Tertiary Students' Perspectives on Online Learning During Emergency Remote Teaching in the Context of Covid-19: A Case Study

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ABSTRACT

In the midst of a global pandemic, educational institutions in Vietnam were forced to move all courses online. Under that circumstance, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is a conceivable alternative for onsite learning. This paper provides an insight into one specific case study of a university in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. The study employed a Likert scale survey, open-ended questions, and a semi-structured interview to examine undergraduate students' perspectives and their engagement (N = 255) in the context of ERT amid COVID-19. Our findings illustrated opportunities and obstacles entailing online video-conferencing lessons with multiple modalities in language teaching and learning. The results showed a rather skeptical view towards online language learning due to the lack of students - student and student-instructor interactions. The paper ends with some implications to improve students' engagement in distance teaching and learning context.

Keywords: Students' engagement, Emergency Remote Teaching, Interaction, and Distance education.

1. INTRODUCTION

When Covid-19 swept over Vietnam causing a disastrous impact on the entire socioeconomic and education system, the government decided to apply a social distancing policy which encouraged citizens to isolate themselves at home. Accordingly, the Ministry of Education had to switch to an alternative teaching mode and learning, turning to online to replace or supplement teaching in brick-and mortar schools. Under that circumstance, Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) [1] is regarded as the most suitable solution for the needed changes of all educational institutions. Yet, there are no clear and available guidelines for teaching content, suitable teaching approaches, and also the heavy workload for teachers and students, [2] and this temporary shift may not be applicable for the available framework for blended or online learning. In such a case, teachers tried their best to optimize current available teaching and learning resources as well as digital platforms to benefit students' learning outcomes. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that such sudden change absolutely causes a heavy burden on both learners and teachers. This also raised scholars' concern about the quality of learning outcome and challenges that teachers and students might encounter.

ERT was adopted to be the solution in such a pandemic; however, it is important to keep in mind that Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) is distinctive from online teaching due to the insufficiency in technologies, material, and teacher training. It is important to distinguish the two terms, which are currently used interchangeably in recently conducted papers in Vietnam. This research, therefore, helps to fill the gap in knowledge of ERT at the university level with insights from students' perspectives and provides empirical evidence to the existing literature about the influence of ERT on language teaching and learning.

For online learning to be effective, student-content, student-student, and student-instructor interactions are critical to maintain and foster [3]. As a result, to gain deep insight into students' perspectives of the academic achievement and limitations of ERT in language learning during the time of the pandemic, the authors conducted a case study with tertiary students with a focus on investigating students' engagement to understand existing opportunities and challenges. This study is one of the first investigations within the Vietnamese school system to capture students'

perspectives and experiences about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on school education.

With the aforementioned purpose, this paper was conducted to figure out answers for the following questions:

(1) How did *students view emergency remote teaching of language learning in the context of Covid-19?*

(2) What factors affected students' engagement in emergency remote teaching?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Online learning versus Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)

Online learning is believed to offer students all the perks of attending a training course, with the added convenience of a learning experience tailored to their schedule. The popular activities in online learning systems include participating in discussion forums, watching videos of tutorials or lectures, reading materials posted by lecturers, submitting homework, taking tests, or doing language practices. Some researchers argue that online learning can provide individualized and differentiated instruction [4] through multiple mechanisms that provide immediate formative feedback about a student's performance [5] or through modularized content that enables learning the same content at a different pace or achieving different learning goals.

As reported by U.S department of education, online learning has become popular because of its perceived potential to provide more flexible access to content and instruction by:

· increasing the availability of learning experiences for those who cannot or choose not to attend traditional schools, and

· assembling and disseminating instructional content more efficiently, and

· increasing student-instructor ratios while achieving learning outcomes equal to those of traditional classroom instruction.

While online learning is regarded as the approach that benefits both learners and teachers in the era of digital development, emergency remote teaching (ERT) is the conceivable solution for the situation of the Covid-19 outbreak, which caused global citizens to enforce widespread community and school closures [6].

There is a significant difference between online learning and ERT caused by the fact that some universities cannot opt for a sudden paradigm shift due to unforeseen constraints on the educational adaptation to digital. ERT should be considered a temporary solution to an immediate problem [7]. ERT has the primary objective of providing instructional support that is reliable but easy to create in the time of the crisis [1],

contrary to a regular and comprehensive online learning curriculum that will take long months before it can fulfill the scholastic endeavors of the students during the pandemic [8].

