Information Technology in Online English Classes: An Opportunity or a Challenge

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to evaluate teaching and learning online strengths and limitations so that there are reforms, updates, and improvements for it. Internet and information technology have changed the way of teaching and learning in general, from teaching methods to giving lessons and tests. Especially during the time of social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic, most universities in Vietnam and around the world choose to teach and learn online. Teachers and students do not have to go to school or class; teaching and learning take place at home, in isolated places, etc., or anywhere convenient and safe for health. With the widely-applied online teaching and learning model, it is necessary to have studies to evaluate its strengths and limitations so that there are reforms, updates, and improvements for it. In this study, the author will survey the application of information technology in teaching and learning foreign languages online by students and lecturers of the Universities in Khanh Hoa province through a questionnaire for lecturers and students and face-to-face interviews to find out the advantages and disadvantages of this teaching and learning method, thereby promoting the benefits and overcoming the drawbacks of this method.

Keywords: online teaching and learning; Information Technology; Covid-19, pandemic; Khanh Hoa province.

1. INTRODUCTION

During the Covid-19 pandemic, not only economic activities and tourism were halted, but even educational activities were affected. Many cities and regions around the world have issued social distancing orders. Pupils can't go to schools; students can't go to lecture halls. Universities in Vietnam in particular and in the world in general, with a proactive spirit to limit the impact of the epidemic, have planned to teach online with Microsoft Teams or Zoom.us or Google Meet applications. Thanks to these tools, teaching and learning in schools are still going on. This is an opportunity as well as a challenge for all lecturers and students of universities when for the first time, the whole university simultaneously teaches online for all subjects, including learning foreign languages. After nearly a year of conducting online teaching, I have observed the advantages and disadvantages of online teaching of foreign language learning, so I have conducted this study to clarify the effectiveness of applying technology in learning foreign languages online and propose some solutions.

Despite realizing the advantages of online teaching, for many reasons, universities have not yet widely implemented online teaching and learning activities. Since the Covid-19 epidemic began appearing in 2019, many activities have changed: from the economy, society to education. The Covid-19 pandemic has occurred in all countries around the world, making online classes the first choice for teachers and learners. The social distancing to ensure the safety of people during the Covid-19 pandemic has caused a disturbance in the classroom situation. Most colleges and universities choose to study online through platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom.us, Microsoft Teams, etc. “Online classes” have now become common phrases in education and are not strange to the students. Online teaching will be somewhat different from classroom teaching. The way of communication between lecturers and students and the way of imparting knowledge and assigning assignments as well as classroom activities to support the lecture are also completely different. Many technology tools are used to serve the needs of teaching and learning subjects, especially with foreign language classes. It not only stimulates learners’ interest in lectures but also helps learners to interact in class. However, the use of technology tools by teachers through online platforms has advantages and
disadvantages. This study will examine the online students at universities in Khanh Hoa province to see the advantages and limitations of online teaching and learning, thereby proposing solutions.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Due to the strong development of digital technology, universities in many countries have been shifting from traditional classrooms to other forms of learning that can be listed as fully online classes (fully online), blended online and traditional classes, or web-based ones. Online classes like these have created many opportunities as well as challenges for educators and researchers. Online teaching also offers many learning opportunities for students outside of the classroom, outside of regular school hours, even online learning is preferred by students to the traditional ones, and students even say that they spend more time studying in online classrooms because it has difficulty and quality sometimes even higher than the traditional classroom (Hannay & Newvine, 2006 [9]).

Studies also show that the application of interactive teaching at the university level has brought positive results. Classes that incorporate interactive learning have promoted intensive, meaningful, critical, and high-level learning (Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia & Jones, 2009 [1]).

However, online teaching (OT) also faces many challenges. One of them is the lack of face-to-face contact between learners and teachers. This is an important factor of success in interactive teaching (Hughes, 2007 [2]). Previous studies have shown that teacher communication supports learner performance (Zhao, Lei, Yan, Lai, & Tan, 2005 [16]) and that learner engagement increases with the involvement of learners. Communication channels between learners and learners, and between learners and teachers (Dixson, 2010 [8]). In addition, time, workload, technical equipment, and support from management levels are also major obstacles (Nelson & Thompson, 2005 [15]). Specialized faculties also face many difficulties in developing interactive teaching programs and believe that interactive teaching consumes a lot of labor time, and interactive teaching is much more difficult than traditional teaching (Gerlich, 2005 [12]).

