

Investigating EFL English-Majored Students' Perceptions Towards Online Learning: The Case of a University in Vietnam

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Abstract –This study looks at how English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students majoring in English perceive online learning at a Vietnamese institution. The transition to online education has created new problems and possibilities for EFL students. The purpose of this study is to investigate students' opinions about online learning platforms and methodologies, as well as their perceived efficacy. Data was obtained using a qualitative technique, with a questionnaire distributed to a sample of English-majored students. The findings show that, while students like the flexibility and accessibility of online learning, they also confront substantial hurdles such as technological concerns, decreased engagement with professors, and difficulty sustaining motivation and self-discipline. Furthermore, the study emphasizes the significance of teacher assistance, efficient communication, and better digital literacy among students. These findings can help educators and policymakers improve online learning environments and meet the particular needs of EFL learners in Vietnam.

Keywords: EFL students, online learning, perceptions, Vietnam, English-majored students, digital literacy

I. INTRODUCTION

The introduction of digital technology has significantly altered the educational scene, and the COVID-19 epidemic has expedited the move to online learning. This transformation has been most noticeable in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education, where students and teachers have had to swiftly adjust to new ways of teaching and learning. The usefulness of online learning environments in EFL teaching is becoming increasingly popular and important (Dhawan, 2020).

The epidemic has caused a significant increase in the usage of online learning platforms in Vietnam, as it has in many other nations. Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training has advocated the use of digital technology to maintain educational continuity (Le & Tran, 2021). However, the transition from traditional classroom settings to virtual learning environments offers students both benefits and problems. This is especially true for English majors, who frequently rely on interactive and conversational strategies to improve their language abilities.

Several studies have emphasized the advantages of online learning, such as enhanced accessibility, flexibility, and the capacity to employ a diverse set of digital materials (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). However, technological difficulties, restricted contact, and a lack of fast feedback can all impede the learning process (Sun & Chen, 2016). These difficulties might be exacerbated in the context of EFL learning, as language acquisition frequently necessitates immersive and participatory experiences.

The purpose of this study is to look at the attitudes of English majors at a Vietnamese institution concerning online learning. This study aims to analyze the strengths and shortcomings of existing online education techniques in EFL contexts by first examining their attitudes, experiences, and perceived efficacy of online learning platforms. This study's findings can help to design more successful online learning methodologies as well as contribute to the larger area of educational technology. In order to achieve the objective of the study, the author endeavors to address the following question:

- How do English-majored students at a university in Vietnam perceive the effectiveness of online learning in comparison to traditional classroom learning?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Introduction to Online Learning in EFL Contexts

The emergence of online learning has revolutionized educational methods throughout the world. This transition was most noticeable during the COVID-19 epidemic, which forced a move from traditional educational settings to online platforms (Dhawan, 2020). Online learning provides the flexibility, accessibility, and abundance of materials that traditional educational approaches sometimes lack. It enables students to learn at their own speed and gives access to a wide range of educational resources from across the world (Al-Marouf et al., 2020).

However, the shift to online learning has not been without obstacles. Technical concerns, such as inconsistent internet connections and a lack of access to appropriate gear, might impede students' ability to engage fully in online classes. Furthermore, a lack of face-to-face connection might cause feelings of isolation, lowering student engagement and motivation (Moorhouse, 2020). These problems are especially important in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction, where interactive and communicative activities are essential for language learning.

Online learning provides unique opportunities and problems in EFL instruction. One of the key advantages is the opportunity to access a diverse set of authentic language materials and engage with native speakers via virtual platforms. This exposure to real-world language use can help students improve their listening and speaking abilities, which are critical components of language competency (Li, 2020). Furthermore, internet platforms frequently provide interactive tools and multimedia materials to make language learning more interesting and successful.

On the other hand, EFL students may encounter unique problems in the online learning environment. For example, a lack of timely feedback and personal connection with teachers might stymie language learning. Furthermore, cultural variations and varied degrees of digital literacy might influence students' capacity to adapt to online learning platforms (Hung, 2016). To address these issues, online EFL programs must be designed and implemented thoughtfully, with tactics that foster engagement, offer timely feedback, and take into account students' specific needs and settings.

2.2. Benefits of Online Learning

The advantages of online learning have been widely documented. Flexibility and accessibility are among the most significant benefits, allowing students to learn at their own pace and from any location (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Online learning environments can provide a plethora of digital resources, such as multimedia content and interactive activities, which can enhance the learning experience (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009).

