STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES TOWARDS ONLINE LEARNING OF ENGLISH DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Le Thi Thao Linh, M.A

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic has transformed various aspects of life and sectors of countries around the world. Among them, education and training have significantly suffered and fundamental changes have to be made accordingly to keep up with teaching and learning. The main purpose of this small scale study is to shed light on students' perspectives regarding online English learning amid Covid-19 pandemic in University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH). Participants of this research include first-year students of General English program. Online surveys are employed to figure out their perceptions towards online learning during the first semester 2020. The study indicates that participant students are generally positive about the online platform to study English during the pandemic. Besides, some immediate problems that need more attention also emerge. The study concludes that online learning platform has great potential to enhance academic performance and may go hand by hand with offline lessons in the long run.

Keywords: *learners' perspective, Covid-19 pandemic, online teaching of English.*

Introduction

2020 has seen significant changes in various fields of nearly all countries around the globe with the Covid-19 pandemic and Vietnam is not the exception. Among many seriously affected sectors, education witnessed some fundamental changes, especially with the closure of schools, language centers and other education organizations. It affected nearly 300 million students worldwide with the majority of Chinese students (Allo, 2020). In Vietnam, Covid-19 pandemic was similarly felt by the education sector since the introduction of social as physical distancing asked for everyone to stay at home. As a result, all public school levels as well as language or training centers faced shutting down until the mid of April.

Vietnam reported the first case of Coronavirus disease in late January (Tuoi Tre News, 2020) and the disease quickly transmitted to many provinces and cities across the country. This pandemic did not only have severe influence on English centers or other language organizations but also public

schools and universities of all levels. Consequently, this pandemic took its toll on many teachers' income as well as the quality of education in general.

In light of this, online teaching became an inevitable path for teachers amid the pandemic who did not want continuous learning to be disrupted. Consequently, a new methodology, online teaching approach in face of the situation came into existence. As a matter of fact, the idea of running an online class sounded alien to the majority part of teachers in Vietnamese schools. However, amid the "disease season", it was the last resort to maintain teaching and learning process.

Literature review

1. Definition

Online learning is defined as when you take the course online instead of attending physical classroom. The biggest different between online and face-to-face learning is that online learners can study at their own preferences regardless of place and time (Swan, 2019). Besides, there is the notion of simultaneous online learning in which learning takes place at the same time and enables direct interaction via the use of tools or apps.

School of Foreign Languages (SFLE) at UEH has been incorporating e-learning even long before the pandemic by providing students with extra practice and self-study via LMS. During the Coronavirus pandemic, e-learning added the organization of simultaneous online sessions to replace physical classes. Therefore, online learning in this sense involves both simultaneous and non-simultaneous learning.

The changing model from face-to-face to online learning means varying perspectives to different individuals. There are, as a matter of fact, advantages and disadvantages of this kind of learning.

2. Benefits

In Vietnamese context, there have been several transitions at universities. Those that were pioneers in conducting earliest online learning during the pandemic include: University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Hoa Sen University, Van Lang University, to name just a few. This is to say how digital learning actually proves itself in such a pandemic as a life buoy (Allo, 2020). Some of the benefits involves enabling teachers to reach out to students more effectively and students' easier communication outside class even after the pandemic (World Economic Forum, 2020). On the

online platform, teachers and students can easily communicate with others and access the unlimited and sometime free learning resources. Actually, this solution during the conundrum has been recognized by the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) as a significant step to promote technological application in the education and training sector (Viet Nam News, 2020)

With the ideal condition for online learning to take place, it is believed to bring about certain academic benefits. One positive effect is longer retention of learning materials. This is because students are able to learn faster or go back frequently at their own pace when learning online compared to the traditional classroom setting (World Economic Forum, 2020). Moreover, online learning enhances students' adaptability, learning autonomy and critical thinking (Smart & Cappel, 2006). Those skills are crucial in establishing good learning habits and lead to more positive academic performances.

Although the effectiveness of online learning varies, with young learners being less promising due to their short concentration and getting distracted easily, students at tertiary level or adult learners are believed to get the most out of this learning mode.

The Covid-19 pandemic definitely caused many difficulties to all sectors; however, it has also opened new opportunities. In education, for instance, it has facilitated the establishment of new teaching methods following online learning platform that promisingly transform the traditional education in a better way (Sun & Chen, 2016).

