Student Engagement in Online Language Learning: A Study at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia

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Abstract: At times of the pandemic, online learning is vital to the learning process. It is drastically incorporated into the learning process by Malaysian students. It is also interesting to study the impact of this online learning, especially at tertiary level. A number of factors have been identified as success factors for the adoption of online learning. These factors include student perceptions and student engagement in learning. This pilot study was carried out with 33 students from various courses. A questionnaire was distributed to respondents to collect data on their perception and engagement in learning English in online courses. The results showed that they perceived English online courses very positively and were also very engaged in the lessons. It is recommended to implement blended learning to get the best results and satisfaction in the learning process.

Keywords: Online learning, engagement, perception

1. Introduction

Numerous facets of our lives are significantly impacted by Covid-19. The epidemic has had a significant impact on higher education globally. Since campuses and schools have closed and face-to-face instruction is no longer an option, universities and colleges have been compelled to run solely online. Malaysia, like many other nations around the world, has not been immune to the pandemic's harmful repercussions. Malaysian universities have abandoned pure mixed learning and are instead required to offer only online courses. Although the inclusion of online learning is a significant part of the Malaysian Education Plan 2015–2025 (Higher Education) and plays a significant role in the 21st century, especially at the tertiary level, universities must adopt and adapt online learning faster than anticipated to stay relevant, competitive, and sustainable.

Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia UTHM has actively embraced blended learning in response to the Malaysian government's initiative to promote online learning through the promotion of the Malaysian Education Plan and the National eLearning Policy, or Dasar ePembelajaran Negara DePAN. Since institutional norms require faculty to fully supervise online learning, including the delivery of English courses, the current epidemic has unavoidably accelerated online learning in these four higher education institutions. As a result, both educators and students rely on online learning platforms including institutional learning management systems (LMS), Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), video conferencing technologies like Zoom, Google Meet, MS Team, and Google Classroom, as well as other online resources and programmes.

Learners' engagement (Chiu, 2022), motivation (Meşe et al., 2021), emotional experience (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021), and cognition (al Kurdi et al., 2021) have all been impacted by the introduction of online learning in different ways. According to Hiver et al. (2021; Martin & Bolliger (2018), learner participation in the learning process is increasingly seen as a sign of a fruitful and fulfilling educational experience. Regarding online learning, a variety of research contends that using technology to learn either considerably improves or impairs student learning. Distance between students and teachers and peers, as well as the nature of online learning itself, make online learning a substantial difficulty (Bolliger & Martin, 2020).

Engagement is one of the things to be worried about. Although the term "engagement" has many different meanings, it primarily relates to a learner's involvement in and interaction with educational activities, subject, teachers, and other students. According to Yang et al. (2018), learning engagement in the context of online learning refers to "learners' investment of time, energy, value/interest, attitude, learning strategy, or even creative thinking in e-learning environments and the motivational and action processes triggered by them" (p. 3). In order to learn English effectively, it is crucial to be engaged in the process (Ginting, 2021). Critics have expressed concerns that online learning and the use of information technology may disadvantage particular groups of students, despite studies finding positive relationships between the use of computers and information technology and student engagement and potential learning outcomes (Muir et al., 2019; Alawamleh et al., 2020).

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine students' perceptions of the implementation of online English courses and to assess students' engagement in learning English through online learning in UTHM. The study specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. What do the students think about the use of online English courses?
2. How do students perceive their participation in English-language online courses?

2. Literature Review

The theoretical framework that guides the method used to address the research questions is presented in this section along with a discussion of the theoretical viewpoints that underlie this study. Additionally, significant literature linked to this topic is examined along with earlier related investigations.

Studies have primarily been done to look at how online learning affects students' interest in learning the English language. Based on their research, researchers have highlighted the benefits of online education. Several studies can support this. Learning is the process by which students take information and blend it with their past knowledge to create something meaningful, according to Alawamleh. M., Al Twait. L, and Al Saht. G. (2020). Students continue to develop and evolve as a result of their education. One of the most significant indicators of learning achievement is regarded to be student involvement. A student's level of attention, curiosity, enthusiasm, optimism, and passion towards learning or teaching is generally referred to as their level of student engagement. This affects their level of drive to learn and advance in their education. It also describes a commitment to learning objectives and active participation in a variety of academic and extracurricular activities. Is student engagement, whether in offline or online programmes, related to successful learning? Some pedagogical repercussions for the English language classroom are discussed in the paper's conclusion.

According to a study by Martin, F., and Bolliger, D.U. (2018), student interaction boosts learning motivation, minimises feelings of isolation, and enhances student performance in online courses. Based on Moore's interaction theory, the survey-based research study looked at how students perceived different engagement tactics employed in online courses. The research also looked at how students' opinions of engagement tactics were affected by variances in age, gender, and years of online learning experience. For online instructors, instructional designers, and administrators looking to increase student engagement in online courses, the studies' findings have consequences.