Moreover, online platforms often facilitate personalized learning experiences, where instructional content can be tailored to meet individual students' needs (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). This personalization can be particularly beneficial for EFL students, as it allows for targeted practice in areas where they may struggle, such as grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation (Sun & Chen, 2016).

Another significant benefit of online learning is the opportunity for increased student engagement and interaction through various digital tools. Discussion forums, chat functions, and collaborative projects can foster a sense of community and enhance communication skills, which are crucial for language learners (Hrastinski, 2008). Additionally, online assessments can provide immediate feedback, helping students to quickly identify and address their weaknesses (Anderson, 2008).

The global reach of online education also allows EFL students to connect with peers and instructors from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, providing a richer learning experience and promoting cross-



cultural understanding (Bates, 2019). This exposure can be instrumental in developing a more nuanced and practical understanding of the English language.

To summarize, the flexibility, accessibility, and personalization provided by online learning make it an effective instrument for EFL instruction. Using digital materials and interactive platforms, instructors may build interesting and successful learning experiences that cater to the individual requirements of language learners.

2.3.Challenges of Online Learning

Despite the advantages, online learning can create some obstacles. Technical concerns, such as unstable internet connections and a lack of proper devices, can make it difficult for students to fully engage in online classes. Furthermore, a lack of face-to-face connection can contribute to feelings of isolation and low motivation, both of which are important elements in language learning (Muilenburg and Berge, 2005).

EFL students, in particular, may find online learning difficult owing to the limited options for real-time discussion and engagement with classmates and instructors. Language acquisition frequently relies on immersive and engaging experiences, which are challenging to reproduce in an online setting (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005). The lack of instant feedback, as well as the intricacies of body language and facial expressions, which are critical in comprehending and practicing a new language, might hinder the learning process (Hampel & Stickler, 2015).

Another big problem is keeping students engaged in a virtual environment. Distractions at home, along with the flexibility of online learning, might cause students to procrastinate and lack discipline (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz, & Santiago, 2017). Furthermore, the digital gap exacerbates these issues, since students from impoverished backgrounds may not have equal access to technology and online services as their peers (Van Dijk, 2017).

Online learning settings can provide challenges for instructors who may lack the necessary training to provide successful online education. The transfer from traditional teaching techniques to digital pedagogy necessitates a considerable shift in teaching methodologies as well as the acceptance of new technology, which can be challenging for certain instructors (Baran, Correia, & Thompson, 2011). Furthermore, maintaining academic integrity in online examinations remains difficult, as the possibility of cheating and plagiarism grows in an unmonitored setting (Hollister & Berenson, 2009).

Lastly, cultural and linguistic diversity in online classrooms can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunications, as students and teachers navigate different communication styles and educational expectations (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nolla, 2003). This can be particularly problematic in EFL contexts, where language barriers already pose a significant challenge.

2.4.Student Perceptions of Online Learning

Research on students' perspectives of online learning is a vibrant topic with a wide range of findings. While some students like the flexibility and convenience of online learning, others have misgivings about the lack of direct engagement and fast feedback. Smart and Cappel's (2006) findings, which found a range of views among students about online education, demonstrate the diverse character of these perspectives.

In a research done by Almahasees, Mohsen, and Amin (2021), students recognized the benefits of online learning while simultaneously expressing worries about its flaws. Technical challenges surfaced as a significant obstacle, with the ability to disrupt the smooth flow of the learning process. Furthermore, the lack of face-to-face connection presents issues, impacting the level of engagement and sense of community in the learning environment. Students also expressed difficulties retaining motivation in the absence of the controlled routine given by a physical classroom setting.

These findings highlight the significance of considering both the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. Efforts to improve technological assistance and provide comprehensive online resources can help to overcome difficulties, resulting in a more smooth learning experience. Furthermore, initiatives for

encouraging student engagement and cooperation in virtual environments might help reproduce the sense of community that is commonly associated with traditional classrooms. Acknowledging and resolving these issues allows educational institutions to better serve students as they navigate the complexity of online learning.

2.5. Online Learning in Vietnam

As Le and Tran (2021) point out, the quick transition to online learning in Vietnam has been driven by the need to continue education in the face of pandemic problems. This transition mirrors a wider worldwide trend in which educational systems must quickly adapt to distant learning modes in order to assure learning continuity.

Recognizing the importance of digital integration in education, Vietnam's Ministry of Education and Training has aggressively promoted for the use of digital technology to improve learning. The shift to online learning is more than just a reaction to the current crisis; it also acknowledges the potential benefits that technology may offer to education, such as enhanced accessibility and flexibility.

