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## Students' perceptions towards the application of peer assessment in a virtual English writing class

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## Students' perceptions towards the application of peer assessment in a virtual English writing class

### Abstract

Writing skills are not easy to develop in English language learning, especially when online learning is being implemented amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to improve students' writing skills, as well as increase students' autonomy, peer assessment is often adopted. The article presents findings of the research conducted in late 2021 on students' perceptions towards the use of peer assessment in an online English writing class in Vietnam. The research applied a mixed method model with a questionnaire and an interview as the instruments. The questionnaire has 18 items divided into 4 parts: students' personal information, students' attitudes towards peer assessment, advantages of peer assessment, and disadvantages of peer assessment. The participants were 97 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students who experienced one semester studying "Advanced Writing Skills" in online classes. The findings of the research revealed that students had negative attitudes towards the application of peer assessment to improve writing skills and they shared ideas of advantages and disadvantages of peer assessment. It is recommended that specific guidelines on how to do peer assessment with samples should be provided before teachers implement this teaching technique in class. In addition, in online classes, teachers need to be aware of making students familiar with peer assessment, as well as in the virtual environment.

### Practitioner Notes

1. Peer assessment can be applied as an effective method to develop students' writing skills in both offline and online situations.
2. To implement online peer assessment, practitioners should carefully design the activity with well-prepared peer assessment criteria and familiarise students with the way to do online peer assessment.
3. Technical issues and platforms used to conduct online peer assessment should be accounted for as an effective implementation of peer assessment.
4. Students' attitudes towards the application of peer assessment to develop writing skills may vary due to various factors like the organisation of the activity.
5. Whether peer assessment can develop students' soft skills like critical thinking and team work depends much on practitioners' ways of implementing the activity.

### Keywords

English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Writing Skills, peer assessment, Online Learning, Digital Writing, COVID-19 Pandemic

## Introduction

The world has been changed greatly due to the serious impact of the COVID-19 in all fields, especially in education. The educational system has witnessed a mass adoption of technology in education since the pandemic hit, and online learning has been used more than ever before. In language education, immediate online teaching was implemented as a solution to social distancing measures taken worldwide (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Eri et al., 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Sulaiman et al., 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021). In Vietnam, 2021 saw a nationwide adoption of online learning due to the severity of COVID-19 (Vo, 2021). Most schools and universities were shut down and there was an abrupt transition to online teaching and learning (Lo, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021).

Students in Vietnam spent the whole first semester of the 2021-2022 school year learning online due to the lockdowns that were imposed because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden use of online teaching and learning causes many problems to both teachers and students, especially in language learning which requires interactions and exposure to language environments. Conducting online activities in language lessons is not always easy when teachers are not well prepared for such a teaching context (Gao & Zhang, 2020; Jothinathan et al., 2021; Sakulprasertsri et al., 2021). In addition, activities to develop language skills in the virtual environment cannot be adopted in the same way as they are used in normal language classes.

Peer assessment in face to face classes, is a popular activity in language education across a diverse range of contexts (Cheng & Warren, 2005). It can be used as a solution to develop students' language skills, as well as a kind of formative assessment. Peer assessment is defined as the process in which students assess each other's work using performance criteria (Lan Li & Gao, 2015). Peer assessment has many variants, but basically it is one type of language learning activity in which students play the role of both "assessor" and "assesse" (Li et al., 2010). Regarding the role of an "assessor", students review their peer's work and, based on the criteria given by teachers, give comments or feedback on such work. As an "assessee", students reflect on the feedback they receive from their peers to make improvements on their own work (Li et al, 2012).

Even though the procedure of conducting peer assessment in face-to-face language classes and online classes to develop writing skills is often seen to be as similar to each other, the distinctive features of online language teaching may cause students to have diverse attitudes towards peer assessment in virtual writing classes. Moreover, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of online peer assessment may be also different from face-to-face writing classes. With the purpose to discover English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students' perceptions towards peer assessment in virtual writing classes, the study was conducted at a Public University in Vietnam (a pseudonym) in the later part of 2021 and early 2022.

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The research aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are students' attitudes towards the application of peer assessment in virtual classes?
2. What are students' perceived advantages of peer assessment in virtual writing classes?
3. What are students' perceived disadvantages of peer assessment in virtual writing classes?

