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The Attitudes Towards Distance Learning of Ton Duc Thang University Students and Teachers

Minh Uyen Ky Tran

Creative Language Center, Ton Duc Thang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam
Email: kytranminhuyen@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

High school and university students in Vietnam are compelled to learn through the virtual classroom in the era of COVID-19, which traumatized many students because it is the only choice at that time. This study looks into the attitudes towards distance learning of 15 teachers and more than 300 students in Ton Duc Thang University during COVID-19. This was the first time they experienced classroom interaction through a screen with many teachers and learners, which caused many problems during the lesson. Overall, students' attitude towards distance learning was negative. Many of them were overwhelmed by the heavy workload and the flooded learning materials, while the interaction with the instructor and other students was limited, which weakens their motivation to take on the assignments. Teachers also experienced the difficulties of managing the class, creating an eager classroom atmosphere through the screen, and also a huge workload. Acknowledging the adversity of distance learning from both teachers' and learners' view is the basic premise for the development of online language teaching methodology for Vietnamese learners who have little exposure to learning through the screen. This study contributes to the elevation of distance language learning in the Vietnamese context.

Keywords: *distance learning, challenges, solutions.*

1. INTRODUCTION

In the same situation as many countries in the world during the outbreak of COVID19, Vietnam has undergone the same hardship in the economy, society, medication, and even education. During the lockdown period, face-to-face learning became impossible for the education system all over the world and in Vietnam. There is no choice except for distance learning through many technology products such as Zoom, Google, Microsoft, etc. Distance learning is supposed to be an alien concept to Vietnamese learners since most of them have never experienced learning through technology devices. A sudden change in the way of teaching and learning causes both teachers and learners many difficulties. In contrast, the benefits that distance learning brings to education are inevitable in that time. A study that obtains further insight into learners' motivation and attitude towards distance learning is urged to conduct in the local area to acknowledge the learners' challenges and work out the predicted future solution.

2. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Distance learning became prevalent in comparison with the rapid development of technology. Computerized systems provide a platform for people to access

education conveniently everywhere at any time (Xu et al., 2020) [14]. Information & Communication Technologies (ICT) has been used in the education system for many years (Stickler & Shi, 2006) [9], which represent through the development of blended learning in higher education in Viet Nam. Learners, especially higher education learners and even lecturers, have been exposed to the use of technology for academic purposes. However, distance learning has never prevailed in teaching and learning a Vietnamese language, even in the most developed city like Ho Chi Minh City. However, a study of many authors in 2012 stated the similar effectiveness of face-to-face learning and online learning if they are well-designed (Driscoll, Jicha, Hunt, Tichavsky, & Thomson, 2012) [5]. According to these researchers, the satisfactory outcome of education was irrelevant to the medium through which the course is delivered. In other words, whether the lesson is delivered face-to-face or online does not affect the learning outcome if the course is designed properly. However, the success of a lesson depends not only on teachers' mediation but on learners' effort as well (Harris, 1995) [8] as Grenfell and Marcaro (2008) [7] claimed that many learners study more effectively than others. Therefore, distance learning success does lie in both teachers and learners, not the teachers only. However, White (2008) [13]

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assumed that learners' beliefs about learning a language shape their actions to structure their learning. Therefore, their attitude towards distance language learning is vital to their learning progress.

The study's key objective was to analyze the learners' attitude towards challenges they experienced and how they deal with those problems during the distance learning phase. The questions that this study is going to seek for the answer are:

1. What are the challenges Ton Duc Thang University students and lecturers may face in distance learning and the ways they deal with those problems?
2. What do lecturers do to overcome the difficulties of distance learning?

3. THE STUDY

3.1 Participants.

The study involved students in Ton Duc Thang University, who are mainly sophomore and junior students. Those students had experienced blended learning in learning English before distance learning. Learners know how to work well with technology devices. They were required to complete the online workbook and submit the writing and speaking assignments to the platform such as MyELT, CLMS, X-Reading, and ELAB. Teachers assessed their performance by sending private comments and elicit the class's popular errors during the face-to-face lessons. The students are able to cope with technological problems and be familiar with being alone when completing assignments, thanks to the blended learning experience. For that reason, freshmen were excluded from this study because they have never experienced blended learning at the university before, which may convey a different view from other students.

