

A Study on the Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning at a University in Vietnam During Covid – 19 Pandemic Era

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Abstract:

Background: Since Covid-19 ruled the globe for the past two years, it is not strange that teaching and learning online have been popular more than ever. Various virtual conferencing platforms such as Zoom meeting, Google meets have been applied in almost all educational levels ranging from primary to post-graduate across Vietnam. The task of online teaching and learning is believed to be beneficial to students as it is the only choice. However, the reality shows that students and teachers also encounter challenges.

Materials and Methods: This research aims to explore the pros and cons of online learning at a university by merely interviewing 25 English majored students from different cohorts. The researcher chose a random of participant to interview basing on students' schedules.

Results: The results show that despite the pros such as convenience, cost and time saving, teaching quality, online learning also brings back cons for students namely isolation, technical problems and cheating.

Conclusion: The results of this study would suggest ideas for further research in various contexts.

Key Word: online learning, advantages and disadvantages of online learning, students' attitude

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I. Introduction

Starting from the late 2019, Corona virus has spreading globally with an exponential speed and the number of infected cases is still increasing with over 5 million deaths (<https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>). All aspects of life have been upside down and education is not an exception. Online learning, therefore, is a trend of the 4th Revolution since it is the only choice to guarantee the original plan of the course (Duc & Chau, 2020). Accordingly, teachers are forced to start teaching virtually despite the fact that there is little or no support from the school or institution which leads to a heavy burden on teachers (Van der Spoel, Noroozi, Schuurink, & van Ginkel, 2020).

Of course, there are schools or institutions providing assistance to teachers by buying a stable and standard platform such as Microsoft Team so that teachers can best exploit the functions and the lessons would be more effective. Besides, it is claimed that being professional in applying ICT as well as online teaching is a part of a teacher's profession (Amhag, Hellström, & Stigmar, 2019). As a result of this, teachers from all levels of education are asked to participate in ICT courses organized by the ministry of education. Once the ICT skill is improved, teachers are expected to be professional in running the online sessions smoothly.

At first, the sudden change in mode of teaching (from face-to-face to online) causes problems to students. According to article at <http://b-company.jp/online-learning-en/>, just one third of Vietnamese students have experience in online learning before the outbreak of Covid-19 although this mode of teaching has been introduced in several institutions. There is no doubt that Covid-19 has also negatively affected students' mental health and study progress (Cao et al., 2020). Later, when students were fully vaccinated with at least 2 doses, the fear for Covid-19 was diminished. The teaching and learning tasks seemed not to be different with offline version. At certain time, blended learning was a pilot choice in which teachers not only had to teach students coming to class but also broadcast their lessons for those who were in quarantine.

By conducting this study, the researcher is trying to explore students' perspectives on online learning during Covid-19 pandemic era since this plays a pivotal role in contributing to the task of online teaching and learning. This is motivated by the following research question:

What are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning in Covid-19 pandemic?

Various researchers have tried to define online learning in both similar and distinct ways. The term online learning is generally understood to describe the task of learning based on ICT (Lê Văn Toán, 2020). Accordingly, teachers and learners will be able to interact via a network of modes such as email, online

discussion, forum or video conference. In the same light, Sadiku, Adebo, and Musa (2018) assert that online learning refers to distance education, web-based learning, e-learning and digital learning in which internet is a pre-requisite since activities are not only organized online but also materials are easily transferred via virtual platforms. This surely helps students save a sum of money as the course books or workbooks are provided virtually. However, Oliver (2000) indicated that online learning was tough to define due to its relative short history and implementation diversity. Although it was true that online learning has long been existed and exploited, the alteration of mode as well as definition would occur due to the development of society and technology. Overall, online learning is obviously a virtual task in which instructors and students do not present physically at the test venue. Instead, both sides just need to stay at home and enjoy distance teaching and learning as long as the internet connection is stable.

