Online education at Saigon University during the COVID-19 pandemic: A survey on non-English major college students' attitudes towards learning English

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Abstract

The outbreak of Covid-19 has forced educational institutions to initiate online teaching to maintain the process of student learning at all levels. This paper focuses on online education at Saigon University, during which the local government has been mandating social distancing in most of the regions. This paper aims to investigate the students' attitudes towards using online learning tools, which are comprised of learning management systems (Moodle and digital support for core materials) via virtual classrooms (Google meet). A survey questionnaire was designed to evaluate attitudes towards using the above online teaching and learning package from 222 non-English major undergraduates who took part in General English courses at Saigon University in July 2021. The results indicate that a majority of students show favorable attitudes towards online education; in the meantime, health and social issues also concern their learning process. Some recommendations are also offered for improving the efficiency of the online education process at Saigon University. Since the study focused on non-English major college students, it is hoped to have particular relevance to other institutions of higher education.

Keywords: Online education, non-English major college students, attitudes, learning management systems, higher education, Saigon University

1. Introduction

The outbreak of coronavirus disease (Covid-19) and its rapid spread into a worldwide pandemic has greatly affected people in any job field. There existed a substantial infrastructure for online education in many countries before the pandemic (Mishra et al., 2020). However, no university was ready for a complete shift to online education. Students missed the help they received from their peers in classrooms and laboratories and access to the library (Patricia, 2020). Nevertheless, students felt that online education helped them to continue their studies during the pandemic (Mishra et al., 2020). Universities were now using innovative strategies to ensure continuity of education for their students (Zhu & Liu, 2020).

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The government has strongly supported the use of information technology (IT) in schools and universities through initiatives ranging from primary schools to higher education that has encouraged the acquisition of laptop computers for students and teachers under favorable conditions and secured broadband connections in all public establishments. Lecturers are now delivering course content through various platforms. They were using online educational platforms, videoconferencing software, and social media to teach their courses (Patricia, 2020). Online educational platforms, like Google Classroom and Blackboard, allow lecturers to share notes and multimedia resources related to their courses with students. The online educational platforms also allow students to turn in their assignments and teachers to keep track of the progress of the students. Videoconferencing tools, like Google Meet, Zoom, and Microsoft Teams, help in organizing online lectures and discussion sessions. Some universities are also disseminating course material through their websites and their own learning management system (Mishra et al., 2020). Moodle can be considered an open-source platform that 'educators can use to create effective online learning sites' (Moodle, n.d.).

In order to deal with the outbreak, Ho Chi Minh City authorities have imposed social distancing measures since the end of May 2021 due to a dramatic rise in the number of infection cases. At Saigon University (SGU), the summer semester from mid-June to August 2021 was taught online, using online educational platforms including Moodle, E-zone for textbooks, and video conferencing tools, namely Google Meets.

However, students were able to encounter some challenges or difficulties when learning online English classes in SGU. According to Octaberlina and Muslimin's findings (2020), students faced three difficulties during online learning: unfamiliarity with e-learning, slow internet connection, and physical condition, such as eye strain. Similarly, students believed that online education was difficult and had a negative impact on their health and social lives (Chakraborty et al., 2020). Accordingly, when the implementation of online learning was too urgent, and there was not sufficient training, non-English major students of SGU might have more concerns and unfavorable attitudes toward online educational platforms when taking part in English classes.

Research Questions

Considering the present situation and previous research, our study intends to uncover the EFL students' attitudes and the challenges towards the implementation of English online education. To fulfill the purpose of the study, the survey sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1. What are non-English major learners' attitudes toward online education in SGU in terms of content delivery, interaction, and testing and assessment?
- 2. What are their difficulties or challenges when taking part in online education in SGU?

2. Literature review

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced various educational institutes and schools to suddenly modify their workflow strategies and adopt new technologies. In most cases, these organizations did not get enough time to reflect upon how the new strategies and the corresponded technology should be introduced and integrated into their existing setup (Carroll & Conboy, 2020). Bao (2020) described how universities were moving from classroom-based education to online education because of the raging pandemic.