The percentage of male learners who joined this study was higher than the female, with 65% for males and 35% for females. They were at the age of 19 to 22 who are learning English at Ton Duc Thang University. The students were at different levels, from elementary to intermediate English learners. Although more than 1000 invitations were sent via mail and social media, 351 students completed the survey.

3.2. Context.

During the distance learning section, learners communicate and receive important notifications from teachers via Google Classroom. They are obliged to complete the assignments through this platform. The teacher views learners' responses and sends them private comments. They also join the Zoom or Google Meet platform to meet their teachers and friends as scheduled to exchange information and analyze learners' common errors as similar to face-to-face learning.

3.3. Methods

3.3.1. Instruments

The study consists of two phases: an online questionnaire for students and a semi-structured focus group for lecturers. A questionnaire on students' attitudes towards distance learning mainly focuses on distance learning challenges. The questionnaires were delivered online in order to get the answers conveniently, which consists of open and closed items. The items were adapted from "The survey of School: ICT in education" (Wastiau et al., 2013), a study of "A comparative study of Spanish adult students' attitudes to ICT in the classroom, blended and distance language learning modes" (Arrosagaray et al., 2019), and the study of Walker, U., & Haddon, R. (2011). Besides the questionnaire for students, 15 lecturers were invited to 3 simultaneous focus groups with 5 teachers in each group. There were 5 questions that were planned to ask the teachers. With the lecturers' view, the study's findings may be more trustworthy and hold a multidimensional view. The questionnaire and the focus group outline are provided in Appendix 1.

3.3.2. Data collection and analysis

351 students have completed the questionnaire thoroughly in English with Vietnamese translation for each question. Their answers were collected and analyzed quantitatively through charts and graphs. The teacher focus group's answers were transcribed and encoded to investigate the underlying meaning.

4. FINDINGS

The answers from the questionnaire for the students were analyzed and categorized into 3 main groups, language learners' characteristics, challenges, and solutions. The learners' characteristics dealt with learners' attitudes toward language learning, while the challenges involved in general language learning and distance learning.

4.1. Students survey

4.1.1. Language learners' characteristics

The majority of participants think that using language is a bit arduous. 74% of learners agreed that they are embarrassed when making mistakes, while 66% thought that mistakes might improve language use. The result suggested that producing language is considered to be complicated and hard to achieve. According to Figure 1, the large numbers of learners agreed with the statement about the difficulty of productive skills.
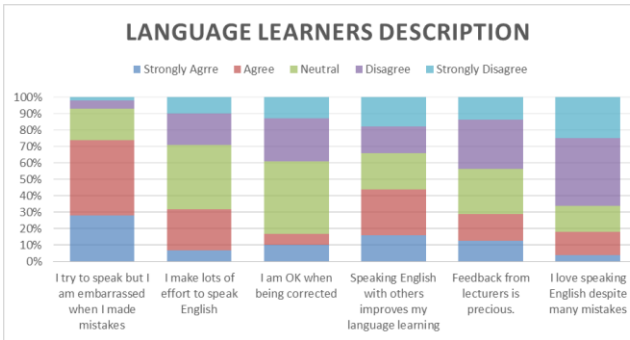
Figure 1. Language learners' description

