

Online learning experience of the master of TESOL students during Covid-19 closures

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the online learning experience of the Master of TESOL students studying at a University in Ho Chi Minh City. The online survey was sent to students of both the local and joint Master programs who took online courses during the university closures because of Covid-19. The findings showed that the students had a positive experience with their online learning. They indicated that they were ready for studying online in the future though they had challenges such as improper attention in the online study; poor internet connectivity, unfavorable conditions to study at home and lack of training for online study.

1. Introduction

The purpose of the study was to investigate the online learning experience of the Master of TESOL (Teaching English to speakers of other languages) students studying at a University in Ho Chi Minh City (hereinafter called the University) during the university closures due to Covid-19.

Introduction of the context

In Viet Nam, from Jan 3 to 14 November 2020, there have been 1,256 confirmed cases of COVID-19 with 35 deaths (World Health Organization, 2020), with two waves of the outbreak. During the first wave, all educational institutions in Vietnam were closed at the beginning of February when the first infections were reported. These nationwide closures affected more than 22 million students, including over 1.7 million HCMC students (Manh Tung, 2020). The Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) encouraged institutions to use their forms of online teaching available to ensure the continuity of education for their students, including the postgraduate level.

All teaching and learning activities were moved to an online delivery format at the University. Then the students returned to school by mid-May. In late July with the second outbreak reported in Da Nang, the social distancing measures were applied again. In HCMC, due to few cases reported, schools were not required to close. The University anyhow continued offering online classes based on the consensus of students. Face to face learning mode was only resumed in late August 2020.

During the closures, in addition to the courses of the local Master of TESOL program, all the six courses of the second phase, the joint Master program in collaboration with an Australian university, were provided online in March, June and September 2020. The Australian teachers could not come to HCMC to teach due to the ban on overseas travel from the Australian Government.

Though traditional distance and online courses of the undergraduate program have been taught in the University for a long time, the online teaching and learning at the postgraduate levels have not been allowed by MOET. The graduate students have to go to classes at the campus where they are present physically in the classroom along with their teacher and participate in classroom activities. Then COVID-19 started to spread, the switch to online education was organized quickly by the Graduate School and students could continue with their studies. The Learning Management System for the administration of online courses was also extensively exploited. Brief guides and technical support were provided to teachers for their online teaching. Teachers were provided with a Zoom account and the class was organized online at the same time as it had been planned with face-to-face mode. The online class session typically was conducted as the following: All the students logged in simultaneously online, then the teacher delivered the lecture and conducted other activities such as discussions, question answering activities, etc. (Gandolfi, 2020).

2. Literature review

2.1. Online learning

McBrien, Cheng, and Jones (2009) remarked that technological developments have enhanced distance education. Distance education has developed into various forms of delivery, such as online learning, open learning, web-based learning, computer-mediated learning, blended learning, m-learning, etc. These forms all use the computer connected to a network, which facilitates learners to learn from anywhere, anytime, in any rhythm, and with any means (Cojocariu, Lazar, Nedeff, & Lazar, 2014). Online learning is viewed as the learning experiences in synchronous or asynchronous environments using different devices (e.g., mobile phones, laptops, etc.) with internet access (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Synchronous learning, quite similar to face-to-face learning, takes place through digital platforms where students use online media at the same time. There are real-time interactions between teachers and students, and instant feedback, which nurtures the necessary social interaction in education. In asynchronous learning, the learning content is not live, and instant feedback or immediate response is difficult to perform (Littlefield, 2018).

The pros and cons associated with online learning are well noted in the literature. The major advantages of online learning are cost saving in terms of time, money, and travel. The classes are free from any time and location restrictions. Active and impartial learning can be ensured (Shahzad et al., 2020). Anyhow, problems associated with online learning are also claimed. First, not all students are ready for online learning. Students vary in degrees of their capabilities and confidence level. Some do not feel comfortable while learning online, leading to increased frustration and confusion and they find it difficult to understand the instructions (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Second, personal attention is also a huge issue facing online learning. If students are not serious in terms of time and flexibility, they could have problems with keeping the pace of the study. Third, students can face many technical difficulties that hinder learning (Parkes, Stein, & Reading, 2014). Fourth, students want two-way interaction which sometimes gets difficult to implement. There is a lack of teacher-student, student to student interaction, as well as lack of corrections of mistakes immediately. In addition, online content might be quite theoretical and does not let students practice (Dhawan, 2020).

