ONLINE EDUCATION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC - OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES: A CASE STUDY IN THE SOUTH OF VIETNAM

Huynh Nhu Yen Nhi[1i],
Truong Trong Nhan[2]
Faculty of Foreign Languages,
Dong Nai Technology University,
Bien Hoa City, Dong Nai Province,
Vietnam

Abstract:

The Covid-19 pandemic has led all Vietnamese students to study at home since 2021. Therefore, a number of universities in Vietnam have shifted to online learning platforms to keep their academic activities going. The challenge is whether learners can absorb all knowledge through online learning? Between the two learning platforms, traditional and modern, what will be the impact on learners? and what needs to change in teachers? Therefore, in order to have an overview and partly clarify the questions of education 4.0, the authors carried out this research among 200 Vietnamese students to highlight the significance of online education. The results indicated that the majority of the respondents (91%) are willing to online classes to manage their studies during a time of the global pandemic. The respondents claimed that the convenience and flexibility of online classrooms make it the right option while students' self-discipline and broadband connectivity matters in rural areas make it a challenge for most students when taking advantage of online classrooms.

Keywords: online learning, covid-19, students, Vietnamese education, university

1. Introduction

Education is one of the fields that are invested a lot to apply for scientific and technical advances; the global pandemic brings many difficulties but also a real challenge in the digital era of education. In Vietnam, there are nearly 100 million people and more than 20 million students and about 2 million teachers at all levels with penetration of mobile devices increasing rapidly in recent years. The application of modern technology in education is urgent and needs to be implemented immediately as well as overcome difficulties caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to lockdowns, learning management

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[i] Correspondence: email huynhnhuyennhi@dntu.edu.vn

systems (LMS) of many universities are updated and employed with innovative techniques in order to help students take advantage of E-learning. In this study, we focus on understanding students' perceptions and preferences towards online learning through an online survey of 200 students from three universities in the south of Vietnam including Dong Nai Technology University, Lac Hong University and Thu Dau Mot Unversity. It also investigated the strengths and limitations of online education for undergraduates so that it was expected to draw objective conclusions about the quality and some requirements for online learning in Vietnam.

2. Literature Review

Andrews & Haythornthwaite (2011) gave different views on online learning and presented new perspectives in exploring how teaching and learning have been changing with the presence of the Internet and media. Firstly, teachers and educators will gain an understanding of new learning practices and learners will gain a sense of their new role as active participants in the classroom and a lifelong learning attitude. Besides, three merits of online learning are described including (1) student's preference for the method of delivery avoiding face-to-face classroom; (2) student's confidence in employing electronic and computer-based communication; (3) student's capability of autonomous learning. Gilbert (2015) also illustrated an effective online classroom depends on well-structured courses, well-prepared instructors, clear feedback and instructions from teachers as well as advanced technologies. However, some limitations related to online learning were also presented in many studies such as: delay in responses among teachers and students, lack of a sense of community (Lin & Zane, 2005), difficulties in collaborating with partners and technical issues (Piccoli et al., 2001). In addition, the need for students' discipline and self-motivation were also considered barriers to online learning (Serwatka, 2003). Some studies also proved that online classes are only as effective as a traditional classroom if they are well-designed with appropriate LMSs (Nguyen, 2015). Obviously, the literature has highlighted different approaches to online teaching and learning so as to examine the positive effects on students' perception and adaptation to online education. Papers have also investigated potential barriers to online learning. However, not many researches have aimed to understand the students' perception in the Vietnamese context, benefits and drawbacks of online education, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, which the authors try to fill this gap.

3. Material and Methods

3.1 Research Design and Data Collection
This study employed an online surveying tool called "Google form", which was an anonymous survey sent to students in three universities in the south of Vietnam including Dong Nai Technology University, Lac Hong University and Thu Dau Mot Unversity. This research was designed to investigate students' perceptions of online

learning, benefits and challenges of online learning in order to determine if there are strategies that assist students to study successfully with the online learning platform. The survey was divided into three main parts: (1) the current situation of online learning students, (2) the approach to studying online, (3) students' views on online learning to get opinions on the advantages and disadvantages of this method. Therefore, all participants were students who were studying online and they could submit their responses to the questionnaire electronically, via a computer, a tablet or smartphone at any time that was convenient for them from November to December 2021. The data collection period lasted one month.

