

Online Assessment in Times of COVID-19 Lockdown: Iranian EFL Teachers' Perceptions

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic revolutionized the world's status quo to transition from face-to-face into online E-learning. However, this unexpected transformation in teaching-learning approaches necessitates teachers to teach while frequently assessing students' performance through online assessment, which has been substantiated to expose teachers to an array of unanticipated challenges. To this end, the current study was a bid to unearth the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment and illustrate the challenges encountered through adopting a sequential mixed-methods design. For the quantitative phase of the study, one hundred EFL teachers submitted responses to an online questionnaire constructed in Google Forms. The researcher recruited twelve teachers for the qualitative phase of the study from a pool of one hundred participants who completed questionnaires to participate in a semi-structured interview protocol. The findings from the descriptive statistics of the questionnaire revealed that Iranian EFL teachers had either a negative or a neutral attitude toward online assessment. In addition, the results of the interview offered more insight into the challenges that teachers encounter during online assessment. In this light, the three most frequent challenges were the high risk of students cheating and plagiarism, the issue of internet connectivity, and poor technological infrastructures. The findings of this study bear witness to the voices of a group of Iranian EFL teachers about their perceptions and challenges of online assessment during the COVID-19 epidemic. In the spirit of the findings, the recommendations and suggestions for further investigations are discussed.

Keywords: COVID-19 lockdown; Iranian EFL teachers; online assessment; perceptions

1. Introduction

Within the last few decades, a large array of inquiries have substantiated the burgeoning prevalence of digital technology integration in various English as a foreign language (EFL)/ English as a Second Language (ESL), learning landscapes (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021; Hafner & Miller, 2011; Mompean, 2010; Wu et al., 2010). Given the indispensable implementation of technology in many language instructional settings, various researchers have pinpointed significant challenges to technology's efficient application (Hedayati & Marandi, 2014; Jahanban-Isfahan et al., 2017; Marandi, 2010). This stage of technology integration in educational settings occurred along with the worldwide epidemic of

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COVID-19. The worldwide outbreak of COVID-19 has revolutionized the world's status quo, locking down numerous universities and schools, and posing enormous complexities to the world's educational systems (Carrillo & Flores, 2020; Liguori & Winkler, 2020; Turnbull et al., 2021; Wang et al., 2020), and laid the foundation for several transformations in organizational and social interactions (Murphy, 2020). In light of the reports disseminated by UNESCO referenced in Mohammadimehr (2020), the pandemic has impacted over 1.5 billion learners, and educational establishments have undergone substantial adjustments.

In consideration of the aforementioned concerns, students are exposed to a novel approach to assessing their capabilities during the crisis. Similarly, universities and teacher educators were required to respond swiftly to an unexpected and unwelcome crisis by transitioning from face-to-face testing to distant testing. As a consequence of this unanticipated crisis, instructors, students, and teacher education authorities and institutions all warranted to master how to accommodate online testing as a substitute manifestation of assessing students' knowledge. The precondition may demonstrate how institutions of teacher education and university educators encountered and withstood obstacles and possibilities to pursue their careers in such unexpected circumstances (Flores & Gago, 2020; Nasri et al., 2020; Quezada et al., 2020). The extant literature demonstrates that several investigations have been undertaken on various facets of the COVID-19 crisis. Hartshorn and McMurry (2020) elaborate on the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on a group of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners and Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) instructors in a university environment in the USA. Their investigation proved that both instructors and students had increased stress levels following the epidemic to the degree that learning and teaching were not their major concerns. Additionally, the students experienced additional complications in the online format.

Khatoony and Nezhadmehr (2020) have also explored the difficulties experienced by Iranian instructors in integrating technology for online classrooms during the COVID-19 outbreak in Iran. The study revealed that teachers encountered several impediments despite effective utilization of online apps and venues, including a lack of adequate resources, learners' lack of attention and desire for online sessions, and a lack of financing and assistance for language schools. However, instructors were receptive to technological incorporation in Iranian educational contexts, which was expedited by the epidemic. Todd (2020) also recruited 52 English language instructors at a prominent Thai university to delve into their attitudes toward the transition from classroom to online instruction. While the teachers were originally confronted with several major issues, they discovered solutions to them. Furthermore, instructors discussed some of the difficulties they witnessed, such as choosing appropriate stimulating activities and analyzing the students' remaining assignments. In a similar research strand, Abid et al. (2021) conducted research in which they probed into the personal experiences of eleven Pakistani university instructors who began teaching online for the first time during the COVID-19 epidemic. Five themes emerged from semi-structured interviews with instructors on their online teaching experiences: cultural and gender issues, teaching effectiveness, online teaching challenges, coping mechanisms, and faculty impressions post-COVID-19. The results indicated that university instructors prioritized urgent online instructional concerns in the aftermath of the epidemic, placing a

low premium on global online learning procedures. The experience, on the other hand, prepared instructors for a mixed learning methodology and raised their understanding of global and future challenges. In the pursuit of clarifying the significance of educational technology in facilitating the shift from face-to-face to online teaching and learning process during the COVID-19 pandemic, Turnbull et al. (2021) outlined five constraints to online education that higher education institutions confronted: integration of synchronous and asynchronous learning tools, access to technology, faculty, and student online competency, academic dishonesty, and privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, this study's comprehensive review of the literature disclosed many successful procedures for the effective implementation of online education, such as offering e-learning training support for faculty members and students, establishing online learning communities, and broadening traditional face-to-face course delivery to introduce more blended learning components. As previously stated, one of the challenges is in the assessment interface, which has garnered much scholarly interest in the sphere of assessment and educational systems (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). It influences learners' comprehension of the subject matter and affects their propensity for improvement (Mohammadkhah et al., 2022). Furthermore, instructors' perceptions significantly impact the teaching process, especially in EFL settings.

