



## Exploring Diploma Students' Perspectives on Online Assessment: Addressing Challenges in the ESL Classroom

Jacqueline Susan Rijeng\*  
[jacquelinesusan@uitm.edu.my](mailto:jacquelinesusan@uitm.edu.my)  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

Imelia Laura Daneil  
[imelialaura@uitm.edu.my](mailto:imelialaura@uitm.edu.my)  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

Kimberley Lau Yih Long  
[kimberley@uitm.edu.my](mailto:kimberley@uitm.edu.my)  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

Tang Howe Eng  
[lily@uitm.edu.my](mailto:lily@uitm.edu.my)  
Faculty of Computer and Mechanical Science  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

Christine Jacqueline Runggol  
[christine@uitm.edu.my](mailto:christine@uitm.edu.my)  
Academy of Language Studies  
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM)  
Cawangan Sarawak, Malaysia

Corresponding author\*

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## ABSTRACT

Assessment has long been a topic of concern in Malaysian higher learning institutions, leading to a rapid shift from traditional assessment methods to online approaches following the COVID-19 pandemic. However, there is still limited understanding of learners' experiences with online assessment during this uncertain time, highlighting the need for further exploration. A study was carried out to investigate Diploma students' perceptions of online assessment and the challenges faced in completing online assessments particularly among English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. The study employed a quantitative research design and involved a group of second year full-time Diploma students (n=62) from a public university in Sarawak, Malaysia. Findings revealed that students had a positive attitude towards online assessment as an integral aspect in learning. Online assessment is believed to be an important tool to facilitate self-learning, is unbiased and fair, and helps to provide immediate feedback on students' performance. However, economic constraints and time limitations emerged as significant challenges of handling assessments online. The findings carry implications on curriculum development across different programs in designing feasible and effective online assessment in higher education.

**Keywords:** Online assessment; perceptions; challenges; higher education

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the use of online assessment and testing has taken a toll in tertiary education especially in online language teaching and learning. The sudden COVID-19 pandemic that hit the nation resulted in a shift from the traditional method of meeting face-to-face to an online environment. Instructors were compelled to adjust classroom instruction by using remote learning technologies through means of digitalised materials and communication tools. This includes the appropriate use of suitable online assessment format to ensure continuous progress in students' learning. In doing so, much emphasis is given on the preparation, guidance and support particularly in assisting both instructors and learners in the implementation of online assessment. This is imperative to ensure that an appropriate and effective online assessment method is put into practice during the pressing times of uncertainty.

Although there are past literatures on students' perceived attitude towards online assessment, research that investigated learners' experience of online assessment during the pandemic is still not fully understood. With the abrupt and massive changes in assessment and testing approaches, students are expressing concern on the feasibility of online assessment. According to Carless and Boud (2018), assessment is a tremendous form of motivation for students which impacts their progress in studies. Students want to ensure that online assessment is able to enhance their performance and not to be affected by potential challenges such as technical issues (Bennet et al., 2017) because the quality of learning largely depends on the availability and effectiveness of digital resources (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Additionally, fairness in grading is also a main concern since it is technology-driven and dependent on internet availability (Omar et al., 2021). It allows students to thrive as a result of understanding their own effort and expectation



(Martin, 2020). These circumstances clearly reflect the importance to redesign online assessments properly to ensure its effectiveness and to allow students to improve their performance, uninterrupted.

Due to the demands of online assessment, universities in Malaysia are also looking into some possible alterations. In Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), the UFUTURE system is employed as a learning management system where teaching and learning processes alongside assessments are carried out on the suggested platform. Other platforms such as Google Classroom, Cisco Webex and Zoom are among the preferred platforms which are also utilised by students and educators. With this in mind, the effective implementation and innovation of new evaluation methodologies are urgently required to remain relevant during the endemic period (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Thus, it is essential to further explore and understand students' views regarding online assessment as well as to identify possible challenges in the implementation of online assessment.

