

The Advantages and Disadvantages of Virtual Learning

Doan Thi Hue Dung

Department of English Language, Hong Bang International University

Abstract: Virtual education has exploded during the past few years and become even more centric to the life of university and school worldwide during the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic. Together with the expansion of virtual courses is the increasing concern about the quality of education it provides and the challenges faced by the teacher and the learner. This article aims to look at the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning experienced by the faculty and the student. The study took place at the Department of English Languages of Hong Bang International University during Semester 2 of the academic year 2019-2020, based on the survey with 205 students and 22 lecturers. Deriving as a contingent solution to provide the instruction to students during the pandemic time, virtual courses have been recognized by more than 82% participants for their positive impacts on the student's learning experience. The two most critical issues that raise concerns are digital division and the lack of social skills among students in virtual learning environment.

Key words: Online Learning, Virtual Classrooms, Virtual Learning, Virtual Education

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I. Introduction

Virtual education generally refers to instruction in a learning environment where teacher and student are separated by time or space, or both. The course contents are conveyed through IT applications, multimedia resources, the Internet, videoconferencing, etc.

Virtual education starts its life as an innovation to provide education access beyond the campus walls. The first online provision dates back to 1960, when the University of Illinois created an Intranet for its students. It is the system of linked computer terminals where students could access course materials as well as listen to recorded lectures [1]. Virtual education has grown rapidly and globally in the past few years with diversified online courses at all levels including K-12, colleges, universities and lifelong learning institutions. Discussing the growth of online learning, Forbes forecasts the online education market will possibly reach \$350 Billion by 2025 rising from \$107 Billion in 2015[2].

Many educators predicted that technology ecosystems have gradually overturned the world of higher education globally as massive open online courses (MOOCs) can even replace the face-to-face university education and require a new field of educational psychology [3], [4],[5].

In the field of English language teaching, Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) derives its significance as a dynamic and advanced approach of teaching and learning, in which the computer and computer-based resources such as the Internet are widely used to present, reinforce and assess the learning contents. Similar to other online provision, the implementation of CALL often faces common challenges from teacher training, IT infrastructure, investment budget, etc. [6].

Even though the study mainly focuses on students of English Language major, the term virtual education and virtual learning will be used more often for their broader coverage of meanings. Another reason is that the study also attempts to look at issues and factors beyond the language teaching and learning scope such as students' skill development and students' perspective towards online learning opportunity.

Types of virtual courses

There are typically three types of virtual courses depending on the nature of instructional interaction between the teacher and learner, particularly the point of time of occurring interaction.

Asynchronous online courses do not take place in real-time. Students are more self-directed, doing the course work and assignments within a time frame. The teacher-student interaction takes place through discussion boards, blogs, and email, etc. There is no appointed class meeting time. Asynchronous are flexible and effective to students with time constraint or busy schedules.

Synchronous online courses require the instructor and student to interact online simultaneously. Students receive instruction from teacher and interact with their teacher and course mates through texts, audio chats, and video chats in a virtual classroom. Synchronous learning environments enable students to participate in a course from home in real time.

Hybrid online courses, alternatively blended courses, facilitate both in-person and online interaction. Hybrid courses require meeting in-person during a semester and provide for computer-based communication in between those face-to-face sessions. Hybrid type of virtual learning therefore can be both asynchronous and synchronous, and face-to-face interaction.

Benefits of Virtual Education

The benefits of virtual education are varied for all stakeholders including the course provider, the instructors, and the learner.

Initially, virtual education helps institutions to extend their outreach to those students who wish to access to the education from a distance. Therefore, it helps the institution to increase the student intake. Virtual courses also enable the institution to offer instruction to a large number of students participating in online lectures and videoconferences. In cases, it helps to reduce cost of staffing as well as cut down traveling budget of staff mobility.

Virtual teaching and CALL application can obviously diversify the delivery methods, therefore enriching the teaching experiences for the faculty. It is common that teachers need to take several training seminars and many hours of self-taught practice to get familiar to this new way of teaching. Furthermore, fast changing IT technology constantly urges the teacher to learn new tools and applications to enrich both the contents and the educational activities of their lessons.