In addition, Iran's present language teacher education program(s) are no longer promising, their designation is becoming more intricate as a result of the pandemic outbreak, and they are unable to fulfill the expectations of Iranian EFL student teachers, cooperating teachers, practicing teachers, and teacher educators (Hassani, 2021). To this end, it is reasonable to lay the groundwork for experimenting with and implementing more modern models of language assessment education. Online assessment in general and specifically online English language assessment education is a possibility. As a result of this transformation from face-to-face to full-time online learning, it is necessary to investigate instructors' perceptions of the techniques used to assess online EFL learners and to offer insight on the challenges that may hamper appropriate e-learning assessment. Owing to the paucity of literature on teachers' perceptions of assessing full-time online teaching in the Iranian EFL context, this study attempts to analyze EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment and illustrates the difficulties encountered.

2. Review of the Related Literature

A substantial body of research testifies that assessment is an inseparable part of language acquisition that instructional programs rely significantly on its learning outcomes (e.g., Fan & Jin, 2013; Sharma, 2020). It keeps track of the educational and learning process's effectiveness. Furthermore, it assesses the extent to which the curricular yardsticks have been fulfilled by offering commentary on the students' performance (Samir & Tabatabaee-Yazdi, 2020). In practical terms, assessment operations are constructed to determine if actual learning outputs mirror the targeted learning outcomes of educational programs. According to Webber (2012, p. 202), assessment corresponds to "activities designed primarily to foster student learning." Hence, it is obvious that assessment design and implementation are critical aspects of a language teacher's professional development. In addition, because instructors are regularly engaged in formative and summative assessments of students in educational

contexts, how they function and interact with wider contextual and experiential variations would become significant (Crusan et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2021). Many elements have affected educational assessment. The most critical element may be teachers' perceptions of the nature and purpose of assessment. A burgeoning body of investigations reverberates that instructors have a consensus that assessment must be used to enhance learning and teaching and give information about students' development (Ahmadi et al., 2022; Brown, 2004; Muñoz, Palacio & Escobar, 2012). Borg (2003) characterized teacher cognition as including more than a belief. In compliance with his standpoint, cognition relates to the teachers' knowledge, ideas, behaviors, and perspectives; hence, teachers have cognitions regarding teaching, learning, and assessment. Johnson's (1994) conceptualizations concerning teachers' cognitions clearly reflect the educational value of investigating teacher perception:

(1) teachers' beliefs influence both perception and judgment, which, in turn, affects what teachers say and do in classrooms; (2) teachers' beliefs play a critical role in how teachers learn to teach, that is, how they interpret new information about learning and teaching and how that information is translated into classroom practices; and (3) understanding teachers' beliefs is essential to improving teaching practices and professional teacher preparation programs. (Johnson, 1994, p. 439)

It is essential to acknowledge the importance of teachers' cognitions and perceptions in the domain of online learning and assessment. In line with the online learning principles, the online assessment of learners has been in practice for many years. Even though online assessment is employed in many instructional contexts, several researchers have found impediments to the practical consideration of online assessment. In common parlance, the movement from physical classroom-based traditional assessment to online assessment, which was instigated by the epidemic of COVID-19, has had a considerable influence on various dimensions of classroom-based assessment. An extensive corpus of research has examined variables affecting the online assessment, including lack of contact with instructors, insufficient digital literacy, and a lack of efficient interaction and feedback mechanisms (Holmes & Gardner, 2006; Kanaan et al., 2013; Masa'deh et al., 2013; Tarhini et al., 2013).

In consideration of the various sophistication associated with online assessment, it is crucial to recognize how instructors utilize different procedures of online assessment, specifically their attitudes, the challenges they encounter, and their coping mechanisms. In compliance with these concerns, the following part represents some research that has been undertaken to elucidate the importance of instructors in the COVID-19 pandemic online assessment. Forrester (2020) examined the obstacles and potential solutions connected with transitioning a face-to-face group speaking assessment assignment to an online form due to the emergence of the pandemic at a Hong Kong university. Even though teachers perceived the new one-to-one discussion assessment positively, students were equivocal, with some favoring the previous group discussion format. The research proposes that a wide range of pedagogical, administrative, and integrity prospects must be addressed in conjunction with the teacher and student commentaries on the new assessment activity. Furthermore, Abduh (2021) examined instructors' perspectives of the assessment methodologies utilized in full-time e-learning during the COVID-19 outbreak in a Saudi EFL setting. The findings