In particular, blended learning is regarded as an innovative way of teaching and learning English in which teaching and learning activities have been completely supported by information technology (David, 2014). Siirak (2008) argues that blended learning with computer-based learning in the Moodle E-learning environment, based on social constructivist learning theory, is an effective tool for teaching and learning in the occupational health and safety discipline. In fact, using Moodle in teaching develops learners' communicative skills in language and requires social interaction between the teacher and students and among the students themselves (Al-Ani, 2013). A large number of studies on using Moodle in teaching and learning English were implemented in the past few years (Brandle, 2005; Irina & Laura, 2007; Stewart, 2007; Al-Ani, 2013; Tang, 2013); however, there has been little research on using Moodle in teaching translation modules thus far.

For those reasons, researchers have tried to understand the viewpoint of students on online education during the COVID-19 pandemic using empirical studies in India (Mishra et al., 2020) and the USA (Patricia, 2020). Students in this research had good opinions regarding online English learning using the LMS Moodle, despite it being their first time using Moodle.

Overall, one survey conducted by Carvalho et al. (2011) revealed that students appeared to value the contribution of an LMS to their learning, seeing it as a supplement rather than a replacement for traditional classroom activities.

Another study (Cinkara & Bagceci, 2013) investigated learners who took part in the online course using Moodle at a state university in south-eastern Turkey indicated a relatively positive attitude toward the course in accordance with the learners' scores from the uniquely-designed Online Language Learning Attitude Test (OLLAT). This study pointed out how the differences of male and female learners and their self-perception of computer literacy skills impacted their learning attitudes.

Sinaga and Pustika (2021) explored the attitude of SMK Yadika Bandar Lampung students in Turkey towards learning an English subject via Moodle, considering the characteristics of their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. It was a nice result that students showed a positive attitude to implement Moodle as a learning platform during the period of the Learning from Home program.

Here are certain studies conducted in Vietnam concerning learners' attitudes towards online learning of English. At UEH in Vietnam (Duong, 2020), some students even expressed their

enthusiasm for this method of teaching and learning because of the benefits it provides, among which concerned non-education related factors (e.g., transport cost-saving, time-saving). Duong also noted that one of the initial impressions English professors had of teaching online was that the students were more engaged in-class participation. The researcher in ULSA2 (Nguyen, 2022) found that non-English major students generally had a positive attitude about learning through video conferencing, with significant differences in attitude across gender, technical proficiency, and competencies. Nguyen concluded with high confidence that undergraduate students are eager to study a variety of courses online. Although online learning is welcomed, the encounter of difficulties is inevitable. Those were indicated in the studies of Nguyen et al. (2021) and Ngo (2021).

3. Methods

3.1 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Saigon University (SGU) first pioneered Learning Management Systems - SGU Moodle in 2019. Since then, it has steadily been promoted among 19 faculties, providing training for basic technical practices. Alongside, teachers are required to attend real-time meetings with students via Google Meets, which also allows teachers to save recorded meetings directly to Google Drive and share with students to help them stay up to date on lessons. Furthermore, the core textbook (i.e., Helbling material) provides students with digital support from the online educational platform. This study has examined the adoption of these three platforms, hereby called online education platforms, in SGU during the summer semester.

This study selected samples by a convenient sampling method. The participants were 222 non-English major EFL students of Saigon University, Vietnam, recruited from all faculties (excluding English majors). The vast majority of students (50.5%) were between the ages of 18 and 19, which was typical of first-year undergraduate students who were required to enroll in this course. Yet, this course also attracts a high percentage of sophomores (39.7%), equivalent to the group of 20 - 21 (42.7%). In terms of gender, the percentage of female students is superior to the proportion of male students (63.9% and 39.1%, respectively).