## **Literature Review**

Peer assessment is defined as the process that involves students in assessing their peer's work based on a given performance criteria (Falchikov, 2007). Despite variants of peer assessment, its values lie in the fact that peer assessment is an effective method that engages students in the learning process and encourages students' self-assessment and reflection. Peer assessment has been widely used in various teaching and learning contexts such as teacher education, computer science, language learning, and a variety of other disciplines (Li & Gao, 2015).

According to Topping (2020), social constructivism is the underlying theory on which peer assessment is built on. The major belief of social constructivism is that students' knowledge is developed through students' interactions with others in social and cultural contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism posits that the cognitive functions are enhanced when students have the opportunity to interact with each other and the outside world. "More Knowledge Other", one of the key concepts of social constructivism, is defined as "someone who has higher skills or more experiences than the learner with regard to a certain task" (Lan Li & Gao, 2015, p.4). In peer assessment, teachers and peers are "More Knowledge Other," and students can work to develop their knowledge and skills. In addition, "Zone of Proximal Development" is understood as the distance between the level of actual development and the high level of what is called "potential development" (Vygotsky, 1978). Such distance can be obtained by "adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In peer assessment, students do their own task first and then, with teachers' guidance and support, make an assessment and leave comments for their peers, from which students are then able to improve their work.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Peer Assessment**

Various benefits are found in the application of peer assessment through learning engagement (Dickson et al., 2019; Falchikov, 2007; Li et al., 2010; Li et al., 2012; Ramon-Casas et al., 2018; Tighe-mooney, 2016; Topping, 2020; Wanner & Palmer, 2018). First, peer assessment encourages motivation through giving students chances to work together. Secondly, peer assessment is an effective method to develop students' responsibility for their own learning, thus enhancing learner autonomy (Li et al., 2010). As students' work has to be assessed by their peers, they are more likely to take caution and spend time revising their own work before it is sent for peer assessment (Ramon-Casas et al., 2018). In addition, peer assessment is conducted as part of the learning process, which creates a sense of seeing mistakes as opportunities to be corrected rather than failures (Dickson et al., 2019; Topping, 2020).

Therefore, peer assessment provides students with chances to practice transferable skills necessary for life-long learning, such as critical thinking and self-reflection (Bloxham & West, 2004). Interactions among students are greatly increased in the implementation of peer assessment in the learning process, and it is an effective method for teachers to monitor their students' progress at regular intervals (Hernandez, 2010). Furthermore, peer assessment decreases teachers' workload, but it increases students' chances to work with their peers. Teachers do not have to assess a large amount of students' work when they implement peer assessment in their teaching.

Nevertheless, several disadvantages are found with the application of peer assessment. The biggest challenge to effective peer assessment is the design of criteria. Students assess their peer's work based on criteria given by teachers; therefore, if the criteria are not developed well, the quality of peer assessment is affected (Lan Li & Gao, 2015). Another challenge is the validity and reliability of peer assessment conducted by students and their peers (Vickerman, 2009). How reliable and accurate the feedback from peers really is an important question in peer assessment (Foley, 2013; Kaufman & Chunn, 2011). It is doubtful whether weak students are sufficiently skilled to evaluate their peer's work. Students may not reserve an adequate amount of time for assessing their peer's work, resulting in the low quality of their assessment.

Furthermore, if marks are given during the process of conducting peer assessment, can such given marks be considered fair and reliable? Research suggests that collusion in peer assessment may cause peer assessment to be less reliable (Song et al., 2017). For example, grade inflation may be found when students tend to give their peers higher scores than they ordinarily would. The time that peer assessment requires and issues of class management are also commonly cited challenges of peer assessment (Lan Li & Gao, 2015). What is more, managing the activity in a crowded classroom is also a challenge, especially when peer assessment is first introduced in the class.

### **Application of Peer Assessment in Writing Skills**

Writing skills which are often considered challenging and boring by students can be made more interesting thanks to peer assessment (Ngo, 2021). Students take part in the process of developing writing skills actively rather than passively with interaction with peers, which then in turn enhances their knowledge (Topping, 2020). The writing process consists of pre-writing, drafting, revising, and publishing (Hyland, 2003). Often, peer assessment is applied in the revising step when students evaluate their peer's work based on the checklist of criteria given by their teachers.