instantiated that teachers had an ambivalent attitude toward e-assessment. Additionally, it was shown that professors encountered significant difficulties while assessing learners online. Yulianto and Mujtahin (2021) conducted another study in which they studied the perceptions and behaviors of ELT instructors concerning the implementation of online assessment during COVID-19. The researchers discovered that instructors were negative about the online assessment during the COVID-19 epidemic, employing open-ended surveys and online interviews. They were particularly worried about the internet connection, the validity of their evaluation, and the enthusiasm of the impoverished students. Despite these objections, the study found that online assessments assisted teachers in measuring students' progress. Still in another study, Arif (2020) examined how English language instructors adopted online assessment and how they overcame barriers to implement it during the COVID-19 epidemic. The study revealed that instructors assessed students' online assignments through a multitude of social networking technologies, including Google Forms and Google Classroom. Further, the study made clear that teachers experienced a range of barriers, including misinterpretation of the offered instruction, lack of internet connection, and difficulties involved in the scoring. The study also noted that teachers established techniques to deal with the difficulties they confronted. In a similar spirit, Chung and Choi (2021) investigated how teachers' teaching and assessment procedures started to change as a result of the switch to online mode. Moreover, they measured teachers' and students' contentment with the new online modality. The study's findings illustrated that instructors formed a professional learning community in order to practice new types of assessment techniques that were formative and process-oriented in nature. Additionally, they allocated multimodal initiatives to advance the cause of sustainable assessment. The study also discovered that, while students were quite delighted with the new types of language assessment practices, teachers were dissatisfied. To increase the authenticity of assessment in both synchronous and asynchronous online assessment, Sutadji et al. (2021) used a variety of assessment methods, including a written test with case study questions/analysis, an online conversation with peer assessment, and teacher-assessed activeness. The study's results suggested that diverse assessment strategies resulted in a more authentic assessment. Zhang et al. (2021) inquired about six EFL instructors' online assessment techniques at a Chinese university. The study's results suggested that EFL teachers established assessment judgments and chose particular assessment techniques in accordance with policy, the local environment, and their own teaching experiences and perspectives.

Long before the COVID-19 outbreak, many educational schools offered integrated or mixed-mode education through the incorporation of technology into classroom teaching. Notwithstanding, the availability of blended learning was a supplement to the course, not a comprehensive substitution. Accordingly, given that online instructional delivery has inspired the "new normal" in a number of tertiary educational environments worldwide, and given the change's power-coercive and unforeseen nature, a coherent research program is required to examine the change in a variety of tertiary education settings. To this aim, the future directions of effective online courses may be recognized. Furthermore, provided that teacher professional development occurs in situated contexts of practice, a better perception of the specific challenges teachers encountered during online assessment would enable TESOL

decision-makers to improve the quality of online assessment initiatives in local contexts of practice. Therefore, there is a dearth of research on the actual perceptions of Iranian EFL teachers functioning with online assessment. Based on the abovementioned concerns, the current study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What are the challenges that Iranian EFL teachers encounter while assessing students in online courses?

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

To address the research questions, a sequential mixed-methods design was employed (Hashemi & Babaii, 2013; Riazi & Candlin, 2014; Tashakkori & Teddlie 2003). The explanatory design of the mixed-methods procedure was adopted (Creswell et al., 2003), in which qualitative outcomes were utilized to assist in justifying, refining, and elucidating quantitative findings. In consonance with the importance of mixed methods design, Creswell (2009) contended that it is a research technique that puts emphasis on "converging or triangulating different quantitative and qualitative data sources" (p.210) that will result in "well-validated and substantial findings" (p.213). As Creswell (2009, p.242) posited, a mixed-methods approach can be executed by "collection of both quantitative and qualitative data in phases (sequentially) or at the same time (concurrently)".

3.2. Participants

This study was conducted in two phases, namely quantitative and qualitative. For the quantitative phase of the study, the researcher disseminated an online questionnaire constructed in Google Forms to 250 EFL teachers who were BA graduates, MA graduates, PhD students, or PhD graduates through their LinkedIn, Research Gate, Email, or Telegram groups. Of the 250 teachers, merely 100 individuals submitted responses to the questionnaire. These teachers were appointed from several foreign language institutions and universities in Kermanshah and Tehran, Iran, via their LinkedIn, Instagram, and Telegram accounts. Because participants completed the questionnaire voluntarily, this study employed convenience sampling, the most frequently utilized sampling technique in L2 research (Dornyei, 2007). It is worth noting that the corresponding field of the teachers was Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), English Literature, Linguistics, or English Language Translation Studies, or was enrolled in programs leading to such degrees. In the quantitative phase, 59 percent of the participants were female, and 41 percent were male. In addition, 27 percent of participants were BA graduates, 42 percent were MA graduates, 22 percent held PhD, and 9 percent were PhD students. Furthermore, 38 percent of the participants had 3-5 years of teaching experience, 42 percent had 6-10 years of teaching experience, and 20 percent had more than 11 years of teaching. The researcher recruited 12 participants for the qualitative phase of the study from a pool of 100 individuals who completed questionnaires and indicated their readiness to participate in the interview session, employing a purposive sampling approach. Due to the exploratory nature of the qualitative research question in this

study, the researcher decided to gather data for the qualitative phase of the study through semi-structured interviews. These teachers were interviewed for 20 to 30 minutes and responded to interview questions (e.g., What are the challenges that teachers face while assessing students in online courses?). Five of the chosen participants were female teachers, seven were male instructors, and they were between the ages of 27 and 50. Additionally, these teachers were primarily university teachers with at least five years of experience teaching English and, more significantly, were experts in the domain of testing and assessment (as evidenced by their academic publications).