An open-ended question about the challenges of learning a language was addressed in the survey. Various answers were recorded and encoded in 5 main components related to vocabulary, grammar, reading, speaking, and listening skills. As seen in Figure 2, the most prevalent issue that students confront was speaking in front of other people, with 84%. At the second place, standing is 70% of learners saying that there were too many new words to learn while they usually forgot too many words. Impractical grammar exercises, difficulty in getting the message when reading and listening are also a hindrance to language learners with 56%, 28%, and 15%, respectively.
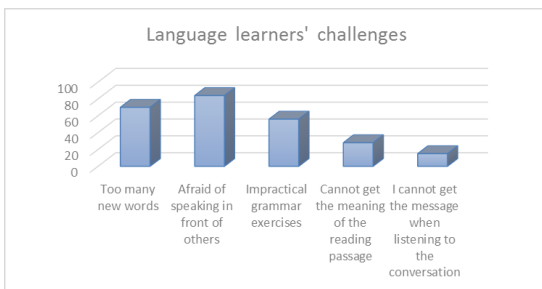

Figure 2. Language learners' challenges

When asking about the most influential factor in language accomplishment, 31% of learners chose learning materials while 28% thought that learners' effort had the most impact. According to the learners, the lecturers' influence was the lowest percentage with 16% of learners' choices. Learners who have chosen "Other" option also mentioned that the family and friends' affection also contributes to language learning progress.
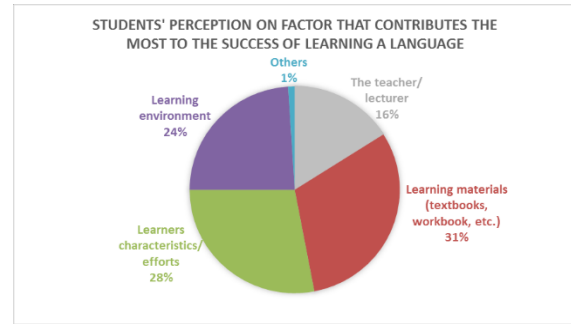

Figure 3. Students' perception on the factor that contributes the most to the success of learning a language

4.1.2. Distance learning challenges

Learners were asked to choose the most difficult skill to learn online, including Speaking, Writing, Listening, and Reading. The result was not so surprising, with Listening being the most popular choice with 66% due to the unstable internet connection that students regarded as a challenge of learning online. The second place was Speaking skill with 25%, which is connected with the challenge of limited interaction that learners have mentioned.

Figure 4. The most difficult skill to learn

A list of expected activities during distance learning periods was given to the participants. They are required to decide the frequency of those activities during their learning by always choosing, usually, often, hardly, and never. The result revealed in Table 1 that 78% of learners did not focus entirely on teachers' presentation during class time while 85% do other irrelevant things at the same time of learning. Surprisingly, 82% decided to keep silent when not understanding the concept instead of raising the questions. Moreover, 25% thought that they had never practiced speaking in small groups. What learners have done during the lesson has an effect on the way they think about distance learning. Due to their irresponsibility in distance learning, their views towards distance learning turn negative with loads of challenges mentioned when asking about their difficulties during learning in the distance.

	always	usually	often	hardly	never	total
Listen to the teacher presentation	9%	13%	43%	28%	7%	100%
Listen to other friends	7%	13%	53%	21%	6%	100%
Check your phone or watch a film at the same time	54%	31%	10%	5%	1%	100%
Do the assignment in a meagre way	31%	28%	22%	16%	3%	100%
Discuss the lesson with friends	25%	30%	25%	19%	1%	100%
Help your friend understand better	19%	25%	31%	16%	9%	100%
Practice speaking in small groups	9%	13%	31%	22%	25%	100%
Raise a question when not understanding	5%	6%	7%	19%	63%	100%