Therefore, the study hopes to seek answers to the following research questions; (a) What are the Diploma students' perceptions towards online assessment in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom? and (b) What are the challenges faced by the students when conducting online assessment? In this context, it is important to understand the students' perceptions and experiences in order to accommodate their learning needs best. The findings of the present research hope to provide useful and meaningful insights to decision-makers in implementing best practices for online assessment methods in the future.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Online Assessment*

As part of an essential component in recent years, online assessment is defined through various meanings by different researchers. Online assessment is defined as a technology-based assessment which is efficient in measuring students' performance in an online platform (Iskandar et al., 2021). To this, online assessment is also referred to as an alternative method to assess learning via a website or an application (Yoestara et al., 2020). Additionally, online assessment is further defined as a method to evaluate students' performance, provide feedback and motivate students in an online environment (Weleschuk et al., 2019). Thus, for the purpose of this research, online assessment refers to a process involving students' performance to achieve a certain degree of understanding based on their knowledge biases through digital means. This may include online tests, quizzes, presentations or submissions of assignments via digital platforms.

Online assessment gains the interests of many schools of thought which contributes to the present study. According to Rosa Amalia (2018), students perceived online assessment as both positive and negative. The findings revealed that students experienced challenges when assessment is done online especially in terms of time constraint and poor network connection. To add, the data gathered by Sarah Khan and Rashid Azim Khan (2018) further revealed that online assessment was not appreciated and accepted by university students. This finding echoed similar results to a more recent study in Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), where both undergraduate and postgraduate students preferred traditional assessment to online assessment (Iskandar et al., 2021).



In another study, Howe (2020) investigated the perceptions of students and lecturers on e-assessment. Interestingly, the results revealed a positive attitude towards the implementation of online assessment in various contexts of teaching and learning. The result also shared similar findings in the works of past literature on students' positive experience on online assessment during the pandemic (Loi & Ang, 2022; Omar et al., 2021).

#### *Benefits Online Assessment*

Past literature has highlighted the importance of online assessment in many ways. To begin with, online assessment offers more flexibility as compared to traditional assessment. According to Sarah Khan and Rashid Azim Khan (2018), online assessment allows students to conduct assessments anytime and anywhere because of the privilege to choose a convenient time and place. Majority of students also claimed to feel comfortable with online assessment (Sarah Khan & Rashid Azim Khan, 2018). Secondly, online assessment is also thought to develop independent and autonomous learners in many areas. In a study by Kebritchi et al. (2017), online assessment enables students to be self-paced and self-motivated in their learning. This is due to greater flexibility in an online environment, which means greater control of their learning progress compared to traditional methods. Thirdly, online assessment benefits students in terms of the tendency to provide and receive immediate feedback (Alruwais et al., 2018). The findings of Rolim and Isaias (2018) further stated that frequent and detailed feedback can be provided to students as it is useful to facilitate learning and enhance performance in a particular subject (Yoestara et al., 2020). Indeed, online assessment offers many advantages to both students and educators in navigating assessments on digital platforms.

#### *Challenges of Online Assessment*

Despite the positive outcome that online assessment can offer, it also posed some drawbacks along the way. In a study undertaken by Weleschuk et al. (2019), students expressed concern regarding fairness in online assessment. It was claimed that online assessment facilitates cheating since nobody is monitoring the process especially in online examinations where there is a tendency to seek help from classmates or refer to notes when completing the assessment online (Hylton et al., 2016). This appears to be challenging for instructors to control and prevent cheating from taking place in a virtual environment. Furthermore, the lack of technological knowledge and skills also contribute to the trouble of conducting online assessment among students. According to Alruwais et al. (2018), students who experience problems with technological resources may hinder them from using the assessment tools effectively. The findings also shared similar results among undergraduates and postgraduates who revealed challenges in terms of having technical and personal issues in completing online assessment effectively (Iskandar et al., 2021). This also includes concerns relating to distractions at home, thus affecting students' focus to complete tasks online (Norazrina, 2020).

