

# Testing the English Language in the Online Environment during the imposed Covid-19 Era

Marko Kukić, Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade

**Abstract** — As the outbreak of Covid-19 occurred two years ago, the entire education system was forced to change a well-established learning system; thus universities and schools faced numerous challenges, and one of the challenges was the way of conducting testing. Given the fact that the world was in lockdown, online testing was the only solution. Therefore, many programs and applications emerged to provide help and support; however, the question arose whether online testing could be implemented in certain fields, such as learning foreign languages. This paper aims to shed light on the current situation of testing the English language in the online environment. The first part of the paper compares on-site testing and online testing, and at the same time delves into the problems that may occur during online testing. On the other hand, the second part of the paper focuses on the examined attitudes and experiences of English language students regarding online testing. Also, the results reveal the problems that students encounter when conducting online testing and consider online testing as new normality.

**Keywords** – *education; Covid-19; foreign languages; online testing; challenges; English*

**Apstrakt** – Kako je prije dvije godine došlo do izbijanja Kovida-19 čitav obrazovni sistem je bio uslovljen da mijenja dobro utvrđeni sistem učenja, time su se univerziteti i škole susreli sa brojnim izazovima, a jedan od izazova je bio, upravo, način sprovođenja testiranja. Imajući u vidu da je svijet bio pod mjerom zabrane kretanja, onlajn testiranje je bilo jedino rješenje. Stoga su se pojavili brojni programi koji su služili kao pomoć; međutim, postavljalo se pitanje da li je onlajn testiranje bilo moguće u određenim oblastima poput testiranja stranog jezika. Ovaj rad za cilj ima da rasvijetli trenutnu situaciju o testiranju engleskog jezika u onlajn okruženju. Prvi dio rada upoređuje tradicionalan način testiranja i onlajn testiranje, i u isto vrijeme zalazi u probleme koji se mogu javiti prilikom onlajn testiranja. Sa druge strane, drugi dio rada se bavi isključivo ispitanim stavovima i iskustvima studenata engleskog jezika o onlajn testiranju. Takođe, rezultati otkrivaju probleme sa kojima se studenti susreću prilikom sprovođenja onlajn testiranja i razmatraju onlajn testiranje kao novu normalnost.

**Ključne riječi** – *obrazovanje; Kovid-19, strani jezici; onlajn testiranje; izazovi; engleski jezik*

## I. INTRODUCTION

At the end of 2019, with the appearance of the pandemic, the world began to change and harmonize with the new, imposed form of life. Numerous occupations and jobs received

a new form of operating. An increasing number of people were forced to switch to teleworking. In most cases, these were people who did jobs that did not require working solely in the office. However, jobs that were unimaginable to operate online switched to the online work system due to the pandemic. The education system was one of such occupations and fields that had to move from school premises to a virtual classroom.

All teaching staff within the education system had to react promptly and find a way to deliver knowledge to students. Therefore, many universities used various applications and programs to maintain constant teaching. In Serbia, different universities applied different platforms. The faculties gathered around the University of Belgrade conducted classes, in most cases, through the Moodle platform, Google Meet, and Zoom application. At the beginning of the new academic year 2020/21, Singidunum University and the University of Novi Sad started with the implementation of the Microsoft Teams application. Even in challenging times, many educational institutions quickly found a way to replace the traditional teaching methods using online tools.

Despite the fact that teaching was successful in the online model, the way of conducting testing was the next challenge. Even though it was not possible to test those courses that required practical application of knowledge, certain theoretical subjects could certainly be tested through various applications or oral examinations. Online testing of a foreign language such as English certainly posed challenges. Testing materials had to be prepared, and adequate testing programs had to be found, and it was necessary to organize testing for all skills such as writing and speaking. This step was important and still is because teaching and testing the English language skills are two inseparable activities in the teaching-learning process.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the testing process was important to get involved in online education but it also caused many struggles.

The paper is bound to examine on-site and online testing and the problems of online testing. Firstly, and arguably most importantly, the paper presents students' opinions related to online tests and their previous experience in this field.

<sup>1</sup> Jeyaraj, J. S. (2012). Testing English language skills: Changes and challenges. SSRN Electronic Journal. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3487904>

## II. ONLINE TESTING VS. ON-SITE TESTING

Prior to the appearance of the coronavirus, the type of assessment was not so often considered. Therefore, it should be noted that two types of assessment appear in the literature, it is formative and summative. Among others, these two are mostly implemented in learning and teaching English. When it comes to formative assessment, it is intended for students to receive regular feedback. This type of assessment is not seen as a high-stakes assessment and the goal is for professors and students to overcome obstacles together. Contrary to formative assessments, summative assessments are high-stakes and aim to check how much students know and how much learning has taken place<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, the paper focuses on the summative assessment conducted online and in educational premises (on-site).