In short, having ERT concept in mind is an opportunity to divert responsiveness for the students in the virtual world and institute a system to discuss real-life lessons though freestyle and unstructured due to the ongoing suspension.

2.2. Online versus Offline language teaching and learning

There has been a growing interest in the delivery of language courses online worldwide. Computer-assisted learning has created greater opportunities and challenges for both students and teachers. In language teaching and learning, the use of audio- and video-conferencing has made it possible for students and their tutors to meet virtually, to interact in real-time over a distance. Videoconferencing can be defined as synchronous audio and video communication through computer or telephone networks between two or more geographically dispersed sites [9]. Web-conferencing software is often incorporated with collaborative features, including screen sharing, whiteboards, digital pens as ways for students to engage with the course content and audio, video, text chats, breakout rooms for students to interact with peers and the instructor [10]. These special features may account for overall better student engagement. [11] note that "studies that investigated students' perception and evaluation of CALL materials mostly indicate positive outcomes" (pp. 222–223).

Long-standing problems in distance education have been well documented [12]. The first one is that technological problems, including time lags and poor connection, often lead to the reduction of two-/three-way communication [8]. The distortion of audio and video signal pose an impact on turn-taking and leave students involved in online collaborative learning the feeling of frustration [13], or a lost feeling among themselves and the rest of the class or the flow of the lesson [14]. Technological problems often lead to diminished interaction as [15] recorded a greater number of long nomological turns in online lessons. Teachers found it difficult to facilitate interaction and collaborative learning. Another important area that has emerged in recent years is the role of content (instructional materials) in online courses, and that content design should be paid more attention to ensure the effectiveness of online learning [16].

In online lessons without a learning management system (LMS), individual websites and technologies are also incorporated to aid learning. These include the use of social networking sites, blogs, wikis, and digital games. Studies on blogs and digital games blogs show consistently positive findings. Wikis offer mixed results, with some showing very little enduring participation and another showing active participation [10]

Research concerning the effect of computer-mediated communication (CMC) suggests that its use can best assist self-study [17]. Students found online learning to be helpful as they could pause the recordings and learn the material at their own pace. Participants in [17]'s study also regarded Zoom as an effective tool to develop learner autonomy, and the application created an authentic language experience. However, the study also concluded that student interaction and engagement were dependent on the language level. [18] studied students' perspectives on technology-enhanced class in general and CMC in specific and found out that the majority of participants enjoyed the experience; however, the students themselves were skeptical about the effectiveness of this mode of study. Another study that worked on three types of teaching and learning: online, offline, and blended-learning concluded that students' performances were roughly the same across three teaching modalities, yet, students' preference over the traditional face-to-face learning teaching modality was reported as "an imperative part in their learning experience" [19]. This result is supported by another study by [20] in which outcomes of online and offline courses were reported to be similar. Other types of ICT that are often incorporated to support collaboration are also reviewed. The discussion board namely Padlet showed effectiveness in enhancing student engagement [21], social networking sites such as Facebook were also found to improve student engagement [22].

The learning of foreign languages through distance learning has always presented many challenges regarding lower quality of interaction [23]. Although these e-learning platforms already had a teacher-student and student-student interaction application by which teachers and students can send messages to each other, teachers and students hardly used them. Students just do self-study passively without teachers' or their classmates' feedback. [24] 's research also reported that students of mixed abilities showed less collaborative learning activities in online learning backgrounds.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

Participants in the study were 255 first, second and third-year students majoring in Business Administration, Finance and International Trade from Foreign Trade University, Ho Chi Minh City campus, with 54.7% freshmen, 16.8% sophomores, and 28.5% juniors. Students were free to choose whether to complete the questionnaire and to join the interview after the academic researchers explained to them the purpose of the study. Therefore, the 255 participants all voluntarily took part in the research.

3.2. Instruments

The framework for gathering the research data was mixed mode, based on the use of online questionnaires for quantitative data and interviews for qualitative data.

The first three questions collected demographic information, including students' current academic year, prior experience with distance learning, and technological applications used in online language learning during the ERT. The next two were 1-to-5 Likert scale questions to deploy students' preference of online or offline learning and students' perceived effectiveness of online learning compared to language learning in traditional classrooms. At the end, there were open-ended questions for students to give their opinions anonymously on their preferences and constraints about lessons during the ERT.

