


Online Language Testing and Assessment in the Pandemic: Opinions from Test Administrators and Examiners

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ABSTRACT

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The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted foreign language education in general and assessment practices in particular. Many changes have been implemented regarding the mode of language testing and assessment when conventional face-to-face examinations cannot be applied. One radical change is the emergence and acceptance of online at-home assessments. The University of Languages and International Studies, Vietnam National University (VNU-ULIS), has followed this trend with numerous online testing and assessment activities during the 2021-2022 period. These activities assess learners' language learning progress and proficiency via different tests. To evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of online testing and assessment during the period, the researchers surveyed more than one hundred test administrators and examiners on their opinions and experiences in virtual exams. The participants shared valuable information on their experiences with the online system and their beliefs on the advantages and drawbacks of online at-home assessments. As a result, the research project can develop and later expand its sample as well as utilize other data collection methods to gain multi-dimensional information.

Introduction

The last two years have witnessed dramatic changes in every field due to the pandemic's influence. In education, alternative forms of teaching, learning, and assessing have been implemented to replace conventional face-to-face classrooms in the context of lockdowns and social distancing. Regarding testing and assessment, a number of online, open-web, and at-home examinations have become available (Gehringer & Peddycord III, 2013; Isbell & Kremmel, 2020). Around the globe, online assessments have been conducted for English, French, German, Spanish, and Korean language proficiency. In Vietnam, online teaching and learning are regulated by guidelines issued in March 2021 by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). According to the document, online testing and assessment are utilized only when the conventional form cannot happen, and the at-home examinations are under MOET's regulations. Accordingly, the university and its associated middle school and high school organized various online testing and assessment activities in 2021-2022. So far, studies in this

new field in Vietnam are quite limited. Therefore, this research was conducted with the purpose of collecting test administrators' and examiners' opinions and experiences concerning online examinations at the university. The ultimate purpose of the study is to report what test administrators and examiners of this Vietnamese university have experienced and how they perceive the strengths and disadvantages of computer-based assessment forms. As a result, the researchers can reflect on what happened in the area of university testing and assessment, then contribute valuable information to the field.

Literature review

The body of international research has seen papers targeting online testing and assessment. According to Isbell and Kremmel (2020), a number of test providers have converted their traditional paper-based test formats to computer-based versions. Some big names in at-home proficiency testing are ACTFL Assessments, Duolingo English Test, IELTS Indicator, LanguageCert, TEF Express, TOEFL iBT Special Home Edition, and Versant. Not only does this conversion happen in the field of high-stakes tests, but it is also common in educational institutions regarding diagnostic tests, placement tests, and summative assessments (Plough & Raquel, 2020; Ockey, 2021; Purpura et al., 2021). The common feature of examined tests is the usage of technology and supervised software. Due to the COVID pandemic, automated assessment has become a part of the teaching and learning process throughout the world. Technology has been applied in both formative and summative assessments, from classroom assessments to high-stakes examinations. This addresses the issue that the usage of automated assessment may lag behind technological development (Dreher et al., 2011). Additionally, there is a concern about cheating in online tests. Li et al. (2021) cite methods HAT, Examity, and Proctortrack as some of the associated technologies assisting with online proctoring.

Teachers and learners are reported to benefit from online testing and assessment. Students can take exams nearly anywhere with an Internet connection (Gehring & Peddycord III, 2013), and teachers can easily distribute the testing materials with technical support (Yulianto & Mujtahin, 2021). Moreover, the effectiveness in terms of saving time, the convenience of the platform interface, workforce involvement, and reduction of administrative expenditures are undoubted advantages of at-home exams (Dreher et al., 2011; Baleni, 2015; Gehring & Peddycord III, 2013; Li et al., 2021). From both teachers' and students' viewpoints, the benefits of immediate feedback and automatic grading are highly appreciated. Students feel much more encouraged when they receive their scores with prompt formative feedback from teachers. (Demo, 2009; Baleni, 2015; Forrester, 2020; Hoang et al., 2021). These can be a part of “pedagogical benefits”, which also include the idea that teachers are freed from administrative tasks like preparing paper-based tests or marking assessment items, then providing individual guidance to students (Dreher et al., 2011). This study also showed that the pedagogical benefits of online assessment could lead to a commercial benefit for the educational institution. That is to say, "pedagogical benefits of improved assessment methods and outcomes can affect the overall university performance as a business enterprise." (Dreher et al., 2011, p.177). The institution can increase its reputation from its valued assessment platforms, thus attracting more learners to its doors.

However, the drawbacks of virtual assessment should be mentioned. Gehring & Peddycord III (2013) summarized the disadvantages of online testing, which covers aspects of administration,

grading, and academic integrity. They emphasized that if the Internet connection is poor, the exam can be a failure (Yulianto & Mujtahin, 2021). Thus, there exists a dependence on technology that sometimes goes beyond human control. Cheating in virtual exams is worth considering, even though many measures have been provided to prevent this issue. Furthermore, teachers and students also recounted their negative feelings towards the test validity, practicality, and reliability of e-assessment (Dermo, 2009; Yulianto & Mujtahin, 2021; Hoang et al., 2021). Teachers, in particular, reflected that they initially faced serious barriers related to pedagogical, technical, administrative, and affective issues after the shift to online assessment (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). Even when the course ended, surveyed teachers still reported some lingering problems affecting their practice. They stated that being competent in technology for online assessment was still a hard duty for them. They had a tendency to choose face-to-face teaching as a preferable choice due to its interactive features over the technology.

In Vietnam, the education system has followed the global trend of online instruction due to the pandemic. MOET issued Decision 09/2021/TT- BGDĐT on March 30th, 2021, which provided regulations on managing and organizing online teaching and learning activities in general education institutions and continuing education institutions. The decision regulates what to do with formative and summative assessment in the context of virtual classrooms. Formative assessment is conducted during the teaching and learning process under MOET's control. Summative assessment, if it cannot be held at the institution due to social distancing or lockdowns, should occur online. The heads of the institutions are responsible for online examinations to ensure their validity, reliability, and equity. Additionally, schools and higher education institutions across the country have also implemented a range of online testing and assessment in the past two years. Regarding online learning and teaching activities across the country, some studies have been conducted for the last two years (Nguyen, 2021; Tran & Nguyen, 2021; Andrew, 2022). However, there are not many research papers and academic publications related to virtual language testing and assessment in Vietnam. Therefore, this study was carried out to contribute to the national research community of online testing and assessment activities and narrow the gap with the current global research trend.