There are three major strategies to conduct peer assessment; modelling, scaffolding, and fading (Falchikov, 2007). Teachers need to demonstrate the use of peer assessment in class before adopting it as a learning activity, where timing facilitation is the key for the success of the implementation of peer assessment to develop writing skills. Students may not be capable enough to do their peer assessment due to their lack of confidence, knowledge or experience; thus, in-time help from teachers assist them with issues that may arise and make them more confident in their evaluation. Clear and detailed criteria are found to be very useful in facilitating students' assessing their peer work.

## **Previous Studies**

Numerous studies have been carried out on peer assessment. Generally, the previous findings reveal that peer assessment has positive impacts on improving students' writing skills (Altstaedter & Doolittle, 2014; Almahasneh & Abdul- Hamid, 2019; Gupta et al., 2019; Elena & González, 2020; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Kaufman & Chunn, 2011; Ngo, 2021; Philpot, 1987; Yaghoubi & Mobin, 2015). Yet, in different contexts of language teaching and learning, students' perceptions towards peer assessment and the results of this activity's adoption may be various. Gupta et al. (2019) did a review of 15 articles published on Scopus-Indexed and peer-reviewed journals. Such articles present research on the use of peer assessment to develop students' writing skills in either English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts in India, Saudi Arabia, Scotland, the United States, Iran, Malaysia, Sweden, Japan, China, and Malaysia. These studies were conducted in offline writing classes, and despite certain differences in research methodologies and findings, the review reveals the high practicality of the adoption of peer assessment in writing classes. In these studies, different levels of students' attitudes toward the adoption of peer assessment are identified, ranging from positive to negative ones.

A recent quasi-experimental study was carried out in Malaysia to investigate the effect of peer assessment on writing performance among 120 Arab EFL students. The results of the study reveal that those who experienced peer assessment in their writing lessons could improve their writing skills more than the others (Almahasneh & Abdul- Hamid, 2019). A similar study on self-assessment and peer assessment was conducted in Iran with 46 EFL Iranian students. Research shows that both self-assessment and peer assessment are effective in enhancing students' writing performance, but peer assessment proves to be more efficient. It is also found that students have positive attitudes towards the application of peer assessment in writing classes.

In Vietnam, Ngo (2021) explored the effectiveness of peer assessment in a writing class with 30 EFL students. The research indicates that peer assessment helps to enhance students' writing skills to a certain extent. Quantitative studies, such as this, with a very limited number of participants (30 EFL ones), poses the question of whether its findings can be generalized for the Vietnamese context. The impact of the rapid move to online teaching caused by the pandemic, of course, means that the finds may not be replicated post-pandemic. Whether students accept this kind of activity positively, or how students perceive its advantages and disadvantages, are vital questions. Therefore, the research was conducted to cover the gap in students' perceptions of peer assessment in immediate online writing lessons, especially in the Vietnamese EFL context during the phenomenon of COVID-19.

## **Technology- Enhanced Peer Assessment**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, digital writing including peer assessment in online writing classes usefully adopted to develop students' writing skills (Gupta et al., 2019). Software or online courses on such platforms as Learning Management System (LMS) or Microsoft Team (MS Team) facilitates the adoption of peer assessment to develop writing skills during the pandemic. According to Li et al. (2012), anonymity in doing peer assessment reduces students' worries and increases the reliability and validity of peer assessment. Technology-enhanced peer assessment makes it easier for management. It is time-consuming if peer assessment is conducted in a face-to-face classroom, and teachers may find it difficult to manage the activity in a crowded classroom.

With the use of technology, such issues can be better managed (Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001). The technology also facilitates the store of files which are not restricted to Word files, but may be audio or video files, saving space and also scaffolding the process of assessing peer work. Technology also provides students with chances to interact with each other flexibly, and they do not have to worry about where and when they can meet for their assignments. Finally, when offline classes were cancelled for the safety of students, digital writing including online peer assessment conducted with the help of technology was an in-time tool to maintain the development of students' writing skills. Yet, teachers as well as students, especially those in developing countries like Vietnam face challenges in accessing technology due to lower economic conditions (Lo, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021). It is found that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the availability of technology is quite limited in poor socio-economic areas (Lo, 2021), resulting in the lower effectiveness of online learning and teaching activities (Vo, 2021).