After the questionnaires, students who agreed to join the interview participated in a semi-structured group discussion with the researchers to investigate their opportunities and constraints during ERT. The transcript was later coded and grouped into themes to help explain the research questions.

3.4. Data collection and data analysis

The outbreak happened immediately after the national lunar new year, while all students, lecturers, and staff were back at their hometown. After the shutdown announcement of MOET in February the Third, the university took another two weeks to react and announce Emergency Remote Teaching for all subjects. ERT was implemented from 23 February to 15 May, 2020. On average, students received ten language lessons during a period of two months and a half. Once the school was opened and all classes resumed, the researchers delivered the questionnaires and started the data collection process.

Responses were collected digitally and saved automatically in .csv format with Google Form. The file was converted to .xlsx. The cleaning and formatting of the data were done in an Excel document. The survey used the Likert scale, strongly disagree, disagree, neutral, agree, strongly agree, and the Likert scale was converted from 1 to 5. After converting the Likert Scale from text to numbers, different frequencies on variables were calculated in Excel.

4. FINDINGS

Research question 1: How did students view emergency remote teaching for language learning in the context of Covid-19?

The first research question asked whether participants had had any experience with online language learning before. Results from the survey demonstrated that almost all students (98.6%) had had no experience with online language learning prior to ERT. Only three out of 255 students participated in an online course before.

The second survey question about the types of technology used by students has revealed a wide range of different digital and interactive platforms incorporated in the lessons. Nearly all students had experience with web

conferencing (98.1%), including Zoom and Microsoft Meet as the main platforms for communication and scheduled teaching sessions. This was followed by social networking sites (81.3%), digital games (47.5%), and blogs (35.7%).

The next two questions concerned students' preference and perceived effectiveness of ERT of language classes in comparison with traditional offline classes. When considering overall preference, more than half of the participants (53.7%) expressed their interest in the traditional mode of language learning (Mean = 3.48, SD = 1.20). Regarding perceived effectiveness, participants showed their skepticism towards the effectiveness of learning a language online. However, a positive view can be seen with a mean of 3.33 (SD = 1.09). It is important to note that a large number of students (34.9%) chose the neutral option, which can be understood that these students were indecisive about the answer to the question.
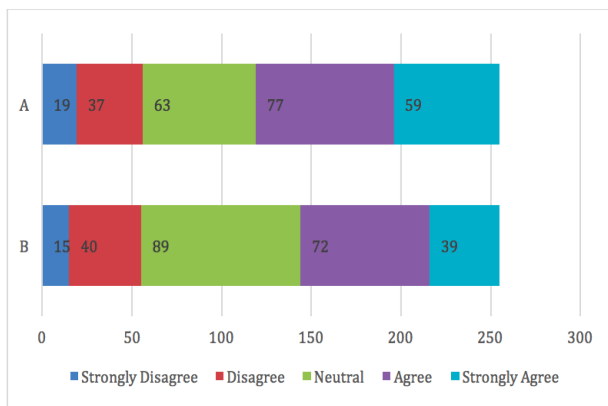
[A] I would rather take traditional offline classes than Emergency Remote Teaching for language classes.

[B] Learning English in ERT is as effective as learning English in traditional offline classes.

Chart 1: Quantitative result for survey questions

In the qualitative data, students provided explanations for the rating of their choices. They emphasized on the convenience of online learning mode, which allows them to save time on commuting, learn regardless of time and space, and access learning materials easily.

. Students' overall perceptions include the following comments:

"I think we should encourage online learning because it saves a great amount of time, opportunity cost while generating the same amount of effectiveness."

On the other hand, the study subjects also commented on the distractions and lack of interaction or motivation. The interaction among peers and between students and instructors was the most complained issue, and this is the main reason why some students disregarded online language learning.

"Learning online makes me less focused on my studying because there are so many things that distract me easily."

"I don't have many chances to ask the teacher what I don't understand."

"Hardly learn anything."

"I can sleep whenever."

