

STUDENTS' PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE ENGLISH CLASSES

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The pandemic – COVID 19 – triggered a big change in teaching and learning at universities in general and at University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh city (UEH) in particular. Most of the courses have been conducted online with the exploitation of video conference tools/services like Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. During the online English classes there, it was a nice surprise to find that the students actively participated in class discussions and eagerly showed their answers to the exercises in the chat box. The study was to find out what motivated them to “speak up” more and what the English teachers could do to encourage their participation both in online and offline courses.

Keywords: students' participation, online and offline learning, motivation

I. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of coronavirus disease and its rapid spread into worldwide pandemic has greatly affected people in any job fields. Teachers have had to apply online teaching more, if not to say, for the whole courses. At UEH, thanks to the LMS system, which has been set up and put into operation for more than five years, the shift from teaching offline to online has not been a big problem. Some students even expressed their enjoyment in this way of teaching and learning due to its certain advantages – no need to travel or take public transport to get to campuses, to spend money on gas for motorbike, and to get up early to get dressed for class, etc. . To the English teachers, one of the first impressions they have had with teaching online was that the students were more active in class participation. There were more responses when the teacher put a question to them. They tried their best in typing to be the first ones showing their answers to the exercises in the chat box. At the end of a class, they raised more questions to the teacher. Meanwhile, in offline learning, there was usually an embarrassing silence at this stage. From some of the students' explanation, it was the feeling of more comfort when participating in a “hidden” way that helped them have such an impressive change. However, the concern was what other motivations for their participation were and what teachers could do to encourage their active involvement in not only online but also offline learning. These were the issues studied in this paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Lee (2005), there are two communication behaviours for students' participation in class, verbal and nonverbal ones. Zainal Abidin (2007) explains clearly that with verbal participation, the student can speak, ask and answer questions, give comments on certain issues and voice their opinions in class discussions. Meanwhile, nonverbal participation can be recognized by behavioral responses such as nodding the head, raising the hand, body movements and eye contact.

Liu (2001) identifies four forms of involvement that the student can have in class, which are full integration, participation in the circumstances, marginal interaction and silent observation. Both Liu (2001) and Zainal Abidin (2007) share the idea that these forms change with time and place for the obvious fact that a student can be active in one discussion but may become quite passive and even silent in another one.

In Zainal Abidin's ideas, students involve with full integration when they naturally and spontaneously take part in class discussions, being aware of what to say and what should be said. Participation in the circumstances involves factors relating to socio-cultural, cognitive,

affective, linguistic or the environment which often lead to less participation and interaction with other students and teachers. Besides, students can speak at only appropriate time. In marginal interaction, students spend most of the time in class listening and taking notes rather than actively take part in group or class discussions. Finally, students are grouped into “silent observation” when they have the tendency to avoid any forms of oral participation and use different strategies such as taking notes, tape recording, or discussing after class to ensure that they comprehend what is or are discussed in class.

As far as factors influencing students’ participation are concerned, Pajares (1996) in Mohd. Yusof Abdullah et al. (2012) identifies that the first one is the student’s personality. Students who participate more in class are the ones who have high self efficacy, curiosity and the urge to explore new things. These enhance their confidence and motivate them to become more active members in class, ask more questions, give more opinions and be ready or willing to discuss more in class. A study conducted by Mohd. Yusof Abdullah et al. (2012) on forms and levels of participation and factors affecting students to actively participate in classroom also reveals that

“ ... students who have the characteristics of responsibility, like to read, high curiosity, always be prepared, and like to ask questions will form an active personality. These traits will (...) increase confidence level and motivate them to speak up in classroom.” (Mohd. Yusof Abdullah et al., 2012, p.519)

Meanwhile, the students with the characteristics of low self efficacy – having no interest in the topic being studied, being ashamed to ask, lack of knowledge and having no confidence in themselves – prefer to work in person with the teacher, do reference and seek information from the Internet as well as talk only when necessary.