Obviously, online learning benefits both students and instructors (Oliver, 2000). First and foremost, it allows students worldwide to pursue a recognized degree without commuting to the classrooms or lecture halls. With the development of 4.0 Technology, learners are able to complete assignments anywhere at any time and move to the convocation day with good mood. This, as a result, leads to the next advantages of convenience and flexibility (Barr & Tagg, 1995; Le & Truong, 2021). By mentioning these, they mean teachers and students are capable of discussing the suitable time for organizing the lessons which are appealing to a large number of digital learners. Some students even find online learning more interesting and effective than traditional mode because of the availability of resources. Besides, (Yuhanna, Alexander, & Kachik, 2020) have shown 4 major advantages of online learning including navigation, exchange of ideas, comfortable communication and low cost. Once students are required to read materials related to the lesson, they can navigate easily between documents. Exchanging of ideas and comfortable communications are also done at ease amongst students basing on the social networking applications they are using. Then, low cost is completely a benefit when there is a fact that the price for a smart device is getting lower to guarantee that most students are able to afford. In terms of collaborations between students, (García-Alberti, Suárez, Chiyón, & Mosquera Feijoo, 2021) prove that online learning enhance collaboration between students when being asked to work in groups. This seemed true since students are divided into sub-rooms and free to discuss the assignment without intervention of instructor or fellows. Nevertheless, this only applies if students are extremely serious about their study. In summary, the more the technology develops, the more the benefits online learning brings back.

Besides the strengths that online learning provides students, a wide range of limitations are also recognized. To begin with, Barr and Tagg (1995) claim that online learning generally creates isolation amongst fellows. This problem has been proved in McInnerney and Roberts (2004) when students were unable to communicate with peers, or they were not professional in dealing with technical difficulties in the computer. Once these issues were repeated chronologically, students would feel disgusted and gradually they would be isolated in the virtual classroom which led to negative experience in online learning. Another limitation of online learning is related to students' cheating when studying and taking examinations virtually (Abdelrahim, 2021; Brothen & Peterson, 2012; Sadiku et al., 2018). Accordingly, these studies show that online learning during quarantine has promoted e-cheating not only during the lessons but also online formative and summative exams. In a different view, Yuhanna et al. (2020) has mentioned six main drawbacks of online learning namely copyright, information search, support without technical and wise management, internet access, access agreements and lack of quality control. Generally, these difficulties are mostly related to information technology and internet access since they are of great significance in distance learning. Despite the fact that internet is now covered worldwide and are mostly available for individuals, it cannot be denied that technical problems still happen sometimes. Overall, limitations of online learning are obviously experienced by a wide range of institution; however, research on solutions are also carried out to ensure that the task of online learning is still an ideal option for educational institutions, educators and students.

Various studies on online learning have been conducted and each study brought back interesting findings. The summary of both domestic and international research work would be clear illustrations for this.

Research by Trang and Đào (2021) was on what emotions of learners to distance learning were. The participants were 553 students of Ho Chi Minh University of Education with different majors. Each student would have to do a questionnaire related to both positive and negative emotions of distance learning such as interesting, hopeful, confident, angry, worried, shame and sad. The results showed that the level of positive emotions were higher than negative ones.

Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) carried out a study on difficulties and suggested solutions in online learning at a university in Vietnam. A Google form questionnaire was applied to survey more than 100 participants. The findings indicated that nearly half of students got tired of focusing too much on the device for long hours. Besides, students also stated that they experienced headaches, dizziness, and eye strain when contacting with device screen. Last but not least, about one third of participants faced to technical problems such as internet connection and unstable network when signing in online class.

A case study conducted by Duc-Long, Thien-Vu, and Dieu-Khuon (2021) aimed to explore the impact of Covid-19 pandemic on online learning in higher education. As the name suggested, this was completely a qualitative research design with in-depth interviews. After transcribing and analyzing the data collection, the researchers claimed that covid-19 pandemic had positive impact on online learning in Vietnam context.

