



## ENHANCING LEARNERS' SATISFACTION TO IMPROVE RETENTION IN ONLINE CLASSES: CURRENT PRACTICES AT A CENTER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM

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### Abstract:

Online learning has experienced rapid growth recently, particularly due to many schools' closures because of the Covid-19 pandemic. As online learning is growing, institutions have become more interested in knowing what factors influence learners' satisfaction in online learning environments. This becomes more important for them when the results of studies show lower retention in online courses than in face-to-face traditional courses. Although there is surprisingly little research empirically linking student satisfaction to retention, it is generally believed that there is indeed a positive relationship between the two. The current study was undertaken with 164 online learners at a center of foreign languages in Vietnam. An online survey was administered to assess the participants' level of satisfaction with their online learning through the four main areas or groups of factors such as course content, teachers, online learning facilities and online learning support. The results revealed that the four groups are significantly associated with learners' overall satisfaction with online learning, and there is positive retention rate during the program.

**Keywords:** online learning, retention, satisfaction, strategies

### 1. Introduction

Learners' satisfaction in online learning environment is of compelling interest to many educational institutions as learners' satisfaction is thought to have a high correlation with their performance in a specific class (Khan & Iqbal, 2016). There is an increasing need to understand factors that affect learners' satisfaction with online learning and its impact on retention. People tend to care about learners' satisfaction because of its potential impact on student motivation, retention, and performance. The success of online learning programs generally depends on learners' satisfaction. While a number of studies conducted by researchers seeking to identify learners' satisfaction with online learning in

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higher education contexts, it appears that few studies have been done on online learners' satisfaction in the setting of foreign language centers, especially in Vietnamese context. This study is aimed at finding out online learners' satisfaction with different factors affecting online learning as well as their perceptions towards current practices of improving learner retention in online classes at a center of foreign languages in Vietnam.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1. Satisfaction with online learning**

Learners' satisfaction generally refers to attitudes, perceptions and expectation of learners toward a specific mode of learning (Wu et al., 2010). Researchers have stated that learners tend to be satisfied when their expectations of the learning environment, design of a course, teaching practices and learner achievement are met (Huang & Wang, 2012). Studies have shown that satisfied learners appear to be engaged, motivated and responsive, contribute to an effective learning, and achieve higher levels of performance. On the contrary, dissatisfied learners may result in situations where teachers appear to have much more difficulty facilitating effective learning situations (Dziuban et al., 2007). In the context of online learning, the definition of satisfaction seems complex and multidimensional and includes many factors, such as communication, student participation in online discussions, flexibility, workload, technology support, instructor pedagogical skills, and feedback (Barbara et al., 2013). A review of the literature in this field indicates that researchers have used different methods to define and assess students' satisfaction such as students' final grades, course completion rates, students' attitudes toward online classes, and students' self-reports of satisfaction. In this study, learners' satisfaction with online learning is defined and measured in terms of learner retention.

### **2.2. Factors influencing satisfaction with online learning**

When learners are satisfied with online learning, this will determine if they more likely will complete the program, and more importantly, continue with other online courses. Knowledge of the factors that influence learners' satisfaction with online learning can help improve such online courses.

There are a number of factors that determine whether a learner will stay and complete a program. Lee and Choi (2011) examined research targeting retention in online courses and suggested groups of reasons affecting learner retention: course/program factors, teacher factors and environmental factors. With regard to the program, the difficulty level of the academic program or subject matter was an influential determinant of learner retention in online courses. Revealed by Boston and his colleagues (2011), learners tended to drop out when the curriculum or program was found to be too easy or too difficult. About teachers, online learners generally expect active facilitation from teachers to promote learners' social interaction and engagement. In addition, learners appreciate teachers to foster their knowledge acquisition and guidance for promoting

topic understanding. Environmental factors mainly include support services such as advising, tutors, and technical support.

### **2.3. Retention and retention rate**

Retention can be difficult to measure or define. In online learning literature, the terms retention and persistence are frequently employed interchangeably. Attempts to differentiate the terms have not been successful. For example, it has been suggested that retention is an institution-level measure of success, and that persistence is an individual or learner-level measure of success (Hagedorn, 2006). However, this differentiation of terms has not been widely accepted. In an educational context, retention is a measure of the rate at which learners persist in their educational program at an institution, expressed as a percentage. Retention rates are vital data that is indicative of the institution's ability to engage students in their learning, satisfy their student's educational needs, and prevent them from dropping out.

### **2.4. Retention rates in traditional and online classes**

Online learning continues to grow faster than onsite learning, but overall online programs struggle with a lower retention rate (Brown et al., 2013). Online learners tend to withdraw more often, compared to learners in traditional classrooms. Generally, retention rates for online courses have been calculated to be 10 to 20 percent lower than the retention rates for their in-person counterparts in a conventional program. Statistics of online education (2021) show that E-learning increases retention rates from 25% to 60%. Online literature reviews indicate that the online attrition pattern is not limited to any specific period. Learners may withdraw from online classes anytime during the program or at any level of their learning process.

