Research Article

Implementation of Ungrading in Vietnamese EFL Education: A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Perspectives

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	Introduction: Ungrading is an innovative assessment method that emphasizes individual learning journeys over conventional grading systems. As an emerging topic in educational reform, it promises to enhance intrinsic motivation and engagement among students. Therefore, the current study aimed to explore both the advantages and challenges of implementing ungrading in Vietnamese EFL contexts. By focusing on the experiences of EFL teachers at various career stages, the study aims to uncover insights into the operational and cultural barriers, as well as the potential benefits of this non-traditional assessment approach. **Methodology:** The methodology of this study was rooted in qualitative research, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data. A total of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers from two different educational institutions participated in the study. These teachers represented a range of career stages, providing a diverse perspective on the adoption of ungrading. Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the data collected from these interviews. **Results:** The thematic analysis highlighted a range of challenges associated with the implementation of ungrading. Early-career teachers reported difficulties in adapting teaching methods and providing tailored feedback within existing constraints. Mid-career teachers faced resistance from students accustomed to traditional grading systems. Teachers nearing the end of their careers struggled with integrating ungrading into an entrenched grade-centric educational framework. Despite these challenges, significant benefits of ungrading were identified, such as increased student motivation, improved interactions between students and teachers, and the promotion of critical thinking and lifelong learning skills. **Conclusion:** The findings from this study shed light on the complexities of adopting ungrading in Vietnamese EFL contexts and indicate a substantial need for support and strategic planning in implementing such educational innovations. The study underscores the transformative potential of ungrading in language learning environments and emphasizes the importance of considering both cultural and institutional factors when introducing educational reforms. This research contributes to the broader discourse on alternative assessment methods, advocating for a more nuanced approach to evaluation in education.

1. Introduction

In a world where education continually evolves, the challenge of measuring student success grows increasingly complex. In recent years, the traditional grading system, primarily based on numerical or letter grades, has come under increasing scrutiny in educational circles. This scrutiny has given rise to alternative assessment methods, one of which is "ungrading." Ungrading is not just a theoretical concept but a practical approach to assessment

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that has been studied and implemented to varying degrees in both Western and non-Western countries. Ungrading, a paradigm shift in educational assessment, emerges as a significant departure from conventional practices, emphasizing student learning and development over traditional performance metrics. Historically, grades have been critiqued for their potential to detract from intrinsic motivation and true educational engagement (Kohn, 1999). Ungrading focuses on student learning and development rather than on traditional metrics of success (Kohn & Blum, 2020).

Studies often discuss ungrading in the context of progressive educational philosophies that advocate for student-centered learning. Researchers like Kohn (1999) have long criticized traditional grading for undermining intrinsic motivation and promoting a fixed mindset. Ungrading is seen as a way to cultivate a growth mindset by encouraging students to focus on learning and improvement rather than on a numerical or letter grade. Besides, numerous case studies from universities and K-12 schools in the United States and parts of Europe reveal varied implementation strategies for ungrading. For instance, Johnson (2022) indicated that some educators use narrative evaluations, others rely on student-generated goals and reflections, and some combine these with peer assessments. A common finding is that both students and teachers initially struggle with the transition but often report higher satisfaction and better understanding of learning objectives once they adapt. Despite its growing popularity, the application of ungrading in diverse educational settings, particularly in non-Western contexts, remains underexplored. This study explores the implementation of ungrading within the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Vietnam, a setting where traditional grading methods have long been the norm.

The primary aim of this research is to uncover the benefits and challenges associated with the adoption of ungrading from the perspectives of Vietnamese EFL lecturers. These lecturers, who have firsthand experience in teaching and assessing students in a system deeply rooted in conventional grading (Coxhead et al., 2023), offer valuable insights into the transition towards a more holistic and student-centered assessment approach. Through semi-structured interviews, the study seeks to understand the lecturers' viewpoints on how ungrading influences both teaching methodologies and student learning outcomes.