The second factor is the instructor’s traits and skills. According to Siti Maziha, Nik Sutiyani & Melor (2010) and Fassinger (2000), a supportive, approachable, friendly, and open-minded, etc. teacher creates a good atmosphere and space for students to participate actively in class. Besides, the teacher’s skills in grouping and delegating the tasks, checking students’ progress and offering positive rewards do contribute to increasing students’ participation. By using various teaching techniques, the teacher can make the class become more interesting with higher involvement from students.

Another factor that counts is the influence from peers or classmates. To some students, studying with open-minded friends, they will have motivation to participate more in class discussion and activities (Cayanus & Martin, 2004). However, with passive students, active ones cause them to feel inferior and they depend on active students to get information. Generally, for assertiveness, students enjoy being in a group similar to them (Mohd. Yusof Abdullah et al., 2012).

Finally, the class size and facilities (projectors, lights, fans, air conditioners, etc.) – called environmental factors – play a certain role in encouraging students to be more active in learning (Shaheen, Cheng, Audrey & Lim, 2010). However, the study by Mohd. Yusof Abdullah et al.’s study (2012) indicates that active students are not influenced by environmental factors. Meanwhile, to passive ones, even seating positions in the class do affect their participation in classroom with passive students preferring to sit at the back so that they can ask for friends’ clarification when they do not understand something.

The studies in the past have provided in-depth information on forms of participation and factors affecting students’ involvement in class. It is the teacher’s task to identify the motivators for

his/her students to participate more and employ appropriate techniques to create responsive classes.

III. METHODOLOGY

The subjects of the study included 25 second-year students who just finished the online classes with their English teachers at UEH. The tool conveyed was structured interviews with seven questions raised to the students. Delivering questionnaires to a big group of students was not in favor for in this study to ensure that the options were chosen with care and the questions were answered with full consideration.

The length of each interviews was around twenty minutes. The language used in the interviews was Vietnamese to make sure that all the questions and responses were clear and thoroughly understood. During the interviews, the interviewer gave more explanation/clarification about certain terms/concepts relating to forms of participation.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Question 2 - The level of participation in online classes compared to that in offline ones

Nearly three-quarters of the students (72%) responded that they involved more in class activities when studying online. The main reason was that they felt more comfortable and confident to voice their opinions in class (here was in the chat box). Presenting ideas in offline class was a bad and unnerving experience to them because it made them feel shy, ashamed and/or awkward with other classmates' looking at them. The other explanations included that there were more tools or means for them to find information or the answers to the questions raised (4 students); it was faster to type short answers than to raise their hands to speak up (1 student); interaction with the teacher and other classmates became easier in offline mode (1 student); and the teacher encouraged participation by giving bonus for marks in midterm evaluation (1 student).

Questions 3 and 4 - Comparison on four forms of involvement in offline and online classes

With full integration marked as (1), participation in the circumstances as (2), marginal interaction as (3) and silent observation as (4), the results of 25 responses were presented in the following bar chart.