Research Questions

The study aims to answer three research questions:

1. What were test administrators' and examiners' experiences of online language testing and assessment?
2. What are the advantages of online language testing and assessment as perceived by test administrators and examiners?
3. What are the disadvantages of online language testing and assessment as perceived by test administrators and examiners?

Methods

Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The research was conducted at a university in Hanoi, Vietnam. The university has its associated middle school and high school. The total sample involves 109 test administrators and examiners. Of those participants, 24.8% are university English language teachers; 24.8% are

university teachers of languages other than English; 24.8% are English language teachers at a gifted foreign language specialized high school, 15.6% are English language teachers from a middle school, and 10% are administrators from these three institutions. The average age of the participants is 36.45 (SD = 8.8). The average number of years of experience is 12.1 (SD = 8.75), with 97.2% being female, 6.4% male, and 0.9 % did not reveal their gender. The majority of the participants (96.3%) claim that they usually use computers in their daily life.

Data collection & analysis

An online questionnaire was built on Google Forms to survey test administrators and examiners about their experiences of online language testing and assessment as well as their opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. The questionnaire has four main parts. The first part aims to collect the participants' background information. The second part has questions to explore what test administrators and examiners experienced while doing their online assessment tasks. The next part asks the participants to share their opinions on the positive aspects of online language testing and assessment, whereas the final part focuses on their ideas about the drawbacks. The survey questions were built upon the analysis of and adaptation from research by Ockey (2021), Isbell and Kremmel (2020), Li et al. (2021), Dreher et al. (2011), Baleni (2015), Gehringer and Peddycord III (2013) as well as upon the experiences of the research team, having played different roles in online test administration. Most of the questions are Likert-scale type. The scale is from 1 to 4 or 5, showing the degree of agreement (from strongly agree to strongly disagree) or frequency (from usually to never). Also, some open-ended questions were added to collect more ideas from the participants, if any. Regarding data analysis, descriptive statistics were chosen to present and interpret the data.

Findings

Test administrators' and examiners' experiences of online language testing and assessment

The data show that the test administrators and examiners experienced online tests for various purposes during the pandemic period, namely mid-term tests, end-of-term tests, and achievement tests (i.e., a language proficiency test as an outcome requirement for students). Among those, the majority dealt with end-of-term (81.7%) and mid-term tests (81.7%), while a little more than a third (35.8%) played a role in online achievement tests (Figure 1). This supports the findings of Plough and Raquel (2020); Ockey (2021); Purpura et al. (2021).

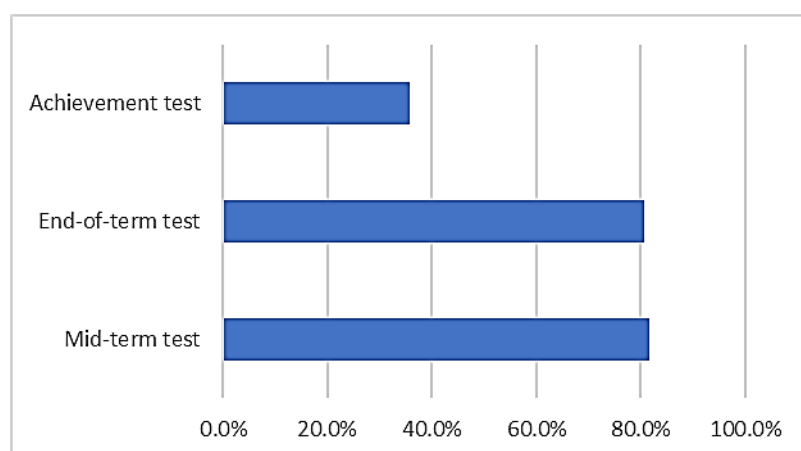


Figure 1. Online test purposes (N = 109)

In these tests, the most popular tool for test administration was Zoom. 77.1% of the test administrators and examiners revealed that they were usually asked to use this tool for online testing by their managers. Microsoft Teams (abbr.: MS Teams) ranks second, with 36.7% of the participants reporting its use. The other applications only account for a negligible percentage, with only 3.7% of regular users (Figure 2). Additionally, when involved in these online tests, a large number of participants observed that test takers were usually required to use a camera or webcam on the device on which they were taking the test (64.2%). Meanwhile, 39.4% mentioned the use of one camera placed perpendicular to the test taker so that the test administrator could see both the test taker and his/her working screen. 45.9% observed two cameras used, one of which was on the device used for the test and another perpendicular to the test taker (Figure 3).

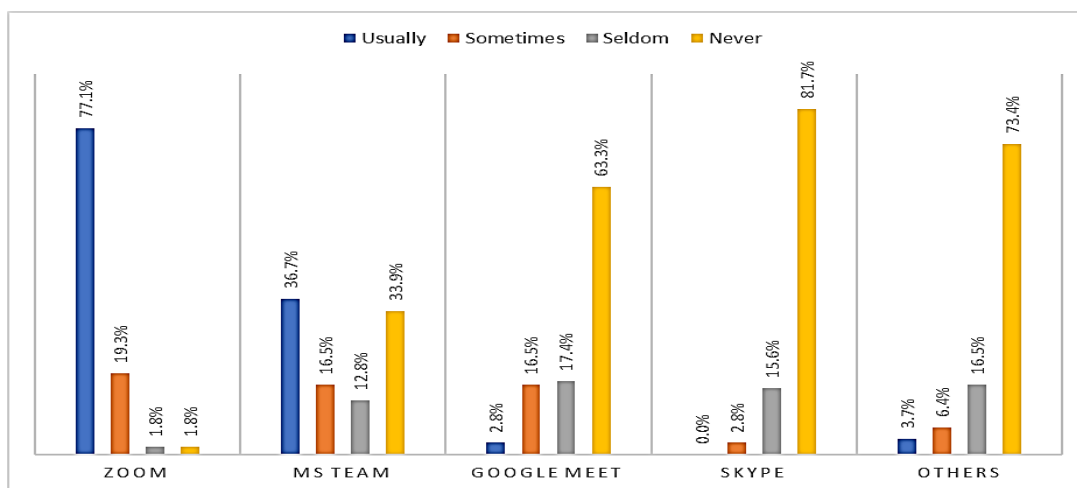


Figure 2. Tools for test administration (N = 109)