Starting from the term online testing, it should be noted that this phenomenon refers to those tests that can be performed in any place that has access to the Internet. Some professors applied this model of assessment in the previous year. Thanks to well-created software and applications, students were able to perform their duties regularly. When it comes to online English language testing, in most cases, grammar and vocabulary were assessed using the programs with multiple-choice questions. On the other hand, the examination of speaking skills was successfully conducted through applications: Zoom, Skype, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams applying the oral examination method. Other skills such as listening, reading, writing, and translating were tested using the just-in-time testing method. This method works by giving students limited time to complete the assignment they previously received from the professor. Regardless of which testing method was used or is used in the online environment, it should be emphasized that online testing has many advantages. One of the advantages is that students in online assessment receive results at the end of the test. Also, students can run a test from anywhere in the world which makes it flexible. Professors certainly have relief when it comes to reviewing assignments. They have more time to devote to creating tests than grading tests. Online assessments are more preferred as compared to printed submissions of assignments.<sup>3</sup> Due to the fact it is faster and easier to complete tasks with the help of technology.

As part of online testing, games began to be created for testing purposes. Currently, there is a new trend to reducing assessment and test anxiety by utilizing game-based tools to conduct assessments test.<sup>4</sup> Well-known applications that are applied are Kahoot and Quizizz. They allow students to relax and prepare more successfully for online testing since they have a similar nature of tasks. The biggest problem and challenge in online testing is of a technical nature. Slow,

unsteady Internet or limited access to the Internet from home is often a problem during the educational process and also during taking tests.<sup>5</sup> As no one expected the appearance of the Covid-19 pandemic and no one even imagined that online testing would become commonplace, the education system was not even equipped for that. Professors face serious issues when it comes to creating the form of questions. In addition to the Internet connection, question forms - a big problem arises in the very supervision of online testing. Precisely, the academic dishonesty or cheating that often occurs is the biggest problem in online testing. With the introduction of technology into the classroom and the popularity of online classes, new opportunities for "e-cheating" exist.<sup>6</sup> Since it is the biggest challenge, it requires the most attention to be solved. In order to overcome the challenge, the supervision of the place where a student takes a test should be strengthened. Testing programs have the ability to limit the possibility of cheating within the program itself. However, the program does not have full access to the student environment.

Coming to traditional testing or on-site testing, it should be borne in mind that this type is very common in education. Universities that did not apply online testing were waiting for the pandemic situation to improve so as to test the students. First of all, this type of testing refers to the fact that students are supposed to come to the premises of an educational institution in order to be assessed. The main advantage of on-site testing or traditional testing is that the possibility of cheating is drastically reduced. Moreover, students are able to get an explanation from the professor on the question that is not clear to them while such an option does not exist during online testing. The disadvantage with this testing type is that it is time-consuming and not flexible. There is no possibility that students will run a test if they are not in the country and building where the exam is taking place.

## III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The first part of the research uses facts that are represented and current during the pandemic. The paper compares different assessments based on theories from adequate sources.

The methods applied in the research are of both quantitative and qualitative character. The results are first analyzed and then presented in the form of numbers and percentages. The questionnaire was made in the form of multiple-choice so that students could answer as easily and flexibly as possible. The main goal of the questionnaire was to examine the attitudes of students and try to present the reality that is happening today during the online testing of English.

<sup>2</sup> Gardner, R. (2010). *Motivation and second language acquisition: The socio-educational model*. New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>3</sup> Johnston, T. C. (2004). Online homework assessments: Benefits and drawbacks to students. *Academy of Educational Leadership Journal*, 8(3), 29-40.