3.3. Instruments

The instruments of the current study comprised a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. The questionnaire was adapted from Abduh's (2021) version and consisted of three sections. Abduh's (2021) original questionnaire comprised four sections, and the third section, titled "teachers' perceptions of techniques / methods used in online assessment," was excluded because it did not align with the study's purposes and research questions, which could explain why the researcher adapted the questionnaire. Besides, some items in the second and fourth sections of the original questionnaire were revised in terms of language and in response to content validity reviews conducted by specialists in the testing domains. In this light, the study's adapted questionnaire comprised three sections. The first section (items 1 to 8) explored the participants' demographic information; the second section (items 9 to 19) outlined teachers' perceptions of online assessment, and the final section (items 20 to 33) highlighted teachers' perceptions of the challenges they face when conducting online assessments. According to Azevedo and Shane (2019), the pilot study is a critical milestone in the research methodology since it enables the researchers to enhance the foundations for their research programs. As Doody and Doody (2015) maintained, a pilot study allows the researcher to refine their data gathering strategies and increase the questionnaire's content validity. This being the case, a pilot study was conducted to establish reliability, and 30 teachers were asked to respond to the online questionnaires. A reliability test was performed to examine the study's reliability. The researcher used the SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences) to analyze the pilot study's findings. Further, the reliability of the questionnaire was reported through the internal consistency procedure. Cronbach's alpha on this scale stood at 0.89. The questionnaire's content validity was also strengthened by incorporating comments from experts in the testing domains prior to sending the questionnaire to the targeted teachers. The interview protocol was also emailed to five TEFL specialists for content validity approval, and their commentaries were included in the questions.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure and Analysis

The questionnaire was intended to attract as many EFL teachers in the Iranian context as practicable with its Likert-scale format (e.g., strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) and total anonymity. A list of twelve EFL teachers from Kermanshah and Tehran universities and institutes were invited by email to participate in an online interview conducted via What's App as a follow-up to the questionnaire, with the participants informed

that their complete anonymity would be preserved. The semi-structured interviews were executed in order to elicit as much information as necessary. The interviews were not constrained to a closed list of prepared questions; each interview gave each participant enough room to voice his or her own viewpoints and opinions within the broader context of online assessment challenges and their perceptions. The interviewer was the study's researcher, who holds a MA degree in TEFL and has taught English for six years in various educational organizations and institutions. Each participant was sent an email consent form before carrying out the interviews. All interviewees stated a willingness to remain entirely anonymous (i.e., no reference to their names or place of work). Each interview was performed independently, and the majority of the content of each interview lasted around 20–30 minutes. Due to the nature of this research, which focused on EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment in the Iranian context during the Covid-19 pandemic, both the questionnaire and interviews were undertaken only in English. Furthermore, the SPSS program was used to analyze the questionnaire data. Data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4. Results

4.1. Research Question One

To address the question, "What are the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment during the Covid-19 pandemic?" items 9 to 19 of the questionnaire were investigated. The findings were reviewed employing descriptive statistics in order to provide insight into the response frequency distribution. Table 1 illustrates the frequency distribution for each item separately. Further, this table indicates teachers' perceptions of online assessment.

Table 1.
Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
9. I prefer online assessments to paper-based assessments.	41 (%41)	30 (%30)	15 (%15)	9 (%9)	5 (%5)
10. Online assessment helps teachers improve their technological skills to assess students effectively using various techniques.	4 (%4)	43 (%43)	14 (%14)	39 (%39)	0 (%0)
11. Effective evaluation of students' performance is possible in online assessment.	28 (%28)	32 (%32)	19 (%19)	21 (%19)	0 (%0)
12. Online assessment measures students' achievements fairly.	42 (%42)	27 (%27)	5 (%5)	26 (%41)	0 (%0)
13. Effective use of the online assessments platform enables	22 (%22)	34 (%34)	9 (%9)	24 (%24)	11 (%11)

teachers to assess their students more effectively.					
14. Compared to paper-based assessments, online assessments provide faster entry of grades into the electronic grading center.	13 (%13)	24 (%24)	36 (%36)	18 (%18)	9 (%9)
15. Online assessment allows teachers to measure learning outcomes more accurately.	22 (%22)	43 (%43)	16 (%16)	19 (%19)	0 (%0)
16. Online assessments help instructors explore the unique learning styles of individual students.	23 (%23)	41 (%41)	16 (%16)	20 (%20)	0 (%0)
17. Providing teachers with managerial, pedagogical, and technological support during online assessment enables them to increase the accuracy with which they assess.	10 (%10)	42 (%42)	9 (%9)	28 (%28)	11 (%11)
18. E-portfolios, a form of online assessment, support students' reflective thinking, develop creativity and increase collaborative work.	0 (%0)	0 (%0)	34 (%34)	39 (%39)	27 (%27)
19. Online assessment approaches such as online discussion and personal activities for learning problem solving are effective assessment strategies.	0 (%0)	16 (%16)	8 (%8)	67 (%67)	9 (%9)
Mean	18.6 (%18.6)	30.2 (%30.2)	16.5 (%16.5)	28.2 (%28.2)	6.6 (%6.6)