Table 1. Activities during distance learning

The question about the challenges of learning via technology is raised in open-ended form. Students have a great chance to share their difficulties. Tens of thousands of reasons were mentioned in the survey. There were 11 main key points that are repeatedly mentioned among the learners. The challenges of distance learning were illustrated in Figure 5. The highest number of students agreed that unstable Internet connection is one of the challenges. The second most frequent problem was the limitation of interaction among learners and teachers. Owing to the restricted use of technology devices and many technical problems, the interaction of learning and teaching language is hindered. Raising questions and clarifying concepts became almost impossible in distance learning when learners hardly do these things. Besides, the different types of distraction learners exposed when they learn distantly are diverse, compared to learning in the classroom. Therefore, learners tended to be driven to distraction more easily, which makes them bored faster than in class. The learning environment is also a trouble for many learners while their house is not convenient for learning online. Background noise or many other people in the room demotivated learners to practice the language. In addition, a large number of learners said that they had been flooded with too many learning materials that teachers provided them with 208 over 351 learners.
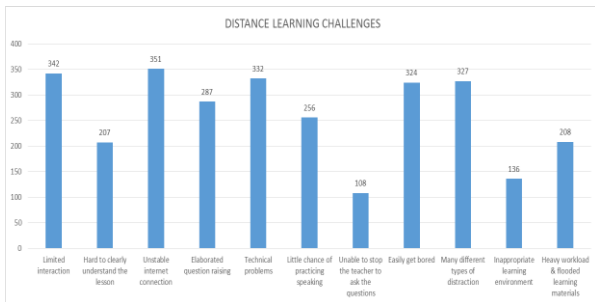

Figure 5. Distance learning challenges

While too many disadvantages of distance learning have been mentioned, there were some advantages that distance learning may bring to the learners. This was an open-ended question that learners share their different opinions. There were five main benefits that were indicated by many learners represented in Figure 6. The most fundamental benefit of distance learning was to reduce traveling time. Learners are able to save a lot of time for many other meaningful tasks in their life such as exercise, healthy breakfast, or even getting more sleep. The equally important concern was the improvement in technical skills thanks to distance learning, with 159 students agreed with. Learners also believed that distance-learning might help them gain learning autonomy, concentrate more on their learning path and remember the lesson easily, but just a small number of students thought so.
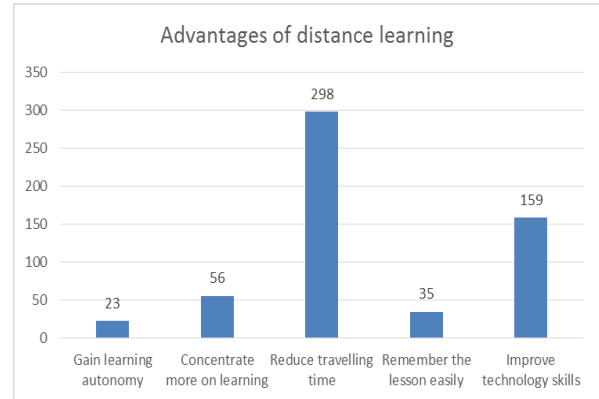

Figure 6. Advantages of distance learning

4.1.3. Solution

When sharing distance learning difficulties, learners also recommended some solutions to overcome the difficulties. There were 5 solutions, such as limited time, promoting interaction, sound filter, high-quality images, and faster organizing. Among those ideas, promoting interaction among learners and teachers received the most attention. 339 student over 351 thought that there should be an innovation in technology that help learners and teacher interact faster and easier. They also recommended that the sound and image quality should be taken into account in order to improve the class atmosphere. Besides, the program that supports distance learning should run smoothly that learners can acquire the language better.
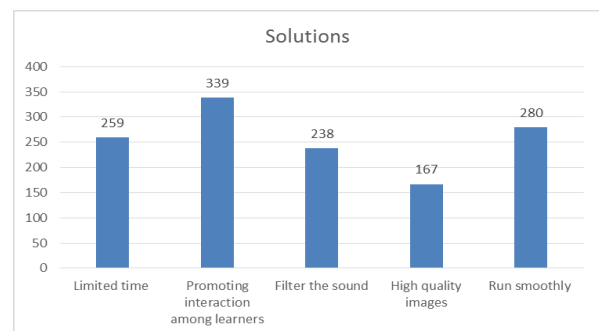

