

The Impact of Online Learning on Student Engagement in English Language Learning

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Abstract

In this pandemic age, online learning is crucial to the learning process. It is drastically integrated into the learning process by Malaysian students. It is also interesting to study the impact of this online learning, especially at the tertiary level. Some factors have been identified as success factors for the adoption of online learning. These factors include student perceptions and student engagement in learning. This study was conducted among 475 students from different degree programmes. A questionnaire was distributed to the respondents to obtain data on their perceptions and engagement in English learning in online courses. The results showed that they perceived English online courses very positively and were also very engaged in the classes. Some challenges were identified in implementing online instruction, such as the technology gap, documentation, and the nature of instruction. It is recommended that blended learning should be implemented to achieve the best results and satisfaction in the learning process.

Keywords

online learning, engagement, perception

1. Introduction

The Covid 19 pandemic outbreak is having a profound impact on higher education worldwide. Universities and schools are forced to operate entirely online as campuses and schools are closed and face-to-face learning is no longer possible. Like many other countries around the world, Malaysia has not been spared the negative impact of the pandemic. Malaysian universities have moved away from pure blended learning and now rely on online courses without exception. Online learning is key to the 21st century, especially at the tertiary level, and the inclusion of online learning is an important element of Malaysia's 2015-2025 Education Plan (Higher Education). However, to remain relevant, competitive, and sustainable, universities need to adopt and adapt online learning faster than expected because the pandemic is already here.

In response to the Malaysian government's initiative on online learning through the promotion of the Malaysian Education Plan and the National eLearning Policy or Dasar ePembelajaran Negara DePAN, UTMSpace, Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia UTHM, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia USIM, and Kolej Poly-Tech MARA (KPTM) have actively adopted blended learning. Moreover, the current pandemic has accelerated online learning in these four higher education institutions as institutional policies require faculty to fully manage online learning, including the delivery of English courses. As a result, faculty and learners alike rely on online learning platforms such as the institutional learning management system LMS, Massive Open Online Learning MOOC, video conferencing such as ZOOM, Google Meet, MS Team, Google Classroom, and various online tools and applications.

The adoption of online learning has affected learners in many ways, including their engagement (Chiu, 2022), motivation (Meşe et al., 2021), emotional experience (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021), and cognition (al Kurdi et al., 2021). Learner engagement in learning is increasingly viewed as an indicator of a successful and meaningful learning experience (Hiver et al., 2021; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

With respect to online learning, there is a wealth of research suggesting that the use of technology in learning significantly increases or decreases student learning. Online learning presents a significant challenge because of the distance (Bolliger & Martin, 2020) and nature of online learning itself that separates students from faculty and peers. One of the areas of concern is engagement. Although there are various definitions of engagement, it generally refers to learners' engagement and interaction with learning activities, content, instructors, and their learning community. In an online learning context, Yang et al. (2018) postulate that learning engagement includes "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). Thus, the role of engagement in learning is an important factor in effective English learning (Ginting, 2021). Although studies have found positive associations between the use of computers and information technology and student engagement and potential learning outcomes, critics have raised concerns that online learning and the use of information technology may disadvantage certain student populations (Muir et al., 2019; Alawamleh et al., 2020).

1.1 Objectives

This study aims to determine students' perceptions of the implementation of online English courses and assess students' engagement in online English learning in UTM Space, UTHM, USIM, and KPTM. The study specifically addresses the following research questions:

1. How do students perceive the implementation of online English courses?
2. How do students perceive their engagement in English online courses?

The objectives of the research are:

1. To identify the students' perception on the implementation of online English courses.
2. To investigate the students' engagement in learning English online courses

2. Literature Review

This section discusses the theoretical perspectives that underlie this study and presents the conceptual framework that provides the approach to answering the research questions. In addition, a discussion of previous related studies, including literature relevant to this study, is presented.

Primarily, studies have been conducted to examine the effects of online learning on student engagement in English language learning. Researchers have highlighted the effects of online learning based on their subjects. This can be supported by several studies.