As indicated in Table 1, 18.6 percent of participants selected strongly disagree, 30.2 percent selected disagree, 16.5 percent selected neutral, 28.2 percent selected agree, and 6.6 percent selected strongly agree as manifestations that offer insight into their perceptions of online assessment. The findings from the descriptive statistics demonstrated that Iranian EFL teachers had either a negative or a neutral attitude toward online assessment (e.g., 18.6 strongly disagree; 30.2 disagree; 16.5 neutral). A closer examination of data in Table 1 illustrates that the mean for strongly disagree and disagree is at a high proportion for the majority of items, with the exception of items 10, 18, and 19, which pertain to the benefits of online assessment for teachers and students (online assessment helps teachers improve their technological skills to assess students effectively using various techniques; E-portfolios, a

form of online assessment, support students' reflective thinking, develop creativity and increase collaborative work; online assessment approaches such as online discussion and personal activities for learning problem solving are effective assessment strategies). These items were scored (39%; 39%; 67%) respectively on the questionnaire's *agree* option. In addition, item twelve, which addresses the assertion that "online assessment fairly measures students' achievements," received the highest mean in the strongly disagree section, implying that Iranian EFL teachers are concerned about assessment justice and that online assessment cannot live up to an evaluation system that accurately reflects students' achievements and performance.

4.2. Research Question Two

In order to answer the second research question, "What are the challenges that Iranian EFL teachers encounter while assessing students in online courses? ", items 20 to 32 of the questionnaire were examined, and the results of the analysis are reported in Table 2. Furthermore, to shed more light on the challenges that teachers face during the online assessment, a semi-structured interview with 12 Iranian EFL teachers was undertaken.

Table 2.

Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of challenges they face in online assessment

Item	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
20. Teachers encounter difficulties when it comes to assessing students online.	5 (%5)	0 (%0)	6 (%6)	33 (%33)	56 (%56)
21. The lack of physical interaction may be a constraint for assessing students enrolled in full-time e-learning.	0 (%0)	0 (%0)	9 (%9)	50 (%50)	41 (%41)
22. Teamwork sometimes is impractical because students are more accustomed to completing assignments individually than collaboratively with classmates.	0 (%0)	0 (%0)	14 (%14)	76 (%76)	10 (%10)
23. Online summative assessments are associated with anxiety.	0 (%0)	10 (%10)	32 (%32)	50 (%50)	8 (%8)
24. Many students fail to submit assignments on time due to their poor technical capabilities.	0 (%0)	9 (%9)	19 (%19)	57 (%57)	15 (%15)
25. E-assessment of translation courses is problematic.	11 (%11)	0 (%0)	28 (%28)	52 (%52)	9 (%9)
26. It is difficult to conduct peer or team assessments.	0 (%0)	5 (%5)	11 (%11)	69 (%69)	15 (%15)
27. There is a higher probability that	0	0	11	24	65

students may cheat on online assessments.	(%0)	(%0)	(%11)	(%24)	(%65)
28. Technical difficulties such as an overloaded platform are one of the primary challenges during online exams.	0 (%0)	0 (%0)	9 (%9)	42 (%42)	49 (%49)
29. I find it difficult to E-assess students in listening and speaking courses.	6 (%6)	14 (%14)	20 (%20)	51 (%51)	9 (%9)
30. Synchronous activities are difficult to be assessed in groups of a large number of students.	0 (%0)	6 (%6)	19 (%19)	75 (%75)	0 (%0)
31. Many students frequently request postponement of the submission date of exams/assignments for various excuses.	0 (%0)	14 (%14)	5 (%5)	61 (%61)	20 (%20)
32. Many students submit assignments that include a high proportion of plagiarism and are directly copied from websites without modification or paraphrasing.	0 (%0)	5 (%5)	0 (%0)	80 (%80)	15 (%15)
33. Many students copy each other's assignments.	0 (%0)	0 (%0)	10 (%10)	54 (%54)	36 (%36)
Mean	1.6 (%1.6)	4.5 (%4.5)	13.8 (%13.8)	55.3 (%55.3)	75.2 (%75.2)

According to Table 2, over 70% of teachers strongly agreed that online assessment introduces a multitude of impediments and challenges (e.g., 75.2% strongly agree). Moreover, 55.3 percent of teachers agreed on the impediments and difficulties associated with online assessment (e.g., 55.3% agree). In line with these findings, it is plausible to declare that Iranian EFL teachers were largely annoyed with the many challenges involved in online assessment and that these impediments and challenges influenced their online assessment practices. It is noticeable that items linked to a high risk of cheating and plagiarism (e.g., 65% strongly agree), issues with overloaded platforms and Internet connectivity (e.g., 49% strongly agree), and the lack of physical interaction (e.g., 41% strongly agree) scored the highest in the strongly disagree option, revealing the significant impact of such components on assessing students in online courses. In addition, the impracticality of teamwork (item 22, 76 % agree), anxiety considerations (item 23, 50% agree), students' technological capabilities (item 24, 57 % agree), and the difficulty of conducting peer and team assessment (item 26, 69 % agree) were all mentioned as significant

impediments and challenges to online assessment in the agree option of the questionnaire. Given that only 5% of the participants selected "disagree or strongly disagree," we can conclude that the majority of Iranian EFL teachers perceive online assessment as being complicated with different impediments and challenges and held negative perceptions and attitudes toward online assessment.

To provide a deeper comprehension of the challenges faced during online assessment, the data from the interviews were analyzed. Based on the semi-structured interview results, Figure 1 outlines the most significant challenges that teachers encounter during online assessment.