2.1 Research Questions

To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey sought to answer the following research questions:

1. There are a number of factors affecting the application of information technology in teaching and learning foreign languages online.
2. Teachers and students have some difficulties in applying information technology teaching and learning of English for major language

3. METHODS

3.1 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The study was conducted in English language classes at Khanh Hoa University and Nha Trang University, with about 1000 students majoring in English who are students from year 1 to year 4. Due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, students had three online periods for all English modules.

The students all learned the modules of listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar. Among them, the author randomly selected 391 students to conduct the survey. Khanh Hoa University has used the Microsoft Teams platform to teach online for students of all grades, while Nha Trang University used Zooms.us and Google Meet.

3.2 Design of the Study

After 3 sessions of online learning by students in 2020-2021, the author conducted an effective assessment through observation, interview, investigation with a survey, and drawing some conclusions.

The author conducted a random survey for students of English majors from year 1 to year 4. Survey for 391 over 1000 students aged 18-22 and 34 English teachers of Faculty of Foreign Languages of the two universities, with 25 lecturers from 30-40 years old, 07 lecturers aged 40-50, and 02 lecturers over 50 years old.

3.3 Data collection & analysis

The author used the questionnaire to survey the learning and teaching online of students and teachers, these questionnaires are designed on Google Form, and this link was sent to students and lecturers via email and Zalo, a social network. Then I collected data.

The interview method is used to interview students and lecturers to clarify what the questionnaire has not shown, such as the reasons for an action, what the interviewers think about it, and so on.

From the survey charts and answers in the author's interviews, there was a comparison, analysis, and synthesis of ideas related to the content of the article.

In addition, the author studied related documents, books, journals, etc., to clarify the issues of online teaching and learning, synthesize the theories and
ideas on the issue of online teaching and learning in writing in the country and the world.

3.4 Limitation

Although there have been efforts in synthesizing the data, this study was only carried out in a rather small area of Vietnam, a province out of 63, so the number of samples of the study is not many.

Khanh Hoa is a province with a lot of tourism development, so the economy here is quite developed, compared to cities like Hanoi and Saigon and neighboring areas like Phu Yen and Binh Dinh province. Therefore, foreign language learning and teaching play an important role in the overall development strategy of Khanh Hoa province, especially during the Covid pandemic.

In my future studies, I will do more researches on effective methods and new information technology tools that can be used on teaching and learning foreign languages online for undergraduate students, and I am also researching the points of view of university lecturers on the ideal environment to teach online, and about the management or regulations that need to be set before teaching and learning online to create discipline and efficiency in the classroom.

This study is just the first step in long research, and hopefully, there will be more in-depth research in the future.

4. RESULTS/FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Survey results for students

The results of the survey are as follows:

And in Figure 2, about one-fifth of students, when studying online, use computers (including desktops and laptops) (about 20%), followed by phones accounting for nearly a half, specifically 46.3%. A third of students, 33.9%, use both phones and computers when studying online.

Figure 2: Devices students use to study online

Most students have internet access to study online. In which, 4 out of 391 students interviewed do not have an Internet connection, accounting for 1.1% of students. Most of the students' families have internet access (79.3%), the rest, about 11%, used Internet from the Internet of neighbors, schools or restaurants, bars, cafes, etc.

Figure 3: Percentage of students who has internet access

In general, the online study place of students is quiet (accounting for ¾ or 72.6% (however, about a quarter of students do not have a quiet place to study. Through face-to-face interviews, the reason is revealed. It is because of family members, neighbors with daily communication activities causing noise; this number accounts for about 27.4%.

Figure 1: Places of accommodation of students

As can be seen in Figure 1, about a third of university students live with their families, accounting for 37.6%, and nearly a half (47.6 percent) stay in hostels, the rest rent accommodation in dormitories (14.8%)
Most of the students are good at information technology tools that teachers use when giving assignments, accounting for about 4/5 of 81.4%, while about one-fifth of students have difficulty in using information tools when doing online assignments. This number of students accounts for about 18%.

About a half of students do not have enough knowledge and do not know how to handle technology devices (tablets, mobile phones, laptops, etc.) when problems occur during online learning, such as electrical problems. When being interviewed directly, the students mentioned the problems with their computers or mobile phones. Because these devices are relatively new so they take students a lot of time to get acquainted. Some students said that because of the online instruction from the lecturer is not clear enough and the weak network, they could not access the tool right away.

In general, the number of students having problems while studying online is quite a lot because the internet infrastructure is not strong enough for quick access. Most of the students come from small communes with weak networks, and many of them use mobile phones with 3G to access the Internet, so the quality is not as good as using a computer with a wifi connection directly plugged into the device. Another reason is that many students use old phones (used ones or second-hand ones which are no longer good) so the wifi reception is not good.