Ultimately, one of the major challenges experienced by students is the instability of the Internet network regardless of location. A study by Azmina et al. (2017) stated that students struggled to complete online examinations due to poor Internet connection. Similar findings also revealed that students' main concern in completing online assessment successfully depends largely on the availability and stability of Internet connections (Agung & Surtikanti, 2020; Lischer et al., 2021). On top of that, economic challenges such as purchasing costly data plans and Internet fees also contribute to the difficulty to complete online assessment (Demuyakor, 2020). As a result of



this, it may impede the smooth process of administering and completing assessment in any online platform.

Although there are various studies carried out on online assessment in recent years, research to explore students' perspective on online assessment in the context of public universities in Sarawak is still scarce especially in the endemic period. It is hoped that the present study will garner fruitful insights from the university students to implement best practices in online assessment in the future.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The research employed a quantitative research design throughout the course of the study. A survey was conducted to answer the research questions which are to explore Diploma students' perception on online assessment in an English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom and the challenges faced by them. This study involved 62 Diploma students from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Sarawak Kampus Samarahan from various faculties who are currently in the second year of their Diploma studies. These students were selected for the purpose of this study as they have undertaken at least one English subject in the previous semesters. The data collected was then analysed and tabulated by using a numeration formula.

### *Instrumentation*

The instrument used in the study is adapted from the works of Iskandar et al. (2021) which consists of 25 items. It was adapted and used in this study to investigate Diploma students' perceptions of online assessment in an ESL classroom as well as the challenges faced by these students. The questionnaire is based on two sections; Section A: Students' Perceptions of Online Assessment and Section B: Challenges of Online Assessment. The choices of answers for every item were arranged in a 5-point Likert Scale with values ranging from 1=*Strongly Disagree*, 2=*Disagree*, 3=*Neutral*, 4=*Agree*, 5 = *Strongly Agree*. The data was administered through an online questionnaire via Google Form and the responses recorded were then analysed by using a numeration formula.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

From the demographic profile, the analysis showed that the female respondents represented 71% of the overall sample (n=62) with a total of 44 respondents, while only 29% were male representing 18 respondents. The distribution of respondents based on faculties revealed that a large number of respondents came from the Faculty of Business Management with 38.7% followed by the Faculty of Information Management with 30.6%, Faculty of Accounting with 16.2% and Faculty of Sports Science and Recreation being the minority with a total of 14.5%. Following that, the respondents CGPA scores revealed that the majority of the respondents' scores were between the ranges of 3.00 to 3.50 with a total of 42.4%. This shows that most of the students are consistent in their performance at the Diploma level.



**Research Question 1:**

What are the Diploma students' perceptions towards online assessment in the English as a second language (ESL) classroom?

To answer the first research question, the data was analysed according to the fifteen statements presented in Section A: Students' Perceptions of Online Assessment in the questionnaire. Table 1 provides a summary of the value of the overall percentage obtained from the findings.

**Table 1**  
Students' perceptions towards online assessment

<b>Items</b>	<b>Statements</b>	<b>SD (%)</b>	<b>D (%)</b>	<b>N (%)</b>	<b>A (%)</b>	<b>SA (%)</b>
1.	Online assessment enhances my learning quality.	0	1.6	32.3	41.9	24.2
2.	Online assessment improves my technical skills.	0	3.3	24.6	50.8	21.3
3.	Online assessment enhances self-learning.	1.6	1.6	14.8	52.5	29.5
4.	Online assessment provides immediate feedback about my performance.	0	3.2	22.6	51.6	22.6
5.	Online assessment provides unbiased grading. It is fair.	1.6	1.6	32.2	43.5	21
6.	Online assessment does not facilitate cheating.	1.6	6.6	42.6	32.8	16.4
7.	Online assessment is suitable for all students.	1.6	14.8	26.2	34.4	23
8.	Online assessment is suitable (applicable) for all subjects.	0	19.4	21	30.6	29
9.	Online assessment reduces the exam stress.	1.6	1.6	32.3	30.6	33.9
10.	Online assessment is convenient and flexible.	0	3.2	29	35.5	32.3
11.	Online assessment motivates me to learn the subject matter.	0	6.5	30.6	38.7	24.4
12.	Online assessment is easier than the traditional assessment.	1.6	4.8	33.9	29	30.6
13.	Online assessment is faster than the traditional paper assessments.	0	3.2	30.6	32.3	33.9
14.	I prefer online tests, quizzes, exams, presentations and other online assessment tools.	0	1.6	22.6	38.7	37.1
15.	I prefer online assessment to traditional assessment.	0	1.6	27.4	38.7	32.3