2.2. Studies related

There are various studies related to online teaching and learning in higher education during the lockdown all over the world, however, most of them mainly focused on the undergraduate level. Gonzalez et al. (2020) in their study on the influence of Covid-19 confinement in

undergraduate students' performance in Spain, or Elzainy, El Sadik, and Al Abdulmonem (2020) in Saudi Arabia found out that there was a positive effect of the Covid-19 confinement on students' performance. Students have improved significantly their learning performance. Shahzad et al. (2020) found that the English as a second language (ESL) graduate students at Punjab, Pakistan had positive attitudes in studying English online during the lockdown.

Related to the online learning experience, the study of Kapasia et al. (2020) reported that the undergraduates and postgraduates in West Bengal, India, suffered from stress, depression, and anxiety. The students also faced problems related to poor internet connectivity, followed by the absence of a favorable environment to study at home. Khalil et al. (2020) indicated that students in Saudi Arabia encountered methodological, content perception, technical, and behavioral challenges during online sessions and exams. Chung, Subramaniam, and Dass (2020) in their study on Malaysian undergraduate students revealed that the biggest challenge was internet connectivity, while the lack of self-discipline, poor learning atmosphere, a distraction from surroundings and unstable in Hong Kong (Xiong, Jiang, & Mok, 2020).

In Vietnam, Duong (2020) reviewed the challenges for the Vietnamese education system and measures that the authorities were undertaking. She considered homeschooling as a remedy and raised the need for cooperation of family, school and society as well as the experience of learning from other countries. Studies on students' online learning experience were scarce and those of postgraduate students were hardly found.

3. Methodology

The survey was conducted online from 12-17 November 2020, using Google forms. It consisted of 23 items, among which 2 items related to the participants' demographic data (their age range and gender), and eight items for the online classes information that the participants had attended. 12 items for the online learning experience were constructed on five Likert-scale, with options ranging from *Strongly disagreed* to *Strongly agreed*. The last item probes participants' the most serious problems that they had encountered, in which they selected the answers from the six provided options.

The purpose and details of the survey were shared with the participants. Completion of the survey was taken as a form of consent to participate. The survey was sent to all Master of TESOL students studying at the two programs at the University, including those following the local Master programs, MTESOL2019, and those following the joint Master programs 2020. Those students had taken online classes this year. For the data analysis, the percentage was relied on to understand the distribution of participants' biodata, characteristics of their online classes, and prominent issues related to online learning. Mean was used to discuss the online learning experience.

4. Findings and discussions

4.1. Participants' characteristics

63 out of 93 students completed the survey, accounting for 67.7% of the population. There were 63 participants in this study. The majority of them (68.3%) were students in the Joint Master program, 31.7% from the local MTESOL. The sample distribution of the two programs resembled the population components with two-thirds from the joint Master program. 74.6% were female, which reflected the female dominant characteristics of this language teaching area. The participants were quite young with 63.5% under 30 years old, 33.3% from 31-40 and very few (3.2%) from the age range 41-50. None was over 50 years old. In Vietnam, the postgraduate students become younger in all areas and TESOL might be among the leading ones. They are English teachers and might be considered as familiar and associated with technologies.

4.2. Information about online classes

Half of the participants had attended various online sessions before the outbreak of Covid-19. These English teachers at schools have attended professional development training compulsory by MOET or those teaching only at language centers could participate in seminars or workshops held by either the language centers or by universities or by various NGOs such as British Council or from the US consulate, Education and Culture section, etc. Some of the seminars have been provided online and that might explain the large number of students who had been quite familiar with online learning before the university closures. In addition, they might conduct their own teaching using various forms of online teaching at work.