1.1. Traditional grading and its limitations

Traditional grading systems, characterized by their use of letters or numbers to quantify student performance, have long been a staple in educational assessment. However, an increasing body of research and educational discourse suggests that these systems are overly simplistic and may have unintended negative consequences for students and the learning environment. Guskey and Bailey (2001) highlighted a fundamental issue with traditional grading: its tendency to oversimplify the complex process of learning. These systems often reduce a student's multifaceted

learning journey to a single, often arbitrary symbol, which may not accurately reflect the depth and breadth of their understanding or skill development. This reductionist approach can obscure the nuances of student learning and does not account for the individual progress or the context in which learning occurs.

Butler et al. (2001) provided further insight into the psychological impacts of traditional grading. Their research underscores how grades can undermine intrinsic motivation - the internal desire to learn for the sake of learning. When grades become the primary focus, students may shift their attention to achieving high scores rather than engaging deeply with the material. This shift can stifle creativity and critical thinking, as students might opt for safer, more conventional approaches that they believe are more likely to yield higher grades.

Moreover, traditional grading systems can inadvertently fuel a competitive and high-pressure environment. Such environments can induce anxiety and stress among students, particularly those who may struggle to meet standardized benchmarks of performance (Holme et al., 2013). This competitive atmosphere may detract from collaborative and cooperative learning experiences, which are vital for developing interpersonal skills and a sense of community among learners.

Brookhart (2010) raised another critical concern regarding equity in traditional grading. These systems often do not adequately account for the diverse backgrounds and learning styles of students. Students from different cultural, linguistic, or socioeconomic backgrounds may have varied approaches to learning and demonstrating their knowledge. Traditional grading systems, with their one-size-fits-all approach, can disproportionately disadvantage these students, perpetuating inequities in educational outcomes. Furthermore, traditional grades are often more reflective of a student's compliance with instructions and ability to perform under test conditions, rather than their actual understanding or mastery of the subject matter (Cain et al., 2022). This scenario is particularly concerning in disciplines where critical thinking and problem-solving are essential. Grades may also reinforce a fixed mindset, as proposed by Yeager and Dweck (2012), where students come to believe that intelligence and ability are static and unchangeable, rather than something that can be developed through effort and learning.

1.2. Ungrading

The concept of ungrading represents a significant departure from conventional educational assessment paradigms. Emerging as a transformative approach, it directly challenges the long-established practice of using grades as the primary metric for evaluating student achievement. This shift stems from a growing recognition of the multifaceted nature of learning, which conventional grading methods often fail to capture adequately. Pioneers such as Kohn and Blum (2020) have been at the forefront of promoting ungrading. Their work has highlighted the limitations of traditional grading systems in assessing the

full spectrum of student learning and development. They first emphasized that grades, often seen as objective measures of learning, can, in fact, be highly subjective and may not accurately reflect a student's understanding or engagement with the material. They then extended this critique by illustrating how traditional grades can inadvertently prioritize performance over learning, leading students to focus on achieving high grades rather than on understanding and internalizing the course content.

A core tenet of ungrading is its focus on learning processes rather than merely on outcomes. This approach fosters a learning environment where students are encouraged to reflect on their understanding, engage in self-assessment, and participate more actively in the learning process (Kehlenbach, 2023). This shift from a performance-oriented to a learning-oriented assessment is designed to cultivate intrinsic motivation among students. Intrinsic motivation, as opposed to the extrinsic motivation often engendered by grades, is linked to deeper engagement with course material, higher levels of student satisfaction, and better long-term retention of knowledge (Froiland & Worrell, 2016).

Furthermore, ungrading aligns with contemporary educational theories that emphasize constructivist and student-centered learning (Capt & Oliver, 2012). These theories advocate for an educational approach where students construct knowledge through experiences and interactions, rather than passively receiving information. Ungrading supports this by allowing students to take ownership of their learning process, fostering critical thinking, and enabling them to understand their progress in a more nuanced and personalized way.

However, implementing ungrading is not without its challenges. It requires a fundamental rethinking of assessment strategies and often necessitates additional resources and support for educators (Koehler & Meech, 2022). Despite these challenges, the growing interest in ungrading reflects a broader movement within education to create more equitable and effective learning environments that recognize and cater to the diverse needs and abilities of students.