## **Methodology**

### **Context of the Study**

The study was carried out in late 2021 and early 2022 in Vietnam when the COVID-19 pandemic was gradually controlled. In the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year, most schools and universities in Vietnam were closed due to the nationwide social distancing policy. As Lo (2021) points out, Vietnam was no exception to the devastations of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the high rate of contagion meant that assessment of university students needed to change. Peer assessment was already applied to develop students' writing skills in the "Advanced Writing" course in a higher education institute in Vietnam. The peer assessment was used throughout the semester not only as an activity in online writing classes but also a kind of formative assessment in which students assessed and gave marks to their peers, with 20% of the final marks reserved for it. The "Advanced Writing" course has two main parts: Letter writing and Essay writing. The course is delivered in 45 periods, each of which is 50 minutes long. The course was implemented online with online meetings organised on Microsoft Team (MS Team) and supplementary courses on Learning Management System (LMS). Students were introduced how to use peer assessment with checklists. The checklists consist of guiding questions designed as criteria for students to do peer assessment. The peer assessment activity was either conducted in online meetings or on LMS courses.

### **Research Design**

Sequential mixed method was selected as a research approach for the study because it is the method that can reduce drawbacks of both quantitative and qualitative approaches, even if used separately, and equally enhances the benefits of these two approaches (Cohen et al., 2007; Vo, 2019). In the research, the quantitative phase was conducted first, followed by the qualitative one. After the quantitative data was collected and analysed by means of a questionnaire, the interview questions were designed to further explain what obtained from the analysis of the quantitative data.

### **Research Instruments**

The study has two instruments: a questionnaire and an interview. The questionnaire has 18 items divided into four parts: part 1 seeks for students' demographic features; part 2 gathers information

on students' attitudes towards online peer assessment; part 3 focuses on advantages of peer assessment; part 4 employs the disadvantages of peer assessment. The in-depth semi-structured interview was designed to support the findings of the quantitative data analysis. Besides the prepared questions, spontaneous ones were added at the time of the interview to get a deeper understanding of students' opinions on the application of peer assessment and give explanations to what had obtained from the questionnaire, which included; reasons for students' attitudes towards peer assessment, and how students perceived certain advantages and disadvantages of peer assessment in virtual writing classes.

### ***Reliability and Validity***

In order to achieve the reliability and validity of the study, the instruments were carefully designed and the pilot study was carried out before the main study. The two instruments were sent to two experts, who both hold a Doctor of Philosophy in TESOL, for validation. The questionnaire has good reliability with Cronbach alpha .742 in the pilot study. After the pilot study, the items of the questionnaire were revised to serve the main study better. The Cronbach alpha of the main study is .746 which denotes a good level of reliability. The reliability of each part of the questionnaire is good with .703 for items of students' attitudes towards online peer assessment, .763 for advantages of peer assessment in virtual writing classes, and .603 for its disadvantages. Member-checking was utilised to maintain the reliability and validity of the interview (Merriam, 2009). All the transcripts and data analysis were sent to interviewees to check whether the interpretation of data was appropriate.

### ***Pilot Study***

The pilot study was conducted with 10 students. First, the questionnaire was designed and sent to these 10 participants. They were required to not only respond to the initially designed questionnaire but also give comments on the items' clarity and comprehensibility. Then, the results of the questionnaire were examined to see whether they actually addressed the research questions. Based on the information obtained from the pilot study, the questionnaire was edited to better serve the main study later.

### ***Research Sampling***

97 students who were the third year English majors of a higher education institution took part in the study. The number of female students surpasses that of male counterparts as usual in language education (90 female students and 7 male students). 8 students who took part in the online interviews were given anonymous names: Mai, Lan, Hoa, Nga, Yen, Truc, Thanh, Phuc.

### ***Data Analysis***

The quantitative data was analysed using SPSS version 20. Mean, Std. were calculated. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used for the questionnaire. The interval is 0.8 (i.e., interval =  $\frac{N-1}{N}$ ,  $N=5$ ). It indicates that 1.00 to 1.80 means that students generally select "Strongly disagree" option; 1.81 to 2.69 represents the general choice of "Disagree"; 2.61 to 3.40 shows that most students select "Neutral"; 3.41 to 4.20 represents a selection of "Agree"; and 4.21 to 5.00 indicates most students choose "Strongly Agree". In addition, a simple regression was utilised to evaluate whether students' attitudes on peer assessment affected their perceived



disadvantages and advantages of peer assessment. The qualitative data was processed using codes and themes.