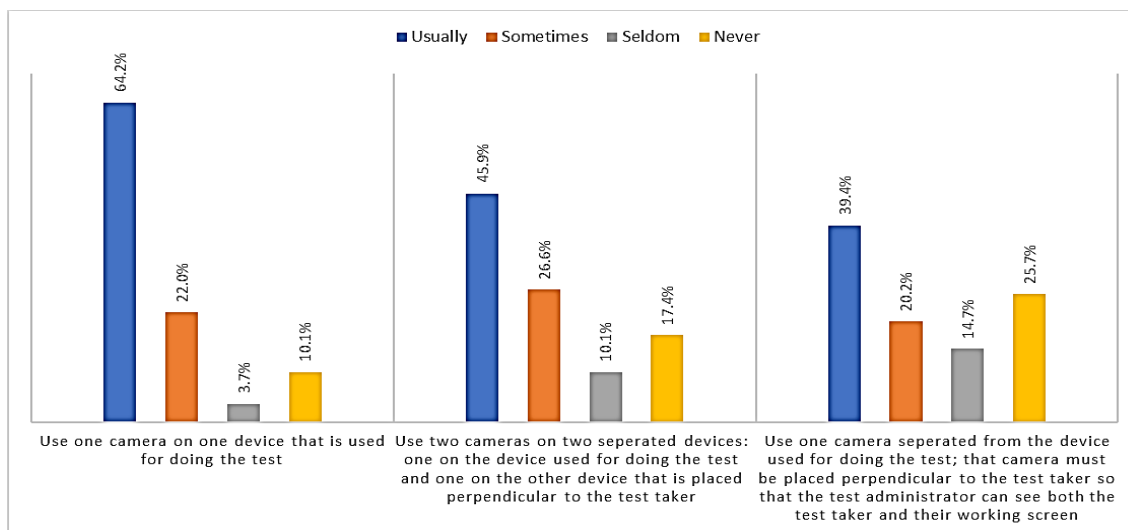


Figure 3. Camera use during the online test (N = 109)

As for the tools for collecting test papers (i.e., on grammar-vocabulary, listening, reading, and writing), Google Forms were utilized the most, with 63.6%, and 35.5% of the participants utilized Microsoft Forms (abbr.: MS Forms). An email was reported to be used by nearly 20% of the participants, while each of the other tools, such as Zalo and the like, and a learning management system (abbr.: LMS) account for less than 16% (Figure 4).

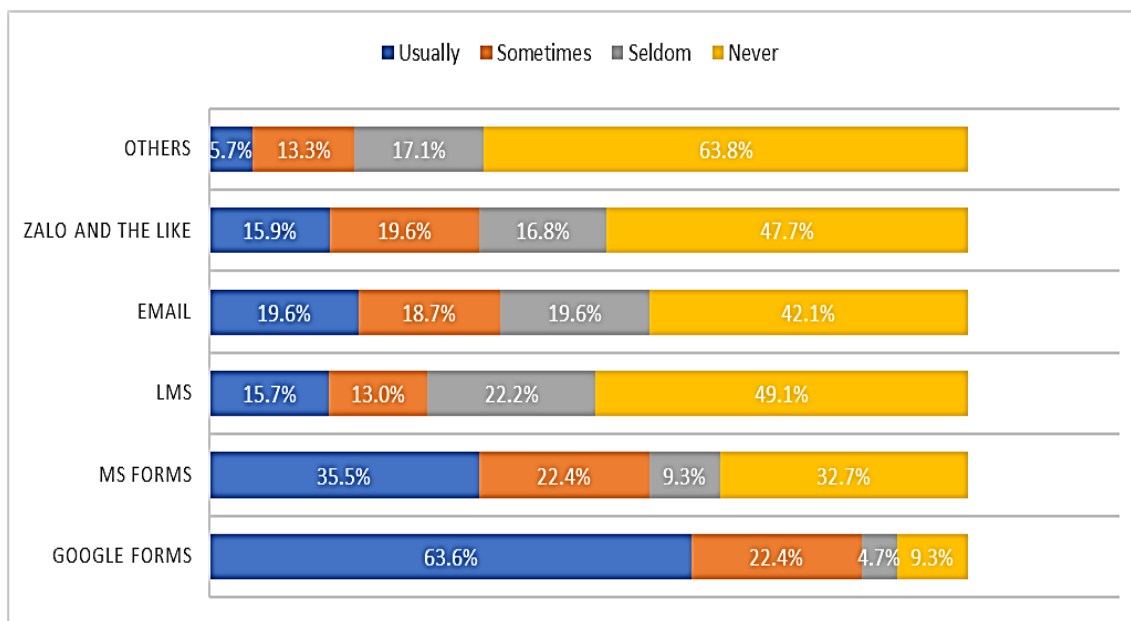


Figure 4. Tools for collecting test papers (N = 107)

Besides experiencing different tools for supervising test takers and collecting test papers, the participants mentioned how the listening test audio was delivered to test takers and how test takers submitted their writing papers. 58.7% of the respondents stated that test takers usually listened to the audio file embedded in the online testing platform (Figure 5). 13% of the respondents revealed test takers usually downloaded the audio file onto their devices. For the writing papers, 72.5% of the participants reported that test takers usually typed their answers directly on the forms; meanwhile, 23.4% and 29%, respectively, reported that test takers sent their typed and handwritten papers via another tool (Figure 6).