An interesting viewpoint could be the changing attitudes towards online learning. Some showed confusion and frustrations on technology use at the beginning but later grew interested. Shortfalls of digital readiness and unprecedented experience can be used to explain this phenomenon. During ERT, students were forced into an unexpected and unprepared situation. They were not yet in the right mind to learn and/or had reliable devices or necessary skills for switching all lessons into online mode. Yet, some showed their tolerance of emergency remote learning as an unavoidable solution. However, they still highlighted their preference of offline learning mode as follow:

"Quite strange to me, but it is interesting. I can raise hand actively."

"At first, I am not really interested in it, but after some online lessons, I found it more convenient and got used to it."

In general, a large number of participants claimed their preference for ERT because of its convenience, flexibility, easy access to learning materials, and anonymity. Yet, the effectiveness of ERT was questionable due to the lack of interaction and engagement.

Research question 2: What factors affect students' engagement in online lessons during ERT?

Factor 1: Technology

Some students acknowledged the benefits of online learning, including easy access to materials, the fact that they can record and re-watch the lessons at any time, note-taking on the computer as well as flexibility in time and place.

"I can get access to the class material easily. I can take quick notes on my laptop and also re-watch the records to review the lessons.'

On the opposite side, some students reported weak connections that led to the time lag, and distortion of audio and video was the main culprit of their low engagement. This phenomenon reflected inequalities that are often reported regarding online courses (UNESCO, 2020). Students in rural areas might encounter unreliable Internet connections more often. Regarding this issue, further investigation needs to be done and could not be covered within the scope of our study.

" I cannot hear clearly, cannot correct pronunciation, cannot communicate with the group in a short time when

the Internet is lagging, and there is too much noise from the teacher's background."

Another major theme regarded e-pedagogy. A student stated the fact that procedures of online learning were not different from how it was often taken offline. Instead of answering questions on a paper, they would now do it within Google form. This can be understood that during ERT, language teaching only changed in the mode, not in the pedagogy or methodology.

A student commented on some online substitutions of class activities. When the student explained the use of Padlet in-class discussion, he also commented: *"(Padlet) is an interesting way to gather information online from all students; however, most opinions are the same, so too much doesn't really work, I don't read all of them."*

In this transition to ERT, despite some obvious benefits of online learning, the interview revealed a major deficiency in digital literacy and digital readiness from both teachers and students. Both parties were forced into a previously unencountered situation and under-prepared for the short period of online language teaching and learning.

Factor 2: Motivation/ Distraction

Students acknowledged the anonymity of online learning, and some actually appreciated it. Students commented that they felt more comfortable raising their voice, as commented:

"I feel more confident to speak up than in normal classes."

"I feel closer to the teacher because I can hear her voice clearer."

Yet, the Internet and the immediate surrounding were both sources of distractions. Students admitted the presence of other devices such as televisions or mobile phones, as well as applications, namely instant messaging or mobile games. Also, learning environments at home interfered with the full participation of learners.

Students reported a lack of social engagement opportunities during ERT lessons. They often felt isolated and had no sense of community, which affected their motivation to learn. Being unprepared or underprepared in such a crisis also led to negative emotions such as anxiety and worry.

"I feel lonely and isolated. I often practice speaking with my desk mate, but during ERT, we only chat."

"We are asked to discuss in a group of three or four, but I don't feel like talking because I cannot see my friends' faces."

"Once, my micro didn't work, and the teacher "cold called" and asked me to answer the question. I was really scared because I don't want to get bad marks."

Finally, technological barriers themselves, including adequate devices and reliable Internet connection, during ERT were significant for students to keep continuing attention to the lessons.

"Some online presentations have really bad quality. Maybe my classmates' devices are not good enough, and that makes her presentation boring."

In sum, a few students shared their strengthened motivation to learn during emergency remote teaching and learning. The results also uncovered a lack of social engagement opportunities and inadequate devices that led to negative experiences and challenges as well as distraction and low motivation.

Factor 3: Interaction

Most negative comments from students came from the scarcity of student-student and student-instructor engagement. The major culprit might be the lack of a working learning management system (LMS). Applications like Zoom or Google Meet did not support functions such as break-out rooms or discussion boards for remote group work. Students often "chatted" rather than "discussed" to complete the assignment. The lack of one single platform for teaching and learning also led to the incorporation of too many applications. One language class might need a Zoom application for video conferencing, a Google classroom or Facebook group for out-of-class notice or assignments, digital games or blogs for class activities, and Facebook group chat/call for group meetings. Students found it confusing and troublesome.

"I have to open too many tabs, and it is easy to make mistakes."

