various platforms such as *Gmail* and *WhatsApp*. Data collection was conducted in September 2021, using a purposive sampling method. The analysis of the results was generated automatically due to the nature of the online questionnaires, mainly using descriptive statistics.

The purpose of this section is to examine and make sense of the data gathered from the online survey questionnaire given to the group of 150 Indonesian EFL university students from various institutions. The analysis of the collected data is generally based on the research questions and survey questions of the study. Specifically, the quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire provides an overview of the participants' overall tendencies.

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### **The preparedness and opinions of students regarding online assessment (RQ1)**

*The preparedness of students to take part in remote assessment is being examined*

*Question: Were you prepared for online evaluation?*

To gain an understanding of students' perceptions of online assessment, it is important to consider their readiness and motivation towards this type of assessment. For this reason, a set of closed-ended questions were presented to the participants to assess their readiness to take online exams. The results indicated that 80% of the participants did not feel ready for online exams and had no intention to sit for them. On the other hand, 20% of the participants reported feeling ready for this type of assessment.

*Challenges related to internet connectivity when accessing exams online.*

*Question: Can you describe the level of difficulty or ease you encountered while attempting to connect to the internet for the purpose of accessing your exams?*

The level of ease or difficulty in accessing the internet plays a significant role in determining the success of online learning and evaluation, as it directly affects students' ability to access their exams remotely. The results, presented in Fig. 1, show that more than a third of the participants (35%) were uncertain or neutral about the ease or difficulty of accessing the internet for online exams. However, nearly half of the respondents stated that accessing their exams online was either easy (30%) or very easy (5%). In contrast, a smaller number reported that it was either difficult (20%) or very difficult (10%).

*The feedback provided by instructors on the online performance of students is the subject of analysis.*

*Question: Can you recall if your instructor has given you any feedback regarding your performance?*

To enhance students' performance, giving and receiving feedback is a common assessment approach. To investigate this, the participants were requested to rate on a five-point scale (1 = always, 2 = usually, 3 = often, 4 = sometimes, 5 = never) their experience in receiving feedback about their performance in online assessments. The data obtained (as shown in Fig. 1) indicated that 40.5% of the participants responded that they received feedback sometimes, 16% usually, 14% often, and 6% always. However, 23.5% of the respondents declared that they received no feedback.

*The way students view their experience with online assessment.*

*Question: Can you describe your experience with remote online assessment?*

The focus of this study was on students' perceptions of online assessment, and it was important to learn about their perspectives. According to the collected data, the majority of the participants (38.9%) regarded their experience with remote online assessment as average or insignificant, while some respondents (2.1%) did not make a decision. Moreover, some of the informants found this experience to be challenging (34.1%) or not helpful (9.7%), while others found it beneficial (17.2%). Overall, the number of participants who expressed dissatisfaction with the online assessment experience was almost the same as the number who considered the feedback insignificant.

## The efficacy of online assessment (RQ2)

### *Perception of Online Assessment Effectiveness*

*Question: Can you perceive online assessment as being equally effective as traditional assessment?*

The main focus of this study was to understand the effectiveness of online assessment as compared to traditional onsite evaluation, especially since students had only experienced the latter before the COVID-19 pandemic. To gain insight into this, students were asked a yes-no question about their perception of the effectiveness of online assessment. The results revealed that 75% of the respondents believed that online assessment is not effective when compared to traditional face-to-face assessment, while 25% thought that online assessment could be as effective as onsite assessment.

### *Ethics of taking exam*

*Question: Did you adhere to ethical principles during exams?*

In regards to challenges and issues related to assessment; students were asked if they followed ethical principles during exams. The collected survey data, illustrated in Fig. 2, demonstrated that most students (75.5%) reported adhering to exam-taking ethics, while 20.5% stated they only partially followed the ethics. However, a small number of participants (4%) admitted to not respecting exam-taking principles and resorting to cheating.

*The belief that online assessment offers equal opportunities compared to face-to-face assessment from the perspective of students.*

*Question: Can you say if you think that online assessment and traditional evaluation offer the same opportunities?*

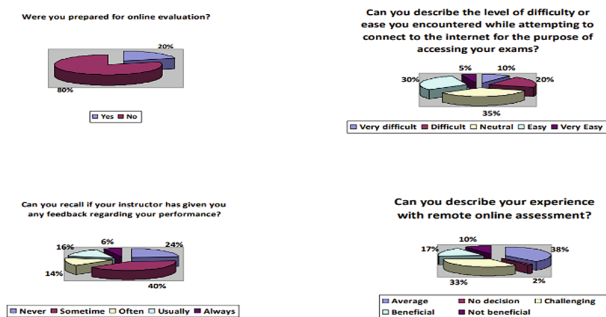


Fig. 1. .