3. Challenges

Online learning is not without its challenges. The first and foremost barrier is unreliable internet access, especially in remote areas. Besides, the gap between privileged and underprivileged students poses more difficulties. This is a universal issue since statistics indicate that while 95% students Switzerland Norway and Austria own a computer for their studies whereas this figure in Indonesia is just 34 % (World Economic Forum, 2020). Since online teaching and learning is quite a novelty, the whole learning approach may change and countless barriers do exist. Indeed, for many people in rural areas, digital learning can be a whole new world opening to them. Nonetheless, with a view to keeping continuous learning for students, there seems to be no other choices but build an online learning environment across various levels.

Furthermore, online learning may face oppositions on the part of the teachers and students alike (Allo, 2020). Teachers are afraid to take on more responsibility since online learning demands teachers' availability as well as they need to update themselves in the tech world. Concerning learners, doubt for the effectiveness of new methods may prevent them from pleasantly adopting the online platform in which learners themselves take more charge of their studies. Adapting to a new teaching method also means instructors or teachers need to learn and utilize some online tools, which may pose numerous challenges to teachers who are in need of some learning or training. Among a variety of tools available, apps such as Facebook, Zalo that allow group calls or chat are frequently used. Besides, some other specialized tools designed for educational purposes like Zoom are highly preferred as it provides free video conferencing and allows a large number of participants simultaneously. Moreover, Zoom offers some interaction such as raising hands, group interactions, etc. (Tuoi Tre News, 2020). Responding to significant demand, many online platforms have been set up and applied widely in numerous countries. For example, Tencent Classroom in Chinese, Lark in Singapore, Dingtalk of Alibaba, BBC, etc. (World Economic Forum, 2020).

Although the move to online learning is controversial, a new model of education is to emerge with obvious benefits. "*I suppose the integration of technology into education will be more popular in the future and gradually become an essential part of various school education*", says the Minister of Education and Training, Phung Xuan Nha in Tuoi Tre News.

4. Online learning at UEH

University of Economics, Ho Chi Minh City took timely steps during the pandemic by eliminating all activities on campus confirming to the regulation of the Government. Simultaneously, so as not to interrupt students' continuous learning, UEH became one of the first universities to switch to the online learning system since the mid of February. Hence, with the great effort from both lecturers and students, proper education and training have been maintained during pandemic. Via the use of LMS and tools that assist video conferencing such as Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Team, etc, simultaneous online learning and self-study practice have sustained the learning path over the past months. The online interaction includes providing e-learning materials, assignment, discussions, etc. as well as teachers performing scheduled learning sessions.

SFLE successfully conducted e-learning during the pandemic with the completion of nearly all English courses of the first semester 2020. This is thanks to the effort of all lecturers in the Department and students involved. Besides, it is one firm proof that learning on the online platform is applicable to this subject with enormous advantages. Learners, especially those at tertiary level, definitely build their own perceptions towards online learning during the pandemic. This acknowledgement is essential input for teachers and the schools to make necessary adjustments. Therefore, the main purpose of this study is to investigate students' perceptions regarding online learning specifically in the mist of the Covid-19 pandemic. The main research question for this preliminary study is:

What is the students' attitudes towards online teaching of English during the pandemic at UEH?

Methodology

This study applied quantitative approach, employing the close-ended and open-ended questionnaires with a view to eliciting more opinions from participants (Creswell, 2012). The subject of this study is two classes of General English Programs at level 2 (pre-intermediate levels) with the total of 78 students. The participants were chosen using convenient sampling method (Cresswell, 2012). Those classes finished the first level last year, so they got already familiar with the English subject's requirements and content.

The instrument used in this study is online questionnaires due to the social distancing during this pandemic. The items for close-ended questions were designed following the short interviews with the students from classes except for the participating ones. This is important since participant students may not come up with the answers for the questions on the spot. The questions were sent out to students and got back via LMS. Moreover, the questions were designed in Vietnamese to ensure that students did not misunderstand any points and assist those of low level of English competency. In the end, 78 questionnaires were delivered to students, 70 of which were sent back to the researcher (approximately 90%).

Findings and discussion

First of all, in term of students' overall satisfaction of online learning of English on the Likert scale 1 to 5, the result is demonstrated as the following:

1 (Very dissatisfied)	2 (not satisfied)	3 (Neutral)	4 (Satisfied)	5 (Very satisfied)
0	2	5	55	8

Table 1. The result of students' satisfaction level when learning English online at UEH

As can be seen, students are generally satisfied with the e-learning system for English subject, with 11.4% feeling very satisfied and 78.6% being satisfied. On the other hand, two students rated 2 on the scale, which accounts for only 2.9%. Therefore, it can be concluded that participants are overall positive towards online learning of English during the pandemic. This is also supported by the study of Smart & Carppel (2006).