## **3. Material and Methods**

### **3.1. Research setting: CFL and its online programs**

The Center of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University in Vietnam (hereafter referred to as the Center or CFL) has provided varieties of fee-paid courses of foreign languages and began with more online classes during the country's social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Currently, there are two types of online programs in terms of study purposes. One group of online classes is for general English purposes, and the second group is for exam preparation such as IELTS, TOEIC or VSTEP. The class size is relatively small, from 15 to 24 learners. The teachers generally use Zoom meeting as a technical tool of their instruction. The course duration is between 8 and 10 weeks, and each class has 3 zoom sessions per week.

Currently, to guarantee the success of online programs, the Center has implemented different strategies focusing on course development, teacher involvement, online learning support, and social engagement.

Course development strategies refer to developing practical course content, creating classroom activities utilizing different teaching tools such as Quizizz or Baamboozle for effective interaction, implementing the e-learning system for self-study and assessment based on specific learning outcomes.

Teacher involvement strategies refer to enhancing teacher training and support in online pedagogy, encouraging the quality of teacher and learner interactions, and providing opportunities for technology competence support in online teaching.

Online learning support strategies refer to providing learner services such as registration and payment procedures, making orientation programs, providing course guidance and at-all-times supports.

Social engagement strategies refer to providing opportunities for an online learning environment to be friendly and effective both physically and emotionally. Some practical activities include building learning community using Zalo groups, creating a sense of connection, and establishing good interactions between teachers and learners and among learners.

### 3.2. Research design

In this study, the descriptive survey design was employed, in which questionnaire were distributed to all the current online learners in a particular language center. The survey method is appropriate as it entails the development of a questionnaire based on the literature review of online learning.

### 3.3. Participants

Participants of the study were current learners of online programs. There were 164 participants completing the survey. The basic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Demographic Characteristics of Participants

| Characteristics               | Number | Percentage |
|-------------------------------|--------|------------|
| <b>Gender</b>                 |        |            |
| Female                        |        | 52.4%      |
| Male                          |        | 47.6%      |
| <b>Profession</b>             |        |            |
| Student                       |        | 84.8%      |
| Employee                      |        | 15.2%      |
| <b>Types of online course</b> |        |            |
| Exam preparation              | 130    | 79.3%      |
| General English               | 34     | 20.7%      |

### 3.4. Research instrument

The learners of the current online courses were invited to respond to an online survey. A structured self-administered questionnaire was developed based on prior literature related to online learning. There were two sections. The first section consisted of four domains: Course content (5 items), Teachers' characteristics (5 items), Online learning

facilities (5 items), and Online learning supports (5 items). Each item of the domains was rated in 5-point Likert scale from the respondent's level of satisfaction with each item (from 1 = lowest level of satisfaction to 5 = highest level of satisfaction). The second section consisted of one question requesting the percentage of class attendance and one question about types of future learning.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Results

All the participants completed the questionnaire and the data were analyzed according to each domain related to online learning. Overall, the lowest mean score was 3.83 for the "Internet connection is stable for learning" and the highest mean score was 4.60 for the "teachers can manage lesson plans within the assigned schedule".

#### 4.1.1. Course content

Course content is generally considered a critical element to successful online instruction. It is natural that the statement "The course content meets the learner's needs" received the highest mean score at 4.29 (Table 2). The participants also indicated their high level of satisfaction with the course duration with the mean score of 4.12. The lowest mean score is for the statement "self-study resources are sufficient" with  $M = 4.08$ .

**Table 2:** Mean Scores of Course Content (N = 164)

| Items                                            | Min | Max | Mean        | SD    |
|--------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|-------|
| The course content can meet the learner's needs. | 1   | 5   | 4.29        | .896  |
| The course length is appropriate.                | 1   | 5   | 4.12        | .913  |
| Instructions are comprehensive.                  | 1   | 5   | 4.09        | .975  |
| Lesson activities are practical.                 | 1   | 5   | 4.11        | 1.009 |
| Self-study resources are sufficient.             | 1   | 5   | 4.08        | 1.015 |
| <b>Overall mean</b>                              |     |     | <b>4.14</b> |       |

#### 4.1.2. Teachers

A teacher will always be crucial to the effective learning process of any learner, whether it is in a physical classroom or an online learning environment. However, in an online setting, teachers should be competent and are empowered to create more engaging and interactive learning experiences for learners. In this study, it is interesting to note that participants were highly satisfactory ( $M = 4.60$ ) when "teachers can manage lesson plans within the assigned schedule" (Table 3). It is also natural that participants reported high level of satisfaction ( $M = 4.41$ ) with the statement "teachers have good knowledge of the subject".