However, this change has not been without challenges. Vietnamese students and instructors have faced several challenges along the way. One of the most significant issues is restricted access to technology, particularly in rural and economically disadvantaged regions where access to devices and dependable internet connectivity remains a critical concern. Furthermore, there is a significant gap in digital literacy among students and instructors, limiting their capacity to efficiently traverse online platforms and use digital resources for learning.

Furthermore, the transition to online instruction demands the creation and execution of efficient online teaching practices. Educators must adapt their pedagogical techniques to the online environment, ensuring that learning objectives are satisfied while retaining student interest and participation. This necessitates training and assistance for educators to improve their digital pedagogical abilities and familiarity with online teaching technologies.

In response to these problems, considerable efforts are being made to bridge the digital gap and improve digital literacy among students and educators. Government initiatives, as well as cooperation with corporate sector partners and civil society organizations, seek to expand access to technology and provide training programs for digital skills. Furthermore, continual study and experimentation are critical for discovering and sharing excellent online teaching approaches that are specific to the Vietnamese setting.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The current study included 78 (33 male and 45 female) Nam Can Tho EFL University students. The participants were from several cohorts, ranging from freshmen to seniors. Addressing the participants was done via convenient sampling. That is, they were picked for their desire to participate. The study was done during the academic year 2023-2024.

3.2. Instrument and Data collection

The study used a self-designed questionnaire, which was reviewed by an expert before being sent to participants. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: demographics, benefits of online learning, and challenges. In the Benefits and Challenges of Online Learning sections, participants used a Likert Scale to indicate whether they strongly disagreed, disagreed, were unsure, agreed, or strongly agreed with the statements. Data for this study were collected using Google.docx, and the link to the questionnaire was delivered to participants using Zalo and Facebook Chat. The researcher possessed the contact information for the members of the population, which made it easier to distribute the link to the questionnaire utilized in this study.

IV.FINDINGS

4.1. Benefits of Online Learning

The data collected from 78 English major students through a questionnaire was examined after gathering all the required information and concepts.

Table 1. Student's perceptions towards Benefits of Online Learning

Items	N	Mean
Online learning provides the flexibility to learn at my own pace.	78	4.21
I have easy access to a variety of online learning resources (e.g., articles, videos, e-books).	78	4.13
Online learning is more convenient than traditional classroom learning.	78	3.98
Online learning encourages me to take responsibility for my own learning.	78	3.72

The highest mean score (4.21) shows a significant agreement that online learning allows students to learn at their own speed. This shows that students place a high importance on the capacity to arrange their studies around personal and professional responsibilities, which is a key benefit of online learning.

Following closely, the statement about having simple access to a range of online learning materials, such as articles, videos, and e-books, obtained a mean score of 4.13. This reflects students' favorable perceptions of the widespread availability of digital materials that cater to a variety of learning styles and improve their educational experiences.

Students rated the ease of online learning positively (mean score 3.98). Although somewhat lower than the results for flexibility and access to resources, it demonstrates that students prefer online learning to traditional classroom settings. However, this number indicates that there may be additional problems, such as technical issues or home distractions.

Finally, the fostering of personal responsibility for learning received the lowest mean score of 3.72 out of the four statements. While this score remains good, it implies that students value this feature less than flexibility, resource access, and convenience. This may indicate the need for further assistance in helping students build self-discipline and good time management abilities.

The survey results emphasize numerous fundamental benefits of online learning, such as flexibility, resource availability, and convenience, while also identifying opportunities for development, notably in developing student accountability. These findings can assist educators and institutions improve online learning environments, making them more helpful and effective in addressing students' needs and enhancing educational results.

4.2. Challenges of Online Learning

In the second part, students were questioned about challenges of Online Learning. Table 2 shows the results of the students' challenges with Online Learning.

Table 2. Student's perceptions towards Challenges of Online Learning

Items	N	Mean
I often face technical issues (e.g., connectivity, device problems) during online classes.	78	3.84
I miss the face-to-face interaction with my instructors and classmates.	78	3.67
Online Learning is difficult for those who need assistance in learning from the lecturer.	78	3.58
Online Learning decreases students' motivation in learning because of lack of formality in the teaching process.	78	3.34

The statement "I frequently encounter technical issues (e.g., connectivity, device problems) during online classes" earned an average score of 3.84. This suggests that many students have technological challenges that limit their capacity to fully engage in online classes. Poor internet access and faulty equipment can disrupt learning and cause frustration.