When it comes to the things that they prefer when learning English on the online platform, there are some significant factors that account for students' satisfaction level.
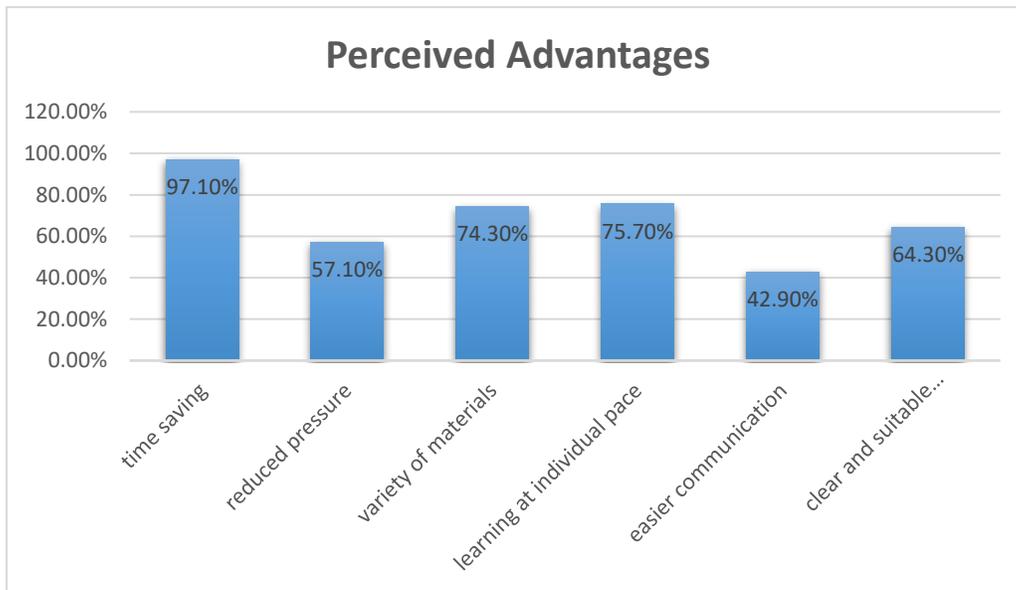

Figure 1. Advantages of online learning of English at UEH

The most preferred reason is time saving and cost saving for travelling with 97.1% of those surveyed agreeing. It is apparently an advantage for online studying especially in big cities like Ho Chi Minh City in terms of traffic congestion. The second most popular factor emerging in this study is that students have more chance to learn at their own pace compared to face-to-face lessons

with 53 out of 70 participants choosing (75.7%), closely followed by the variety of materials provided in the LMS for self-practice with 74.3%. As a matter of fact, with online learning, each student may fasten their learning, skipping the parts that they have already mastered without having to wait for other peers. On the contrary, they can absolutely go back or spend more time with any knowledge at their wish. Thus, learning is believed to be more effective when students are able to adjust their pace. Besides, the provision of assignment, extra-practice for English skills in the LMS is an additional advantage of online learning. The use of LMS system even before the pandemic to supplement the course book had been highly appreciated and during this time, it is essential that teachers put more effort in designing more tasks or uploading materials for students' autonomous learning at home.

Another explanation for student' consensus about e-learning of English relates to the clear and suitable requirements of the subjects during the Covid-19 pandemic (64.3%). As usual, setting clear learning objectives as well as informing assessment methods is done properly at the beginning of every new course by teachers from SFLE of UEH. It is even more critical for studying online in which students' anxiety rises dramatically. Additionally, some adjustments are inevitably made to suit the online platform assessments with a view to ease learners' concerns.

More than half of the students surveyed agreed that they experience less pressure while attending online lessons. It may be the case of introverts who feel more relaxed studying by themselves or that students are allowed to set up the most pleasant home-based learning conditions.

The last factor posed to participants in this category, the communication and interaction that take place during online sessions receive the least approval as an advantage. Approximately 43% checked on this statement, which indicates that learners still feel the lack of interaction and communication as opposed to face-to-face classes.