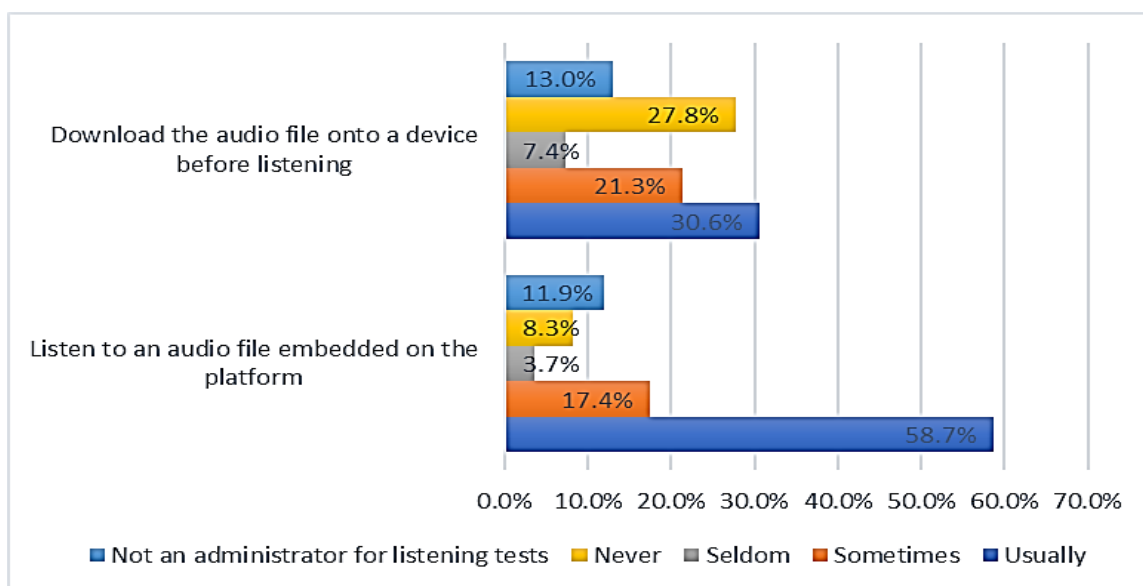


Figure 5. Use of the listening test audio (N = 109)

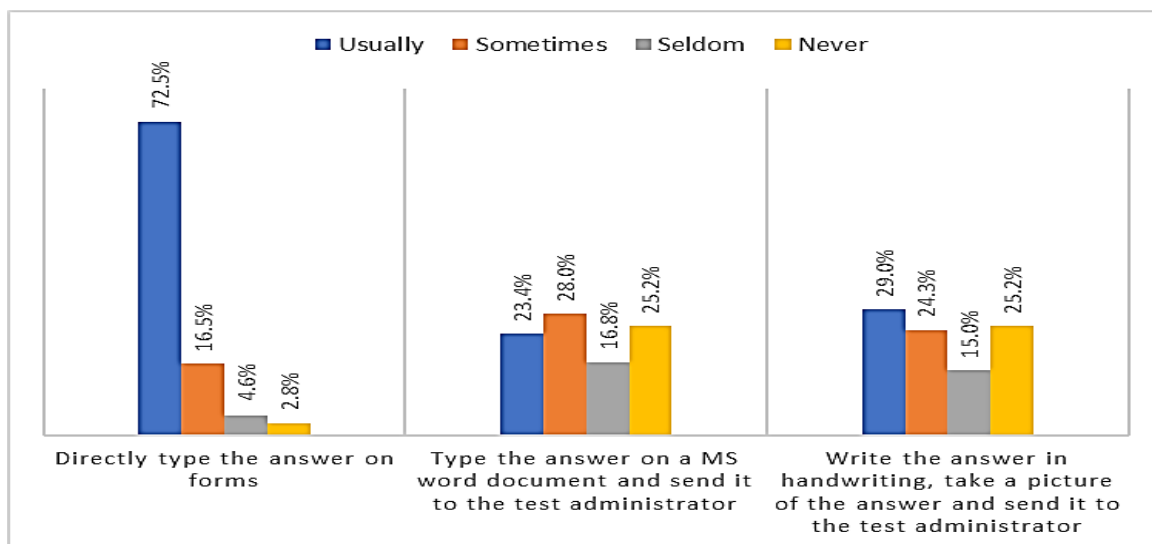


Figure 6. Submission of writing papers (N = 109)

Strengths of online language testing and assessment as perceived by test administrators and examiners

As shown in the data, a very large number of the participants agree and strongly agree with statements concerning the strengths of online language testing and assessment.

The first group of advantages is related to test takers' online performance. The percentage of participants that recognized these advantages ranges from 67% to 98.2% (Figure 7). Specifically, 98.2% of the respondents felt that the answers are clear and friendly for the eyes when they are typed. 96.3% shared the same opinion that it is convenient and time-saving for test takers to choose and change the answers. 92.7% recognized a useful function of the online platforms that allow test takers to see their results and answers instantly after they finish their test. In this aspect, the paper advocates what has been presented in a number of existing studies regarding the effectiveness of at-home exams, such as Dreher et al. (2011) and Demo (2009), and Hoang et al. (2021). Regarding mistakes of transferring their answers to the answer sheet, 90.8% of the participants agree or strongly agree that online testing can help test takers to avoid them. Regarding the advantages of doing the writing paper, keeping the interaction during conducting the speaking test, and using audio files, the percentage of advocates were 89.9%, 87.2%, and 82.6%, respectively. Noticeably, only 67% of the participants agreed that online testing prevents the test taker's answers from being copied.

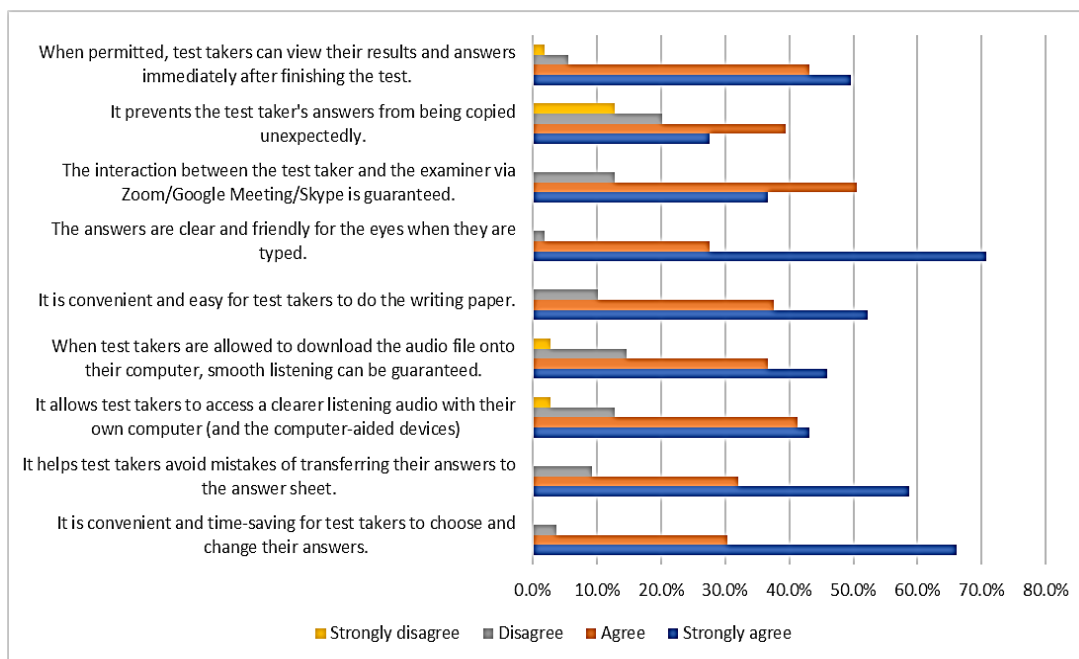


Figure 7. Strengths in test performance (N = 109)