1.3. Ungrading in language education

The integration of ungrading into language education, especially in EFL settings, represents a burgeoning area of interest that challenges the conventional paradigms of language assessment. As Rapchak et al. (2023) noted, ungrading in the context of language learning has shown potential in fostering environments that encourage more authentic communication and greater autonomy among students. This shift from traditional grading to ungrading could be particularly transformative in language education, given its unique demands and objectives.

Language acquisition is a complex process that extends beyond mere mastery of grammar and vocabulary. It involves the development of communicative competence, cultural understanding, and the ability to use language in context. Nunan (1999) emphasized that in EFL settings,

where learners are often navigating a language that is not part of their everyday environment, traditional grading systems can inadvertently become obstacles rather than aids to effective learning. Such systems may lead students to prioritize grammatical accuracy and test performance over functional and practical use of the language.

Ungrading addresses this issue by shifting the focus from error correction and assessment precision to holistic language development. This approach aligns with communicative language teaching methodologies, which prioritize the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately in real-life situations (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). By removing the pressure of grades, students might feel more empowered to take risks, make mistakes, and engage in more meaningful and spontaneous language use, which is essential for developing fluency and confidence in a new language.

Moreover, ungrading in language education can enhance learner autonomy, a critical aspect of language learning. Learners are encouraged to set their own goals, reflect on their progress, and take ownership of their learning journey (Koehler & Meech, 2022). This self-directed approach is vital in language learning, where continuous, lifelong learning is often necessary to maintain and improve language proficiency.

The adoption of ungrading also allows for a more personalized approach to language learning. Each learner brings a unique set of linguistic backgrounds, learning styles, and motivations to the classroom (Chen et al., 2021). Ungrading enables educators to tailor feedback and support to the individual needs of each student, rather than applying uniform assessment criteria that may not be relevant or beneficial to all learners.

Additionally, ungrading can facilitate a more inclusive and culturally responsive learning environment. Traditional grading systems in EFL contexts often fail to acknowledge the diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds of learners, which can influence how they acquire and use the target language (Crogman et al., 2023). Ungrading opens up opportunities for educators to incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into language learning, thereby enriching the learning experience and promoting cross-cultural understanding.

1.4. Ungrading in the Vietnamese context

In Vietnam, the educational landscape has long been characterized by an exam-centric paradigm, where rote learning and high-stakes testing have predominated (Nguyen et al., 2023). This traditional approach, focused largely on memorization and standardized exam performance, has often been criticized for not fully addressing the diverse needs of learners or fostering critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, the winds of change are blowing through the Vietnamese education system, as evidenced by recent reforms that advocate for more student-centered learning approaches (Thao & Mai, 2020). In this evolving educational milieu, the exploration of ungrading is particularly pertinent, resonating with the

broader goals of these reforms.

Ungrading in Vietnam represents a radical shift from the entrenched norms of educational assessment. It suggests a move away from the deep-rooted emphasis on quantitative measures of student achievement towards a more qualitative and process-oriented approach. This shift is especially significant in a context where educational success has traditionally been synonymous with high scores in standardized tests (Nguyen, 2018). Ungrading, with its focus on individual learning progress and understanding, offers an alternative that aligns with the recent shift towards student-centered pedagogies.

The implementation of ungrading in Vietnam could potentially address several critical issues in the current educational system. For one, it could mitigate the pressure and stress associated with high-stakes exams, which have been linked to various negative educational and psychological outcomes for students (Bao & Cho, 2022). Ungrading could foster a more supportive and less competitive learning environment, where students are encouraged to focus on their personal learning journey rather than on outperforming their peers.

Moreover, ungrading aligns well with the pedagogical shift towards skills such as critical thinking, creativity, and problem-solving. These skills are increasingly recognized as essential in the 21st-century global economy and are areas that the Vietnamese educational reforms are keen to promote (Nhat et al., 2018). By focusing on holistic learning and development, ungrading could better prepare Vietnamese students for the demands of a rapidly changing world.