According to Alawamleh, M, Al Twait. L and Al Saht. G, (2020) learning is the process by which students take in information and combine it with their prior knowledge to form something meaningful. Learning contributes to students' continuous growth and change. Student engagement is considered one of the most important predictors of learning success. In general, student engagement refers to the level of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that students display in learning or teaching, which affects their motivation to learn and their progress in education. It also refers to active participation in a range of academic and extracurricular or school-related activities, as well as engagement in the pursuit of learning goals. Is student engagement related to successful learning, whether in offline or online programs? This paper concludes with some pedagogical conclusions for English language teaching. In a study by Martin, F. & Bolliger, D.U. (2018), student engagement was found to increase student satisfaction, increase student motivation to learn, decrease feelings of isolation, and improve student performance in online courses. The survey-based research study examined students' perceptions of various engagement strategies used in online courses based on Moore's interaction framework. The studies also analyzed the impact of differences in age, gender, and years of online learning experience on students' perceptions of engagement strategies. The results of the studies have implications for online instructors, curriculum developers, and administrators seeking to improve engagement in online courses.

In addition to the above studies addressing the impact of online learning on student engagement in English language learning, Ellen. C., Geetha S., and Laura C. (2020) also investigated whether demographic factors make a difference in learning engagement, online learning experiences, and intention to continue online learning.

Another study 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 intent and preferences for using online learning for future implementation.

Selvanathan, M., Hussin, N. A. M., & Azazi, N. A. N. (2020), in their paper titled "Students learning experiences during COVID -19: Work from home period in Malaysian Higher Learning Institutions" the experiences of higher education students in Malaysia with the implementation of online learning during this pandemic. Another study that examined the impact of online learning on students' engagement in English learning was conducted by Razami, H. H., & Ibrahim, R. (2021) in their article: Distance Education during COVID -19 Pandemic: The Perceptions and Preference of College Students in Malaysia Towards Online Learning. IT An interesting study conducted by Al-Kumaim, N. H., Alhazmi, A. K., Mohammed, F., Gazem, N. A., Shabbir, M. S., & Fazea, Y. (2021) in their article: Exploring the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on college students' learning lives: an integrated conceptual motivational model for sustainable and healthy online learning. These barriers include (a) faculty workload and information overload, (b) incapacity and unfamiliarity with the new online learning environment, and (c) personal health challenges related to stress and anxiety. All previous studies have shown that it is critical to determine students' perceptions of the challenges they face, their satisfaction with distance education, and their preferences and recommendations for improvement. These are the goals of this study, and the results of this study contribute to existing studies on student perceptions and preferences regarding distance education by shedding light on undergraduate and graduate perspectives. Thus, this study presented a set of motivational factors and developed a conceptual motivational model for sustainable and healthy online learning.

In addition to the above studies, Coman, C. Țiru, L. Meseșan-Schmitz, L. et al. (2020) found that the hierarchy of problems encountered in online learning changes in the context of the crisis caused by the pandemic. Technical problems ranked first, followed by lack of technical skills among instructors and teaching style not adapted to the

online environment. However, students assigned the last place to lack of interaction or poor communication with faculty. Based on these findings, implications for college and research are discussed.

Overall, the literature has provided some bases and rationales for investigating the impact of online learning on students' engagement in English language learning at the four selected higher education institutions in Peninsular Malaysia, as such studies were lacking.)

3. Methods

3.1 Participants

The participants of the study were 475 students from four different higher education institutions in Malaysia. They were randomly selected from certificate, diploma and degree programs. They also have different study backgrounds and belong to three dominant races: Malays, Chinese, and Indians. Three English teachers were interviewed about the students' participation in their respective courses.

3.2 Research Instrument

In this study, the instruments developed by Muhammad et al. (2021), and Gray & DiLoreto (2016) were adapted. Respondents were administered a series of questionnaires to measure their engagement in online learning. Results were recorded in SPSS.

4. Data Collection

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

Reliability test was conducted for this study, and as a result of validity and reliability analysis, it was found that Cronbach's alpha coefficient was calculated as 96 ($\alpha=0.96$). A reliability coefficient of 0.70 or higher is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations (Mockovak, 2016).