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree    2=Disagree    3=Neutral    4= Agree    5 = Strongly Agree





Table 1 shows the perceptions of Diploma students on online assessments in the ESL classroom at Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Cawangan Sarawak Kampus Samarahan. The respondents were asked to rate their perceived attitude towards online assessment according to the fifteen statements in Table 1. Based on the analysis, it was revealed that students generally have positive viewpoints on online assessment. The descriptive statistics on every item in this section indicated that most respondents identified their responses as “Agree” (see Table 1). From the table, a total of 82 percent of the respondents indicated either “Agree” or “Strongly agree” that online assessment enhances self-learning. The result supported the findings of Iskandar et al. (2021) that also identified the ability to self-learn as a result of online assessment. Moreover, research by Kebritchi et al. (2017) also revealed similar results in their findings which suggested that online assessment enables students to be self-paced and self-motivated because of the opportunity to be autonomous and independent in completing assessment online. Interestingly, respondents further reported that online assessment provides unbiased grading and that it is fair with a total of 75.7 percent of the respondents. Although recent studies have explored fairness in face-to-face classes (Grace, 2017; Rasooli et al., 2019, Fan et al., 2020; Murillo & Hidalgo, 2017; 2020), empirical studies to investigate students’ perceptions of fairness in online assessment is still scarce. Therefore, this finding is important in the development of this study while adding data to existing literature.

Not only that, online assessment is also thought to provide immediate feedback about students’ performance. Based on the findings, 74.2 percent of the respondents answered “Agree” or “Strongly agree” to the aforementioned statement, which reflects the findings of Alruwais et al. (2018) indicating that online assessment is beneficial in providing and receiving immediate feedback. Getting prompt feedback gives students the privilege to facilitate and enhance their performance in a particular subject (Rolim & Isaias, 2018; Yoestara et al., 2020). Hence, it is no surprise as to why students appreciate getting immediate feedback about their assessments especially when it is done online. Some online platforms provide immediate feedback as soon as students complete a test or quiz, but other platforms may still require online feedback from their lecturers, which may be time-consuming. Despite that, receiving feedback is indeed a strong indicator for students to progress further in their studies. It is also noteworthy to highlight that the majority of the respondents also indicated that online assessment improves technical skills with 72.1 percent. This finding goes hand in hand with the finding of Iskandar et al. (2021) where students were able to improve their technical skills as a result of self-learning and trying to figure out how assessments can be done on virtual platforms. At the same time, the idea of self-learning also resonated when students revealed that online assessment helps to provide immediate feedback about their performance.

Although students stated a positive response towards online assessment in general, it was also found that 42.6 percent of the respondents felt neutral about the statement i.e., online assessment does not facilitate cheating. This finding appeared to be contradicting from the result revealed by Weleschuk et al. (2019) in their research, where students expressed concern regarding fairness in online assessment. However, the result from the present study is still an important finding because it implies that respondents still believe that cheating may also be rampant on virtual platforms. According to García-Peñalvo et al. (2021), Kundu and Bej (2021), and Sa’di et al. (2021), one of the disadvantages of online assessment is that it is susceptible to cheating. It is due to the possibility that nobody is monitoring the process when assessment is done online, thus



facilitating cheating indirectly (Hylton et al., 2016). Similarly, this could be the reason why the majority of the respondents felt indifferent about the statement.