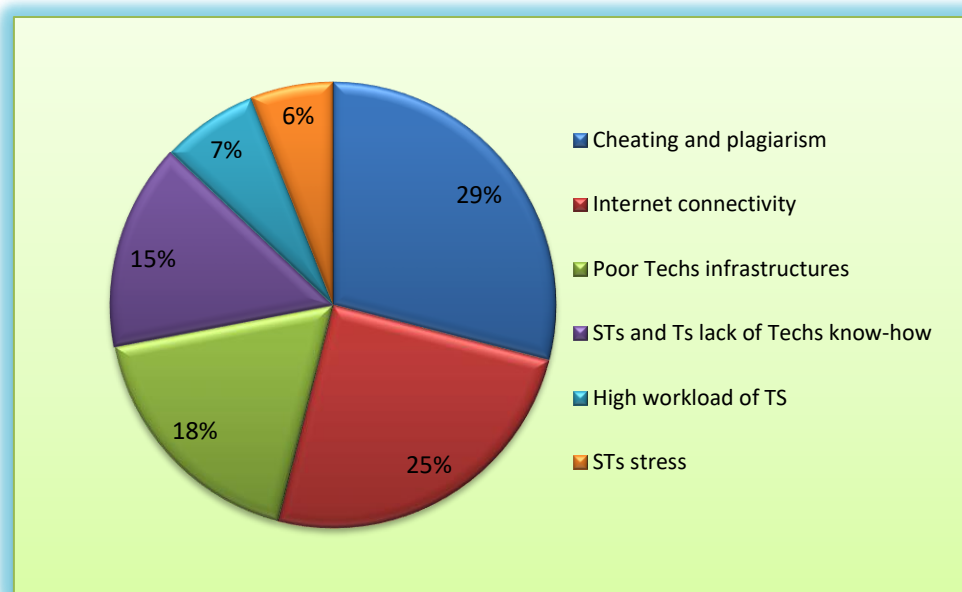


Figure 1. The challenges Iranian EFL teachers' face during online assessment

Note: Ts: teachers; Tech(s): technological; STs: students

Figure 1 demonstrates that the most important challenges that teachers encounter in online assessment, in descending order, were the high risk of students cheating and plagiarism (29%), the issue of internet connectivity (25%), poor technological infrastructures (18%), students and teachers lack of technological know-how (15%), the high workload of teachers (7%) and students' stress in online assessment (6%). Therefore, the most frequently encountered challenge was consideration about cheating and plagiarism (29 %), which is rooted and attributed to the Iranian context, which is bound by the assumption that scores and grades are extremely important and that students' achievement or failure is determined by their exam score. Furthermore, the teachers characterized the procedure through which the student will cheat on the exam during the interview, as documented in the following excerpt from a university instructor in the field of TEFL.

The online assessment functionality lends itself quite well to exam cheating. To do this, students will conduct a Google search for the exam items and retrieve the responses. In the meanwhile, when conducting face-to-face exams in the form of interviews, the majorities of students, particularly female students, are shy and bring

up the Hijab concern as a justification for being unable to turn on their webcam. As a consequence, teachers do not have a visual representation of the students, which enables them to search for answers to questions easily and without the teachers' awareness. Likewise, the majority of students have many WhatsApp or Telegram groups on their phones, which allows them to conveniently share the answers to examination questions and copy and paste the responses.

The teacher's comments were so vehement about cheating that they claimed that on certain occasions, students' responses to exam items were exactly the same, rendering them unable to objectively evaluate students' performance, as illustrated by the following complaint from an MA holder in TEFL.

I conducted an online test the previous semester and was surprised to discover that 98 percent of students' responses were exactly the same. In that case, I wasn't sure what to do; I was not really certain who was to be blamed for this problem; I wasn't certain whether the responses were from my first-ranked student or the twenty-ranked student.

In addition, teachers were dissatisfied with the Internet's speed, which was the second significant challenge (25 %) that frustrated teachers to the point where they did not want to proceed with the online assessment and were only doing so because there was no alternative procedure to perform in-person examinations.

My largest concern resides in the interface of Internet connectivity. What if you're performing an online exam and the Internet suddenly goes down? When this occurs, not only is the exam interrupted, but it also provides opportunities for students to review their responses and ensure that they are correct. It is unfair for one student to complete the exam with stable Internet connectivity while another is disconnected several times. It may also result in unpleasant stress for students with unstable Internet connectivity, affecting their performance in the exam (associate professor in TEFL).

In accordance with the third serious challenge, namely poor technological infrastructure (18%), it is necessary to point out that online courses in the Iranian context are not equipped with up-to-date technological equipment, and they utilize specific platforms that do not authorize teachers to design their own questions and compel them to use the format approved by the platform. Teachers' and students' involvement in integrating technology infrastructures is fundamental. One additional issue in the Iranian setting is that teachers and students are not sufficiently competent to employ online assessment procedures, which poses another challenge in this context (e.g., lack of technological know-how, 15 %).

In our context, certain software is available for performing online assessments. This software needs technological know-how or expertise, which students and teachers may lack, restricting them from using these platforms successfully. Additionally, online assessment is challenging in our context due to difficulties such as a lack of technological know-how and the fact that language's content does not lend itself to constructing subjective questions for which no answer is available on the Internet.

The questions and exercises that we construct for our students are easily searchable on the Internet, and developing questions for which the responses are not easily available on the Internet is inefficient in terms of time and cost. (PhD holder in English Literature)

Correspondingly, it was revealed that teachers felt uncomfortable with online assessment because of the increased workload (7%) associated with it. The following remake, made by a university lecturer of Linguistics who has been teaching English for six years, testifies to this point.