When asked if they like learning online, more than half (54.1%) of students like it, and 45.9% don’t like it. When interviewed, the students said that they like it because they can study at home, they don’t have to spend much time going to and back from school. Many students live far away, such as in outskirt or remote areas, so it will be very convenient for them to study at home without spending hours in traffic. Many students said that when learning online, they can choose a study space according to their interests and feel comfortable without being directly reminded by teachers and classmates. However, some students do not like it for some reasons, including that they prefer to study at school because they can meet friends and teachers can explain and share knowledge with them. And other reasons are when they study at home, parents often ask them to do housework, or they forget the time to study online, or the electric power goes out, or there is no wifi network at their place, etc. However, the student is very conscious to learn (open online classes on time, but due to wifi and electrical problems, they may be 30 minutes late for class or may not be able to attend class. They don't enjoy studying online because their families do not afford to buy computers for them to do exercises and submit assignments online. They often borrow computers from friends and relatives. Some of them study online with mobile phones. So after 3 to 5 class periods, they had a headache or backache or sore eyes.

When students were asked whether they like teachers to use information technology tools in online teaching, more than three-quarters of students (77%) like about 20% of students slightly liked and 3% of students disliked it.
When asked about information technology tools that teachers use in class, a large number of students answer Kahoot! accounts for nearly 42.2%, followed by Google Docs with about 40%, and Padlet, Bamboozle, and Mentimeter accounts for a small percentage (7%, 6.7%, and 4.3%, respectively).

Figure 7: Percentage of IT tools used to teach online

The majority of students are satisfied when teachers use information technology applications in online teaching (95%), and only 5% of students are not satisfied.

Figure 8: Percentage of students satisfied with the IT tools in teaching

All of the students surveyed said that the amount of time using information technology in a teaching session should be limited. Students think that the time teachers spend using information technology tools in online classes should be 20-30 minutes, accounting for about ¾ (72%).

Figure 9: The amount of time to use IT tools in teaching

Through the survey, the students said that among the English skills, the students' listening and vocabulary skills are said to have improved. Meanwhile, speaking and writing skills account for the lowest percentage (less than 5%). When asked about what students like the most about using information technology in teaching, the answer is fun (accounting for 59%), getting new knowledge, working with friends, and earning a bonus (with the percentage of 54%, 32%, and 33%).

Figure 10: The skills and language aspects of students improved by using IT tools in teaching

4.2 Survey results for teachers

Out of 34 teachers surveyed, about half of teachers prefer teaching online. And about the other half of teachers do not like it. When being interviewed, they suggested many reasons for it: failure in internet access, difficulties in managing students, bad interaction between students and lecturers, etc.

Figure 11: Percentage of lecturers who like teaching online

There are a lot of lecturers who prefer using technology applications for online teaching. This number is 96%, and just a few lecturers do not like technology applications in teaching (accounting for 4%).
A majority of interviewed lecturers said that technology applications should be used in teaching English. Besides, more than three-quarters of the lecturers (85.3%) said that the duration of using information technology tools should be from 20-30 minutes. However, about one-tenth of the lecturers (11.8%) think it should be 60 minutes, and a minority of lecturers think it should be 10 minutes.

All lecturers apply IT tools to teach online. About 68% of lecturers regularly use technology tools in online teaching, and only 38% of lecturers regularly use them. The number of lecturers who do not regularly use technology tools online is a tenth.

Regarding the type of information technology tools used in teaching foreign languages, the lecturers said that Kahoot! should be used a lot in teaching (nearly 70%) while Google Docs and Quizlet are about 44% and 28%, respectively. The rest are other types of tools such as Socrative and Padlet.

When asked about foreign language skills and knowledge that information technology tools improve, about three-fourths of lecturers agree with listening skills. And about 50% of the teachers agree it improve grammar and vocabulary. The other skills such asSpeaking and writing have a considerable percentage.
As for the difficulties that teachers face when using information technology tools, including the failure of the Internet makes the sound and the view bad (account for 79.4%), which is much higher than others such as not managing students and less time to spend on preparing lessons (which is 17.6% and 32.4% respectively).