5. Results and Discussion

In presenting the results, the researchers divided the questionnaire responses into three parts: 1) respondents' demographic information, 2) students' perceptions of the implementation of online English courses, and 3) their engagement in the process of learning English.

Demographic Information

The demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table 1. As shown in Table 1, female respondents dominated the study with 296 respondents (62.3%). Most of the respondents are Malays with 90.7% (431 respondents) while Chinese, Indians and others account for 9.3%. 60% of the respondents are pursuing undergraduate studies and 38.5% are pursuing postgraduate studies. Almost half of all respondents are from USIM (48.2%), 22.9% from UTHM, and 21.9% from KPTM. The remaining 6.9% are from UTMSpace.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N= 475)

		frequency	percent
Gender	Male	179	37.7
	Female	296	62.4
Race	Malay	431	90.7
	Chinese	21	4.4
	Indian	8	1.7

	Others	15	3.2
Education	Certificate	3	0.6
	Diploma	183	38.5
	Degree	289	60.8
Institution	UTMSpace	33	6.9
	UTHM	109	22.9
	KPTM	104	21.9
	USIM	229	48.2

Perception of online learning

In this section, the results on students' perceptions of online English learning are explained in detail. Table 2 shows the mean value of students' perceptions. To measure students' perceptions of the implementation of online English courses, the researchers asked fourteen questions.

Table 2: Students' Perception of the Implementation of English Online Classes (N=475)

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Interpretation
1. Studying through e-learning mode provides the flexibility to the study at the time convenient to the learner.	3.94	0.79	High
2. E-learning can enable people to study irrespective of where they are located in the world.	4.01	0.83	High
3. There are technologies available to enable one to take tests and submit assignments electronically	4.23	0.75	Very high
4. There are electronic tools available to enable interactive communication between instructor and student without meeting face-to-face	4.18	0.81	High
5. I feel confident while using e-learning system.	3.76	0.85	High
6. I feel confident while operating e-learning functions.	3.79	0.86	High
7. I feel confident while using online-learning content.	3.85	0.86	High
8. I believe e-learning platforms are user-friendly.	3.92	0.87	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 an e-learning service can simplify the 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)

From the above Table 2, the lowest mean score is 3.76 (item 5) and the highest is 4.23 (item 3). Respondents agree that "there are technologies that allow tests and assignments to be submitted electronically" with this statement having the highest mean for perception. A total of five items have a mean score of 4.0 and above, with respondents agreeing that "there are electronic tools that enable interactive communication between instructors and learners without having to meet face-to-face," that "it would be easy for me to find the information I need if I use an e-learning platform," that "I intend to use e-learning as an autonomous (free) learning tool," and that "e-learning can enable people to learn no matter where they are in the world." The remaining ten items have a mean score between 3.76 and 3.97.

Students think that technologies help them a lot in completing their assignments and submitting them online. They think that online tests also save a lot of time and can be done anywhere. This shows flexibility in the learning process. During the pandemic, they say, many students commit to work. According to Shaiful Baharum, A., Md Shar, N. Z., & Abbas, U.-H. (2021), students face challenges in life and pursue part-time jobs to survive. However, there are positive and negative impacts of part-time jobs. With the help of technologies, students can manage both tasks, part-time work and study, well.

In addition, students belong to Generation Z, which has grown up with technological advances. As a technologically savvy generation, online learning is easy for them. Item 9 states, "It would be easy for me to find the necessary information if I use an e-learning platform," which shows that it is an advantage for them to use technology in the learning process, such as searching for articles or information to complete the task or assignment.

The overall response regarding the perception of the implementation of online English courses is positive with an average score of 3.98. According to Moidunny (2009), students' perceptions are rated as positive and high. This study is consistent with the findings of Martin & Bolliger (2018) and T. Muthuprasad et al. (2021), but contradicts a study by Bali & Liu (2018) in which students rated face-to-face learning higher than online learning.

Engagement of students in English language learning using online platforms.