Despite the fact that all areas of study were covered (Figure 2), over half of the participants majored in Business Management and Commerce (37.3%) and Information Technology (18.9%), whereas about 20 percent enrolled in pedagogical studies and education. Details of the participants' backgrounds are presented in Figure 1.

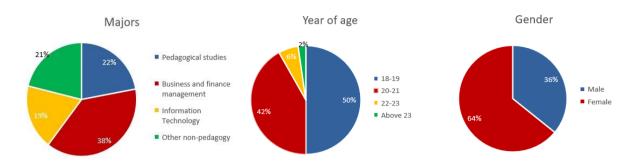


Figure 1: Participants' demographic information

3.2 Design of the Study

Based on qualitative research and referring to previous studies, we synthesized, analyzed, and quantified attribute factors in designing a quantitative questionnaire for participants. This questionnaire presented respondents with a series of questions or statements to which they were to react either by writing out their answers or selecting from among existing (Brown, 2001). It employed attitudinal questions, which are used to find out what people think. This instrument was appropriate to the research purpose (i.e., attitudes) while it was cost-effective and versatile. In addition, questionnaires enabled researchers to collect data from a large number of correspondents, and instrument homogeneity is frequently associated with higher reliability (Mackey & Gass, 2005). The questionnaire was based on the model which was used to examine the influence of various aspects of online education on social issues related to online education suggested by Chakraborty et al. (2020) when they conducted a survey in an Indian university. However, for this study - focused on learning and teaching-related factors, we ignored the impact of health issues and social issues.

We surveyed the students who had completed the General English course - Module I in the summer semester of 2021. The survey was categorized into 3 groups of questions concerning (1) students' demographic information, (2) students' evaluation of the effectiveness of the online education platforms, and (3) their challenges/difficulties of online education.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

The questionnaire was distributed online using the Google Forms tool, and the respondents were collected two weeks after. The Google Forms tool was used to administer the survey electronically. Email invitations to respond were sent out during the following two weeks when the course had finished. We received 222 respondents, which is equivalent to a response rate of about 50%. Cattell (1978), Gorsuch (1983), and Tanaka (1987) suggested that in behavioral analysis, the sample size should be chosen from 4 to 10 times as many as the number of variables in the questionnaire to ensure representativeness. Accordingly, the size of our sample is satisfactory.

In the first section, biographical data was collected and the level and major of studies. Especially, the last items of this part identified the participants' level of English proficiency,

continuing with their needs for learning English, preferences for different contents of English, and expectations of taking the course. Necessities and expectations of learning English contribute to the evaluation of students' attitudes toward the learning process and methods. Belcher (2009) notes that needs analysis can exploit diverse, infrequently conflicting views of a large number of stakeholders.

In the second part, we asked the students to evaluate the effectiveness of online education based on their experience during the course. There were 18 positive statements related to content delivery, interaction and testing, and assessment employed by each tool of the package. A student had to respond to each survey item on a 5-point Likert scale, and their responses are coded as: strongly agree = 5, agree = 4, neutral = 3, disagree = 2, strongly disagree = 1.

The third section required the students to score their satisfaction with the whole course, ranging from favorable to disappointed. They were asked to give feedback on how online learning benefits their proficiency of English in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar use, and 4 major skills. They were also asked to identify the problems or challenges they faced during the online sessions concerning teacher and student-related factors. Therefore, in the final part, the students were encouraged to make recommendations for a better online learning experience.

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Demographic analysis

The demographic variables of students presented in this section include age groups, gender characteristics, areas of study, self-assessment of English proficiency levels, their preferences in learning English, and their expectations for the course. Understanding how they have facilitated their online learning, regarding where they were studying and which technological devices were used, is important.

Learning English background

Their level of English proficiency also fluctuated from Beginners to Advanced, as shown in Figure 2.