**Table 3: Mean Scores of Teachers (N = 164)**

| Items                                                          | Min | Max | Mean        | SD   |
|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|------|
| Teachers have good knowledge of the subject.                   | 1   | 5   | 4.41        | .821 |
| Teachers have good teaching methods.                           | 1   | 5   | 4.23        | .902 |
| Teachers have good interaction with learners.                  | 1   | 5   | 4.36        | .913 |
| Teachers can use technology effectively.                       | 1   | 5   | 4.32        | .932 |
| Teachers can manage lesson plans within the assigned schedule. | 1   | 5   | 4.60        | .707 |
| <b>Overall mean</b>                                            |     |     | <b>4.38</b> |      |

In line with previous studies (Huang, 2018; Mayasari & Kemal, 2020), the participants in this study also indicated their high level of satisfaction with the statements such as “teachers have good interaction with learners” and “teachers can use technology effectively”.

#### 4.1.3. Online learning facilities

A good learning environment should be a great attribute to the success of an online program. Generally, physical learning conditions help to create a positive class atmosphere for learners to feel engaged and motivated (Absah et al., 2021). An ideal course setting should encourage the instructor-learner connection and present a sense of support and communication. In this study, participants were most satisfactory when perceiving “good online support from teachers and technical team” (M = 4.34) as shown in Table 4. The statement “Internet connection is stable for learning” had the lowest mean score (M = 3.83), indicating the common problem affecting online learning in Vietnam (Pham et al., 2021).

**Table 4: Mean Scores of Online Learning Facilities (N = 164)**

| Items                                                      | Min | Max | Mean        | SD    |
|------------------------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|-------|
| Internet connection is stable for learning.                | 1   | 5   | 3.83        | 1.094 |
| Learning tools like Zoom or Google Meet are user-friendly. | 1   | 5   | 4.33        | .873  |
| Media quality (videos, sounds, pictures ...) is good.      | 1   | 5   | 4.10        | .992  |
| Online support from teachers and technical team is good.   | 1   | 5   | 4.34        | .881  |
| E-learning system is organized logically.                  | 1   | 5   | 4.10        | .982  |
| <b>Overall mean</b>                                        |     |     | <b>4.14</b> |       |

#### 4.1.4. Online learning support

Online support services for learners can be as important to their academic success as the actual teaching. As reviewed in online literature (Stewart et al., 2013), a critical component of an effective retention strategy for online students is a program for learner support services. Learners generally need access to a wide range of support services that help them to start and stay with the course, engage with their learning, connect with each other, and complete and succeed with the course or program. In the current study, the participants were most satisfactory with the course orientation as the “course information is sufficient and updated” (M = 4.35) as shown in Table 5. The statement “registration is convenient” had the lowest value with the mean score of 4.21.

**Table 5:** Mean Scores of Online Learning Support (N = 164)

| Items                                         | Min | Max | Mean        | SD   |
|-----------------------------------------------|-----|-----|-------------|------|
| Registration is convenient.                   | 1   | 5   | 4.21        | .903 |
| Payment procedure is easy.                    | 1   | 5   | 4.27        | .887 |
| Support team is efficient.                    | 1   | 5   | 4.26        | .899 |
| Technical support is sufficient.              | 1   | 5   | 4.29        | .856 |
| Course information is sufficient and updated. | 1   | 5   | 4.35        | .855 |
| <b>Overall mean</b>                           |     |     | <b>4.28</b> |      |

#### 4.1.5. Retention rates

Overall, the percentage of learner retention of both groups is relatively high (Table 6). For the Exam preparation group, the retention rate is 77.11% and 78.68% for the General English group. It is relatively natural that the downward trend occurs during the program, particularly with the Exam preparation group. However, with the General English group, there is a slight fluctuation movement when in the last two weeks the learner retention rate is somewhat high again.

**Table 6:** Learner Retention Rates

| Week                      | Exam preparation group<br>(% of learner attendance)<br>N = 130 | General English group<br>(% of learner attendance)<br>N = 34 |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1                         | 90.76                                                          | 88.24                                                        |
| 2                         | 79.23                                                          | 85.29                                                        |
| 3                         | 83.08                                                          | 76.47                                                        |
| 4                         | 79.23                                                          | 76.47                                                        |
| 5                         | 76.92                                                          | 73.53                                                        |
| 6                         | 73.08                                                          | 70.59                                                        |
| 7                         | 67.69                                                          | 76.47                                                        |
| 8                         | 66.92                                                          | 82.35                                                        |
| <b>Overall percentage</b> | <b>77.11</b>                                                   | <b>78.68</b>                                                 |

#### 4.1.6. Future learning

On the question “Will you continue with online learning in the future?”, it is worth noting that the highest percentage of participants reported that why would choose to continue with online learning (Table 7).