Additionally, the Vietnamese education system, with its diverse student population, stands to benefit from the inclusivity that ungrading can bring. Traditional grading often does not account for the varied cultural, linguistic, and socio-economic backgrounds of students (Marks, 2006). Ungrading, by offering a more personalized approach to assessment, can help in catering to the diverse needs and learning styles of students, thereby promoting equity in education.

The existing literature provides a foundational understanding of ungrading and its potential benefits and challenges in educational settings. However, there is a dearth of research specifically focusing on the use of ungrading in Vietnamese EFL contexts. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the perspectives of Vietnamese EFL lecturers on the adoption of ungrading, contributing to the broader discourse on innovative assessment practices in language education.

2. Methodology

2.1. Design of the study

This study adopts a qualitative research design, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the perspectives of Vietnamese EFL lecturers on the implementation of ungrading in their teaching practices. The choice of a qualitative approach is grounded in the study's objective to delve deeply into the experiences, perceptions, and attitudes of educators, areas that are richly textured and cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone. Semi-structured interviews provide the flexibility to probe deeply into the subject matter, allowing for the emergence of nuanced insights and a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding the adoption of ungrading.

The theoretical underpinnings of this study are drawn from constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. The constructivist framework posits that knowledge is constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world, emphasizing the subjective nature of reality and the importance of understanding the experiences and contexts that shape individuals' perspectives (Fosnot, 2013; Steffe & Gale, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978). This perspective aligns with the study's focus on educators' personal experiences with ungrading and how they interpret and integrate this assessment method into their teaching.

The interpretivist paradigm further supports the study's qualitative approach, as it seeks to understand the subjective meanings that individuals attach to their experiences. This paradigm acknowledges the complexity of human perception and the variability of experiences within different contexts, particularly in the diverse and dynamic field of education (Jackson, 1997; O'donoghue, 2006; 2018). By adopting an interpretivist stance, the study acknowledges the individuality of each lecturer's experiences and perspectives, offering a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of ungrading in the Vietnamese EFL context.

2.2. Participants

The study focused on a purposive sample of nine Vietnamese EFL teachers, drawn from two educational institutions in Vietnam. This sample was carefully selected to represent a range of teaching experiences, encompassing three distinct career stages: novice teachers, mid-career teachers, and those nearing the end of their teaching careers. All participants were well-aware of the ungrading approach, having participated in workshops discussing its theoretical and practical aspects prior to this study. The inclusion of teachers from different career stages was deliberate, aimed at capturing a broad spectrum of perspectives on the implementation and impact of ungrading in EFL settings. During the data collection phase, through interviews, it was found that the implementation frequency varied among the participants. Novice teachers reported experimenting with ungrading approximately 30% of the time, using traditional methods the remaining 70% as they gradually integrated new approaches into their teaching. Mid-career teachers employed ungrading more frequently, around 50% of the time, as they felt more confident in balancing both methods to suit different learning objectives and student needs. Near-end career teachers, who had the most experience with traditional methods, utilized ungrading about 40% of the time, often blending both approaches to leverage their extensive

teaching experience. Each group, comprising three teachers, provided unique insights reflective of their career phase. Data saturation was reached with this group size, as no new themes or insights emerged from the data after interviewing the selected participants. The richness and depth of the discussions with these nine participants ensured comprehensive coverage of the experiences and viewpoints necessary to understand the impacts of ungrading across different career stages. Novice teachers, being relatively new to the profession, could offer fresh perspectives and their experiences of adapting to ungrading in the early stages of their careers. Mid-career teachers, with their mix of experience and ongoing professional development, could provide a balanced view, potentially comparing traditional and ungrading methods. Lastly, the near-end career teachers brought a wealth of experience and a long-term view of the changes and trends in EFL education, including the shift towards ungrading.

Addressing ethical issues was a paramount consideration in this study. Prior to conducting the interviews, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their involvement, and how their data would be used. It was emphasized that their participation was entirely voluntary, and they had the right to withdraw from the study at any point without any adverse consequences. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information of the participants and their respective institutions was anonymized in the study's findings. Informed consent was obtained from each participant, which included permission to record the interviews for transcription and analysis purposes. The study also adhered to ethical guidelines regarding the respectful and sensitive treatment of participants, ensuring that their perspectives were represented accurately and fairly in the research findings.