Figure 7. Recommended solutions

4.2. Teacher focus groups

The teacher focus groups are asked some questions similar to learners to examine whether the teacher has the same ideas as learners. In teachers' viewpoints, 6 out of 15 teachers referred to learners' characteristics as the essential factor that contributes to the success of language learning. Learning materials stood in second place, with 27% of teachers chose to be the influential

factor. The least crucial factor is the physical learning environment, with 13% of teachers. Teachers and students have a different perspective towards effective language learning. While teachers considered learners' characteristics as significant, learners assumed that learning materials play a more fundamental role. The variation in learning perspective may lead to divergent views towards distance language learning.
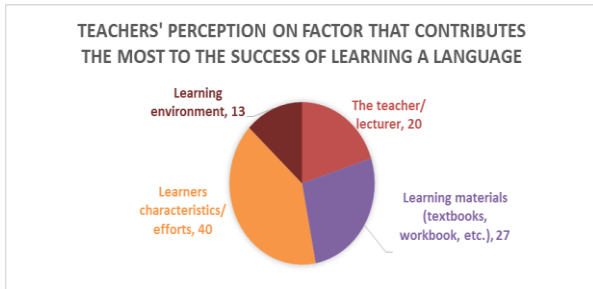

Figure 8. Teachers' perception on factor that contributes the most to the success of learning a language

With regards to the most challenging skill to teach online, most of the teachers thought of Speaking skills first with 47%, while Listening skills with 33%. According to Figure 9, Reading and Writing took up a small piece with only 7% and 13%, respectively.
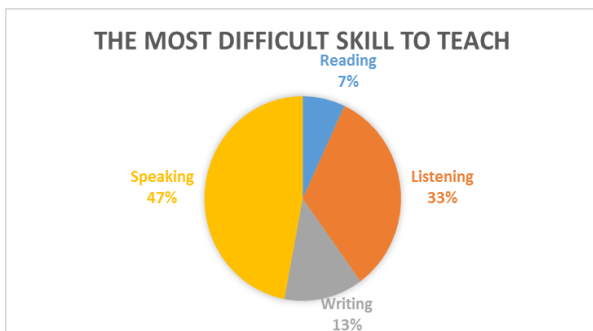

Figure 9. The most difficult skill to teach

The questions about the challenges of conducting distance learning received diverse answers from 15 teachers. Some key points were repeatedly mentioned during the interview. First of all, the interaction with learners was limited because of the learning program. Teachers explained that teachers have to mute all the learners during class time to avoid students' background noises. For that reason, what teachers can hear is a silent sound. The teacher cannot hear what the learners blurted out to predict learners' comprehension that the reason why teachers thought that virtual classroom is challenging to manage. Teachers are unable to recognize any problems from learners to improvise the lesson like in the face-to-face classroom. Second, interactive games to warm up the class atmosphere became impossible for online classrooms due to the devices' hindrance and geographical distance. The reason that made the class atmosphere boring was the lack of games and no response from learners. Learners tend to stay quiet because their

microphones were muted. They just unmuted themselves when there was something important to announce. Therefore, the silence during class was inevitable, which creates a lifeless class. Last but not least, the technical problem is one of the significant issues that teachers and learners confront during distance learning. The unstable internet connection, slow running program, and unfamiliar technical options may lead to unsatisfactory distance lessons. Moreover, these problems may consume more time to prepare the lesson than in the traditional classroom.

Although distance learning has many disadvantages, learning still benefits learners and teachers. According to teachers, the first and foremost advantage was that distance learning is able to prevent COVID19 from spreading. Moreover, distance learning may reduce the traveling time that teachers can devote more time to preparing the lesson to make it more effective.

Like the learners' survey, teachers' focus groups also suggested some solutions to improve distance learning. Teachers also expected that the interaction among learners and teachers could be promoted, while the quality of the image needs to be better for a well-managing class by seeing the learners clearly. Moreover, the internet connection should be fixed to help learners learn smoothly.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1. Research question 1: What are the challenges Ton Duc Thang University students and lecturers may face in distance learning and the ways they deal with those problems?