"Instead of talking to my desk mates, we often chatted, divided the assignment into smaller tasks, and did it individually."

"I completed all the assignments, but I didn't really talk to my classmates. "

The majority of participants claimed technical issues as the dominant factor that demotivated their learning motivation. Time lags and poor Internet connection led to distortion and misunderstanding, which reduced engagement between students and instructors. Also, since not every student possessed a working webcam or mic, two or three-way communication was discouraged.

5. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this paper, the authors focused solely on investigating students' perspectives towards ERT approach. The findings of this paper revealed the majority of participants showed their preference for offline learning over ERT. Among them, some claimed that they tolerated ERT implementation for other subjects but not English because they believed that interaction was of the utmost importance in language acquisition.

Noticeably, this finding is vividly in agreement with the one claimed by [25]. In their paper, they used a mixed explanatory method with an online survey on students from a university in China. The study has emphasized that in language classrooms, students share more moments to have interaction with their teachers or their classmates. However, this feature does not appear on the agenda of an emergency remote teaching in spite of the affordability of online platforms. The finding was also restated in another paper which was conducted in the same year by [26] in which they used an online survey which had been modified from the version by Bernard, Brauer, Abrami and Surkes (2004), to collect data about the attitudes of higher education students in Pakistan regarding online learning. The subjects in the research paper even stated that traditional classroom learning was more effective as compared to online learning or distance education because they preferred "proper interaction and contact with students and instructors". Thus, it can be concluded that to help students have a positive experience with their ERT learning in the language class, and the instructors are supposed to seriously consider their teaching pedagogy which prioritizes interactions among students, students, and teachers during class time.

Regarding the factors impacting on students' engagement in their language learning, digital readiness is noticeably highlighted. The subjects reported that they were reluctant to adapt to ERT at the first stage, then they gradually felt more comfortable. This fact could be explained for some reasons. Firstly, it is given that Vietnam is one of the low and middle-income countries (Data for Vietnam) [27], online education remains unfamiliar and challenging to both teachers and students in general [28]. Thus, apparently, many of those who had no experience in online learning mode was vulnerable to have learning motivation waning.

Secondly, to cope with the hard-hit of Covid 19 pandemic, school suspension was unexpectedly in practice, leading to the circumstance that learners and educators had no time to prepare for that shift. Therefore, it is understandable that digital readiness is one of the main factors that hinder students' learning engagement. To tackle that problem, it is necessary to equip learners with knowledge of digital literacy to be well-prepared for similar circumstances in the future.

One more concerning the finding of this study arose from the lack of a sense of community. As claimed by the study subjects, they enunciated a great need to stay connected as a whole learning community. This issue was aligned with the findings of [29] when he pointed out some negative emotions due to being isolated and learning remotely. The organic nature of human beings is a sense of belonging which interrelates to socio-emotional feeling. As such, learners needed to see themselves as parts of a specific learning community, and school settings are not a mere physical space but a social hub of human interactions and connections that are essential to learning and development (UNESCO 2020c). This is the reason why the necessity of addressing the importance of building and maintaining a strong community to enhance students' learning quality is emphasized. In sum, the significance of incorporating social engagement and facilitating the sense of community in the ERT environment should not be underestimated [30].

6. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that students' perspectives on ERT implementation were paradoxical as they showed both positive and negative views. The Covid 19 outbreak has challenged the whole education system to adapt to unexpected situations without much preparation. It is important for all parties - institutions, teachers, and students to get prepared for the uncertain future. To get that intention in practice, institutions should pay concentrated attention to establish a working learning management system with quality training sessions to teach online. For teachers, before a more systematic administration, teachers had better get ready by equipping themselves with knowledge and skills regarding e-pedagogy. In this specific field of student engagement, it is advisable that well-established technologies to give prompt feedback are essential to foster student-instructor engagement; meanwhile, additional applications such as social network sites and discussion boards can help aid communication and group work.

In the long run, a feasible strategy for hybrid learning which is a mixture of both online and face-to-face learning, is in need to improve learners' interaction and practices to better their learning outcome.

To some extent, this study's findings cannot be generalized because of convenience sampling and a relatively small sample size. Furthermore, the setting is in a university in Vietnam only with a context of second language learning. More research involving more students from various universities should be initiated. It would also be useful to gain insights from lecturers and students at different levels of education.

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