2.3. Instrumentation

Before diving into the specifics of the data collection process, it is important to address the instrumentation used in this study, particularly the interview protocol. The primary method of data collection was through semi-structured interviews, which were carefully designed to elicit detailed insights into the experiences and perceptions of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding ungrading. Prior to the main data collection phase, a pilot study was conducted. This preliminary step involved testing the interview protocol with two EFL teachers who were not part of the main study sample. The feedback from this pilot study was instrumental in refining the interview questions, ensuring they were clear, relevant, and capable of prompting in-depth responses. This process of revision was crucial in enhancing the reliability and validity of the data collection instrument.

2.4. Data collection

Post-revision, the interview questions encompassed a range of topics pertinent to the study's objectives. Some of the revised questions included: "How do you perceive the impact of ungrading on student motivation and engagement?", "Can you describe any challenges you have faced while implementing ungrading in your classes?", and "In what ways do you believe ungrading has influenced your teaching approach and pedagogical strategies?". These questions were designed to prompt detailed and reflective responses, providing rich qualitative data for the study.

The interviews, each ranging from 45 to 60 minutes in length, were conducted at locations chosen for their convenience and comfort for the participants, such as their respective institutions or a quiet public space. In order to ensure that participants could express themselves freely and comfortably, the interviews were conducted in Vietnamese. This choice was crucial in minimizing language barriers and ensuring that nuances in the participants' responses were accurately captured. For participants who were not fluent in Vietnamese or preferred to communicate in another language, arrangements were made to conduct the interviews in their language of choice, with the assistance of a professional translator when necessary.

To maintain the integrity of the data, all interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim, with translations provided for any interviews not conducted in Vietnamese. This approach ensured that the data was captured accurately and could be analyzed effectively to glean comprehensive insights from the participants' responses. The careful planning and execution of the data collection process were integral to the study's aim of exploring the nuanced experiences and viewpoints of EFL teachers regarding the implementation of ungrading in Vietnamese educational settings.

2.5. Data analysis

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were subjected to a rigorous thematic analysis, a method well-suited for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun et al., 2023). This approach allowed for a detailed and nuanced exploration of the experiences and perspectives of Vietnamese EFL teachers regarding ungrading. Initially, the process began with a careful and thorough transcription of the recorded interviews, ensuring accuracy and fidelity to the participants' responses. Following this, the transcripts were read multiple times to gain a deep familiarity with the content, a step crucial for identifying initial ideas and patterns.

The next phase involved generating initial codes. This coding process was both reflective and iterative, where segments of the data were systematically coded with tags that summarized and categorized the content. These codes were then collated into potential themes, with a focus on grouping similar codes that captured related ideas or concepts. This stage was particularly important as it began to highlight the recurring patterns and significant elements in the data, providing a preliminary structure for the analysis.

Subsequently, the themes were reviewed and refined.

This involved a back-and-forth process between the coded data extracts and the entire data set, ensuring that the themes accurately represented the collected data. During this phase, the emerging themes were reviewed by external experts in qualitative research and EFL instruction. Their feedback was instrumental in validating the relevance and robustness of the themes, enhancing the analytical depth and credibility of the findings. Meanwhile, some themes were merged, subdivided, or discarded based on their relevance and coherence to the data set as a whole. This refining process was critical in ensuring that the themes were not only internally coherent but also distinct from each other.

After finalizing the themes, the next step was to define and name them. This process required a detailed analysis and description of each theme, capturing the essence of what each theme represented and how it contributed to the overall understanding of the data. It was during this phase that the deeper meanings and implications of the themes began to emerge, offering insightful revelations into the lecturers' experiences and viewpoints on ungrading.

Finally, the study culminated in the production of a detailed and analytical narrative. This narrative wove together the thematic analysis with relevant literature, providing a comprehensive interpretation of the data. It offered a rich, layered understanding of how Vietnamese EFL teachers perceive, experience, and implement ungrading, and the implications of these practices for language education. The thematic analysis thus played a crucial role in distilling the complexity of the qualitative data into meaningful insights, contributing significantly to the study's objectives of exploring the nuanced dynamics of ungrading in the context of Vietnamese EFL education.