4.3 Comments

Through the survey on the issue of using technology tools in teaching and learning foreign languages online, the author has some comments as follows:

Firstly, the majority of students study online using computers and mobile phones. Studying online for a long time on the phone with a small screen and low sound will lose the effectiveness of the lesson, making students more tired because they have to "align their ears to hear" and "strain their eyes to see." This will greatly affect their health and learning outcomes if they study for a long time. Meanwhile, some teachers do not like to teach online for many reasons, including reasons for the health of all students. However, 100% of foreign language teachers think that teachers should use technology applications in teaching English.

Secondly, about 15% of students do not have wifi to study because they live in remote districts. Therefore, these children all want to study in class.

Thirdly, about a quarter of students have a quiet place to study, and nearly 50% of students do not know how to handle information technology tools when having problems, so about 30% of university students don't like online learning.

Fourthly, a majority of students agree that the technology tool which is mostly used in teaching is Kahoot!. In the second place is Google Docs. Meanwhile, the lecturers said that Google Docs used the most, accounting for nearly 70%, but Kahoot! It is only ranked 3rd, accounting for nearly 50%.

Fifthly, the majority of students are satisfied when lecturers use information technology applications in online teaching. Meanwhile, on the lecturer side, more than 50% of lecturers said that they do not often use technology in online teaching. However, 100% of lecturers agree with the use of information technology tools to help convey foreign language knowledge better.

Sixthly, the number of students who think that the time teachers use information technology tools in online classes is 30 minutes, accounting for the highest number, 20 minutes ranked second. Meanwhile, a large number of lecturers think that the teaching time should be limited to 30 minutes, accounting for 50%, and 20 minutes and 60 minutes accounting for 21.4%. Most instructors think it is best to use information technology tools in class.

When asked about satisfaction with the use of information technology tools in foreign language teaching, all lecturers are satisfied with the use of information technology tools to help impart knowledge.

Seventhly, among English aspects, students' listening and vocabulary are said to have improved. Meanwhile, speaking and writing skills account for the lowest percentage. For teachers, the majority think that students improve vocabulary the most, followed by listening skills. Writing and reading skills make up only a small part of that while speaking skills are not developed.

Eighthly, the reason why students like to use information technology in teaching is fun (35%), the rest is to gain new knowledge and work with friends and get the bonus (with 25%, 20% and 20% respectively).

There are some difficulties for lecturers.

Firstly, the facilities and facilities are not enough to achieve the desired effect. The speed of internet access from students is poor, and they are online by phone for too long, which is not good for their health, and the interaction with teachers is not high.

Secondly, the class size is large. Teachers cannot observe the class, so they have little control over learners' reactions.

Thirdly, lecturers prepare a lot of lessons. It takes time to prepare the lesson on PowerPoint, and sometimes the students do not interact well with the lesson.

Fourthly, the learning environment is not as similar as a classroom, such as noise when students
open the microphone, some students dare not open the camera when they are studying. There are students who turn off the camera to do other things such as sleeping, eating, or playing games.

Fifthly, students do not regularly interact with group members. And the interaction between lecturers and students is sometimes only one-way; that is, only the lecturer speaks, and the students listen. Although teachers use applications such as groups, the operation takes time. Many students do not voluntarily participate in lessons, do their own work, etc. Students are more passive than studying in class.

Sixthly, the time for teaching online is too much. A class (2 periods) takes 100 minutes, and if a teacher teaches two classes, he/she has to sit and look at the screen all morning and sometimes all day if he/she teaches 3 or 4 classes, his/her health will be affected.

With the lecturers themselves, the author found that after conducting the survey, the author also found some negatives of online learning. Some students cheat during their studies. Students also copy their work while doing the homework or ask someone else to do it for them. Some students, when studying online, have not actively participated in activities but only focused on social networks such as Zalo, Facebook, Youtube, etc., making it difficult for teachers to manage their classes.

4.4 Some solutions to promote the effectiveness of the application of technology tools in foreign language teaching.

The use of technology tools helps teachers teach better; students are more interested in learning. Technology tools are suitable for online form; after each lesson, teachers can design review lessons through technology tools such as Kahoot!, Bamboozle, Quizlet, Quizzes, etc., to review and create a fun atmosphere through online games.

However, the quality of the Internet is not good enough; students can't hear clearly because they have headaches, earaches, and eye pains due to studying for too long and looking at computer and phone screens too much. Other reasons such as noisy surroundings or external factors make online learning difficult to focus on, interaction and exchange between lecturers and students are limited, leading to boring learning. In addition, this form of learning has some difficulties, such as using a phone, so operations are limited, looking at slides and watching videos is not clear, cannot open large exercise files; not used to online group study.

With that particular nature, it is possible to point out some solutions to promote the effectiveness of the application of technological tools in foreign language teaching.