The issue of inequality among test takers was a major concern in online assessment, and the study found that most students (70.6%) believed that online assessment did not provide equal opportunities compared to traditional assessment. Only 15.4% of the respondents believed it provided equal opportunities to some extent, while 7% were uncertain about the similarity between online and face-to-face assessment in terms of opportunities offered.

### **The preparedness of students for a fully online learning and assessment experience (RQ3)**

*Students' preparedness for a similar online assessment experience in the future.*

*Question: do you have readiness to enroll the same online experience in the future?*

Certainly, the success or failure of an online assessment experience depends on students' willingness to try something new or repeat a similar experience. This can also help to understand students' attitudes towards online assessment. As such, students were asked whether they would be willing to have a similar online assessment experience in the future. The findings showed that the majority of participants were either unsure (40.5%) or not willing (36.5%) to participate in such an experience again. However, some respondents expressed their readiness for the same online assessment experience in the future (23%).

*Preferred Methods of Learning and Assessment.*

*Question: What is your most preferred mode of learning?*

To understand how students view remote assessment, it is important to consider their learning preferences. As part of this study, students were asked to indicate their preferred learning mode. The results showed that the majority of respondents favored hybrid and traditional learning modes. Specifically, 54.1% of the participants chose the hybrid mode, while 43.9% preferred the traditional face-to-face mode. A small percentage of students (2%) chose online learning as their preferred mode.

### **Challenges, drawbacks, and advantages of online assessment**

#### ***Difficulties faced in online assessment***

The main aim of this research was to expose the difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL university students during their initial online assessment. According to the results of the survey, online assessment presented several obstacles to students, such as excessive workload, heightened stress, connectivity problems, and technical issues. Below are some examples of what the majority of students reported regarding the challenges of online assessment:

*"Problems and instructions were not communicated clearly with lecturers, creating difficulties for students"*

*"Insufficient time, technical issues, and poor internet connectivity"*

*"Managing time effectively"*

*"To submit their documents, students faced issues such as website blockage"*

*"Students experienced a significant level of stress"*



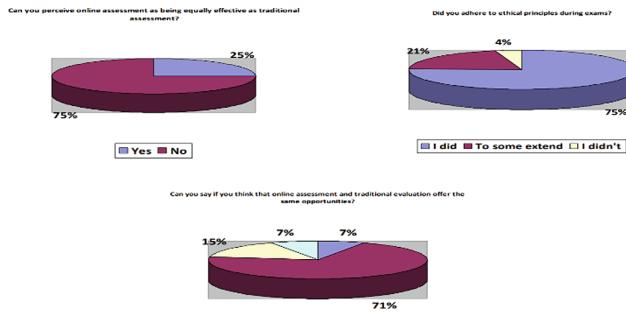


Fig. 2. .

*“Because of internet problems, I was unable to download certain exams immediately”*

### ***Disadvantages of online assessment***

This research not only examined the difficulties faced by students during online assessments, but also aimed to identify the drawbacks of this mode of evaluation. In addition to the challenges mentioned earlier, students expressed concerns about the downsides of online assessments, with academic dishonesty being the most commonly cited issue. Here are some comments provided by students regarding this matter:

*“It enables students to engage in academic dishonesty without being detected”*

*“Dishonesty in academics remains a significant issue in online assessment”*

*“Inequality: some students violate ethical principles when taking exams”*

*“Online assessment did not accurately reflect the students’ true abilities since many of them resorted to cheating to some degree”*

*“Frequent technical issues along with cheating result in significant disparities in grades”*

*“The educational institution was ill-prepared for this type of assessment”*

### ***Benefits of online assessments***

This study aimed to investigate whether students perceive any benefits of online assessment. While most participants did not see any advantages, some students believe that online assessments can accommodate different learning styles and needs. Some of the reported advantages are:

*“Flexibility and absence of interference from classmates”*

*“A student expressed that online assessment allows them to work comfortably and produce satisfactory results because they prefer studying alone in an environment without distractions or hassles”*

*“Online assessment fosters autonomous learning.”*

*“During online assessment, a student mentioned that they were able to listen to music while taking the exam”*

*“During online assessment, a student mentioned that they were able to listen to music while taking the exam”*

*“It allows students to receive feedback on their progress”*

This research aimed to investigate the experiences, perceptions, and difficulties encountered by Indonesian EFL students in online assessments. The previous data analysis section contains various figures that provide significant insights and interpretations of the results. The data collected from the sample is substantial enough to generate strong conclusions and observations that might apply to a broader population.