The second category in this questionnaire reveals what students believe to be drawbacks of online learning of English:
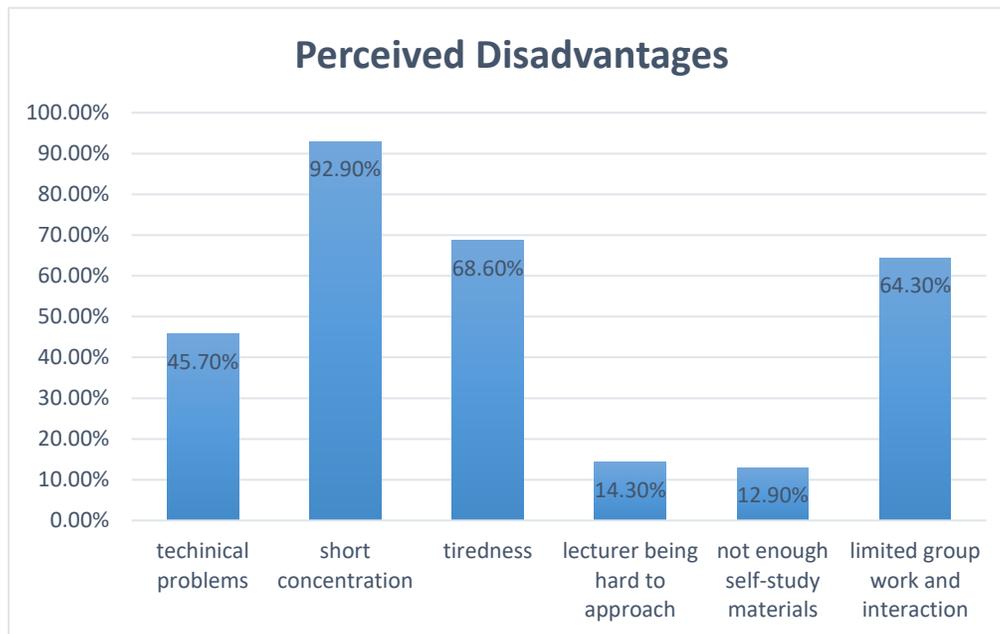

Figure 2. Limitations of online learning of English at UEH

Obviously, the biggest challenge many students face when learning online appears to be the shorter concentration and attention span that they can maintain when studying at home (65 out of 70). Indeed, there are so many distractions that may interrupt the learning process as well as the lack of the teachers' direct supervision that without being determined, learners find it hard to stay focused all the time.

The result also indicates tiredness as one problem learners experience while taking online classes. 68.6% of the students surveyed ticked on this statement due to the fact that looking at the computer or mobile continuously is exhausting. Consequently, teachers ought to allocate class time duration logically with regular breaks in between as well as allow the change of tasks to maintain their attention.

Other issues include limited time for pair / group work, which makes up of 64.3%. This can be explained by the fact that only a few tools enable pair or group work. Besides, the absence of eye contact or face-to-face interaction also discourage learners to take part in discussions. This problem needs to be addressed properly for online learning to take place more effectively.

Regarding technical problems, approximately 45.7% of learners got problem with their connection or power supply, etc., which prevents them from taking simultaneous online sessions. Technical problems also refer to the tech knowledge so as to take advantage of learning resources. This is where teacher should offer clear guidance as well as encourage students' mutual support with each other for learning to flow smoothly.

The other less significant problems with online learning are the limited learning materials and keeping contact with the lecturer, which is 12.8% and 14.3% respectively. As discussed above, keeping in touch still takes place normally using various channels such as emails, chat box, etc. This has actually increased teachers' workload to keep in touch well with their students all the time as some teachers shared.

The open-ended question posed at the end of the survey provides useful input to better online learning of English. In fact, the return for this question is not high, but some themes emerge that present helpful suggestions. Three students expressed their concern over Internet access or power supply during online session and wish to have recordings for each online session for close revision later on.

> *...Đôi khi em không thể vào học được do bị mất điện hoặc không có Internet. Hi vọng sau mỗi tiết học online thầy cô có thể up bài giảng đã ghi lại để chúng em có thể tự học...*

Furthermore, one student commented on the type of tasks given for online learning:

> *...em thấy làm việc nhóm rất khó khăn, vì đôi khi một số bạn không thể liên lạc được để phân chia việc. Cho nên thầy cô đưa ra các bài tập cá nhân sẽ dễ dàng hơn cho tụi em...*

It is understandable that some learners are anxious about group tasks due to the lack of face-to-face interaction. The complaint from students about keeping in touch with the members and submission of allocated tasks on time occurred frequently last semester. In this circumstance, it is optimal to set both individual and group tasks with the former being the majority. The use of group tasks such as presentation is a fundamental part of learning, so attempts to incorporate those while studying online is of great necessity (Ur, 2012)

Finally, students also expressed their wishes to have more detailed explanations and examples of given tasks or assignment. As a matter of fact, numerous of them emailed teacher afterwards to

ask about the tasks since sometimes the system did not work properly or their lack of attention. Consequently, it is vital that teachers have clearer and more specific written guidelines for every online task or assignment.