## Findings

### Students' Attitudes Towards Peer Assessment in Virtual Classes

As can be shown from Table 1 (below), the mean for the item 1.1, which explores students' attitudes towards the usefulness of peer assessment in virtual classes is 2.46, denotes that students do not believe that the use of peer assessment is useful for their writing skills. This may be compromised by the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic, where virtual learning with typical characteristics such as boredom, lack of concentration, and low level interactions, as found in the interviews, replaced the familiarity of face-to-face learning. Students did not directly mention the impact of the pandemic, and further studies could be carried out with reference to this in the future. At present, the mean for the item 1.3 which asks students about their preference of peer assessment is also low (mean=3.37). With such mean, students have neutral ideas of whether they like doing peer assessment or not. The explanation for such figures can be found in the items 1.4 and 1.5. Most students think that they can develop their English writing skill without the help of their peers (mean=4.11). With the mean of 3.75, the data shows that students do not want to show their friends their written work.

**Table 1**

*Student's Attitudes Towards Peer Assessment in Virtual Classes*

N.	Items	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
1	Peer assessment is useful to develop my writing skill.	97	1	5	2.46
2	Through exchanging ideas and knowing my peer's writing proficiency, I feel much more comfortable in the writing class.	97	1	5	3.76
3	I do not like doing peer assessment in my writing class.	97	1	5	3.37
4	I can develop my English writing skill without any assistance from other people.	97	1	5	4.11
5	I do not want to show my work to my peers as I am afraid they will notice my errors.	97	1	5	3.75

Further explanations for such figures are found in the interview data. When asked if they like to do peer assessment in their virtual writing class, 5 out of 8 students replied that they did peer

assessment because they were required to do it by their teachers, but they did not think that peer assessment was useful for their writing skills, especially when they had to do it online. As revealed from the interview data analysis, students do not like peer assessment because they do not believe in their own ability, and they prefer the assessment from their teachers.

*“Q: Do you like to do peer assessment?”*

*A: No. I just do it because this is an activity given by my teachers.*

*Q: Why?*

*A: You know, I do not think that we are good enough to do peer assessment, and when we are not better than our friends, how can we assess them?*

*Q: Why not? Are you given the checklist for peer assessment?*

*A: Yes, we have a checklist to follow when doing peer assessment; we are also instructed carefully by teacher. But the matter is that when learning online, we cannot focus on the activity and doing peer assessment requires a lot of knowledge. I think that it would be better if our pieces of writing are corrected by teachers. Peers cannot do such things as well as teachers.”*

*(Hoa)*

*“Q: Do you like to do peer assessment?”*

*A: Oh, I like the activity, but I do not like to do it for others.*

*Q: Why?*

*A: I find it useful. I am weak, so I am happy if my peers can help me to find out my errors and improve my writing. But, I am afraid that I cannot assess my friends' writing because I am very bad at writing skill. I cannot identify error and also cannot suggest how to rearrange ideas for an essay. I can see that my friends are disappointed when I assess their work.”*

*(Yen)*

In addition, characteristics of online writing classes are also causes for such negative attitudes towards peer assessment. Boredom and lack of interactions in virtual writing classes are mentioned by some interviewees as reasons for students' attitudes towards online peer assessment.

*“...A: Actually, I find it very boring when doing peer assessment in my online writing class when I just looked at the screen and listened.*

*Q: But you still contacted with teachers and your classmates online, didn't you?*

*A: yes, but it seems like not enough interactions and online chatting did not work well with me and many other students when we could not expressed ourselves fully like in offline ones.*

*(Mai)*

In short, students do not have positive attitudes towards the use of peer assessment, nor do they like such activities and believe that these are not very useful. Reasons for such negative attitudes are discovered to result from the experiences students had in virtual writing classes, stating that they were confronted with boredom, lack of interactions, and low concentration.