In addition to the studies mentioned above that examined how online learning affected students' interest in learning the English language, Ellen. C., Geetha S., and Laura C. (2021) also looked into whether demographic factors affected students' interest in learning, their online learning experiences, and their intentions to continue learning online. Another study conducted by Ilias, A., Baidi, N., Ghani, E. K., & Razali, F. M. (2020) contributed to the existing body of knowledge that could help universities strategize future implementation of online learning and minimize challenges. This could improve the intention and preferences for using online learning for future implementation.

Selvanathan, M., Hussin, N. A. M., & Azazi, N. A. N. (2020) assessed the experiences of students at higher education institutions in Malaysia with the introduction of online learning during this pandemic in their work titled "Students learning experiences during COVID -19: Work from home period in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions". Another study, by Razami, H. H., & Ibrahim, R. (2021), looked at how online learning affected students' interest in learning English. In their work, "Distance Education During COVID-19 Pandemic: University Students' Perceptions and Preference Towards Online Learning,". The goals of this study are to ascertain students' opinions of the difficulties they encountered, their satisfaction with distance education, and their preferences and suggestions for improvement. By illuminating the viewpoints of graduate students, the study's findings add to the body of research on students' perceptions and preferences about distant learning.

Students indicated a variety of barriers to adopting IT platform apps for online learning, according to an intriguing study by Al-Kumaim, N. H., Alhazmi, A. K., Mohammed, F., Gazem, N. A., Shabbir, M. S., & Fazea, Y. (2021). An integrated conceptual motivational model for sustainable and healthy online learning is examined in relation to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on university students' learning lives. These obstacles include (a) the heavy workload and information overload of the instructors, (b) the novelty and unsuitability of the new online learning environment, and (c) difficulties with stress and anxiety-related personal health issues. This study established a collection of motivational components and created a conceptual motivational model for sustained and healthy online learning based on prior relevant research.

In addition to the studies mentioned above, Coman, C. îru, L. Meseşan-Schmitz, et al. (2020) discovered that the hierarchy of obstacles experienced in online learning changes in the setting of the pandemic crisis. The most significant issues are technological ones, followed by teachers' lack of technical expertise and ineffective teaching methods for the online context. However, students attributed their ranking as last to a lack of contact or inadequate teacher communication. The ramifications for academia and research are examined in light of these findings. On the basis of these findings, research in universities and in general is explored.

In conclusion, the literature study has given a foundation for further research into how online instruction affects students' interest in learning English at Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

233 undergraduate students from several UTHM faculties participated in the study. They were chosen at random from the degree-granting programme. Additionally, they come from three main races and have various educational backgrounds.

3.2 Research Instrument

The instruments created by Kim & Frick (2011), Muhammad et al. (2021), and Grey & DiLoreto (2016) were modified for use in this investigation. To gauge their interest in online learning, students were given a number of surveys. SPSS was used to record the outcomes.

3.3 Data Analysis

A Google form was created, and the link was randomly given to English teachers. The teachers then shared the link with respondents via the WhatsApp class group. After one week, the researchers reviewed the responses and then analys the data using SPSS version 23.

3.4 Reliability and Validity

A reliability test for this research was conducted and as a result of the validity and reliability analysis, it was determined that the Cronbach Alpha coefficient was calculated as 96 (α=0.96). A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations (Mockovak, 2016).

4. Results and Discussions

The questionnaire responses were broken down by the researchers into three categories: demographic data, student impressions of the use of online English classes, and student engagement in the learning process.

4.1 Demographic Information

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. As shown in the table 1, male respondents were found dominant the study with 125 respondents (53.7%). Almost 53% of the respondents are Malay (122 respondents) while Chinese, Indian and Others contribute 32.8%. All respondents are attending their degree classes.

Table 1 - Demographic characteristics of the respondents (N= 233)

		Frequency	Percent
Gender	Male	125	53.7
	Female	108	46.4
Race	Malay	122	52.4
	Chinese	76	32.6
	Indian	21	0.1
	Others	14	0.06

4.2 Perception On M Learning

This section provides the details of the results on students' perceptions of the implementation of online English courses. Table 2 shows the mean value of students' perception. There are fourteen questions that measure students' perceptions regarding the implementation of English online courses.

Table 2: Students' perception on the implementation of English online classes (N=233)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1. Studying through e-learning mode provides the flexibility to the study at the time convenient to the learner.	4.15	0.83	High
2. E-learning can enable people to study irrespective of where they are located in the world.	4.30	0.73	Very High
3. There are technologies available to enable one to take tests and submit assignments electronically	4.24	0.75	Very high
4. There are electronic tools available to enable interactive communication between instructor and student without meeting face-to-face	4.21	0.86	Very High
5. I feel confident while using e-learning system.	3.97	0.84	High
6. I feel confident while operating e-learning functions.	3.91	0.77	High
7. I feel confident while using online-learning content.	3.95	0.87	High
8. I believe e-learning platforms are user friendly.	4.37	0.87	Very High
9. It would be easy for me to find necessary information when using an e-learning platform.	4.22	0.74	Very high
10. I believe that using e-learning service can simplify the-learning process.	3.97	0.83	High
11. The set-up of the e-learning service is compatible with the way I learn	3.83	0.82	High
12. I intend to use e-learning to assist my learning.	3.93	0.81	High
13. I intend to use e-learning to get updated my subject knowledge with the latest amendments.	3.97	0.78	High
14. I intend to use e-learning as an autonomous (free) learning tool.	4.09	0.76	High