Despite this, the majority of respondents (75.8%) still prefer online tests, quizzes, exams, presentations and other online assessment tools. These online assessment methods are thought to be convenient because it allows flexibility to students to work from anywhere and anytime (Sarah Khan & Rashid Azim Khan, 2018). Overall, the majority of the respondents prefer online assessment as compared to traditional assessment, with a total of 38.7 percent of them indicating “Agree” and 32.2 percent stating “Strongly agree”. In general, the perception of the Diploma students’ experience on online assessment revealed a positive outcome as reflected in the works of past studies (Howe, 2020; Omar et al., 2021; Loi & Ang, 2022).

**Research Question 2:**

What are the challenges faced by the students when conducting online assessment?

To answer the second research question, the data was analysed based on the ten statements presented in Section B: Challenges of Online Assessment of the questionnaire. Table 2 provides a summary of the value of the overall percentage obtained from the findings.

Table 2  
Challenges of online assessment

Items	Statements	SD (%)	D (%)	N (%)	A (%)	SA (%)
1.	Lack of physical space or proper facilities.	3.2	8.1	58.1	24.2	6.5
2.	Lack of resources at the library.	1.6	12.9	48.4	27.4	9.7
3.	Lack of Internet access.	6.5	9.7	35.5	35.5	12.9
4.	Distractions at home.	6.6	14.8	37.7	27.9	13.1
5.	Lack of motivation.	8.2	19.7	39.3	27.9	4.9
6.	Economic challenges (E.g.: Data plan, Internet fee, etc.)	4.9	6.6	27.9	50.8	9.8
7.	Lack of feedback from the lecturers.	4.9	14.8	49.2	27.9	3.3
8.	Online assessment made me nervous.	9.8	18	41	24.6	6.6
9.	Technical challenges (Lack of technological knowledge / unavailability of equipment).	8.2	4.9	52.5	29.5	4.9
10.	Time constraint / management.	3.3	3.3	44.3	44.3	4.9

Scale: 1=Strongly Disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4= Agree 5 = Strongly Agree

Table 2 illustrates the Diploma students’ perceptions towards the challenges of online assessment in the ESL classroom in tertiary education. From the table, the majority of respondents (60.6%) either agreed or strongly agreed with the economic challenge as one of the concerns of online assessment. This includes the purchase of data plans as well as Internet charges that students need





to bear. This appeared to support the findings of Amir et al. (2020) and Demuyakor (2020) where the additional cost for Internet access is burdensome to some students and contributes to financial concerns. Besides, it was also revealed that the challenge of time constraint or time management shares a similar percentage with 44.3 percent of the respondents were undecided, and the same percentage (44.3%) also agreed with the statement. From the result, it can be clearly seen that both financial and time constraints affected the students greatly. Furthermore, the result also showed a common challenge which is the lack of Internet access when completing online assessment with 35.5 percent agreed and 12.9 percent strongly agreed to the statement. The results echoed the findings of past research which identified Internet connection as a great problem in online assessment among university students (Azmina et al., 2017; Agung & Surtikanti, 2020; Lischer et al., 2021). Indeed, the Internet network appears to be a constant challenge in the online environment.

However, it is noteworthy to highlight that the majority of the respondents in this section identified their choices as “Neutral” (see Table 2). Results revealed that respondents were indecisive about the lack of physical space of proper facilities with 58.1 percent. In addition, respondents were also undecided about other prominent challenges which included technical challenges (52.5%), lack of feedback from lecturers (49.2%) and lack of resources at the library (48.4%). According to Alruwais et al. (2018), problems with technological resources may hinder students to utilise assessment tools effectively. This finding suggests that students were generally unsure if online assessment contributes to significant challenges in terms of availability of physical space, technical aspect, the lack of feedback or limited resources at the library. Indeed, the challenges of completing assessment online is inevitable as revealed in the result discussed in this section. This further calls for more creative measures in carrying out assessment practices as part of an integral aspect in the ESL classroom (Rijeng & Daneil, 2016). If executed creatively, the appropriate online assessment may assist students’ engagement to perform effectively despite the online environment.