3. Results

3.1. Challenges of Implementing Ungrading

The analysis of the interview data revealed several challenges faced by the Vietnamese EFL teachers in implementing ungrading. These challenges were echoed across the different career stages of the participants, albeit with varying emphases and perspectives. Among the novice teachers, all three highlighted the challenge of adapting their teaching methods to an ungrading system. One novice teacher described feeling "overwhelmed by the need to constantly tailor feedback for each student," reflecting the intensive, individualized approach required by ungrading. This sentiment was mirrored by another novice participant who expressed difficulties in "balancing the depth of personalized feedback with the practical constraints of time."

Mid-career teachers, while generally more comfortable with pedagogical adaptations, pointed out the challenge of student resistance to ungrading. Two out of three mid-career teachers shared instances where students expressed discomfort and confusion with the lack of traditional grades, as they were accustomed to such systems as a measure of their academic performance. One mid-career teacher noted,

"My students initially felt lost without grades. They seemed to struggle with understanding their progress."

The near-end career teachers emphasized the challenge of integrating ungrading within the broader educational framework that is still predominantly grade-focused. All three teachers in this group discussed the difficulty in aligning ungrading with the institutional and societal expectations of standardized assessments. One experienced teacher stated, "The biggest hurdle is reconciling ungrading with the ingrained culture of grades in our education system."

These findings can be understood through the lens of the constructivist and interpretivist paradigms. From a constructivist perspective, the challenges reflect the shift required in the learning environment – moving from a traditional, teacher-centered approach to a more student-centered, individualized learning process. This shift demands a significant adaptation in teaching practices and assessment methods, as highlighted by the novice teachers. The interpretivist paradigm sheds light on the subjective experiences of both teachers and students in adapting to ungrading. It underscores how personal experiences, backgrounds, and preconceived notions about learning and assessment influence the reception and adaptation to ungrading, as seen in the responses of the mid-career and near-end teachers.

3.2. Benefits of implementing Ungrading

Parallel to the challenges, the thematic analysis also illuminated the perceived benefits of ungrading in the Vietnamese EFL context, as reported by the participants across different career stages. Among the novice teachers, all three enthusiastically noted an increased engagement and intrinsic motivation in their students. One novice teacher shared, "I have seen a shift in how students approach learning. They seem more curious and engaged, not just working for a grade." This observation aligns with the constructivist view that emphasizes learning as an active, engaged process, facilitated by ungrading's focus on intrinsic motivation.

Mid-career teachers observed a notable improvement in the quality of student-teacher interactions. Two out of three mid-career participants remarked on the deeper discussions and more meaningful feedback sessions with students. One mid-career teacher commented, "Ungrading has opened a space for more honest and constructive conversations about learning with my students." This reflects the interpretivist paradigm's emphasis on understanding the subjective experiences of learners, suggesting that ungrading can foster a more personalized and reflective learning environment.

The near-end career teachers emphasized the long-term benefits of ungrading in developing critical thinking and lifelong learning skills. All three teachers in this group observed that students were becoming more self-directed and reflective learners. An experienced teacher noted, "Students are learning to assess their own strengths and areas for growth, which is invaluable for their future." This

benefit resonates with the constructivist perspective, where learning is seen as a process of building upon existing knowledge and experiences, and the interpretivist view that values the individual's interpretation and understanding of their learning journey.

The participants' accounts collectively suggest that ungrading can foster a more engaging, reflective, and student-centered learning environment in Vietnamese EFL contexts. These benefits, as highlighted by the teachers, align well with the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study. The constructivist approach underscores the active role of learners in constructing their knowledge, facilitated by ungrading's focus on intrinsic motivation and self-assessment. Simultaneously, the interpretivist paradigm highlights the importance of personal experiences and perspectives in the learning process, which ungrading supports through its emphasis on personalized feedback and learner autonomy.