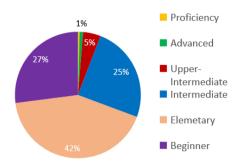


Figure 2: Participants' self-assessment level of English proficiency

Gladly, more than 90% found learning English necessary and showed positive attitudes towards expectations for the course, which aim to serve their communicative competence (Figure 3). Most of the respondents (85.5%) expected to improve knowledge (of vocabulary and grammar) and macro skills of using English which is helpful for their future career, although 78.7% aimed to pass course tests and exams according to the curriculum's assessment. Goal setting has both motivating and informational effects on learning and self-evaluation. Students who set goals are more likely to pay attention in class, put forth the effort, and persevere. These motivational effects result in increased on-task behavior and learning speed. Specifically, the number of students (more than 60%) who aimed at listening and speaking skills were slightly higher than those (around 50%) whose aim was reading and writing. Accordingly, Figure 4 presented the students' preferences for certain main English learning components. The results indicated that a majority of respondents expressed preferences with all components.

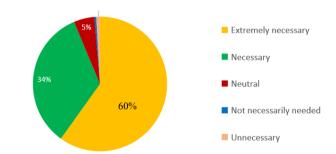


Figure 3: Participants' needs of learning English

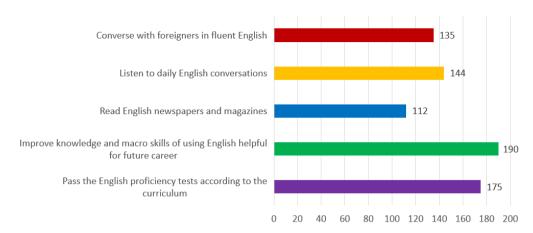


Figure 4. Participants' expectations of taking the EGP course

Studying facilities

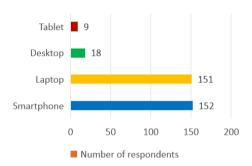


Figure 5. Technological equipment used for studying online

80% of them had been participating in online learning while they were at their permanent residence, of which 46.6% were living in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), and 33.4% were in their hometown outside HCMC. However, due to the pandemic, few of the students (2.8%) had to study while they were staying in the quarantined areas. Wherever they were, each of the participants equipped themselves with at least one piece of technological device to access the course, and their favorite ones are laptops and smartphones or both at one time.

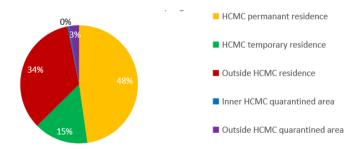


Figure 6. Location of studying online

4.2. Descriptive results of the effectiveness of online education

In general, as can be seen in Figure 7, 23.1% of students found the online course highly recommended, and more than half found the course fairly good, while 21.3% agreed that the course was satisfactory. Nevertheless, only a few of them (less than 5%) showed disappointment with the course. The effectiveness of online education regarding content delivery, interaction, and testing and assessment will be discussed in detail.

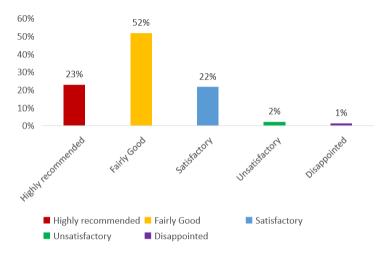


Figure 7. Participants' general evaluation of the online course

4.2.1. In relation to content delivery

The teacher's use of Moodle to share available core course materials timely was well-received by nearly 90% of the students. A high proportion of 85% agreed that the course was a user-friendly design in which the summary of the course enriched the classes. 81% expressed how they thought lectures could be made more informative. During the online sessions via Google Meets, slideshows were also deemed effective in distributing knowledge to the students. Also, the students (86%) also appreciated the meeting-recording functions of Google Meets, which helped them keep up when they had missed a session.

In addition, more than half of the participants had experienced E-Zone learning provided by the core textbook. Over 80% agreed or strongly agreed that the cloud book and e-book had a friendly-user design and that they were interested in a variety of exercises.