<sup>4</sup> Yulia, A., Husin, N. A., & Anuar, F. I. (2019). Channeling assessments in English language learning via interactive online platforms. *Studies in English Language and Education*, 6(2), 228-238. <https://doi.org/10.24815/siele.v6i2.14103>

<sup>5</sup> Stradiotová, E., Nemethova, I., & Stefancik, R. (2021). COMPARISON OF ON-SITE TESTING WITH ONLINE TESTING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC. *Advanced Education*, 8(18), 73-83. <https://doi.org/10.20535/2410-8286.229264>

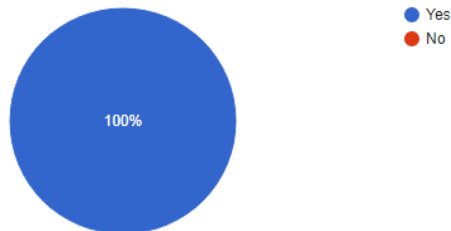
<sup>6</sup> Holden, O. L., Norris, M. E., & Kuhlmeier, V. A. (2021). Academic Integrity in Online Assessment: A Research Review. *Frontiers in Education*, 6. <https://doi.org/10.3389/educ.2021.639814>

#### IV. RESULTS

In this chapter, the paper presents the examined attitudes of English language students pertaining to online English language testing. Twenty-seven undergraduate students from the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade participated in the survey. The survey aims to show the problems that students encounter in online testing, how satisfied they are with the way the testing is conducted, as well as to express their views on online testing of the English language.

**Question 1:** Have you ever taken a test in some of the English language skills online?

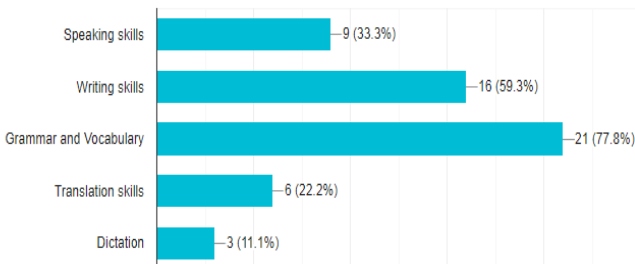
27 responses



The purpose of question number 1 is to check how many students have encountered online English language testing. From the diagram above, we can see that all respondents have encountered online testing so far. Therefore, the paper itself has a basis and can draw conclusions and statistics about online testing.

**Question 2:** What skills were tested?

27 responses



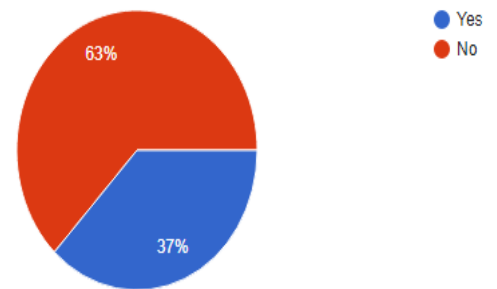
It should be noted that students were able to tick more answers to this question because more of them took different tests. Most of the students confirmed that they had done tests related to grammar and vocabulary due to technical reasons. Grammar and vocabulary are areas that are easy to test through multiple-choice questions, and the Moodle platform which students use regularly has the system that generates this form of questions. However, this question form also has its downsides. The format encourages guessing, and scores might be inflated due to test-wisiness, or the test-taker's knowledge about test taking.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Purpura, J. E. (2004). *Assessing Grammar* (Cambridge Language Assessment). Cambridge University Press.

It is worth noting that writing was the second component that was most tested online. It is certainly not surprising - students had the opportunity to choose a topic for essay writing and, with the help of the Internet, to access valuable resources. As plagiarism software existed then, it was easy to identify and prevent any form of academic dishonesty. On the other hand, students were less exposed to testing dictation, translation, and speaking skills online. Surprisingly, 33.3% of students participated in the speaking skills test. The speaking skill is not so demanding to conduct online when the technical conditions are provided. However, when it comes to testing translation and dictation online, it poses problems because it is difficult to find a system that will conduct testing in accordance with the rules. The scientific paper of the authors Radmila and Ivan (2021), which deals with the development of an application for dictation testing, managed to offer a program that complies with the rules<sup>8</sup>. As far as translation testing is concerned, we have to wait for the appearance of an application that will enable this type of testing.

**Question 3:** Was the test low-stakes? (informal)

27 responses



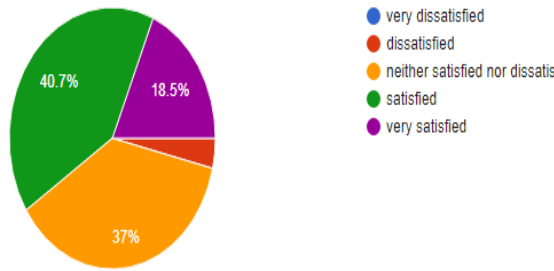
In the field of assessment, the term low-stakes denotes any exam or test that has no meaningful consequence to the test taker; conversely, a high-stakes test has at least some academic or other meaningful consequence to the student.<sup>9</sup> Question number 3 confirms that out of 27 respondents, 17 took a test that had a meaningful consequence for them while the rest of the respondents encountered low-stakes tests.