### **Advantages of Peer Assessment in Virtual Classes**

Table 2 (below) shows that peer assessment is an effective solution to make the class more interesting and reduce the boredom of online writing lessons when students tend to agree with the item 1 (mean = 3.41). The means of items 4, 5, 6 indicate that most students think that they can improve their writing skill through peer assessment (mean of item 4= 4.03, mean of item 5=3.94, mean of item 6=3.79). Peer assessment helps students to recognise errors and find solutions to such errors.

**Table 2**

#### *Advantages of Peer Assessment in Virtual Classes*

<b>N.</b>	<b>Items</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1	Peer assessment helps to reduce the monotony of the class and make it livelier .	97	1	5	3.41
2	Peer assessment helps to enhance my team-working skills.	97	1	5	1.88
3	Peer assessment helps me enhance my communication skill.	97	1	5	1.99
4	Peer Assessment helps me find out my errors and supplies me solutions to remedy them.	97	1	5	4.03
5	By applying peer assessment, I can expand my range of vocabulary, learn new ways of phrasing and organizing ideas in my works.	97	1	5	3.94
6	Peer assessment helps me learn from my peers' errors.	97	1	5	3.79

In addition, through peer assessment, students can expand their range of vocabulary and learn new ways of phrasing and organizing ideas in their pieces of writing. However, students surveyed

do not believe that they can develop teamwork skills and communication skills with very low means of items 2 and 3 (mean of item 2=1.88, mean of item 3=1.99).

Reasons for the information gathered from the questionnaire are found in the interview. According to students interviewed, peer assessment in online classes did not actually facilitate their development of teamwork skills and communication skills when teachers got them to do peer assessment individually. Students were given pieces of peer writing and then worked individually to assess their peer work; as a result, teamwork and communication skills cannot be improved. Issues arise from the way teachers conduct peer assessment rather than peer assessment itself.

*“Q: What benefits do you get from doing peer assessment in your virtual writing class?”*

*A: Quite a lot. I can improve my writing skills, and know how to organize essays, correct errors, etc.*

*Q: How about soft skills like communication skills and teamwork skills?*

*A: Sorry to say no. I do peer assessment by myself. How can I develop such skills?”*

*(Thanh)*

*“Q: What benefits do you get from doing peer assessment in your virtual writing class?”*

*A: Learning from peers and improving writing skills. My teacher gave us checklists and based on the checklist, we can know whether we have appropriate organisation for our essay and our letters.*

*Q: How about soft skills like communication skills and teamwork skills?*

*A: Teachers rarely let us do peer assessment in groups due to technical issues in online classes and there may be some other issues.....*

*(Mai)*

Overall, peer assessment is beneficial to improving students writing skills, especially the organisation of the written works, vocabulary and error avoiding though the way of implementing peer assessment in specific virtual writing classes may be reasons why peer assessment is not found to enhance soft skills.

### **Disadvantages of Peer Assessment in Virtual classes**

Among 4 items of the questionnaire seeking for students' opinions of the disadvantages of peer assessment, only item 4 has a high mean (mean=3.96), which denotes that most students agree that they tend to give their friends positive comments and ignore their errors. In this case, students' friendship affects their peer assessment. Yet, students show their disagreement over the last three items as the drawbacks expressed in these items are not found in their practice of peer assessment in online writing classes. Students disagree that if students do not have the same level of language proficiency, peer assessment will not work (mean=2.58). In addition, students do not have difficulties in coping with their peers' errors (mean=2.39)

**Table 3***Disadvantages of Peer Assessment in Virtual classes*

	<b>Items</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>
1	Peer assessment only works when my peer has the same or higher level of proficiency in English than mine.	97	1	5	2.58
2	I often cope with difficulties in assisting my peer to correct their errors in terms of grammar, stuctures, and ideas organisation, etc.	97	1	5	2.39
3	Sometimes, I and my peer cannot find out the right answer because of disagreement.	97	1	4	2.08
4	I tend to give my close friends positive comments and ignore their errors.	97	1	5	3.96

The data in the interview also support such figures drawn from the questionnaire. 7 out of 8 interviewed students share the point that they have little difficulties in doing peer assessment thanks to the support from their teachers. They were given clear checklists for their assessment and teachers also organized some activities to help them know how to use such checklists. They were given chances to work in groups with the support of teachers to do peer assessment in the first two lessons. As a result, they found it confident to do peer assessment themselves.