Among the surveyed students who were attending online classes, almost all of them (95.2%) used laptops/desktops/computers and quite a few used their mobile phones. Students relied on the computers because it was easy to follow due to the widescreen with all functions easily operated. 54% of the participants reported that they had attended more than three courses. As the majority of the participants were from the joint Master's program, they actually took part in more than three courses. The joint Master program provided six courses online in three clusters in March, June and September this year, while the MTESOL program offered less and some courses during the second outbreak wave of Covid-19 resumed to face to face after two weeks online in September. 36.5% of participants informed that they had spent less time on their online study, a smaller amount (34.9%) reported that they had spent an equal amount of time, while the least (28.6%) informed that they had worked more.

Related to infrastructure, Zoom was the dominant platform used for online learning (78.6%), next was Google classroom (10.7%), Google meets (8.9%), while the platforms for materials sharing were mainly the institutions or teachers' websites (75.8%) and 16.1% were from Zoom. A very small part (4.8%) was from Google classroom, then YouTube.

4.3. Learning experience

Related to students' learning experience with the online classes, there were 12 questions examining their reflections on the level of agreement. The learning experience was calculated by mean and the mean was described based on the rough classification into four levels: Felling disagreed with the mean less than 2.7 and felt uncertain with the mean range 2.7-3.4; the mean range 3.5-4.2 meant agreed and above 4.2 meant strongly agreed. The results are presented in Table 1 from the highest to the lowest.

Table 1

Learning online experience

Questionnaire items	Mean
Online study was helpful in Covid-19 closures	4.54
Teaching materials were relevant for online study	4.16
Online study was more convenient	4.13
The teacher was easily accessible in online teaching	4.03
Online teaching could meet the learning needs	3.94
After Covid-19 closures, online study should be applied	3.67
There were lesser teacher-student, and student-student interactions	3.19

Questionnaire items	Mean
It was difficult to clarify doubts during online sessions	2.89
I had difficulty concentrating during online sessions	2.86
I did not feel motivated to participate in the online discussions or assignments	2.63
I found teachers' instructions difficult to understand and follow	2.56
I felt uncomfortable during the online sessions due to a lack of online study skills	2.49

Source: The researcher's data analysis

Above all, all the participants strongly agreed that an online study was helpful in Covid-19 closures with $M=4.54$. This coined the study results of Shahzad et al. (2020) on the English as a second language students as they considered online learning was helpful in certain circumstances. Students agreed that they felt satisfied with the teaching materials which were relevant for online study ($M=4.16$). The online study was more convenient than face to face mode of studying with $M=4.13$ and the teacher was easily accessible in online teaching ($M=4.03$). The participants also confirmed that online teaching could meet learning needs ($M=3.94$). Students also asserted that after Covid-19 closures, online study should be applied ($M=3.67$), which might indicate that they were ready for and accepted online learning.

In general, students had a quite positive experience in studying online. They rejected that they felt uncomfortable during the online sessions due to lack of online study skills ($M=2.49$) or found teachers' instructions difficult to understand and follow ($M=2.56$). They also denied that they did not feel motivated to participate in online discussions or assignments ($M=2.63$).

The results confirmed Shahzad et al.'s study (2020) that HCMCOU Master of TESOL students had positive attitudes in studying online during Covid-19 lockdown. They did suffer from stress, depression, and anxiety, but this was not the most prominent issue. In general, participants realized the online learning convenience as nearly half of the students from the provinces. The MTESOL students have to travel to HCMC to study at weekends or students of the joint Master program have to stop from work, moving to HCMC to study eight days consecutively for a course. As the majority of students were very young English teachers, they might be familiar and associated with technologies. Online teaching and learning therefore might be not new to them. Half of them had been familiar with online teaching and learning. In addition, in their curriculum, all of them had to take the Technology and language learning course which help them to employ teaching aids and technology in their language teaching.

Moreover, all students who have had the online courses were voluntarily attending the classes as the Master program is a credit-based program and students graduate when they collect enough credits. In the beginning, students could be made up their mind whether they wanted to follow the course online or wait until the course is offered in the traditional mode, face to face. The participants seemed to acquire the knowledge without difficulties as their teachers, whose major was teaching, as a consequence, knew how to make their lessons reach out to the students.