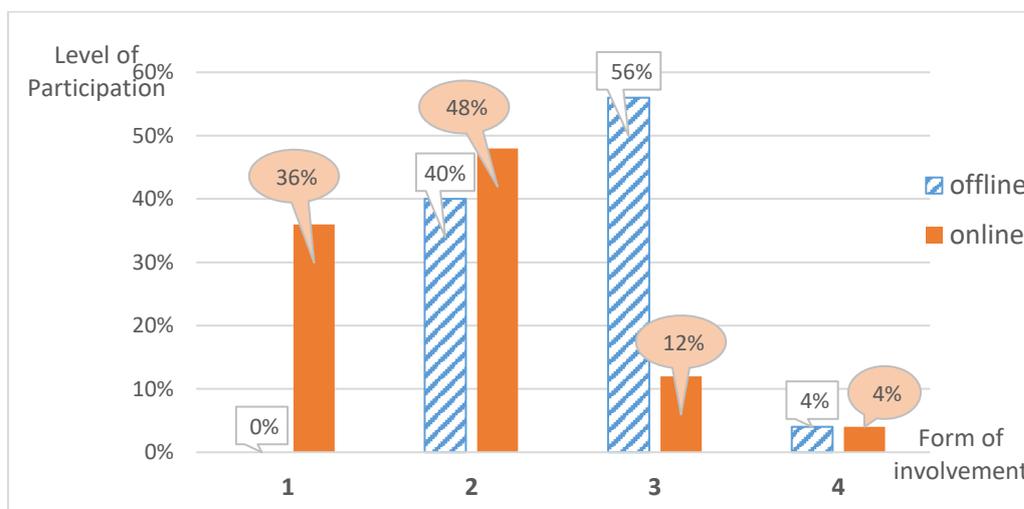


Figure 1. Levels of participation in offline and online classes

It is obvious that there was a dramatic shift in the first form of involvement - full integration - from offline to online study. Besides the reasons mentioned in the answers for question 2, one

simple explanation for the favour of this form in online learning was that teachers could get more responses from their students in the chat box. Therefore, the students had motivation to quickly type and show their answers. In addition, the fact that the teacher uploaded materials on the LMS system and asked the students to study these materials before class did give them more confidence in participation. They were also pushed to involve more because of the teacher's mark-bonus offer.

Meanwhile, the students' participation in the circumstances increased just slightly from 40% (offline mode) to 48% (online mode). However, they explained differently for their choices. With offline mode, some of the students clarified that they were busy noting down things learned and there was more noise around. Besides, they could only involve in the activities if they had knowledge and enough vocabulary to express their ideas about the topics being discussed. While in online mode, the same reason was cited – they did not have to turn on the camera so often in class. Therefore, they felt more confident when they just needed to type the answers or ideas and the teacher and classmates might even did not know who they were and how they looked like.

As far as the third form - marginal interaction - was concerned, there was a wide disparity in offline and online learning with 56% of responses for the former and 12% for the latter. Most of the students who ticked this box for offline classes explained that they were so afraid of making mistakes, being watched or looked at by their classmates, and of their low level of language competency that even if they knew the answer to the question, they would not speak it up except being asked directly by the teacher. The reasons for this choice in offline learning were that their classmates could find out the right answer more quickly and/or type it faster. Moreover, online learning with video conference tools/services like Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams, etc. was quite new to them. Therefore, they were not used to it and could not take advantage of it yet.

With regard to the fourth form – silent observation, only one student ticked this option for both offline and online learning. The only explanation given was that she was too scared of using English to voice her opinions with the presence of the classmates (for all three questions: 3, 4 and 5) although she agreed that she did participate more in online class.

Question 5 - Factors affecting the students' level of participation

The students' responses placed the most importance on the learners' personalities. Then came the environment. Teachers' traits took the third place. Meanwhile, the teacher's skills had the same position as the mode of learning, and the influence from peers or classmates and the cultural factor took the last slot.

Although stating that their personalities shouldered the highest responsibility for the level of involvement, most of the students clarified that it was the teacher's skills in teaching, his/her pleasant characters and enthusiasm that had encouraged the students a lot in overcoming their shyness and speaking up more. In addition, once when the teacher could create a comfortable atmosphere and some of the students in class could get the inspiration to talk about or discuss the issues in English, the other students would be persuaded to join the activity more enthusiastically. The explanation for the modes of studying was in favour for online learning because of the facts that they did not need to travel to class; they felt more comfortable to study at home; it was easier for them to find the answers for the questions raised and they could study more independently. Only one respondent mentioned the problems/disadvantages of studying online relating to collapse or slow connections.

Question 6 – Levels of influence of factors

The three factors in the top choices were the learners' personalities, the teacher's skills and the teacher's characters with completely different orders for the two modes of learning. For online learning, the factor that most affected the learners' participation was the teacher's character. Next was his/her skills and then came the students' personalities. Meanwhile, in offline learning, the students' personalities took the first place, followed by the teacher's characters and then his/her skills. It was interesting to find that the students had the same responses for the factors of instructor's skills in both ways of learning and the disparity for the factor of instructor's traits between offline and online modes was not much.

Although stressing the feeling of ashamed when being looked at by friends when they voiced their opinions in class, the students just had a few ticks for the option on influence from peers and classmates. There was the same number of choices for the item of influence from the modes of learning, either online or offline.