The students received the teachers' use of reference resources and technologies to convey knowledge well. The students believe that there is currently sufficient study material available online. Online tools for problem-solving, programming, and design, according to the students, can enhance classes.

delivery

Table 1

Effectiveness of online education in relation to content

TOOLS	CONTENT DELIVERY	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. SGU MOODLE (222 responses)	The teacher timely share available core course materials to students.	61%	26%	10%	2%	1%
	Reference resources such as videos are provided adequately.	49%	33%	16%	1%	0%
	Course summary is designed with friendly-user layout .	54%	31%	13%	1%	1%
2. GOOGLE MEETS (222 responses)	Slideshows make a session more informative.	50%	31%	14%	4%	1%
	The use of meeting recordings helps the students keep up when they miss a session.	61%	25%	12%	1%	1%
3. E-ZONE (116 responses)	Cloud book and e-book has friendly-user design.	34%	47%	15%	3%	2%
	A variety of exercises interests the students.	35%	48%	11%	3%	2%

4.2.2. In relation to interaction

Google Meets was served as a substitute for traditional classrooms, and interestingly, the students expressed favorable opinions to such an interactive platform in which the students were allowed to contribute to the sessions. A large number of students (90%) found the online sessions more interactive thanks to posting comments in the chatbox and raising hands to converse with the teacher directly.

Table 2Effectiveness of online education in relation to interaction

TOOLS	INTERACTION	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. SGU MOODLE (222 responses)	Use of attendance check makes an online session more effective.	53%	32%	12%	2%	1%
	Teacher-students interaction takes place better through online forums .	48%	34%	16%	1%	1%
	Course announcements are delivered in a good time manner.	52%	31%	14%	2%	1%
2. GOOGLE MEETS (222 responses)	Students are allowed to post comments or answers in the chat box during a session, then it becomes interactive.	58%	32%	9%	0%	1%
	Students are allowed to raise their hands to ask and answer during a session, then it becomes interactive.	58%	32%	9%	0%	1%

The activities of Moodle were also effectively exploited to improve the interaction between the teacher and students and among students. Students were asked to take their own attendance via Moodle at any time of an online session, and this practice was favored by 85% of the students. In addition, 82% showed strong agreement with the idea that interaction took place better through online forums. Beyond the class, 83% received the course announcements in a good time manner.

4.2.3. In relation to testing and assessment

According to more than 80% of the students, regular online quizzes and exercises on Moodle or E-zone could add certain value to their learning process. We discovered that 80 percent of students believed weekly Moodle-designed assignments effectively evaluated their competence, and timely-assigned Cyber homework also assisted their learning process. Almost 80% agreed that testing and assessment were conducted objectively and effectively. 78% of E-zone users found the Cloud book and e-book enhancing self-study and learner autonomy.

Table 3Effectiveness of online education in relation to testing and assessment

TOOLS	TESTING AND ASSESSMENT	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
1. SGU MOODLE (222 responses)	Online quizzes and exercises effectively help in learning process.	51%	32%	14%	1%	1%
	Weekly assignments effectively evaluate the competence of students.	46%	35%	17%	1%	0%
	Testing and assessment is conducted objectively and effectively.	42%	37%	18%	2%	1%
3. E-ZONE (116 responses)	Cyber homework effectively helps in learning process.	37%	48%	13%	0%	2%
	Cyber homework is assigned timely to assist learning process.	34%	50%	14%	1%	2%
	Cloud book and e-book enhance self- study and learner autonomy.	33%	45%	21%	0%	2%

4.3. Descriptive results of challenges of online education

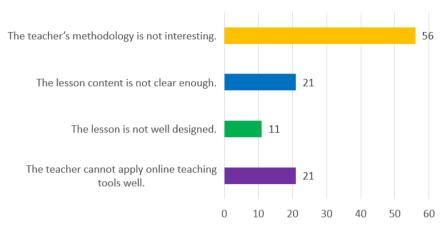


Figure 11. Challenges of online education with respect to teacher-related factors

The survey aimed to find out challenges derived from teacher-related and student-related factors. As for teacher-related factors, there were 99 out of 222 responses, equivalent to 45% of the population. Although more than half of the students found no problems concerning their teacher, the rest's suggestions are worth considering. The findings disclosed that these EFL students' (56 responses) were mainly concerned with the teacher's online teaching methodology, which was not interesting enough. Some of them (21 responses) complained that the lesson content was not clear enough or the teacher was not able to apply online teaching tools well, while a few of them (11 responses) claimed that the teacher did not well design the

lesson.