<sup>8</sup> Suzić, R., & Radosavljević, I. (2021). Dictation Software Development and its Application. *Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference - Sinteza 2021*. <https://doi.org/10.15308/sinteza-2021-264-269>

<sup>9</sup> James S. Cole, & Steven J. Osterlind. (2008). Investigating Differences Between Low- and High-Stakes Test Performance on a General Education Exam. *The Journal of General Education*, 57(2), 119–130. <https://doi.org/10.1353/jge.0.0018>

**Question 4:** In case you did a test online during the pandemic - how satisfied you were with the outcome?

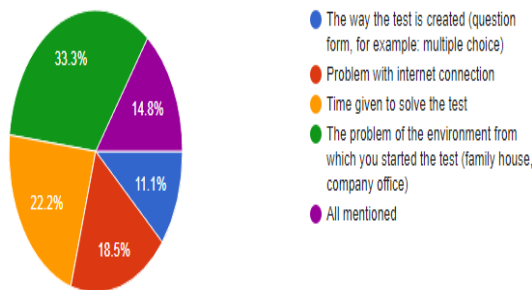
27 responses



When it comes to the outcome of online tests - a total of 16 students chose the option satisfied and very satisfied. The option of neither satisfied nor dissatisfied was chosen by 10 respondents. The survey also indicates that only one respondent confirmed dissatisfaction with the online test.

**Question 5:** What was the biggest problem while doing the test?

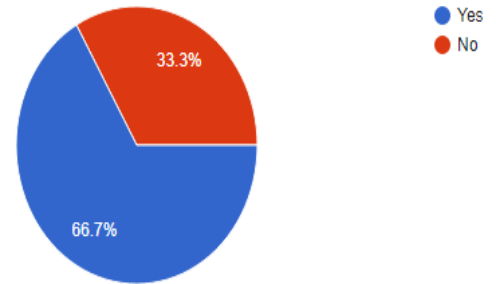
27 responses



While running the test, 9 out of 27 respondents indicate that the problem was the environment. More specifically, the place where they did the test. Little attention is paid to the mentioned problem. It is expected that students, in certain situations, do not have the calm environment needed to complete the online test. Another problem, according to the collected results, is the time given to complete the test. It often happens that professors in order to preserve academic integrity give less time to complete the test. Maintaining academic integrity, professors sometimes overlook the difficulty of the question and the time required to get the question done. Other problems are problems with the Internet and question forms. Only 18,5% of students faced a problem with the internet, while 11,1% of students had struggles with question form. However, 4 out of 27 students had problems with all of the above.

**Question 6:** During the test, the professor had an appropriate system through which he/she could supervise me?

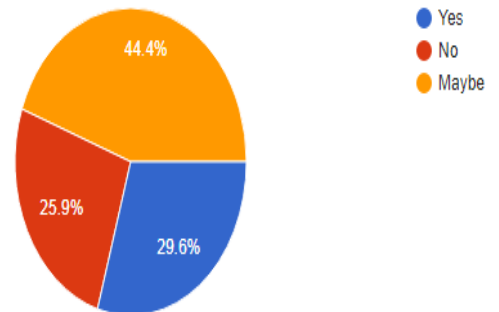
27 responses



One of the biggest challenges in remote testing is ensuring academic integrity.<sup>10</sup> To ensure academic integrity and stop dishonesty, testing applications should be upgraded with a better monitoring system. Eighteen respondents confirmed that they had been supervised during the test. On the other hand, nine respondents had not been covered by the surveillance system.

**Question 7:** Do you think it is possible to conduct online testing in all language courses?

27 responses

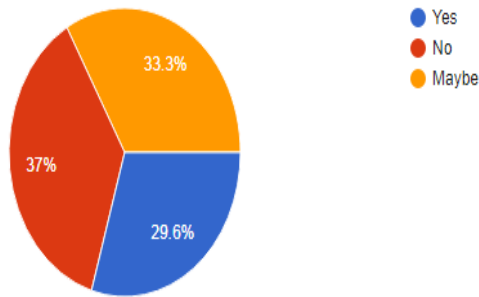


Considering that it is extremely difficult to test certain language skills in the online model, 12 respondents remain neutral; 8 out of 27 respondents believe that it is possible to implement everything online - while 7 respondents think that it is not possible to implement all skills online in any case.