The second group of advantages is related to the test administration process (Figure 8). The lowest percentage of agreement is 89.9%, corresponding to the flexibility in test administration time. The highest percentage of agreement, 97.2%, is associated with the flexibility in the test administration place, the friendliness to the environment, and the possibility of quick and convenient information updates. Additionally, more than 92% of the surveyed test administrators and examiners believe that online testing prevents situations of lacking or misdelivering the answer sheets and that it saves time, money, and effort for both test takers and the test administration itself. These results reflect what has been reported by Dreher et al. (2011) and Gehringer and Peddycord III (2013).

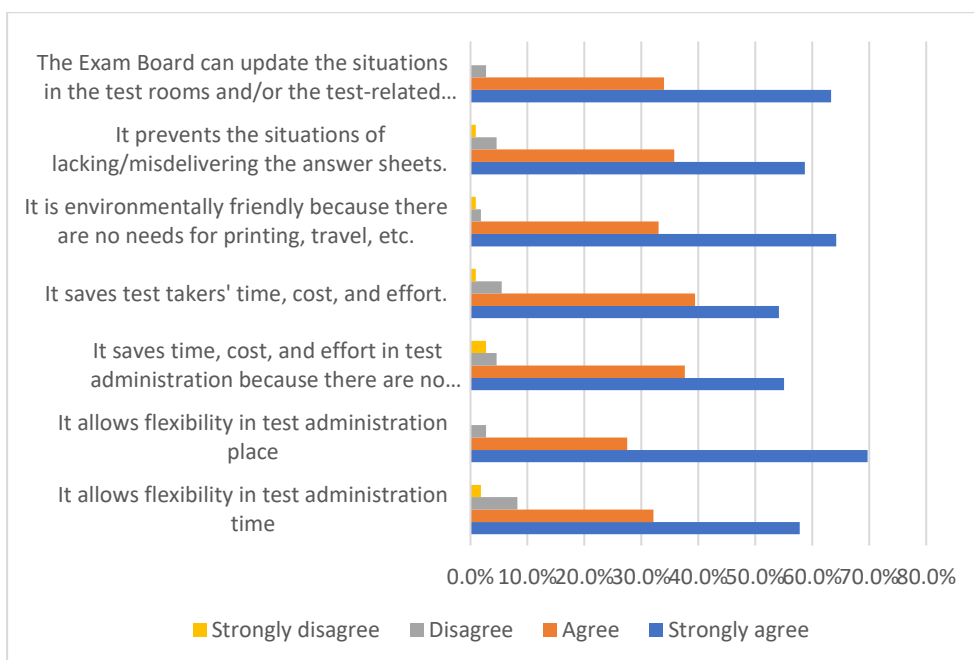


Figure 8. Strengths of the test administration process (N = 109)

The last group of advantages is related to the marking process (Figure 9). 100% of the respondents agreed that online testing allows flexibility in where test-marking occurs and that it is convenient for data storage and analysis. 99.1% also recognize that it saves time to mark multiple-choice test papers when the test is conducted online. The other advantages that are related to test-marking time, score-processing time, accuracy in marking multiple-choice tests, and accuracy in processing scores are also appreciated by more than 90% of the participants. This can be seen as part of the pedagogical benefits which Dreher et al. (2011) revealed.

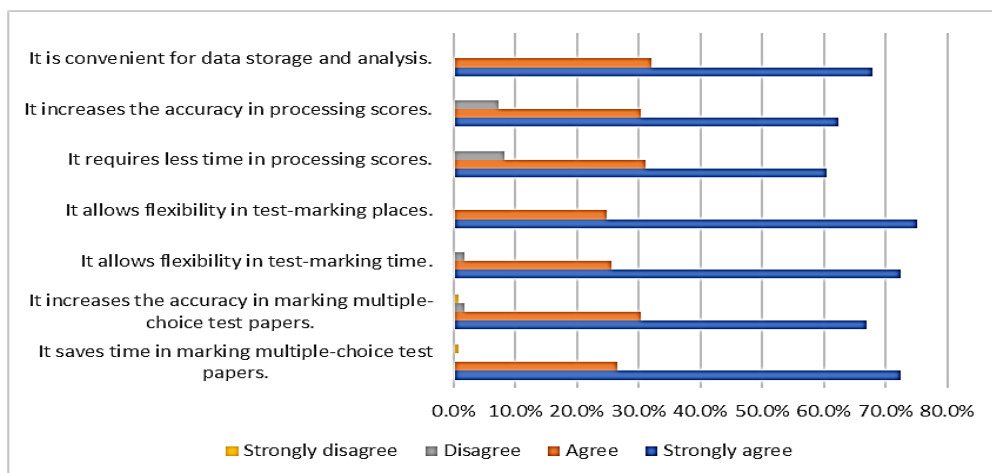


Figure 9. Strengths in the marking process (N = 109)

Besides sharing their agreement on the strong points of online testing in general, the test administrators and examiners also expressed their opinions on the advantages of an LMS over Google/MS Forms (Figure 10). Although only 65 out of 109 test administrators and examiners took advantage of an LMS, 95.4 % of all respondents felt that an LMS could help test takers avoid entering wrong personal information because their personal information is already entered in their accounts. 93.8% hold a belief that an LMS can record test takers' work in progress, avoiding the loss of their answers and preventing them from needing to start over due to a technical problem. Also, more than 80% indicated agreement on the appropriateness of an LMS for online testing as well as its ability to work well on diversified interfaces. Yet, only nearly 70% of the participants believed an LMS was better at restricting test takers from cheating.