We received 205 out of 222 responses regarding the student-related factors, which means about 92% of participants experienced certain challenges in attending online courses. In general, their main difficulties were technological problems such as the unstable internet connection during online sessions via Google Meets (171 responses) or using phones/computers with low configuration (109 responses). One hundred thirty-one students also confided that they experienced some external distractions, namely social networks, household members, or neighborhoods. Eighty-eight of them confessed that they were not autonomous enough. A few of them (66 responses) had difficulties while using Moodle. Some students also stated that social communication and interactions between the teacher and students and among students were lacking in online sessions.

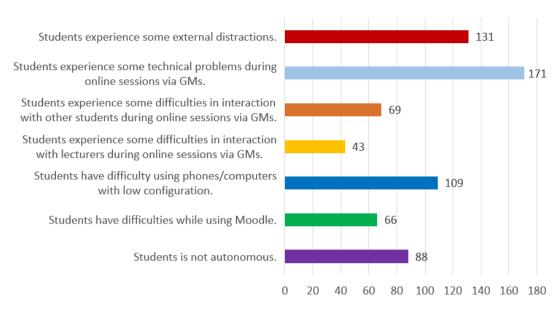


Figure 12. Challenges of online education with respect to students-related factors

Discussion

Students appreciated that the course materials and content were always available, and they could review a recorded session at all times. This was a nice result while the students showed positive exposure to the course material. Additionally, they seemed to participate and engage more in the online classroom thanks to certain functions such as self-checked attendance, posting any comments in the chatbox, or sharing ideas via forums. Assigning quizzes or tasks online via Moodle or Cyber homework assisted their learning autonomy and learning process. Beyond-classroom activities were welcomed by the students who were able to access these online activities, which helped revise and consolidate their learning progress and was rewarded by the teachers.

Nevertheless, the students acknowledged certain problems concerning the teacher's methodology of teaching online, including lesson design and the ability to use technological tools. Switching to online education was also a challenge to teachers, for which reasonable adjustments and adaption of teaching in online sessions should have been well-prepared. The participants were also aware of learners' attitudes towards learning which had a major influence on their learning during the online sessions, whereas technological impairment was also the main problem. The unstable network connection was also the biggest problem found in other recent studies conducted by Adnan and Anwar (2020), Nartiningrum and Nugroho (2020).

5. Conclusion

Due to the COVID-19 epidemic, schools and institutions are currently looking for ways to constantly improve the teaching and learning process in order to adapt to the circumstance. Thousands of further educational institutions, including those in Vietnam, believed that students or professors might conveniently access online learning without the need for face-to-face interactions (Sari, 2020). The study focused on clarifying 2 main issues in the context of social distancing due to the Covid-19 pandemic: (1) students' attitudes towards the use of three platforms for online education of English; and (2) challenges or difficulties they faced while learning online.

The findings of this study indicated that the students held moderately favorable attitudes towards online education during the period. Most of the students found learning English necessary and set a goal(s) of taking the English course, which also motivated their learning attitudes.

The students chose to use assistive technology devices for mobility to join online classes. However, they were still struggling with some interruption of technological impairment. It is required a wide coverage of network infrastructure across the country. They also looked forward to adapting the teacher's online teaching methodology more appropriately.

Limitation

The above results show that the study has contributed to strengthening the understanding of the attitude of students for the use of cross-platform online applications in online education. Despite favorable attitudes, the students' achievement regarding final grades was not discussed in this study. Likewise, the discussion of how their difficulties impacted their study results was also limited.