In this part, the second objective of the study is explained. Nineteen items were presented to students to measure their engagement in learning. Students were asked questions about how they engage in online learning, such as how they collaborate with friends in class and how attentively they listen to lectures. In general, it can be seen that students' engagement in online English courses is high, with a mean score between 3.49 and 3.99. The highest mean score is item number 7 ("Attentive listening/reading" during online classes), and the lowest mean score is item number 18 (Regularly contributing to the discussion forum). Items 7 and 10, 9 and 12, 16 and 17 have the same mean value, which are 3.99, 3.81, and 3.87, respectively. The calculation of the average mean value for student engagement was performed and results in a value of 3.84. (Table 4)

This study revealed that students show positive engagement in online learning. This positive engagement means that they are satisfied with online learning. Positive engagement usually leads them to develop ways to achieve their academic goals (She Long et al. 2021).

The results of this study are consistent with those of Kim and Kim (2021) and Sinval et al. (2021), but contradict the findings of Hollister et al. (2022), who found that student engagement during lectures was low.

However, when comparing perceptions and engagement in this study, it is interesting to note that student engagement is lower during online learning, as the mean score is less than 4.0. Students did listen to the lecture, but participated less in class or group discussions. They also read less, indicating that they only listened to the lecture.

Table 4: Engagement of Students in 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	3.83	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	3.92	0.84	High
5. Being organized	3.85	0.84	High
6. Taking good notes over readings, PowerPoints, or video lectures	3.91	0.89	High
7. Listening/reading carefully	3.99	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	3.81	0.85	High
10. Finding ways to make the course interesting to me	3.99	0.82	High
11. Desiring strongly to learn the material	3.87	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	3.87	0.87	High
16. Doing well on the tests/quizzes	3.87	0.86	High
17. Engaging in conversations online (chat, discussions, email)	3.93	0.85	High
18. Posting in the discussion forum regularly	3.49	0.98	High
19. Getting to know other students in the class	3.73	0.97	High

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three English teachers with three different levels of teaching experience - 1) less than 5 years, 2) 5 to 10 years, and 3) more than 10 years. The instructors were randomly selected and met the above criteria. Faculty were interviewed over four semesters (Sem 2 2019/20, Sem 1 2020/21, Sem 2 2020/21, Sem 1 2021/22) about their experiences and observations in their online courses. The similarities of the responses received are presented below.

1) Technology gap

Technology plays a very important role in the process of online learning. Teachers are struggling with the new applications such as Google Meet, Zoom, Loom, and Webex that they have no experience with. They need to learn how to do the process with the help of colleagues and students. They need to prepare and upload materials into the system, such as AUTHOR, OLES, GOALS and BLACKBOARD.

2) Documentation

There is no longer a manual filing system, as everything should be fully documented online when fully online learning is introduced. Faculty must therefore be experts in using Google Drive, sharing files, recording lectures, and monitoring tests, quizzes, exams, and student management.

3) Teaching approach

Teachers must ensure that students are always engaged in the learning process. Some problems were highlighted, such as turning on the camera during lectures, as many of the students were not on the camera for various reasons, such as poor data and internet connection. Therefore, the satisfaction level of the class was not very high. The instructors also need to be more concerned about whether the students understand the lectures or not, as many students are silent during online learning. In addition, teachers constantly face complaints about internet connection, especially from students living in rural areas such as Sabah and Sarawak. All of this affects the teachers' approach to teaching.

6. Conclusion

It can be concluded that students view online English learning positively and show a high level of engagement in the learning process. Of course, with the sudden changes in the education system, there are many challenges that students, teachers, and administrators must face. In general, fully online learning has advantages in the context of English language learning in these four higher education institutions, as it promotes self-learning, reduces costs, offers convenience, and promotes flexibility to some extent. Online learning is an excellent option during the COVID-19 pandemic, although it obviously cannot completely replace face-to-face learning. Therefore, the study recommends that blended learning should be considered to create a more balanced learning environment in English learning environments. It is also recommended that further research be conducted to clarify the effects of fully online English learning on students of different genders and study backgrounds.

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