As for the students, virtual education is widely appreciated for its flexibility, cost effectiveness, and convenient access. With asynchronous courses, the student can enjoy a more flexible schedule that conveniently fits their available time and location. Searching available online programs offered by many universities around the world, it is common that on-line courses reduce by 25% of tuition fees, materials and travel expenses compared to traditional courses. Virtual learning also allows students to access to different courses and programs of their choices. In fact, virtual learning is a dynamic alternative for self-motivated students who can constantly stay on task and monitor their learning goals.

II. Research design

Research site

The study took place at Hong Bang International University during Semester 2 of the academic year 2019-2020, from February to May 2020. The university has implemented on-line teaching from the beginning of the semester as a compulsory measure to maintain the ongoing of the semester. All online courses are facilitated by a MOOCs platform at *Istudy.edu.vn* and conducted through virtual classrooms via Microsoft Teams.

The study was mainly conducted at the Department of English Languages, where all the courses were offered online. The students followed comprehensive guidance to enroll and participate in the virtual classrooms. It is indeed the hybrid type of virtual learning that the university delivered the courses. The online class meets once a week and runs 2.5 hours in each meeting. Most students took 5 courses as an average in Semester 2. The students generally studied from their home or at cafeterias nearby their places, whereas, most instructors conducted online lessons on campus. Toward the end of the semester, the review time and final assessment of most of the courses took place on campus, in physical classrooms.

Research tools and participants

The survey was carried out with all 256 English-majored students from the first year to the fourth year cohort of the Department of English Language. 205 online questionnaires were collected and used for the analysis of data. In addition, the researcher interviewed 79 students and 22 lecturers on their online learning and teaching experiences, the advantages and disadvantages they faced while taking online courses. These interviews were done via Microsoft Teams and face-to-face on campus.

III. Research findings and discussions

Experiences with online education

Among 205 student participants in the study, only 7 students had previous experience with online learning. The remaining 96 percent of the participants took online courses for the first time.

The instructional kits to guide students to enroll and participate in the online course are available on the university website, which include one video and one comprehensive manual to give step-by-step instruction in both Vietnamese and English language. 178 respondents (70%) commented that the instruction was clear, useful and easy to understand, while 30 % respondents had difficulty following the instruction as it was unclear to them.

Similarly, only 2 lecturers had previous experience conducting online teaching. Other lecturers only took part in some online formal sessions such as Web-minar, videoconferences, and on-line short courses. However, 100% lecturers had made use of the internet and computer- assisted applications in their teaching

before. Prior to the teaching online, all lecturers attended the 3-day seminar on how to deliver online courses, which gave the lecturers basic knowledge and skills to use IT devices to prepare the lesson, conduct the teaching, and give assessment on student work. However, the lecturers strongly indicated high demand for further and continuing training on pedagogies of virtual teaching such as designing online lessons, assessing student work, and managing virtual classrooms.

Digital division

Different from traditional or physical classrooms, virtual classrooms bring in the issue of digital inequalities among the students. It is so obvious that the quality of Wi-Fi connection is varied from place to place of access and dependent on the types of devices being used. The quality of instruction is, therefore, affected by the rates of Wi-Fi speed and digital devices that the student can afford.

The study shows that 55% of the students come from Ho Chi Minh City and 45% from outer provinces. However, the quality of Wi-Fi connection is rather disparate, 11% has high-speed and stable connection, 69% has average speed connection, and 20% has poor connection.

The study also finds out that the students use two main devices for their online learning, which are smartphones (46%) and laptops (45%). The other less used devices are desktops (6%) and tablets (3%). The finding brings out the concerns about what types of practice work and assignment the teacher should give to students while smartphones are more popularly used. Those assignments and tests that require sufficient writing work cause difficulties and fears to students who use smartphones as the only device for learning. Data from the interviews also shows that students who use smartphone do not appreciate tasks and assignments that request immediate submission. They prefer the ones that are short and simple enough to be done on smartphone applications or those tasks that allow them to work with pens and papers after the online class.