The study's results, represented in Fig. 1, indicate that students were not prepared for online assessment, which may be attributed to their lack of familiarity or experience with online learning. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, online assessment was not a choice but was forced upon students. The study's findings suggest that online assessment was perceived as insignificant, challenging, and unproductive. This perception was reinforced by the inconsistent feedback students received from their instructors, which further dampened their readiness for online assessment. Consequently, even though they had undergone online assessment, students expressed reluctance to repeat the experience in the future and preferred traditional assessment methods. Therefore, it is difficult for learning to occur in online environments when students lack confidence in the effectiveness of online assessment. These findings align with those of previous studies, such as Senel and Senel and Anasse and Rhandy, which also found that teachers have similar attitudes towards online assessment.

In relation to the second research question, interesting outcomes regarding the effectiveness of online assessment were obtained from the responses of the participants. The questionnaire results (Fig. 2) showed that the majority of participants believe that online assessment is not as effective as face-to-face assessment. The main reason for this is the unequal opportunities it provides for students' performance, as demonstrated by the results in Fig. 2. This inequality is caused by the negative aspects of online assessment such as cheating. The findings of this study are consistent with those of other researchers such as Khan & Khan and Fitriani et al.

The study's results regarding students' readiness for a fully online learning experience in the future (RQ 3), depicted in Fig. 3, indicate that the respondents were not keen on repeating the online assessment experience in the future. This decision was also evident in their preferred learning mode choices in their responses. Furthermore, students' feedback on the challenges and drawbacks of remote assessment, including work overload, increased stress, connectivity and technical problems, and academic dishonesty, highlights crucial points to consider. These challenges and drawbacks align with findings from previous studies, such as Chan et al. [24] who found that online learning

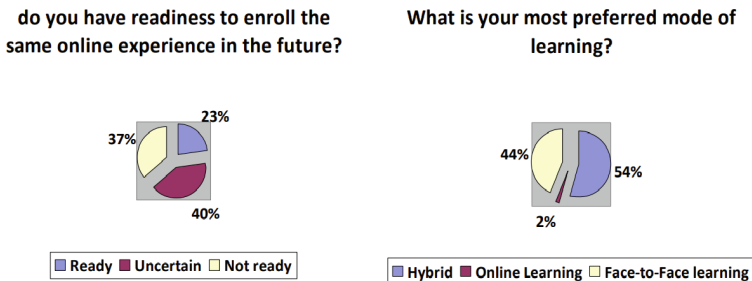


Fig. 3. .

presents various challenges for low- and middle-income country students who may lack internet access due to poverty, Benson and Brack, who noted that submission issues and online discussion forums were challenges for online assessment, and Tiong and Lee [17], who identified challenges related to mechanics of assessment and digital cheating prevention in online assessment.

Undoubtedly, every research study has its own set of limitations and constraints that need to be addressed. The present research study also had several limitations that had to be overcome. Firstly, the findings of this study cannot be widely applicable as they are specific to the context and situation in which the research was conducted. Secondly, the sample size of 150 Indonesian EFL university students may not be large enough to provide a more representative view on a larger scale, and the use of another sampling technique could produce better results. Thirdly, the methodology used in the study may have limitations due to the inherent nature of data collection tools, and students' perceptions and attitudes may change over time. Lastly, there is a lack of studies and references that examine online assessment from a student's point of view.

The results obtained from the quantitative study have led to several implications and recommendations for the integration of online assessment as well as future research. Firstly, policymakers, stakeholders, and decision-makers need to reconsider how they assess students online. Secondly, educational institutions should develop dedicated platforms for online assessments. Thirdly, teachers and students should be trained on how to use these platforms. Finally, teachers should provide clear instructions to students regarding any online assessment. In light of this, it is recommended that future research should focus on teachers' perspectives on online assessment, as well as investigating students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges on a larger scale. Lastly, it is suggested that further research is needed to assess the long-term effects of online assessments on knowledge retention.

## 4 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research study aimed to explore the experiences, perceptions, and challenges faced by Indonesian EFL students during online assessments. The findings reveal that students were not adequately prepared for online assessments, which resulted in negative perceptions of its effectiveness. Furthermore, the study indicates that online assessments can create unequal opportunities for students, leading to cheating and a preference for traditional assessment methods. The research study also highlights the challenges of online learning, including work overload, connectivity issues, academic dishonesty, and increased stress.

However, this research study is not widely applicable due to the specific context and sample size. Therefore, it is recommended that policymakers, educational institutions, teachers, and students rethink how they approach online assessments and develop dedicated platforms for it. Additionally, teachers and students should receive proper training on the use of these platforms, and teachers should provide clear instructions to students. Future research should focus on investigating teachers' perspectives on online assessments and students' experiences and challenges on a larger scale. Lastly, more research is needed to determine the long-term effects of online assessments on knowledge retention.

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