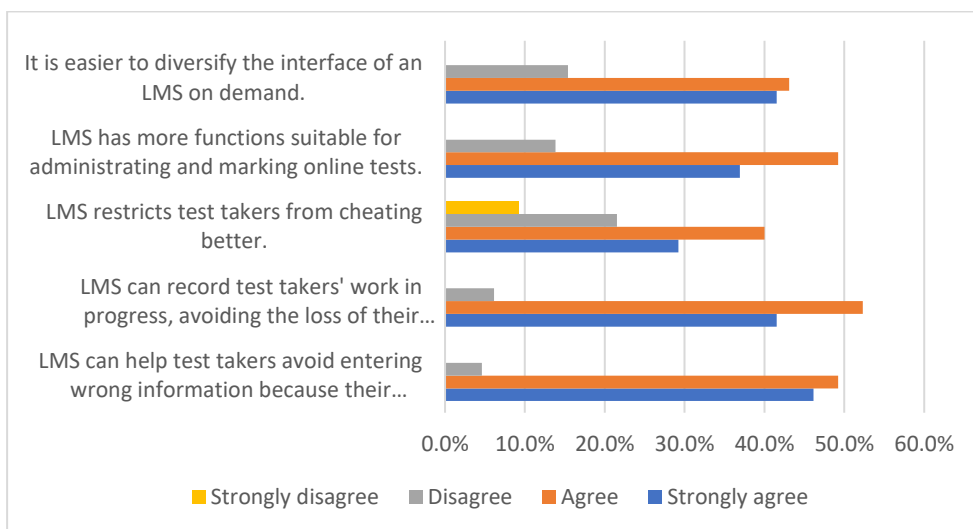


Figure 10. Advantages of an LMS over Google/MS Forms

Disadvantages of online language testing and assessment as perceived by test administrators and examiners

Test administrators' and examiners' opinions on the disadvantages of online language testing and assessment were also surveyed. The data show four groups of drawbacks: problems in online test performance, technical problems, problems in test security, and problems in the marking process.

Although a large number of the respondents agree on the advantages of online testing in terms of online test performance, many of them recognize the potential problems. Particularly, more than 90% hold the opinion that test takers may experience eye strain from looking at screens of electronic devices for a long time and that test takers may lose concentration and process information more slowly, especially with long documents. Likewise, approximately 90% agree on test takers' difficulty in reading the texts while scrolling up and down as well as in remembering the given information without taking notes or marking on the test materials. More than half of the respondents show their agreement on test takers possibly mistaking the test room and time (Figure 11).

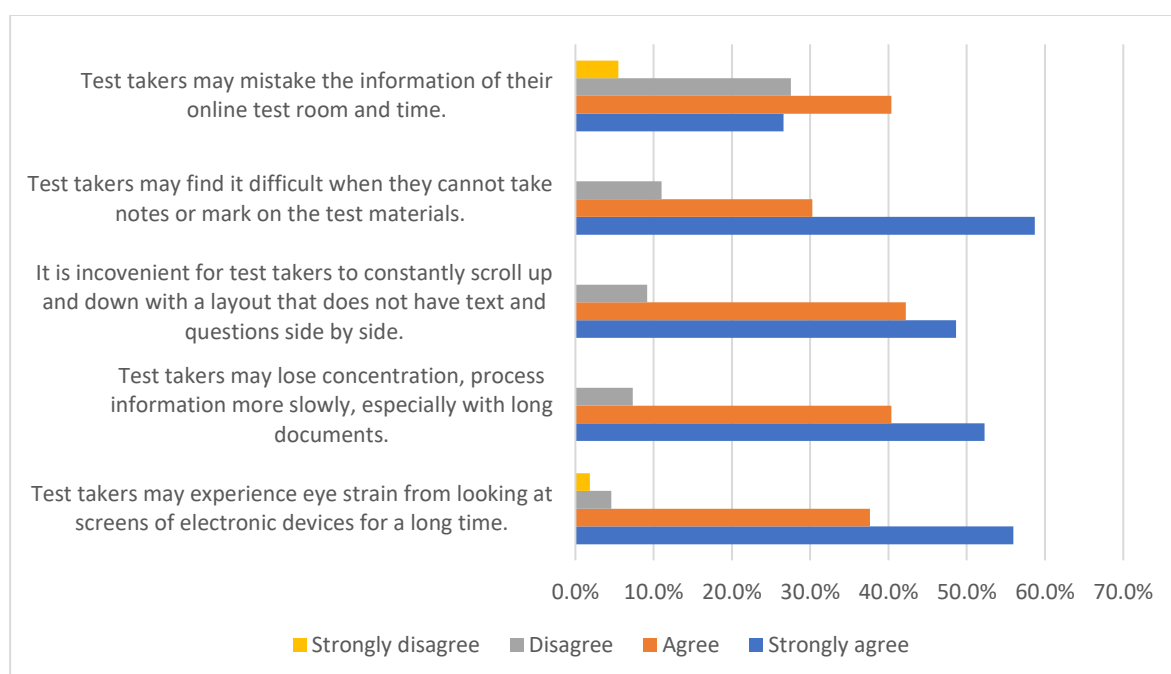


Figure 11. Problems in test performance (N = 109)