There were three areas that students' perceptions were neutral not quite agreed or disagreed. They felt uncertain that there were lesser teacher-student, and student-student interactions ($M=3.19$) or it was difficult for them to clarify doubts during online sessions ($M=2.89$) or they had difficulty concentrating during online sessions ($M=2.86$). Those three issues are usually considered as the challenges to online students while in this study, these were not really the challenges to Master of TESOL students.

When asking about the most serious problems among the six ones provided related to the online study due to COVID-19 that students have experienced while studying online (i.e., improper attention; feeling of stress, depression, and anxieties; unfavorable conditions to study at home; poor internet connectivity; lack of training for online study; doubtful feeling of the study results). The main issues that they have encountered while studying online are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

The prominent issues encountered while studying online

Issue options	%
You did not pay attention properly in the online study	49
You had problems related to internet connectivity	43
You did not have favorable conditions to study at home	30
You did not have relevant training for online study	30
Feeling of stress, depression, and anxieties overwhelmed you	27
You felt doubtful of the study results	22

Source: The researcher's data analysis

The most prominent issue was that students could not pay attention properly in online study (49%). The next issue was related to internet connectivity (43%). Ranging the third was that students did not have favorable conditions to study at home and they did not have relevant training for online study (30% each). Next was the feeling of stress, depression, and anxieties that overwhelmed the students during the time they studied online due to Covid-19 (27%). The least concerned was their doubtful feeling of the study results (22%). The issues related to studying online at the postgraduate levels resembled those found out from the study of students from the Asian countries such as in the internet connectivity, the lack of self-discipline, the absence of a favorable environment to study at home, and the lack of learning methodology (Chung et al., 2020; Khalil et al., 2020; Xiong et al., 2020).

5. Conclusions and recommendations

The study found out that the Master of TESOL students at the University had a favorable experience with their online studying mainly via the Zoom platform. They seemed ready to study online in the future because they realized its convenience, and online teaching could meet their learning needs. As they were very young English teachers, familiar with online teaching/learning and application of technology in teaching, they felt comfortable while studying; motivated to participate in the online discussions or assignments, and followed their teachers' instructions without difficulties. Anyhow Master of TESOL students still encountered issues with their online learning. Their main ones were how to maintain proper attention during the online sessions; the poor internet connectivity, the lack of relevant training for online study and favorable conditions to study at home.

Online mode is in an experiment at postgraduate learning, therefore, having the clarity of the learning experience could help the university to plan effectively and systematically in providing and managing online classes. Modifications can be provided to suit the needs of students to provide them a better learning experience. The modifications can also make online teaching more effective so that in the future it can be integrated along with face-to-face teaching at the

postgraduate level. Though the sample was limited to the Master of TESOL students at a university, the findings could contribute insights into the general issues faced by postgraduate students taking online classes.

Though Vietnam has resumed the “new normal” activities after the Covid-19 closures, face to face teaching is assumed in the local postgraduate programs, there is a need for good preparation to adjust ourselves quickly to different modes of teaching/learning. There are two recommendations as to the following.

First, the university closures due to Covid-19 help change the way how people receive and deliver postgraduate programs in Vietnam. MOET up till the beginning of 2020 still did not allow online teaching and learning for the postgraduate programs. During the COVID-19 closures, MOET fully realized the usefulness of online teaching and learning. Online teaching and learning proved to be beneficial to education sectors at all levels. As a consequence, the newest draft of the Regulations of the teaching and learning at the Master level, MOET allows the use of online teaching/learning up to 30% of the program contents. Online teaching and learning are expected to be allowed in 2021. The universities need to revise the teaching and learning procedures and requirements appropriate for online implementation. Convenience and accessibility aspects should be of priority. Curriculum, as well as curriculum-related matters, such as teaching and learning materials, classroom practices and assessment, need to be approached differently and systematically for the additional online teaching/learning.

Second is that more training sessions for teachers and students should be provided. Teachers and students need technical training on how to best use the internet capacity in online learning to help alleviate the internet connectivity problem. Teachers need online teaching training to make use of the advantages of the online formats, to be more effective in delivering the online contents, or to manage the class. Students need to familiarize themselves with the online learning platforms and enhance the suitable online learning habits such as self-directed learning, control of the study time, as well as overcoming the anxiety of learning online.

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