To understand the advantages and disadvantages of distance learning, Klisowska, Sen, and Grabowska (2020) has implemented a study by collecting and reviewing the recent literature on e-learning in the context of Poland. The findings revealed that main advantages of online learning included teacher professional development, exchange in intergenerational experience, time saving, pace learning adaptation, and access to various teaching materials. On contrary, disadvantages of online learning involved lack of peer interactions, long hours on device screen, lack of physical activity, difficulty in implementing materials, and lack of contact with teacher.

Online teaching and learning in higher education from a student perspective was a research carried out by Coman, Țiru, Meseșan-Schmitz, Stanciu, and Bularca (2020). To discover students' perception of online teaching and learning, the researchers had used an online questionnaire and distribute to 762 university students across Romanian universities. The findings suggested that most Romanian higher education institutions' online learning were not exclusively prepared.

Despite the availability of research on online learning worldwide, the researcher is curious about her university students' opinion on online learning during Covid-19 pandemic era. Hence, she is conducting this study with the hope that new and interesting ideas would be explored for further research.

II. Material And Methods

The qualitative research design was used in this study since the researcher would like to discover students' attitudes towards online learning in the pandemic era. The participants of the study were 25 English majored students at a university in Vietnam. These students were all Vietnamese native speakers aged from 18 to 22 and their English proficiency was different.

In this study, structured interviews were used as a primary instrument as it ensures that the researcher would analyze the participants' answers from different backgrounds but experienced the same product (Morris, 2015). Since there was only 1 research question, the researcher could easily arrange the online interview with participants through Zoom meetings. Each answer would be carefully recorded and saved on Google drive to guarantee that the data could not be lost.

To analyze the data collection, the researcher would transcribe the recordings into word document and then group the ideas that were similar. Besides, the different opinions were also noted for discussion.

III. Result

Answering the research question

What are the advantages and disadvantages of online learning in Covid-19 pandemic?

After interviewing with the participants, the researcher divided the findings in themes.

The advantages of online learning during Covid-19 pandemic era

Convenience

Based on the interpretation of the data collection, 25 students stressed that online learning was convenient in terms of time, document and note-taking. The quotations from S1, S10 and S19 would illustrate these issues:

'I think online learning is beneficial because it's convenient in terms of time and I can find documents whenever I want.' (S1)

'Online learning is effective because I can see many documents at the same time easily.' (S10)

'The advantage of online learning is that it's convenient for taking notes and I can review knowledge when necessary.' (S19)

Saving time and cost

Obviously, online learning is more time saving and cost saving when comparing with traditional mode. The opinions below were shared by S11, S12, S15, S22 and S24:

'The effectiveness is time saving and I can manage my schedule easily.' (S11)

'I think online learning is effective since it saves time and I can memorize the knowledge quickly.' (S12)

'Online learning helps us save time because we do not have to spend time going to school. Besides, we can be more focused without being disturbed.' (S15)

'I think online learning is effective as it reduces travel costs, saves time and study space.' (S22)

'For me, the advantage of online learning is that it doesn't take time to travel and I can get access to good textbooks.' (S24)

Self- motivation and teaching quality

Apart from convenience, cost and time saving, students reported that their self – motivation was improved and the quality of the lessons was still the same. The following quotes would be good proofs:

‘Online learning is really effective because it improves my self-esteem and I also have more time for revision.’ S6

‘For me, the quality of online learning is as good as traditional one and I can understand the lesson and gain knowledge.’ S14

The disadvantages of online learning

Apart from the advantages, the participants also identified the difficulties when experiencing several semesters of online learning. The themes below would represent the ideas that students had shared.

Lack of direct face-to-face meeting

When being asked to list the disadvantages of online learning, 5 students claimed that distance learning is lack of direct interaction between teachers and students.