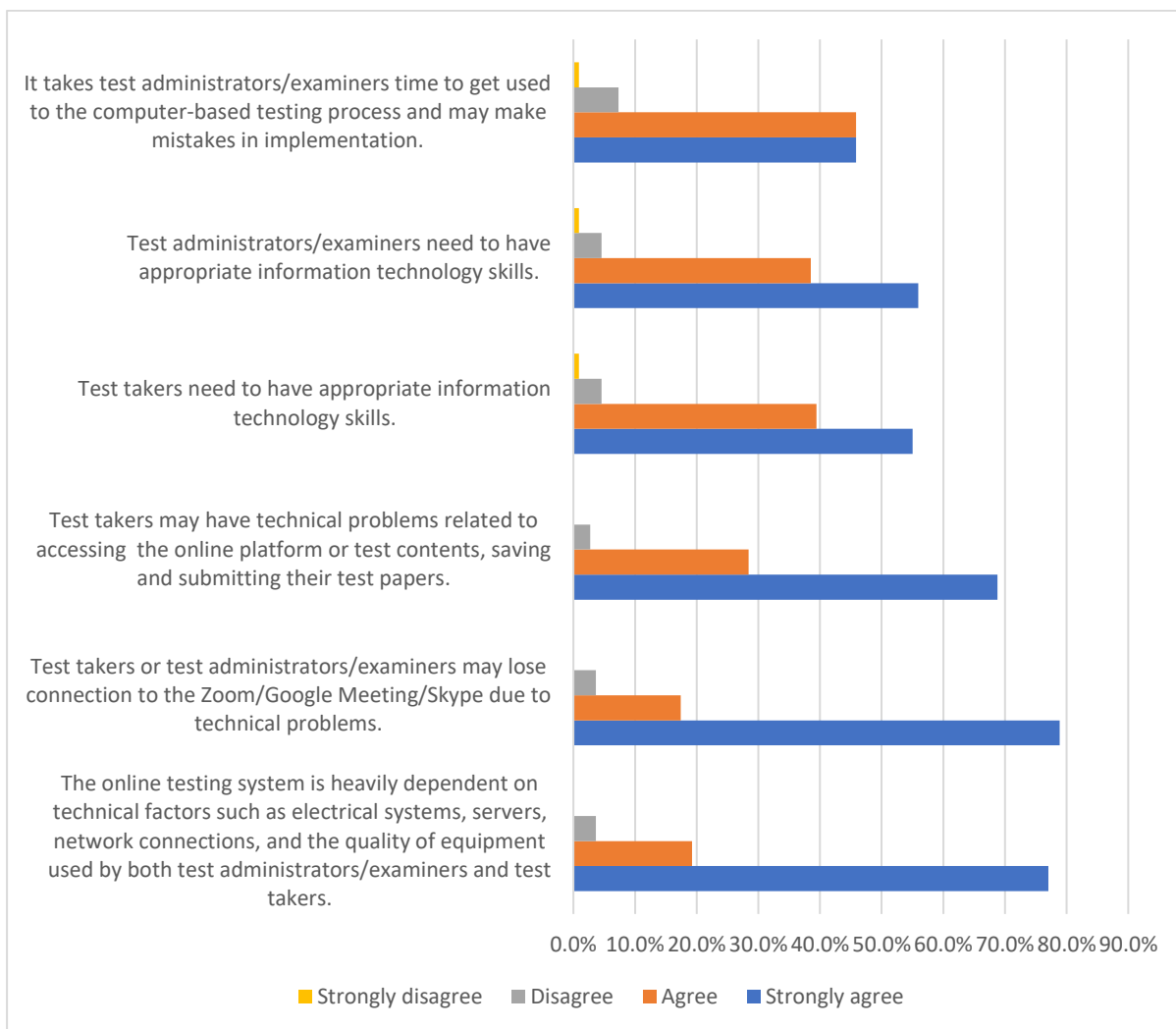


Figure 12. Technical problems (N = 109)

As can be seen in Figure 12, technical problems seem to be very common to test takers, test administrators, and examiners. More than 90% of the participants observed all of the mentioned problems in relation to technology. The most significant drawbacks are associated with the quality of the network, equipment, and testing platform, which accounts for more than 95% of the respondents. Nearly 95% of the respondents agree that if test takers, test administrators, and examiners are not good enough at information technology skills, they may meet challenges when they are taking and/or monitoring the test.

Moreover, the ubiquity and accessibility of technology may result in threats to test security (Figure 13). A great deal of the surveyed shared the agreement on the likelihood that test takers, test administrators, and examiners save and/or disclose the test materials/information illegally while a little control over this situation can be retained. Even though the respondents seem to show a stronger belief in test administrators and examiner's ethics, still around 80% agree on this possible risk caused by these stakeholders. The agreement is reached among more than 91% of the participants for the same threats posed by test takers.

What has been found in technical issues and test security supports the findings of Dermo (2009), Yulianto and Mujtahin (2021), and Hoang et al. (2021). That test takers, test administrators, and examiners are likely to be influenced by technical issues does raise concerns.

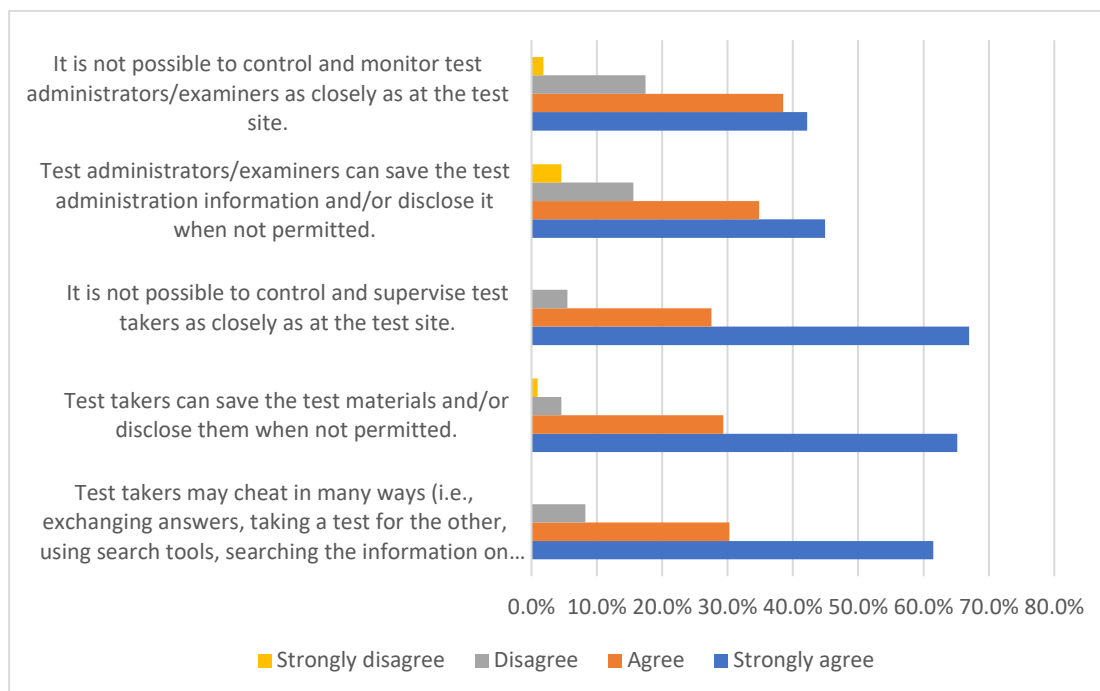


Figure 13. Problems in test security (N = 109)

Regarding the problems in the marking process, the respondents strongly agree or agree that the problems result from what examiners have to do with their devices while deciding on the marks (Figure 14). The highest agreement percentage (around 80%) is associated with the distraction writing examiners may suffer while reading and marking long essays on screen. A large number of the respondents (around 78%) also claim the heavy workload examiners may cover for online language testing and assessment as compared to that at a traditional test site. In online exams, examiners have been involved in not only the marking process as that in paper-based tests but also the administrative work such as entering and processing scores. The difficulty of speaking to examiners, which refers to listening to test takers' answers online and marking simultaneously, is shared by 65% of the respondents. The reasons may lie in the unstable network connection or the fact that speaking examiners have to supervise the test taker to prevent possible cheating during the test.