Table 3 - Mean score interpretation

1.00 – 1.80	Very Low
1.81 – 2.60	Low
2.61 – 3.20	Medium
3.21 - 4.20	High
4.21 – 5.00	Very High

Source: Moidunny (2009)

The lowest mean is 3.83 (item no. 11) and the highest is 4.37 (item no. 8), according to the table above. The respondents concur that "I believe e-learning platforms are user friendly" and this statement adds to the highest mean of perception. The respondents believe that "Studying through e-learning mode provides the flexibility to the study at the time convenient to the learner," "E-learning can enable people to study regardless of where they are located in the world," "There are technologies available to enable one to take tests and submit assignments electronically," and "There are electronic tools available to enable interactive communication between the learner and the instructor." A total of seven items have mean scores of 4.0 and above.

Students complete their assignments online because they believe technology will greatly aid them in doing so. Online testing is thought to save a significant amount of time and can be done anywhere. This demonstrates how the learning process is adaptable.

Many students should engage professionally during the pandemic. According to Shaiful Baharum, A., Md Shar, N.Z., & Abbas, U.-H. (2021), students must work part-time to make ends meet and face problems in life.

However, working part-time has both advantages and disadvantages. With the use of technology, the students set themselves up to effectively fulfil both roles as students and part-time jobs.

The students are also members of generation Z, who have grown up with the development of technology. They are tech aware, therefore they find online learning to be simple. As stated in Point 9, "It would be simple for me to find necessary information using an e-learning platform," this demonstrates that employing technology in the learning process, such as looking for articles or utilising information, is advantageous for them. Finish the assignment. With a mean score of 3.98, the responses on the implementation of online English classes are generally good.

Student perception is assessed as positive and high by Moidunny (2009). The findings of this study are in line with those of Martin & Bolliger (2018) and T. Muthuprasad et al. (2021), but they are at odds with those of Bali & Liu (2018), which found that students' cognition is better in face-to-face learning than it is in online learning.

4.3 Engagement of Students in Learning English Language Using Online Platform

The second goal of the investigation is explained in this section. Students were given 19 items to rate their level of involvement in the classroom. Students were questioned about their online learning habits, their peer collaboration in the classroom, and how intently they pay attention to lectures. With a mean range of 3.50 to 4.10, it can be seen that student involvement in online English classes is good overall. The lowest mean is point 18 (frequent posting in the discussion forum), and the highest mean is point 7 for "listening/reading carefully" in online lectures.

The average score for items 15, 16, and 17 is 3.83. According to this study, students actively participate in online learning. Positive involvement suggests that they are happy with online education. The constructive participation often leads to the development of strategies to help people achieve their academic objectives (She Long et al., 2021).

This study's findings conflict with those of Hollister et al. (2022), who discovered that students are less interested during lectures. The results of this study are similar to those of Kim and Kim (2021) and Sinval et al. (2021). The mean score of student involvement in online learning is lower than perception, where most assertions have a mean score more than 4.0, when perception and engagement are compared in this study. Students paid attention to the presentation but were less active in group or class discussions. They read less as well, indicating that they prefer to just pay attention during lectures.

Table 4 - Engagement of students on learning English language using online platform

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1. Making sure to study on a regular basis	3.72	0.82	High
2. Putting forth effort	3.73	0.80	High
3. Staying up on the readings	3.54	0.90	High
4. Looking over class notes between getting online to make sure I understand the material	3.90	0.84	High
5. Being organized	3.95	0.84	High
6. Taking good notes over readings, PowerPoints, or video lectures	3.91	0.89	High
7. Listening/reading carefully	4.10	0.82	High
8. Finding ways to make the course material relevant to my life	3.96	0.80	High
9. Applying course material to my life	3.71	0.95	High
10. Finding ways to make the course interesting to me	3.99	0.82	High
11. Really desiring to learn the material	3.83	0.79	High
12. Having fun in online chats, discussions or via email with the instructor or other students	3.81	0.95	High
13. Participating actively in small-group discussion forums	3.85	0.91	High
14. Helping fellow students	3.96	0.82	High
15. Getting a good grade	3.83	0.87	High
16. Doing well on the tests/quizzes	3.83	0.86	High

17. Engaging in conversations online (chat, discussions, email)	3.93	0.85	High
18. Posting in the discussion forum regularly	3.50	0.98	High
19. Getting to know other students in the class	3.73	0.97	High

5. Conclusion and Recommendation

In conclusion, students have positive perceptions of English online learning and actively participate in it. Unexpected changes in the educational system inevitably present students, teachers, and administrators with a number of difficulties. Generally speaking, the benefits were self-learning, affordability, ease, and flexibility. Even though COVID-19 makes online learning an option, it cannot take the place of in-person instruction. According to the study, blended learning would contribute to a more balanced learning environment.

Acknowledgement

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