‘Well, I believe that the biggest drawback of virtual learning is that I cannot see my friends in person so I can easily get bored.’ S1

‘I think online learning is not really effective because students do not interact with teachers directly.’ S2

‘One of the challenges when connected with online learning is that we don’t have many chances to practice with others directly.’ S15

‘I don’t think online learning is effective because I cannot interact with teacher.’ S19

Distraction and lack of concentration

The common strains that students complained when they participated in online learning were distraction and lack of concentration. In this study, only 4 students listed such problems:

‘I think online learning is not good because I cannot learn much and I can’t concentrate on the lessons.’ S3

‘Sometimes I cannot pay attention to the lessons because of the noise around me.’ S11

‘I don’t like online learning because it makes students not focus on the lessons. Besides, we can get bored easily and absorb nothing.’ S16

‘I think online learning is not effective because students may have more distractions and less oversight, which can reduce their motivation as well.’ S24

Technical problems

There is a fact that internet connection is the prerequisite of online learning and to ensure that the tasks of teaching and learning happening smoothly, teachers and students must have stable connection. However, technical problems were still found due to various reasons.

‘I dislike online learning because the network connection is not stable.’ S8

‘I think student may not be able to absorb all knowledge delivered by teachers because of unstable internet connection.’ S17

‘I feel it is less effective because students often stay muted. Perhaps they are busy doing other things and they avoid teachers.’ S20

Other problems

Regardless the mentioned problems, students also revealed other which were also needed for consideration. The evidences were proved below:

‘I don’t find online learning effective because this makes me lazier.’ S4 & S14

‘Teachers cannot easily manage students when learning online and this will make them work separately so they do not have chances to do tasks in group.’ S12

‘In my opinion, online learning is ineffective and it is just a temporary solution during the pandemic era. We couldn’t be active like we used to be in the real classroom.’ S20

‘Lacks of self-motivation amongst students in online learning is one of the primary reasons that it fails to complete during the online course.’ S25

‘It is easy for students to cheat in the exam and they can “fall asleep” in classes easily.’ S10

IV. Discussion

Overall, while convenience, cost and time saving, self-motivation and teaching quality are considered as key merits of online learning in this study, the counterparts such as lack of direct face – to – face meeting, distraction and lack of concentration, technical problems and others are also found.

With reference to the strengths of online learning, part of the findings is similar to (Barr & Tagg, 1995; García-Alberti et al., 2021; Yuhanna et al., 2020) when most participants of this research mention convenience, low cost. The difference is that some students find teaching quality does not change and they can still absorb knowledge. This seems interesting because while others are distracted by noise or other tasks, such group of students is still able to achieve the goal of the lesson. Although the researcher does not explore the causes of

this, it can be assumed that these students are highly motivated and they are extremely serious and responsible for their study.

Regarding the weaknesses of online learning, the similarities between this study and the previous literature are isolation, technical problems and cheating (Abdelrahim, 2021; Barr & Tagg, 1995; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). However, there is a surprising point causing debate for scholars called collaboration. In their research, García-Alberti et al. (2021) asserts that teachers and students must adapt with the virtual learning environment and the interaction between them are improved. On the contrary, students from my interviews believe there is no improvement in the collaboration between teachers and students. A vivid example is that they have to stay muted most of the time and they are easy to fall asleep after observing half of the lecture.

V. Conclusion

There is no doubt that the task of teaching and learning via internet is becoming more significant than ever. The shutdown and lockdown periods over the past two years have been a reliable proof for this. Gradually, the online learning platforms are quite popular to all students across the country and all parties seem to adapt to this mode of teaching and learning. We should be aware that this task may be effective to some institutions and vice versa as it depends on how teachers exploit the online platforms and how students are aware of the task.

This study is conducted with just a small sample at a university; hence, it cannot be generalized for other institutions. It is hoped that the findings would contribute to the research community and further research on how to solve with difficulties that students encounter when participating in online courses would be carried out.

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