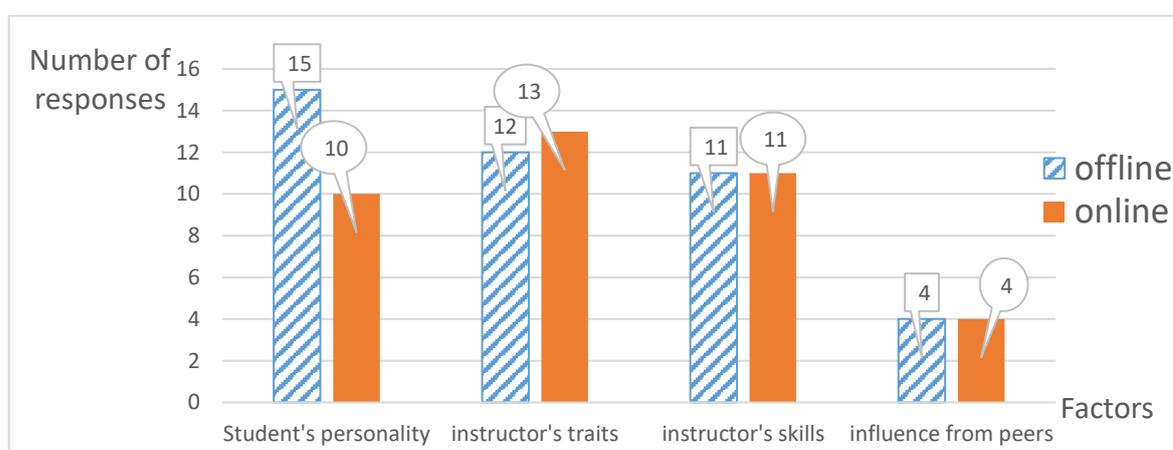


Figure 2: Levels of influence of factors

Question 7 – how to promote the students' s participation

With the question: “What should the teacher do to encourage learners' participation?”, most responses went for creating pleasant atmosphere and designing related activities and games. Some students preferred the mark-bonus offer. Some others suggested that the teacher should called the student's name to get the answer or ideas/opinions. There was only one response for each of the following suggestions: having no critical remarks, exerting less pressure on achieving high scores, encouraging students to make questions, having more online classes and teacher's using a little more Vietnamese in class.

Discussion

The fact that the students participated more in online than in offline classes revealed that their confidence in using English is higher in written form than in spoken one. Generally, there is an improvement in level of participation, but not in speaking skill. The students still could not overcome the fear of speaking English in class. It is obvious that when they feel safe and comfortable in a mode of learning without teachers' and friends' observation, they involve more in class activities and perform better. The teacher, therefore, should give them more practice and especially more encouragement so that they can psychologically get out of the fear of losing face and truly speak up their ideas more in class.

It can be noted that the students had an impartial judgement when identifying the factors and numbering the ones that most affected their participation. They were aware that the learners' personalities greatly influenced the level of involvement, and they also recognized how important the teacher's traits and skills were in helping them become active learners. It seemed that the influence from peers or classmates was not so big over them (with only four responses for each mode of study), and the feeling of shy or ashamed mentioned was due to their own personalities. In fact, they were affected by this external factor to some extent. However, more responses for learners' personalities than influence from peers prove that they put the responsibility on themselves rather than blame on others for their low level of involvement.

The same number of choice for the factor of instructor's skills indicates that in either form of learning, the teacher's skills exert the same influence on the students' participation. This emphasizes the fact that teachers should focus on improving their teaching skills and techniques so that they can push the learners' involvement to higher levels.

In the suggestions for increasing the levels of involvement, only one respondent mentioned having more online classes meanwhile there was a dramatic in the first form of involvement - full integration - from offline to online study. This reveals that the students were also aware that the internal factor – their personalities – were the key element, not the modes of learning, an external one, in promoting learners' participation.

V. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study were in line with the writer's and most experienced teachers' guesses about the students' answers. However, these findings and the analysis help remind and again emphasize the teachers' roles and the responsibilities in encouraging the learners' participation in class activities. In terms of simply improving students' participation, there is one question arising. It is whether we should increase the proportion of online learning to offline one. This requires further study so that we can have more responsive classes especially in the era of technology and of unexpected things like the recent pandemic, COVID – 19.

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APPENDIX

BẢNG CÂU HỎI

Bảng câu hỏi nhằm tìm hiểu về yếu tố tác động lên tính tích cực của sinh viên trong việc tham gia phát biểu và các hoạt động trên lớp (thảo luận, làm bài tập , ...) khi học trực tuyến trong thời gian có dịch COVID – 19 tại UEH.

1. Học kỳ đầu 2020, do ảnh hưởng của dịch COVID – 19, môn tiếng Anh bạn học online qua Google Meetings / Zooms / Microsoft teams:

- một phần của khóa học toàn bộ khóa học

2. Bạn thấy mình tham gia phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp (thảo luận, làm bài tập , ...) khi học online so với học trên lớp trước đây là ở mức:

- nhiều hơn không thay đổi ít hơn

Lý do:

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3. Bạn tự đánh giá về sự tham gia của bạn (phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp) khi học OFFLINE là ở mức:

- rất tích cực, chủ động và thoải mái khi đặt câu hỏi cho GV (full integration)

- khá tích cực, tuy nhiên có chút e ngại về khả năng ngôn ngữ / kiến thức (participation in the circumstances)

- không nhiều, chủ yếu là ghi chép và lắng nghe bạn phát biểu (marginal interaction)

- rất ít, hầu hết thời gian chỉ giữ im lặng và ghi chép (silent observation)

Lý do:

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4. Bạn tự đánh giá về sự tham gia của bạn (phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp) khi học ONLINE là ở mức:

- rất tích cực, chủ động và thoải mái khi đặt câu hỏi cho GV (full integration)

- khá tích cực, tuy nhiên có chút e ngại về khả năng ngôn ngữ / kiến thức (participation in the circumstances)
- không nhiều, chủ yếu là ghi chép và lắng nghe bạn phát biểu (marginal interaction)
- rất ít, hầu hết thời gian chỉ giữ im lặng và ghi chép (silent observation)

Lý

do:

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5. Theo bạn, những yếu tố nào dưới đây ảnh hưởng đến sự tham gia của bạn / người học (phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp) khi học online:

- tính cách của người học (năng động, trầm tĩnh, v..v.)
- tính cách của giảng viên
- kỹ năng của giảng viên
- ảnh hưởng / tác động của bạn bè trong lớp
- môi trường học (thoải mái và hiện đại – máy chiếu, đèn, quạt, máy lạnh, .v..v.)
- hình thức học (online hoặc offline)
- văn hóa tại lớp / trường / xã hội

Lý

do:

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6. Theo bạn, yếu tố nào trong những yếu tố được chọn bên trên tác động mạnh / nhiều nhất đến sự tham gia của bạn / người học (phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp) khi học online và offline? Bạn vui lòng đánh số với 1 là tác động nhiều / mạnh nhất.

Online

- tính cách của người học (năng động, trầm tĩnh, v..v.)
- tính cách của giảng viên
- kỹ năng của giảng viên
- ảnh hưởng / tác động của bạn bè trong lớp
- môi trường học (thoải mái và hiện đại – máy chiếu, đèn, quạt, máy lạnh, .v..v.)
- hình thức học
- văn hóa tại lớp / trường / xã hội

Offline

- tính cách của người học (năng động, trầm tĩnh, v..v.)
- tính cách của giảng viên
- kỹ năng của giảng viên
- ảnh hưởng / tác động của bạn bè trong lớp
- môi trường học (thoải mái và hiện đại – máy chiếu, đèn, quạt, máy lạnh, .v..v.)
- hình thức học
- văn hóa tại lớp / trường / xã hội

7. Để giúp sinh viên phát biểu và tham gia vào các hoạt động trên lớp tích cực hơn nữa, theo bạn giảng viên nên làm gì?

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