I do not believe in online assessment since it requires me to design the items first and then submit them to the Courseware (Darsafzar), which is extremely time-consuming, and occasionally the Internet goes down in the midst of the upload, necessitating a restart of the entire process. What is more, the teachers must grade the papers, which is difficult since some students' responses have not been uploaded; instead, they have been submitted by WhatsApp or email due to an internet outage during the exam. Likewise, in some instances, the teachers are unsure if the student's unsatisfactory response to a question in an online exam is a result of his or her inabilities and knowledge or a result of being involved in a stressful scenario that impacted his or her performance.

It is also worth mentioning that teachers were outspoken in their worry that online assessment will induce stress for students (6%) and hence affect their performance on the exam, a statement that was amply substantiated in the abovementioned comments made by teachers about the challenges they face in online assessment.

5. Discussion

The current study was a bid to unearth the Iranian EFL teachers' perceptions of online assessment and illustrate the challenges encountered through adopting a mixed-methods design. The results showed that Iranian EFL teachers held either a negative or a neutral attitude toward online assessment. One of the plausible justifications for denouncing online assessment could rest in the nexus of the fact that teachers in the Iranian context have a lack of flexibility and that "the local context played a more important role in mediating teachers' specific online assessment practice" (Zhang et al., 2021, p. 505). These groups of teachers are usually not open to new experiences and more possible horizons of knowledge. They stay in the cool shadow of familiarity, sticking to the comfort of tradition. It is also critical to emphasize that the Iranian context has played a significant role in shaping this viewpoint, since in Iran, when someone is employed in one of the country's official agencies; they take a deep breath and do not attempt to keep up with contemporary knowledge of the day. However, in some countries, the situation is reversed, and once an individual is recruited, his or her activity commences, and their field authority constantly monitors them. The findings of this study are in lockstep with those of Abduh (2021), who investigated EFL teachers' attitudes toward e-learning assessment. In compliance with the Abduh (2021) study, teachers expressed a negative or moderate attitude toward e-assessment. They mentioned several

challenges associated with online assessment, including the absence of physical interaction, assessment of speaking and translation courses, a high risk of cheating and plagiarism, technical difficulties, and assessing a large number of students.

The results of the interview bear witness to the challenges that teachers encounter during online assessment. To this end, the three most frequent challenges were the high risk of students cheating and plagiarism, the issue of internet connectivity, poor technological infrastructures. The threat of student cheating has been manifested in a growing body of research (e.g., Azis et al., 2022; Blikstad-Balas & Davies, 2017; Jarrah et al., 2022; Saputra et al., 2022), and it is a significant threat to assessment integrity, compromising the examination's validity and reliability. Similarly, the importance of examination's integrity is demonstrated in other studies, such as Al-Nuaim's (2012, p.214) argument that "the low integrity of examination and homework results submitted by students who are assessed from a distance, as no proof of their identity or whether they actually did their work themselves exists". More importantly, students' cheating is somehow connected to our educational system and milieu, which prioritize grades and scores over learning (Al Amin & Greenwood, 2018). This would lead to a score-based system that maximizes grade inflation regardless of the students' intellectual ability (Dashti, 2019; Kassahun, 2008).

The second significant challenge raised by teachers was Internet connectivity, which was consistent with the findings of other research studies (see Crews & Curtis, 2011; Osuji, 2012 for more information). The confession below, expressed by one of the participants in Ghanbari and Nowroozi's (2021, p.8) investigation, is the infallible epitome of Internet speed in the Iranian context.

In addition, another teacher described the final exam days when she was always worried about the blackout—which was common at that time of the year in the area—and the poor internet connectivity. She also counted times when some students were not able to connect to the microphone during the exam session or had problems uploading their response files. Overall, technological barriers challenged the online assessment of the students in the context.

In turn, it was shown that a lack of technological know-how was cited as another major problem throughout the online assessment. A comprehensive examination of the interviews and teacher reports indicated that the teachers encountered the highest number of technological difficulties early in the transition to online assessment. Almost every teacher reported being unfamiliar with the university's learning management system (LMS). Indeed, teachers perceived the LMS, which was established long before the epidemic, as a supplementary to their education rather than as a replacement for all of their instructional activities. Apart from technological difficulties, teachers lacked confidence in technology as a valid assessment tool. It is important to emphasize that students and teachers both require familiarity with and some specialized training in order to be guided through the process of working with online assessment platforms, which, regrettably, has not been offered in different contexts (Donovan et al., 2007; Osuji, 2012).