4. Discussion

The current study's findings on the challenges and benefits of implementing ungrading in Vietnamese EFL contexts provide both confirmations of and departures from existing literature, thereby contributing novel insights to the field of language education and assessment. The challenges highlighted by novice teachers, particularly the overwhelming nature of providing individualized feedback and balancing it with practical constraints, align with existing research underscoring the intensive demands ungrading places on educators (Kohn & Blum, 2020). However, this study extends that understanding by specifically situating these challenges within the context of early-career EFL teachers in Vietnam, a group previously underexplored in ungrading literature. The specific concerns of these novice teachers about adapting to a fundamentally different assessment system offer a unique contribution, emphasizing the need for targeted support and professional development in the initial stages of adopting ungrading. Mid-career teachers' experiences of student resistance to ungrading echo findings from similar contexts, where students accustomed to traditional grading systems find it challenging to adapt to alternative assessment methods (Zimmerman, 2020). This study, however, adds a new dimension by exploring this resistance in the Vietnamese EFL context, which has its distinct educational culture and norms. The insights gained here are critical for understanding how ungrading can be more effectively communicated and implemented in settings where traditional assessment methods are deeply ingrained. The challenges faced by near-end career teachers in integrating ungrading within a grade-focused educational framework resonate with broader concerns in the field about the compatibility of innovative assessment methods with established educational systems (Kohn & Blum, 2020). The current study contributes to this discourse by highlighting these challenges in the Vietnamese context, thus providing a basis for comparative analyses and cross-cultural understandings of ungrading implementation.

On the benefits side, the increased engagement and intrinsic motivation noted by novice teachers in this study align with constructivist principles, as found in other research (Kohn & Blum, 2020). Yet, the specific observations of how ungrading affects student motivation in the Vietnamese EFL setting offer new insights, enriching the global understanding of how ungrading influences student engagement in different cultural and educational contexts. The improvement in the quality of student-teacher interactions observed by mid-career teachers reflects the interpretivist emphasis on understanding subjective experiences in education. This finding aligns with previous studies (Guberman, 2021) but extends them by providing empirical evidence from the Vietnamese EFL context, thus broadening the scope of knowledge about the relational benefits of ungrading in language education. Finally, the observations of near-end career teachers about the development of critical thinking and lifelong learning skills through ungrading contribute a valuable perspective to the literature. While these benefits are well-documented in general education research (Blaschke, 2021), their specific manifestation in the context of Vietnamese EFL education provides new evidence supporting the long-term educational advantages of ungrading.

In summary, this study confirms some of the existing knowledge about the challenges and benefits of ungrading while also providing new insights specific to the Vietnamese EFL context. Its findings enrich the current understanding of ungrading's impact in diverse educational settings, highlighting both the universal and context-specific aspects of this assessment approach. This contributes significantly to the growing body of literature on alternative assessment methods, offering valuable perspectives for educators, policymakers, and researchers engaged in rethinking and reforming educational assessment practices.

5. Conclusion

This study explored the benefits and challenges of implementing ungrading in Vietnamese EFL settings, providing insights through semi-structured interviews with nine EFL teachers at varying career stages. The thematic analysis identified both the challenges—like novice teachers adapting to individualized feedback, mid-career teachers facing student resistance, and experienced teachers integrating ungrading within a grade-focused system—and significant benefits such as increased student engagement, enhanced student-teacher interactions, and the development of critical thinking skills. Key findings suggest that ungrading can enhance the learning experience, aligning with educational goals that prepare students for complex modern challenges. However, effective implementation requires comprehensive teacher support, gradual integration strategies, and improved student orientation to shift from traditional grading. Limitations include the study's small, specific sample and qualitative nature, which restricts generalizability and quantitative analysis. Future research should expand the sample size, include diverse educational contexts, and possibly

incorporate quantitative methods to provide a broader understanding of ungrading's effectiveness. Additionally, exploring the perspectives of other educational stakeholders could offer a more comprehensive view of the impacts of ungrading.

Declarations

Competing interest

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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Authors' contribution

All authors equally contribute to the research project.

Availability of data and materials

The manuscript contains all datasets generated and/or analyzed in the current study.

Ethical considerations

The researchers assert that they adhered to all ethical standards during their study. Additionally, all necessary preliminary procedures were completed before commencing the official research.

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