3.2 Data Analysis

There were 289 submissions from students for the survey; however, there were 200 responses were valuable and utilized for data analysis. The answers from respondents were grouped into categories, analyzed and provided the authors with ideas about online teaching and learning at the time of Covid-19.

4. Results and Discussion

Firstly, the chart below shows the number of students who can study online, most of them (91%) learn through online platforms, meanwhile, only 9% of students do not know about online learning and do not use any form of electronic device to support their study.
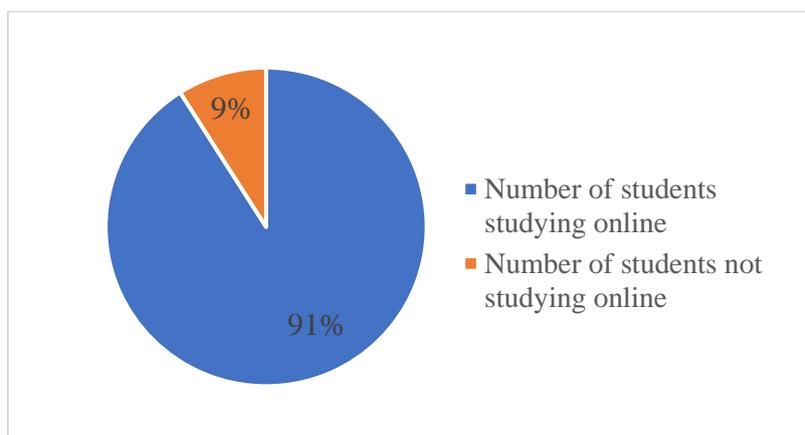
Chart 4.1: Numbers of students studying online

Besides, the research results also indicate different online learning methods for students. The main section accounts for 70% of students learning with the support of instructors all the time. It means they interact through an online application such as Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft Teams. 17% of students learn through LMS provided by their university; they are known as Canvas, Moodles, etc. the last section shows that 13% of students study with tutorial video clips on Youtube.
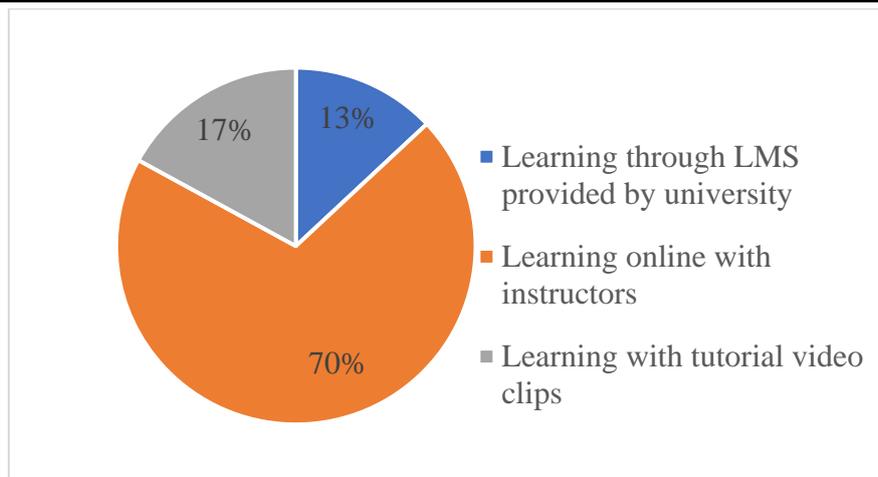
Chart 4.2: Students' online learning methods