The findings indicated that teachers think that Speaking skill is the most difficult skill to teach, while learners considered Listening skill as the hardest. This dissimilarity is clearly explained that learners' listening problem comes from the unstable internet connection, whereas teachers found that learners are reluctant to speak through the computer where interaction through devices is limited. Both skills are challenging to teach and learn online, but the difference in perception of teacher and learners may tell that learner's attitude towards speaking is not positive no matter online learning or face-to-face learning. Learners are not confident in speaking skills, while poor internet connection and sound quality may worsen their pronunciation, which leads to a misunderstanding during speaking practice.

Some technical problems such as unstable internet connection or slow-running website are objective reasons that educators and researchers cannot solve these problems. However, how to increase the interaction among learners and the teacher is an issue that worth thinking about. The solution for this issue depends on the learning program developer. There should be a specialized app for distance learning in Vietnam that helps learners study online need to

improve that learners are able to speak with their friends during class time without disturbing the class the other friends by choosing a particular function or secretly ask the teachers without interrupting the lesson but not in message version. The mute and unmute button should also be redesigned to switch over and attract learners' attention easily.

The problem that learners were flooded with many learning materials is predictable. Teachers cannot explain the concept thoroughly due to the technical problem and interaction through devices so that learners are provided with more learning materials to read more and get the meaning themselves. This is a disadvantage but also an advantage for some reasons. At first, learners may find it impossible to swim in the material ocean given by teachers. However, after a period of time, when learners are familiar with those materials, they may find that they are autonomous to learn and eager to look up the information without teachers' help. Learners' learning autonomy was also enhanced thanks to distance learning. After all, distance learning is beneficial if learners and teachers have a positive attitude towards it and are willing to use distance learning as a tool to success, not an obstacle to blame for.

5.2. Research question 2: What do lecturers do to overcome the difficulties of distance learning?

Most teachers claimed that managing online class is more challenging and demanding due to the lack of interactive games and teacher-learner association. Interactive games may be a key to create an eager classroom, which is hindered during online learning. This difficulty may be dealt with the change in language teaching methodology and the learning apps such as Zoom. It is not to say that teachers discard interactive games during online learning. We can alter some games that are designed to play online that each learner can participate while they are at home. This solution needs support from the designers of the learning program.

In addition, the teaching approaches also need to adapt to the nature of online learning. Teachers can turn the disadvantage of limited interaction into online language learning strength. Learners are reluctant to speak through the screen due to Internet connection problems and incorrect pronunciation, which was exacerbated through the microphone. For that reason, the teaching approach that does not require learners to produce the structure during the practice stage should be employed. The approach that focuses on the input during instruction instead of output practice may solve the problem of limited speaking practice during distance learning. Among many approaches, Processing Instruction, which is based on VanPatten's principles of Input Processing, is suitable for distance learning. This approach allows learners to make form-meaning connections and push them to more optimal input processing strategies without producing during

instruction. The effect of this approach is determined by various studies (Benati, 2001; Cadierno, 1995; Lee and Benati, 2010; Farley, 2001; VanPatten & Cadierno, 1993; VanPatten, 2004, etc.) [2] [3] [4] [6] [11] [12]. The nature of Processing Instruction that learners are not required to produce the language during instruction luckily removes the disadvantage of distance learning. Processing Instruction may have an appropriate feature that enhances distance learning. A study that researches the effectiveness of Processing Instruction in distance learning is necessary for the future.

6. CONCLUSION

Learners in university context have experienced many difficulties in distance learning, while those difficulties are not really a problem for education system. For example, the problem of heavy workload may result in learner autonomy, which becomes an advantage of distance learning instead of drawback in the view of educator. Besides, many challenges that hinder learners from learning language affectively were empirical such as unstable Internet connection, technical problems, or sound and image quality. Teachers and education managers are unable to resolve those problems. However, the problem of lifeless and boring class atmosphere or learner distraction may come to grips with different types of instruction that are more appropriate to distance learning instead of bringing what teachers have done in face-to-face classroom to distance learning like what is happening. A type of grammar instruction that has many features for distance learning is Processing Instruction. The nature of unnecessary output practice of this type of instruction may benefit learners of distance learning. Further studies about this issue should be taken into consideration.

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