To summarise the overall quantitative findings, it can be concluded that the Diploma students showcased a positive outlook towards online assessment to be conducted in the ESL classroom. Students generally agreed that conducting assessments online contributes to many positive outcomes on the students’ performance although at most times, they were rather unsure about the intensity of challenges faced as a result of online assessment.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, online assessment came a long way even before the pandemic hit the nation. It then became a primary means of instruction when most institutions of higher learning were forced to put physical meetings to a halt during the difficult times. For this reason, the present study investigated the Diploma students’ perceptions towards online assessment in the ESL classroom along with the challenges faced by the students. Overall, the results indicated that students’ responses were relatively positive, with the majority of the responses indicating that online assessment allows them to enhance self-learning. In terms of the challenges, the findings also suggested that students’ main concern revealed economic challenges as the main contributor to the problem they experienced when being assessed online.



This study provides useful insights to relevant stakeholders especially in higher education institutions. This is important to develop awareness of the perceptions and experiences students face when dealing with online assessment as part of the new norm in this endemic period. Future researchers may explore factors that contribute to the success of online assessment and examine its relationship to student engagement and motivation. Additionally, best practices for online assessment may also be further explored which may include views from the perspectives of students and educators. It is also recommended to include both students and educators in interview protocols to seek for more in depth information regarding online assessment during the endemic period. Different views and perspectives from various stakeholders would also deliver interesting findings to the study. Also, other documents such as students' assignments and educators' teaching portfolio may also be analysed in future studies. This, in turn, may assist in determining the successful implementation of online assessment across all programs in higher learning institutions.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

We confirm that the article is the result of the researcher's own efforts and has not been previously published or is currently being reviewed for publication elsewhere. We affirm that all authors have made substantial contributions to the material submitted to the Journal of Creative Practices in Language Learning and Teaching (CPLT).

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors contributed to the idea and development of the study up to the final revision of the manuscript.





## About the Authors

	<p>Jacqueline Susan Rijeng is a Senior Lecturer at the Academy of Language Studies in UiTM Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan. She has been involved in English Language teaching and learning for over 12 years and is actively involved in research, invention, innovation and design alongside consultancy work. Her areas of interest include intercultural communication, digital literacy, assessment and creativity.</p>
	<p>Imelia Laura Daneil is a senior lecturer in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Mukah. She has been involved in English language teaching and educational technology. Her areas of interest include teaching innovation and design and digital education.</p>
	<p>Kimberley Lau Yih Long is a senior lecturer in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan, specialises in English language teaching, Sociolinguistics and Applied Linguistics. With a keen interest in teaching and learning innovations, she actively explores strategies to enhance ESL classrooms. Her expertise contributes to the advancement of English language education and the understanding of sociolinguistic dynamics in diverse linguistic contexts.</p>
	<p>Tang Howe Eng is an Associate Professor in College of Computing, Informatics and Mathematics, Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Sarawak Branch Mukah Campus. Having eighteen years of experience in teaching Mathematics, her research interests lie in the area of educational researches, operations researches and statistical analyses especially in the application of computer and mathematical modeling. She has conducted extensive projects in Malaysia, China, Singapore and Indonesia.</p>



Christine Jacqueline Runggol is a lecturer in Akademi Pengajian Bahasa, Universiti Teknologi MARA Cawangan Sarawak, Kampus Samarahan. She has vast experience in teaching students of diverse academic backgrounds. Her research interests include English language education and Sociolinguistics. Being an Iban herself, her extensive knowledge of the Iban language and culture greatly enhances the understanding of Iban language and sociolinguistic dynamics of this research.