*“Q: Do you think that students must be at the same level of proficiency in peer assessment activities?”*

*A: (smile). I do not think so. I am weaker than my peers, but I think i am able to assess my peers with my teacher’s help.*

*Q: How does your teacher support you in doing peer assessment?”*

*A: We are guided carefully with checklists and the teacher modelled what to do. In addition, if I have some problems, I can ask her for help.*

Q: *The data from the questionnaire show that students tend to give their close friends positive comments and ignore their errors. How about you?*

A: *....i try to be objective, but actually it is hard to assess my friend's work. I do not want to make him/her disappointed with my comments.*

Q: *You mean the relationship will somehow affect your assessment.*

A: *Yes, to some extent."*

(Lan)

*"Q: Do you think that students must be at the same level of proficiency in peer assessment activities?*

A: *No, if students need to be at the same level for peer assessment, we cannot do it in class.*

Q: *Why?*

A: *Because there is no class with all students at the same level.*

Q: *Do you often have difficulties in doing peer assessment?*

A: *Of course yes.*

Q: *What difficulties?*

A: *For example, I do not know how to correct grammatical errors, to rearrange ideas for a logical essay. But my teacher is very nice. I can ask her for help."*

(Truc)

To conclude, not many disadvantages of peer assessment are revealed from the data analysis of the research. This may come from reasons that the peer assessment' success depends much on its careful implementation and teachers' supports, facilitation of the activity.

### **Effects of Students' Attitudes on their Perceptions Towards Advantages and Disadvantages of Peer Assessment**

Students' attitudes on peer assessment have certain effects on students' perceptions towards the advantages and disadvantages of peer assessment while experiencing it in their online writing classes. Regression that was implemented using SPSS shows that students' attitudes on peer assessment has negative effects on their perceived advantages of peer assessment with  $\beta = -.390$  and the sig. value is  $<0.01$ . However, as shown in Table 4, Adjusted R square, which is quite low (Adjusted R Square=.140), there is a low correlation between the independence variance and the dependent variance. With such low level of Adjusted R Square, only 14% of the variance of the dependent variable being studied is explained by the variance of the independent variable (Hair et al., 2010). The low level of Adjusted R Square also reveals the fact that besides students' attitudes towards peer assessment, there are many other predictors of students' perceptions towards advantages of peer assessment.

**Table 4**

*Effects of Students' Attitudes on their Perceptions Towards Advantages and Disadvantages of Peer Assessment*

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>R Square</b>	<b>Adjusted R Square</b>	<b><math>\beta</math></b>
Advantages of Peer Assessment	.152	.140	-.390***
Disadvantages of Peer Assessment	.000	.000	.017

The regression results also indicate that students' perceived disadvantages of peer assessment are not influenced by students' attitudes towards peer assessment when the value of Adjusted R Square is .000, and sig. value is greater than 0.05.

## **Discussion**

In this study, students experienced peer assessment in a rather special situation when immediate online learning was implemented due to serious social distancing in the COVID-19 pandemic. Students surveyed did not have positive attitudes towards the use of peer assessment in their virtual writing classes as they found that peer assessments were not actually beneficial for their writing skills and their soft skills. Features of immediate online learning and teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic include; boredom, lack of concentration, lack of interactions, as well as the lack of preparation (Gao et al, 2020; Jothinathan et al., 2021; Lo, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Vo, 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021), which have certain adverse impacts when attitudes are negative like this. Inversely, the research in offline writing classes shows that students have positive attitudes towards the use of peer assessment, which supports the claims of previous research (Altstaedter & Doolittle, 2014; Elena & González, 2020; Ramon-Casas et al., 2018). Regarding the disadvantages, the study in online writing classes in Vietnam shares the idea that students' friendship influences their peer assessment. Students tend to give close friends positive feedback, resulting in a low reliability of the peer assessment (Foley, 2013; Kaufman & Chunn, 2011; Vickerman, 2009).

While students in this study did not think that peer assessment required learners to be at the same level of language proficiency, it is doubtful whether weak students have enough ability to do peer assessment (Kaufman & Chunn, 2011). The differences between the findings in this study and previous ones may reflect either the distinctive features of students due to geographical characteristics, teachers' various ways of implementing peer assessment in language writing skill

lessons, or the different modes of teaching (i.e., online, offline writing classes) during the pandemic (Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020).