The Advantages of virtual learning

The flowing table presents the most advantages of online learning experienced by the students. It shows that online learning is perceived positively by the majority of the participants. Online learning at first was practiced as a contingent solution to keep the education on-going. However, the students recognized the impacts of online learning such as having more extra-time for self-study, exposing to new and interesting forms of learning, and having easy access to resourceful materials online.

Table no1. The Advantages of virtual learning

The impacts of virtual learning	Percentages
1. Protecting individual health and community safety	100
2. Saving the travel time	95.5
3. Exposing to new forms of learning	81
4. Keeping up with the original plan of the semester	79.5
5. Having extra time for self-study	60
6. Having easy access to online resources	60

The disadvantages of virtual learning

The results of the survey reveal several critical disadvantages faced by the students while taking online courses, which are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table no2. The disadvantages and obstacles experienced by the student

The difficulties and obstacles	Percentages
1. Extensive time staring at digital screens	93.6
2. Lack of body movements	91.1
3. Lack of conditions for developing social interaction skills	89.2
4. Fear of online assessment	80.2
5. Suffering from concentration loss	78.2
6. Lack of peer interaction in virtual classroom	75.6
7. Difficulties in hearing the voice of the instructors	72.3
8. Lack of time and condition to practice speaking with peers and teachers	66.8
9. Difficulties in acquiring the contents of the lessons	59
10. Lack of interaction with instructors	56.7
11. Difficulties in following the study schedules, lack of self-discipline	51

Data from the interviews also gave the similar findings. The students complained about the long-hour classes online, which caused tiredness, boredom and concentration loss. Other problem is the up-heating of the electrical devices after long-hour online contact. The students suggest the longest contact time for each session online be 100 minutes.

Since the quality of Wi-Fi connection does not level at all times, the students fear that online work and assessment might be lost halfway. They also fear that their poor IT skills can their performance at the final tests online.

Many students during the interviews also shared their concerns about the shortage of opportunity for social exchange and interaction among students. Online interaction cannot completely replace the face-to-face one.

From the teacher's viewpoints, the most critical disadvantage of online teaching is the challenges of managing virtual classes. Students are often late for class and leave class in the middle of the lesson. Moreover, the majority of the students do not want to turn on camera in virtual classrooms and make the communication between the teacher and the students even more difficult. The survey finds out that only 18 percent of the participants are willing to turn on camera of their devices in virtual classrooms and 96% of the participants do not see the necessary of using device camera.

Skills and courses to go online

Among the courses being taken, the students notice that the quality of online learning is perceivable and online teaching should be continued. Those courses include Academic Writing, English grammar, Reading Comprehension, Listening and Speaking, and Linguistics. It is highly recommended by 80% of the participants that parts or the whole of these courses can be conducted in virtual classrooms. The faculty interviewed also continue to use the MOOCs platform and virtual classrooms to communicate with students, follow up student work, and keep the assessment portfolio.

IV Implications and conclusions

The analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of virtual learning is significant to find appropriate measures to enhance the quality and effectiveness of the courses. On the part of the students, keeping up motivation to study and maintaining self-discipline to participate in online sessions are among the utmost measures. As for the instructors, there are several suggestions from this study to help teachers to enhance the quality of the course. First of all, formative assessment should be used to monitor the student progress throughout the course and avoid putting unnecessary pressure on the final test. This will ease the fear of loss or disruption on the final test if it is given online. Second, the teacher should create more quizzes, contests, and group projects to encourage students to participate in group exchange and interaction. These group activities can help the student to develop their social skills during the course time. Third, the design of instructional material and assessment should be suitable for the student to work with either laptop or smartphone to ease the issue of device inequality. Fourth, the teacher can design personal work for students in the time of Wi-Fi failure or poor connection. In other words, students should be able to carry out the work at their own pace. Last but not least, academic counselling and IT support are extremely necessary to help the student to overcome certain anxiety and difficulties in their new learning experience. Virtual learning is not a new concept, however, it becomes a more prominent term in the new normal life of higher education nowadays, and deserves more attention and adequate investment from the institution, the teacher, and the student.

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