**Table 7:** Future types of learning

| Continue with online learning | Not continue with online learning | Not certain |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-------------|
| 63.5%                         | 15.2%                             | 21.3%       |

Online learning will surely continue to grow in the future. The findings are completely in line with a study (Hockly & Dudeney, 2018) about future digital trends in ELT, reflecting that new development of technology will continue to affect English language teachers and learners.

## 4.2. Discussion

Online courses are a revolutionary trend of educational technology today, particularly in the process of teaching and learning during Covid-19 pandemic. From the results of the study, we can assume that satisfaction with online learning is a significant aspect of promoting successful educational processes. Participants in the current study generally reported their high level of satisfaction with the current strategies at the CFL. The highest areas of satisfaction were teachers and online learning support. Online learning facilities and course content slightly led to lower learners' satisfaction.

In line with previous research (Huang, 2018), teachers are extremely important to enhance learners' satisfaction. It is natural that the overall mean score of these teacher involvement strategies is the highest of the four groups; however, it is somewhat unexpected that the item "teachers can manage lesson plans within the assigned schedule" had the higher mean score than the item "teachers have good knowledge of the subject". It is possible that in this study, perhaps from the participants' experiences, completing the lesson contents within the assigned schedule is necessary for their academic performance despite the flexible feature of online learning. However, this explanation needs further investigation.

The current study also recognizes the importance of online learning support. The results are partially in accordance with a previous study (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000, p.1), indicating that learning support is particularly important because many learners, perhaps for the first time, are now "faced with a new learning environment and the expectation that they will have independent learning skills and the capacity to engage in activities that require self direction and self management of learning". In this study, the participants were most satisfactory with the item "the course information is sufficient and updated". It is also expected that the item "technical support is sufficient" had relatively high level of satisfaction as reviewed in online literature (Nawaz & Qureshi, 2010); Generally, technical support helps learners to be confident and capable of using learning tools to fulfill their online courses.

With regard to the course content, it is advisable that the learner's needs must be taken into account. When organizing the content for online education courses, the amount of knowledge the learners can receive and their satisfaction with the learning experience should be considered (Karacaoglu, 2018). In this study, it is natural that the participants indicated their highest level of satisfaction with the item "the course content can meet the learner's needs" as this is the most important element in the curriculum design. The course duration and online class activities almost had the same level of satisfaction perceived by the participants. Generally, as confirmed in the literature (Dixon, 2010), success often relies on how appropriate the class activities and the chosen technology are for the learning context, and how well both are integrated into the learning process.

In the current study, the participants also indicated their relatively high level of satisfaction with learning environment. To ensure the quality of online instruction, the online learning facilities should be user-friendly and updated (Akanbi, 2020). It is not



unexpected that Internet connection problem led to the lowest level of learners' satisfaction; however, "online support from teachers and technical team is good", gaining the highest level of satisfaction. The results are partially in line with a study in Vietnamese context (Pham et al., 2021), asserting that technology competence such as using Zoom or Meet and technical support are a requirement for effective online learning. A very important finding in this study showed that satisfaction with online learning was a statistically significant predictor of learners' intention to continue with online learning in the future. With over half of the participants (63.5%) who chose to continue their online learning, the results are relatively in accordance with a recent study (Ilynykh, 2020), asserting that online learning is the future trend of education.

## **5. Recommendations**

The following are several major suggestions for improving learners' satisfaction towards retention. Learners' satisfaction can be enhanced with adequate course design, appropriate instructional methods, and at-all-times support services to meet individual learners' needs. Course design should be practical, easy to navigate, and interactive. It should incorporate effective visual, written, and animated content in a relevant and realistic context. In online teaching, teachers need new skills that are obviously different from those in traditional instruction. It is necessary for teachers to be technology-competent in order to facilitate and foster more successful communication online. In order to have the best opportunity for success in their studies, online learners need access to more than course content and effective teaching. They need a wide range of support services that help them to engage with teachers and connect with each other, and most importantly, succeed in their studies.

## **6. Conclusion**

Several encouraging results emerged from this small-scaled empirical study. Current practices for increasing learners' satisfaction with online learning proved to be effective. The four main groups of strategies of teachers, course content, online learning facilities and online learning support are significantly associated with learners' overall satisfaction with online learning. As a result of their satisfaction, over half of the participants believed they will continue with online learning in the future. In this study, Internet connection and self-study resources tend to negatively influence on the learners' satisfaction towards online learning. These factors need to be considered in unison while designing online learning program in order to increase satisfaction rate among the learners.

## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no conflicts of interests.

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