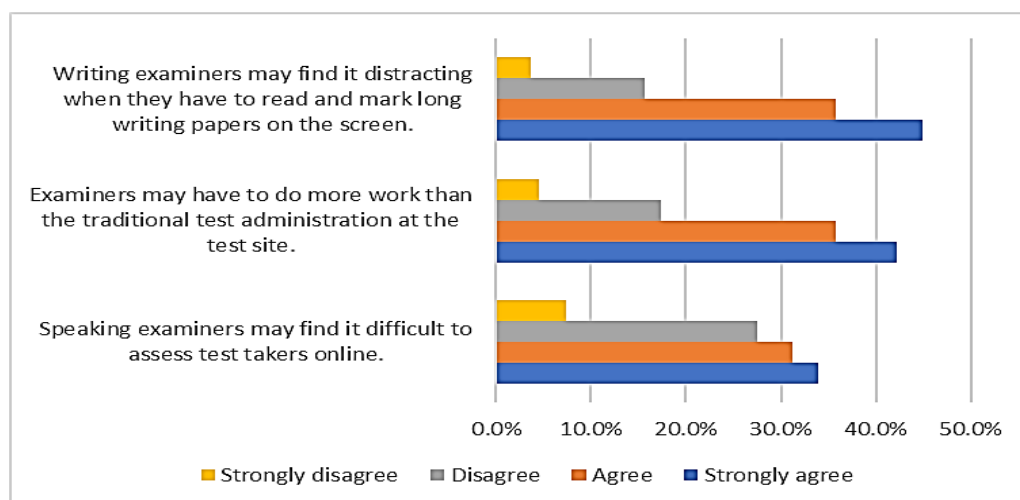


Figure 14. Problems in the marking process

Along with the above-mentioned general drawbacks of online language testing and assessment, the drawbacks of an LMS are shared by more than 85% of the respondents. Specifically, an LMS has a less familiar interface, which may take some getting used to, and an LMS is more prone to overload.

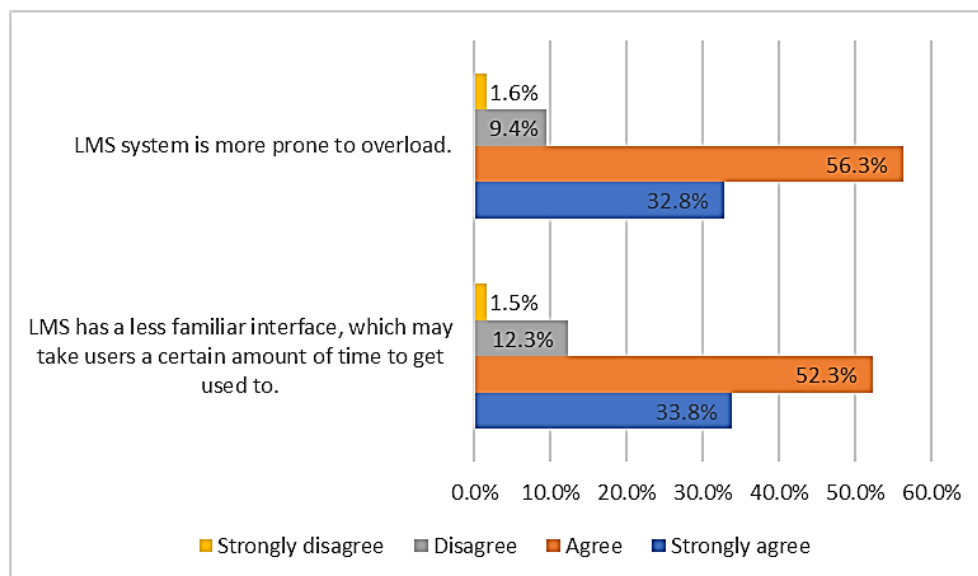


Figure 15. Drawbacks of an LMS (N = 65)

Discussion and Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a number of significant tests, such as mid-term tests, end-of-term tests, and achievement tests as an outcome requirement for school and university students, were administrated online, thanks to which test takers may stay at home taking the tests. The survey data reveal that the most common tool used for online language testing and assessment was Zoom and the second most popular tool was MS Teams. These are simple and familiar applications useful for various purposes but not typical applications for the aim of online testing and assessment.

With regard to the strong points of online language testing and assessment, a large number of the surveyed test administrators and examiners admit the advantages in all major aspects, including test takers' online performance, test administration process, and marking process. Besides, these participants also admit the risks that online language testing and assessment may bring in terms of test takers' online performance, technical dependence, test security, and the marking process. The findings mostly support what has been presented in the previous papers in the literature review. It can be seen that both advantages and disadvantages are in respect of online test performance (involving and/or caused by test takers) and marking process (involving and/or caused by test administrators/examiners). This scenario also poses a question of how to maximize the positives while minimizing the negatives of this practice so as to create a reliable environment in language testing and assessment, even though it is virtually arranged.

Moreover, the development of an LMS in a school or university has been promoted in the hope that it will well manage the learners' studies as well as the test administration process. During the pandemic, it proved to be a tool for online testing and assessment, and via this preliminary survey, opinions from test administrators and examiners on its benefits and drawbacks were collected. The findings contribute to a better understanding of how or whether an LMS is useful.

Like the approach to online testing and assessment, the use of an LMS also has advantages and disadvantages. This requires educational managers to make a good decisions on what and how to use available and/or established tools for specific purposes.

These findings can serve as evidence of how technology plays its role in a critical period of the whole society. The findings are also likely to help test administrators, examiners, and educational managers are aware of online tools' positives and negatives and how to exploit the tools for better results in a general context, not only during the pandemic. On the other hand, more research on online language testing and assessment is essential to have more evidence based on which the practices can be improved. The next stage of the study can further explore test administrators' and examiners' experiences, in which test administrators and examiners can share the strengths and drawbacks of computer-based assessment they have experienced in reality. The same approach can be applied to study the opinions and experiences of various stakeholders from different rural and urban areas in diversified contexts, and more data collection methods can be employed (i.e., questionnaire, interview, or focus group discussion). Such further studies will possibly contribute to the landscape of online language testing and assessment in Vietnam.

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