In terms of advantages, the authors have surveyed a number of objective opinions. Firstly, the majority of students choose the online learning method because of cost savings, accounting for 37%. Online learning learners can access websites to download useful materials, many of which are free. In addition, when participating in online courses, the tuition fee of each person is only about 100 to 200 thousand Vietnam dong, saving a lot compared to studying outside or center. Secondly, students feel active and flexible when studying online, accounting for 28%. With an online learning platform, learners can actively change their learning speed, choose learning methods and appropriate courses for themselves. In addition, students can exchange, have discussions with lecturers and choose the appropriate level of study. Thirdly, students learn online because they save time, accounting for 26%. Each person only needs a smartphone or a computer to access the network and study anywhere and at any time. In addition, other opinions were also collected. By participating in online learning, students can share their experiences or lessons with everyone and keep track of their learning results every day, while the web interface and illustrations help learners absorb more efficiently. Especially, all participants agreed that online learning is the best option during the time of lockdown.

Besides the advantages, there are a lot of weaknesses, 24% of students think that the lecture is not really impressive. There is a lack of interaction between teachers and students, which is difficult for students to grab knowledge immediately. Some students give other disadvantages such as the concentration of learning is still limited, due to not being forced on time, learners are not really serious, some even get caught up in surfing the web, playing games. games, etc; too many online learning channels make it difficult for learners to choose which one is really reputable and effective; when studying online, computers and phones must be connected to the internet, so in remote areas, with inadequate conditions, it is not possible to study by this method; at the same time, learners must have high self-discipline and must cooperate with lecturers and other members; when facing difficulties, questions are sometimes not immediately answered, which interrupts their learning process. Although there are a few students who disagree with online learning, almost all students appreciate this method of learning and give

specific advantages and disadvantages. Obviously, E-learning is growing and popular in today's learning environment.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Covid-19 pandemic has had a huge impact on higher education because of the almost complete transition from face-to-face to online training. This is considered a timely measure to overcome disruptions to the education sector in the context of the current complicated epidemic situation. Obviously, in the future, when online teaching is recognized, this means that long-term solutions and plans must be taken into account, but there is still a demand to ensure the quality and effectiveness of online teaching. Therefore, identifying the opportunities and difficulties of learners in the process of online learning is considered to minimize the negative impacts and improve the quality of online learning for Vietnamese students. From the survey results, the article proposes the following solutions. Firstly, to overcome the difficulties in the online learning process, universities need to have policies or activities to advise and support students in a timely manner to ensure that students' learning is not interrupted, especially for students with difficult circumstances or living in remote areas that are difficult to access and connect to the internet. Secondly, to improve the effectiveness of online education, there is a great need in changing teaching methods; educational institutions need to pay attention to and organize training courses to innovate teaching methods to improve teaching quality. Thirdly, universities need to focus on equipping students with skills in using information technology, information security, exploiting and effectively using applications for learning activities. Finally, lecturers need to increase interaction and exchange with students to create psychological comfort and excitement for learners. In other words, teachers need to diversify teaching forms and integrate many activities in the curriculum to create interest in students' learning, create an environment for students to present and share their views. Within the scope of this research topic, the authors just stopped at describing and pointing out the opportunities and barriers of online learning among students at three universities in the south of Vietnam. Based on the survey results, it can be concluded although students are familiar with online classrooms, they have still been facing a number of barriers when switching to online training. Therefore, with the limitations of the object and research area in this topic, other studies can inherit and develop new research directions with a larger population to propose practical solutions in order to further improve the quality of online education in the future.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

About the Authors
Huynh Nhu Yen Nhi has been teaching English for 10 years. She is a lecturer at Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam. She has got two

Master's Degrees, one is in TESOL at Victoria University, Australia and another major is Economics Management at Dong Nai Technology University, Vietnam. Her passions are teaching methodology and education innovations.

Truong Trong Nhan is a lecturer of English at Faculty of Foreign Languages, Dong Nai Technology University, Dong Nai province, Vietnam. He earned his Master's Degree in Education specialization in TESOL at Edith Cowan University, Western Australia, Australia. His interests include teaching methodology and applied linguistics.

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