According to the results of this research, the author proposes the following recommendations:

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- Modest precautions for scholarly consistency on online exams and quizzes, including question randomization, dynamic numbers, or restriction of access to other course content during the online assessment, are integrated into LMSs and may be implemented promptly (Zhai et al., 2020). Anti-plagiarism applications have also been shown to reduce plagiarism when applied in conjunction with academic integrity education (Lockman & Schirmer, 2020).
 - The deployment of a variety of assessment techniques can contribute to the reduction of academic dishonesty (Darling-Aduana, 2021). To this end, online exams can be more sophisticated by incorporating various items such as matching, short answers, and multiple response items while being simple to administer via an LMS. Validating students' responses to written assignments or exams might be accomplished through the use of technologically advanced approaches such as biometric data validation or keystroke dynamics (Alruwai et al., 2018). However, additional investigation and technology breakthroughs are required before they may be prevalently utilized. The bulk of these strategies have demonstrated their potential to scale to large numbers of students.
 - Drawing upon the literature, one potential drawback of online assessments that was not well-addressed by the participants in this study is that students experience loneliness and are less cooperative when they are not in a similar room during online assessment (Mavo Navarro & McGrath, 2022). Establishing rapport benefits learning that is fundamentally social. Peer assessment activities, discussion forums, and embedding the communities of practice of group meetings into discussions or projects may all assist students in communicating and engaging more successfully in online assessment activities (Akimov & Malin, 2020).
 - Students will feel more relaxed and appreciate the procedure in courses where teachers are required to employ online assessment if the rationale behind online examinations, as well as the protocols, followed in administering grades, are publicly disclosed. Additionally, it might be desirable for teachers to adopt a grading system, such as pass/fail or dividing the work into smaller chunks with feedback choices, to aid in reducing the weight of the final result (Mavo Navarro & McGrath, 2022). Students are sometimes pessimistic about their teachers' technological capabilities (Bloom & Krathwohl, 1956). Due to the fact that their grades are calculated online, students must ensure that technological failures or a teacher's incompetency do not subtract from their achievement. Teachers would describe the learning technology they would be utilizing, as well as the method they will be employing to track their students' development. They can then outline the measures in place in case students encounter technological difficulties.
 - It is strongly recommended that students receive comprehensive, detailed insights on their performance on the online exam in order to monitor and assess their performance. Teachers can develop a plan for promoting academic honesty in online assessment situations and convince their students of the critical nature of this plan (Tuparova et al., 2015). Teachers might benefit from setting up a backup plan for responding to or completing tasks in the case that technology or internet connectivity

malfunctions. Moreover, teachers may observe how their LMS tracks and documents students' progress, ensuring that both teachers and their students have confidence in technology (Naylor & Nyanjom, 2021).

- Teachers can initiate online examinations with practice tests to verify that students are familiar with the test-taking platform before moving on to a quiz on a similar platform (Zhai et al., 2020). In this respect, students will build confidence and optimize their performance before taking the graded examination by undertaking a short, ungraded practice exam, obtaining feedback, and addressing incorrect responses (Zabaleta, 2013). Online exam items should be simple to comprehend for students who will not be able to request clarification as easily as they would in a face-to-face examination. For instance, teachers can have a colleague or teacher assistant evaluate items before using them on an online test.
- Because the current study's findings denoted that teachers encountered difficulties with online assessment applications on a variety of levels, the program administrators must provide ongoing training and professional development programs on how to effectively utilize technological tools in assessing students, as well as train teachers on the appropriate usages of technology in the development and design of assessment tasks (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). These training and professional development programs should be planned in such a manner that teachers have sufficient flexibility to implement their own modifications, as they are the only ones who can manage the realities of the local teaching context, such as students' expectations, the classroom environment, and internet resources, in addition to the top-down educational regulations. In the spirit of training and instruction on educational technology for teachers and students, they would feel more comfortable using it to accomplish educational objectives (Nushi & Momeni, 2020).
- If higher education organizations in the Iranian context intend to perform online assessments as a supplement or alternative for traditional (in-person) exams, they must have enough up-to-date facilities and technology infrastructures (Noori et al., 2022). University administrators and authorities should furnish teachers with facilities and infrastructure that facilitate the appropriate use of online assessment in their classes, and the university's and institutes' information technology department should actively assist teachers and students with technical issues that arise during online assessment.

6. Conclusion

For many years, English language teachers profited from the use of technology in their classrooms (Mompean, 2010; Ros et al., 2010). Numerous research investigations have also probed the advantages and disadvantages of employing technology in ELT courses (Au-Yong-Oliveira et al., 2018; Hedayati & Marandi, 2014). However, few pieces of research have examined how technology may be used as an assessment-oriented instrument in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 epidemic. When many educational establishments have been compelled to close their doors to prevent the outbreak of infection, integrating technology into evaluation systems is crucial. Therefore, the findings of this study are noteworthy

because they showcase the voices of a group of EFL teachers about their perception and challenges of online assessment during the COVID-19 epidemic. The results of the current study will benefit society in many ways. Theoretically speaking, this study will contribute to the body of the literature on the teacher's perceptions of online assessment during the COVID-19 transitory phase. In line with the methodological implications, the study offers preliminary insight into the effect of the COVID-19 transitory period on the assessment procedure in the context of Iran. With respect to researchers and university professors, this study lives up a pragmatic orientation to pertinent educational policymakers and authorities for the development of training courses for online assessment through the provision of suitable remedies and suggestions tailored to the context. Furthermore, the results of this study suggest new paths for future research. Various facets of the challenges identified in this study can be examined independently in large-scale research investigations. In addition, this study was limited to examining the teachers' perceptions of online assessment; future research practices might also explore students' attitudes toward online assessment. Given that the study was restricted to the Iranian context and data were gathered via questionnaire and interview, the replication of this research in other contexts and using alternative data collection approaches such as observation is strongly recommended in order to delve more deeply into teachers' perceptions of online assessment.

List of Abbreviations

English as a foreign language (EFL), English Language Teaching (ELT), English as a Second Language (ESL), Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL), Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), Learning Management System (LMS)

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