Missing face-to-face connection with teachers and students was another major issue, with a mean score of 3.67. This implies that students appreciate the human contacts and fast feedback provided in traditional classroom settings, which are sometimes absent in online situations. The lack of these relationships might cause feelings of isolation and impede collaborative learning.

A mean score of 3.58 indicated the difficulty of online learning for students who want support from instructors. This score indicates that students who need more direct direction and help find online learning difficult. The absence of timely assistance and clarification in an online environment might be a significant obstacle for these students.

Finally, the statement "Online learning decreases students' motivation to learn because of a lack of formality in the teaching process" obtained a mean score of 3.34. While this score is lower than the others, it still suggests that the casual character of online learning may reduce students' motivation. In the lack of an organized and formal classroom atmosphere, students may approach their studies with less discipline.

While online learning has several benefits, it is critical to solve these problems in order to improve the overall learning experience. Technical assistance, more contact opportunities, and techniques for maintaining student motivation can all help to offset these challenges and improve the effectiveness and engagement of online education.

IV. DISCUSSION

The survey results indicate that flexibility is a major advantage of online learning. With a mean score of 4.21, students appreciate the ability to learn at their own pace. This flexibility allows learners to manage their time effectively, accommodating other responsibilities and personal learning preferences (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Additionally, the accessibility of a wide variety of online resources, such as articles, videos, and e-books, is highly valued, with a mean score of 4.13. These resources can enhance understanding and provide diverse materials that cater to different learning styles (Means et al., 2009).

Convenience is another significant benefit, with a mean score of 3.98. Online learning eliminates the need for physical travel, saving time and reducing stress associated with commuting (Almahasees, Mohsen, & Amin, 2021). Furthermore, online learning platforms often encourage students to take more responsibility for their own learning, as indicated by a mean score of 3.72. This autonomous learning approach can foster self-

discipline and independent study habits, which are crucial skills in higher education and beyond (Sun & Chen, 2016).

Despite these benefits, the study also reveals substantial challenges. Technical issues, with a mean score of 3.84, are a prevalent problem. Unreliable internet connections and lack of access to suitable devices can significantly disrupt the learning process (Bawa, 2016). These issues need to be addressed to ensure that all students can participate fully in online education.

The lack of face-to-face interaction is another notable challenge, with a mean score of 3.67. This lack of interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and reduce motivation, which are critical for effective learning, especially in language acquisition (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Real-time communication and collaboration are often limited in online environments, making it difficult for students to engage fully with their peers and instructors (Zhao et al., 2005).

Students who need more direct assistance from lecturers also find online learning challenging, as reflected by a mean score of 3.58. The absence of immediate feedback and personalized support can hinder their learning progress. Additionally, the informal nature of online learning environments may decrease motivation, with a mean score of 3.34. Without the structure and formality of traditional classrooms, students may struggle to stay focused and disciplined in their studies (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005).

IV. CONCLUSION

This study sheds light on how English-majored students at a Vietnamese institution perceive online learning. The findings reveal a variety of benefits and obstacles that influence EFL students' online learning experiences.

Students understand the benefits of online learning, such as flexibility, access to a wide range of resources, convenience, and the promotion of self-directed learning. These benefits show that online learning can successfully supplement traditional classroom education, allowing students to learn at their own speed and access a variety of learning materials.

However, the reported disadvantages, such as technological issues, a lack of face-to-face connection, difficulty gaining direct support from lecturers, and decreased motivation owing to the informal aspect of online learning, constitute substantial barriers that must be addressed. These problems emphasize the significance of strong technological infrastructure, increased engagement, and organized support systems in online learning settings.

To improve online learning for EFL students, educational institutions should prioritize removing technological impediments, developing a feeling of community through interactive platforms, and offering individualized support to meet individual learning requirements. Addressing these obstacles can make online learning a more productive and interesting educational experience for English-major students.

Future study should look at new ways for improving online learning experiences, as well as the long-term effects of online education on language acquisition and academic achievement. The continued growth of online learning involves constant adaptation and enhancement to satisfy the different requirements of students in an increasingly digital society.

About the Authors

Lam Ky Nhan holds an M.A. in English Education from Can Tho University (2021) and serves as a dedicated English Department Lecturer at Nam Can Tho University, Vietnam. Currently pursuing a Ph.D. with an expected completion in 2026, his teaching passions include grammar, academic writing, teacher and learner motivation, and testing and assessment. He is committed to advancing English education and contributing to effective language teaching practices.

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