## **Implications**

The application of peer assessment to improve writing skills would be enhanced if teachers are better prepared. To be specific, the following strategies should be considered (Almahasneh & Abdul-Hamid, 2019; Gupta et al., 2019; Hanrahan & Isaacs, 2001; Ngo, 2021) in both offline and online writing classes. First, teachers need to set clear expectations and goals of the activity. Comprehensive guidelines or checklists on what to do and how to do should be provided with clear instructions and explanations. Students will better understand what they are expected to do and what goals the activity aims at. Secondly, training on what to do should be provided with modeling from teachers (Falchikov, 2007). Before getting the whole class to do peer assessment, teachers ought to demonstrate what students, especially those who do not have prior experience with peer assessment, have to do through examples, which will in-turn help students know what they should do with the help of checklists or guidelines. Timing is another strategy for effective peer assessment. As peer assessment takes a lot of time, teachers need to allocate a suitable amount of time for this activity. In addition, besides doing peer assessment in class, teachers may consider letting students try the activity as part of homework. Furthermore, teachers should not let students work on their own without support or facilitation. Immediate support from teachers helps students move on better during the process of assessing their peer work. Finally, teachers should reserve time for students to reflect on the feedback they receive from peers. In case they have queries or disagreements, they can seek further explanations from teachers.

In the writing environments of immediate online classes both teachers and students have to struggle with such challenges as technical issues, the lack of preparation, and especially learning and teaching equipment, which results in boredom, lack of concentration, and lack of interactions (Jothinathan et al., 2021; Lo, 2021; Ngo, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). Therefore, it is highly recommended that when conducting peer assessment, teachers should also pay attention to the following elements. Making students familiar with the software or the platform used to implement online classes is a “must” to increase students’ confidence in doing online peer assessment. In addition, to increase the validity and reliability of the peer assessment, especially when it is used as summative assessment with marks given, anonymity should be considered. When students are assigned to assess peer work anonymously, “friendship power” will not influence their evaluation, resulting in the higher validity and reliability of the assessment. Peer assessment should be contextualised to suit the specific teaching and learning context for more efficiency. In the Vietnamese context, scaffolding and support from teachers are key factors leading to the success of using peer assessment in language teaching and learning, and an increase in interactions and focus on study among students.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the study which was conducted to explore the use of peer assessment in virtual immediate online writing classes in late 2021 and early 2022 reveals that students do not have positive attitudes towards the application of peer assessment to develop their writing skills. With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, it should be noted that the findings of the study were limited by a learning environment that functioned during lockdowns, and general social uncertainty



(Lo, 2021; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). In spite of this, peer assessment proved to be advantageous for students and enhanced their writing skills, since they can be “assessors” and their written works show meaningful changes. In comparison to previous studies (Fathi & Khodabakhsh, 2019; Geta, Mulu, & Gencha, 2018), the research found that peer assessment was not effective in developing other soft skills like teamwork skills in virtual writing classes. Furthermore, those taking part in this research have negative attitudes towards the use of peer assessment, which results in certain effects on their perceived advantages and disadvantages of peer assessment.

The research also indicates that peer assessment can be conducted regardless of students' levels of language proficiency. In fact, the way of practicing peer assessment in language teaching affects students' attitudes towards its use as well as the quality of teaching. It is highly recommended that teachers need to have careful preparation and lesson design if they really want to see the usefulness of peer assessment in language teaching, in general, and in improving writing skills, in particular. In addition, students have to be trained carefully on “editing strategies in their own work before undertaking peer evaluation” (Geta et al., 2018, p.54). Teachers also need to understand their role as facilitators and instructors in the process of applying peer assessment to enhance students' writing skills.

However, we need to remember that this study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, in a very anomalous situation, and when immediate online learning was introduced. Therefore, the findings of the research may not represent what is seen in distance learning classes with careful preparation. Further research should be done for better understandings of the application of peer assessment in improving writing skills in normal online classes.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The author(s) disclose that they have no actual or perceived conflicts of interest. The authors disclose that they have not received any funding for this manuscript beyond their respective universities.

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