Conclusion and recommendation

Following the findings of this study, online learning is generally a good thing in the midst of the pandemic. It proves to be very helpful in such a hard time with education and training. The finding is in line with the study of Allo (2020).

Not only does this study reveal that online learning is a wise choice, but it also highlights some existing problems: the conditions for online learning to take place (devices, connection, power supply, etc.), lack of concentration or motivation. It is, therefore, necessary that teachers share concerns with students and discuss some strategies for online learning. Building rapport in the classroom can bring positive effects when switching to a novel learning experience. At the same time, students had better develop their learning autonomy, since self-study capacity and high awareness can help them gain significant results in any learning conditions (Sun & Chen, 2016).

Appendix

Questionnaires

Học e-learning môn tiếng Anh, trường Đại học Kinh tế Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh

1. Cho biết mức độ hài lòng của bạn về việc học trực tuyến môn tiếng Anh ở trường Đại học Kinh tế TP. HCM?

Thất vọng	Chưa tốt	Chấp nhận	Hài lòng	Yêu thích
1	2	3	4	5

2. Diều bạn cảm thấy hài lòng về việc học online:

☐ Tiêt kiệm thời gian và công sức đi lại

☐ Cảm giác học tập thoải mái, giảm áp lực học tập

☐ Tài liệu tham khảo và hỗ trợ học tập đa dạng

☐ Mỗi cá nhân có thời gian nghiên cứu sâu hơn hoặc tập trung vào những phần kiến thức chưa nắm kĩ

☐ Giao tiếp và trao đổi giữa giảng viên với sinh viên cũng như giữa sinh viên với nhau thuận lợi và dễ dàng hơn

☐ Yêu cầu môn học và tiêu chí đánh giá, thi cử rõ ràng và hợp lí cho việc học online trong thời kì dịch bệnh

3. Diều bạn cảm thấy chưa hài lòng về việc học online:

☐ Còn thiếu sự tương tác giữa giảng viên và sinh viên cũng như giữa sinh viên (làm việc nhóm) trong các buổi học trực tuyến

☐ Sinh viên gặp khó khăn liên quan đến thiết bị máy móc, đường truyền, kĩ năng máy tính

☐ Sinh viên khó tập trung vào bài giảng khi học online tại nhà

☐ Còn thiếu tài liệu học tập để hỗ trợ tự nghiên cứu

☐ Giảng viên khó tiếp cận và trao đổi thông tin so với trên lớp học

☐ Thời lượng buổi học quá dài cũng như ngồi trước màn hình máy tính gây mệt mỏi

4. Bạn có đóng góp ý kiến gì để việc học online trở nên hiệu quả hơn:

………………………..

REFERENCES

"Tuoi Tre News" (2020). Teaching online an inevitable path for teachers amid Covid-19 pandemic in Vietnam. Retrieved 28th June 2020, from https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/features/20200406/teaching-online-an-inevitable-path-for-teachers-amid-covid19-pandemic-in-vietnam/53884.html

"Viet Nam News" (2020). E-learning methods see boom during Covid-19 pandemic. Retrieved 28th 2020, from https://vietnamnews.vn/economy/715821/e-learning-methods-see-boom-during-covid-19-pandemic.html

"World Economic Forum" (2020). The Covid-19 has changed education forever. This is how. Retrieved 27th June 2020, from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2020/04/coronavirus-education-global-covid19-online-digital-learning/

Allo, M. (2020). Is the online learning good in the midst of Covid-19 pandemic? The case of EFL learners. *Jurnal Sinestesia, 10* (1), 1-10.

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Smart, K., L., & Cappel, J. (2006). Students' perceptions of online learning: A comparative study. *Journal of Information Technology Education, 5*, 201-219.

Swan, K. (2019). *Research on online learning. Research Center for Educational Technology*. Kent State University.

Sun, A., & Chen, X. (2016). Online education and its effective practice: A research review. *Journal of Information Technology Education: Research, 15,* 157-190.

Ur, P. (2012). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.