Firstly, for the effective use of online teaching technology tools, teachers - learners must be well aware of the role, position, and meaning of online teaching for the future. There should be content preparation and determination in action for an asynchronous and highly effective approach. Preparing lessons on technology tools requires lecturers to design lessons themselves and choose questions to suit the lecture and students' level.

The second is the issue of information technology - telecommunications infrastructure, internet connection, teaching equipment (smartphones, computers, laptops, tablets...), and conditions. External circumstances such as light, noise, teaching-learning environment, etc., also play a particularly important role for online learning in general.

Thirdly, lecturers and students must always update their knowledge and skills in using and applying information technology tools and skills in searching documents as well as ensuring network information security. A large number of teachers and students are still confused about technology causing many difficulties for teaching and learning foreign languages online.

Fourthly, teachers should establish rules and regulations to run online classes. Because of the specificity of indirect teaching, regulations such as maintaining classroom order, asking permission to go out, the language of communication, monitoring learning attitudes, turning off the microphone when the lecturer gives a lecture and when having the permission of the lecturer, the student will turn on the microphone to speak. This depends a lot on the sense of self-discipline, independence, the desire of the learners, as well as the reputation of the teacher.

Fifthly, teachers should hone and update their lecture design techniques, their pedagogical art and understand supporting technology tools to give lectures, make exercises, test lessons, and help students feel more comfortable when studying online. Accordingly, online teaching puts new requirements on teachers from preparing lessons, guiding learning styles, designing test-assessment tools, and inspiring learning with new experiences, avoiding boredom and monotony for learners.
5. CONCLUSION

It can be said that online training is an inevitable development trend in the field of education and training not only in Vietnam but all over the world. In addition to the goal of socializing learning, online training also helps to solve learning needs and many difficult problems when learners can learn anytime, anywhere. This is something that traditional educational methods do not have.

Through the above survey, it is found that the majority of lecturers and students prefer to teach and learn online with technology tools. Besides, this study helps to see that online learning has advantages and disadvantages for lecturers and students. For teachers, it is safe during the epidemic season because they do not have to travel long distances to school and are able to use applications available on the Internet to teach, create fun lectures and exercises to help students learn more, study more. And one of the best advantages of online learning for students is to limit the infection during the epidemic season. Both lecturers and students do not travel long distances but still communicate with each other quite well.

And online learning is difficult for teachers because it takes a lot of time to prepare online lessons, which is different from preparing lessons when teaching face-to-face. A difficulty for students is the time spent studying continuously with the Internet causing fatigue for body, eyes, back pain, etc. The Internet in some places is not good, affecting teaching and learning; some lecturers, when teaching online, have little interaction with students. They just point out lessons and force students to read and translate submissions.

Teachers' use of technology tools in foreign language teaching is supported by learners and has good results when these tools support students to develop vocabulary and several skills, and at the same time create a fun and comfortable atmosphere when learning foreign languages. However, besides that, the use of technology tools should also be limited in time. Most lecturers and students consider 30 minutes to be an appropriate time. More time will create health problems such as eye pain, back pain, or less time will not be enough for an activity with that technology tool. Besides, lecturers can exchange technology tools with each other, regularly update new tools to support their lectures, or share resources on these technology tools.

The above is just a small study, initially understanding how students and teachers learn and teach online and the use of technology tools in teaching and learning foreign languages. Many students are interested in learning English online with technology tools because it can be studied at home or anywhere, and there are good tools that can support online learning. However, many students have difficulties in studying online due to their family conditions and in remote areas. Another problem is that due to family conditions, many students study online by phone, the screen is small, the sound is small, so there will be some health problems such as eye pain, back pain, shoulder hurt, etc. Although there are still some disadvantages, online teaching and learning with technology tools are still highly appreciated by students and lecturers. It is expected to be applied more often. And for online teaching and learning to be more effective, it is necessary to have a synchronization of infrastructure, teaching equipment such as the Internet, computers, audio, etc. Besides, the preparation of lessons by lecturers and the application of technology and technology tools are necessary to make online teaching more effective and attractive.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Dr. Phuong, Vo Tu is the only author of this article.

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Dr. Vo Tu Phuong is a committed senior lecturer with over 16 years of experience at College and University in Khanh Hoa, teaching students from various social and cultural backgrounds. She possesses good administrative, verbal communication, and written skills along with constructive and effective teaching methods that promote a stimulating learning environment. She can work as a part of a team and has the proven ability to work to tight schedules and deadlines successfully.

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