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Biodata

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Appendix

Questionnaire of Effectiveness and Challenges of Online Education (English Version)

This questionnaire consists of THREE sections.

For Questions 10 - 27, please select the appropriate response (Strongly agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, or Strongly disagree) to indicate how much you agree or disagree with each statement.

SECTION 1: BACKGROUND INFORMATION

~	
Q1. Ge	ender (Select one)
	Female
	Male
	Other
Q2. Ye	ar of age (Select one)
	18-19
	20-21
	22-23
	Other
Q3. M	ajor (Select one)
	Natural Science Pedagogical Studies
	Social Science Pedagogical Studies
	Pre-School /Primary School Education
	Fine Art / Art
	Business and Finance
	Information Technology
	Law
	Others
Q4. Te	chnological equipment used for studying online (Select one or more)
	Laptop
	Smartphone
	Tablet
	Desktop

Q5. Location of studying online (Select one)

HCMC permanent residence

HCMC temporary residence

Outside HCMC residence

Inner HCMC quarantined area

Outside HCMC quarantined area

Q6. Self-assessment level of English Proficiency (Select one)

Proficiency

Advanced

Upper-Intermediate

Intermediate

Elementary

Beginner

Q8. Needs of learning English (Select one)

Extremely necessary

Necessary

Neutral

Not necessary needed

Unnecessary

Q9. Participants' expectations or objectives of taking the EGP courses (Select one or more)

Pass the English proficiency tests according to the curriculum

Improve knowledge and macro skills of using English helpful for future career

Read English newspapers and magazines

Listen to daily English conversations

Converse with foreigners in fluent English

Write personal basic information

SECTION 2: EVALUATION OF EFFECTIVENESS OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Learning Management Systems - Moodle

- Q10. Lecturers timely share available core course materials to students.
- Q11. Reference resources such as videos are provided adequately.
- Q12. Course summary is designed with friendly-user layout.
- Q13. Use of attendance check makes an online session more effective.
- Q14. Lecturer-student interaction takes place better through online forums.
- Q15. Course announcements are delivered in a good time manner.
- Q16. Online quizzes and exercises effectively help in the learning process.
- Q17. Weekly assignments effectively evaluate the competence of students.
- Q18. Testing and assessment is conducted objectively and effectively.

Online meeting platform- Google Meets

- Q19. Slideshows make a lecture more informative.
- Q20. The use of meeting recordings helps students keep up when they miss a session.
- Q21. Students are allowed to post comments or answers in the chatbox during a session, then it becomes interactive.
- Q22. Students are allowed to raise their hands to ask and answer during a session, then it becomes interactive.

Digital material support - E-zone

- Q23. Cloud book and e-book has friendly-user design.
- Q24. A variety of exercises interests students.
- Q25. Cyber homework effectively helps in the learning process.
- Q26. Cyber homework is assigned timely to assist the learning process.
- Q27. Cloud book and e-book enhance self-study and learner autonomy.

General Evaluation

Q28. Feedback about online sessions during the COVID-19 pandemic(Select one)

Highly recommended

Fairly Good

Satisfactory

Unsatisfactory

Disappointed

SECTION 3: CHALLENGES OF ONLINE EDUCATION

Q29. Teacher-related factors (Select one or more)

The teacher cannot apply online teaching tools well.

The lesson is not well designed.

The lesson content is not clear enough.

The teacher's methodology is not interesting.

Q30. Teacher-related factors (Select one or more)

Students is not autonomous.

Students have difficulties while using Moodle.

Students have difficulty using phones/computers with low configuration.

Students experience some difficulties in interaction with lecturers during online sessions via GMs.

Students experience some difficulties in interaction with other students during online sessions via GMs.

Students experience some technical problems during online sessions via GMs.

Students experience some external distractions.

Q31. Your recommendations for a better online learning experience.

Answer: ...