<sup>10</sup> Guangul, F. M., Suhail, A. H., Khalit, M. I., & Khidhir, B. A. (2020). Challenges of remote assessment in higher education in the context of COVID-19: a case study of Middle East College. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability*, 32(4), 519–535. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11092-020-09340-w>

**Question 8:** Do you think that in the near future online testing will take 90% of the formal way of testing knowledge?

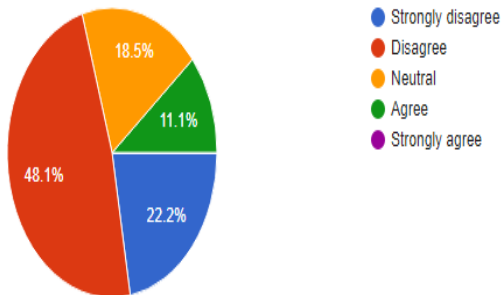
27 responses



Whether online testing will become new normality in the future is the question that causes a lot of controversy in society. 37% of surveyed students claim that this will not be the case, while 29.6% believe that online testing will take over the traditional way of testing, and the rest of the respondents take this possibility as feasible.

**Question 9:** I support online testing more than the old way of testing?

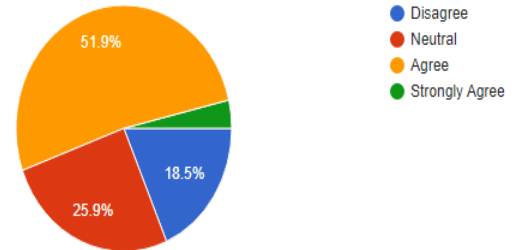
27 responses



Students' attitude about online testing is that they do not prefer online testing. The results indicate that the percentage of those who support traditional testing is 70.3%. However, the percentage of those who support online testing is 11.1%. 18.5% percent of students are neither for nor against online testing.

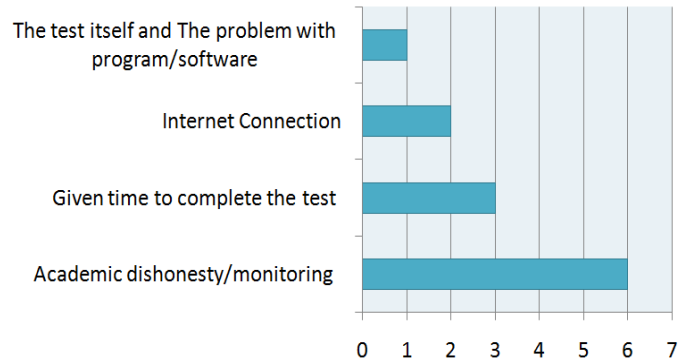
**Question 10:** I do believe that today, in the rapidly evolving technological age, it is possible for every educational institution to create software/systems that will conduct online testing on a regular basis with the same supervision as when tests are done offline.

27 responses



No one can deny the rapid advancement of technology. Many applications and programs have been created to facilitate work in the education system. The transition to the online system due to the outbreak of the pandemic has further strengthened the technology. Therefore, 15 out of 27 students are of the opinion that it is possible to create a system with good features which will successfully replace traditional testing. A small number of students believe that it is not possible to create such a system. On the other hand, 7 students remain neutral on the issue.

**Question 11:** What do you think are the biggest challenges in making online tests?



Students were given this question as optional, meaning they did not have to provide an answer. The number of participating students was 11. According to the students, the biggest problem with making online tests is supervision which aims to prevent any kind of cheating. In addition, there are other problems such as the problem with the Internet, restricted time, and tasks.

## V. CONCLUSION

The coronavirus pandemic, which drastically took hold in 2020, forced the educational system to operate online. The educational system instantly switched to online teaching with the help of modern applications and technology. In addition to regular teaching activities, in one moment, there was a need to test certain areas, including English. As the English language encompasses language skills such as reading, writing, and listening, it was necessary to consider how to test the mentioned skills. Numerous educational institutions managed to test the English language and its skills with the help of adequate applications. The research showed that the students were satisfied with the outcome of the online testing. Furthermore, the research pointed out the problems that the students encountered during the test. The most common problems were internet interruptions, question forms, and limited time. Also, the questionnaire shows that students prefer on-site testing to online testing.

Whether we are talking about traditional testing or online testing, testing will be part of the education system. As previously stated, teaching and testing are inseparable in the educational process. Foreign language testing is a complex process that will face various challenges in the future. Analyzing students' opinions and attitudes will make it easier to get over the upcoming problems. It remains for the education system to react the best it can at certain moments.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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