

A Case Study of Students' Views on Effective Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the students' opinions of the elements of effective online learning. The respondents (n=172) completed a twelve-week course in the module 3 English classes at the University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City (UEH) taught by the author with an eight-week online period. The tool includes a questionnaire with 14 questions regarding the factors that enable them to be engaged in the online lessons and an open-ended question asking for the student's contribution to the ideas of effective online learning. The questionnaire utilizes the Likert scale via Google Form. The elements cover the three components: cognitive presence, teaching presence and social presence in the foundational model for online learning developed by Garrison et al. (2000). Seven main elements for effective online English teaching are recognized as: teaching method, course content, learning activities (updated news delivery, games, polls, and student presentations are favourable), myriad interaction (short questions are preferable), learning incentives (bonus marks), supportive learning environment (teacher voice, praise, encouragement, good teacher-student and student-student relationships) and supplementary materials (revision, extra resources, etc.). Finally, the writer draws on some suggestions for effective online teaching and learning.

Keywords: effective online learning, online teaching, student engagement

1 INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced educational institutions to move into online teaching. This type of education requires more effort from both teachers and students as it presents new modes of presentation and interaction. In this paper, the writer first gives the theoretical background of effective online teaching before presenting the results of the students' opinions (n=172) of the elements that enable them to be engaged in online lessons. The writer then suggests some ideas for effective online teaching and learning.

Online education has been studied for decades but has recently gained high focus due to the Covid-19 pandemic. There have been numerous studies on online teaching and learning over the last year.

The best-known theoretical framework for designing an online learning environment is the model developed by Garrison et al. (2000), which presents three critical components for an effective online educational community: *cognitive presence*, *social presence*, and *teaching presence*. Cognitive presence is providing a sufficient degree of the content of the course. Social presence relates to establishing a supportive environment for students. Teaching presence involves the way teachers design and organizes the learning experience. This theoretical framework has been the most popular model for online educational studies.

Likewise, Gold (2001) points out three basic roles of online facilitators: *organizational*, *social*, and *intellectual*. The organizational role involves setting the agenda, objectives, and procedures for the learning process. This is essentially the teaching presence of Garrison et al. (2000)'s framework. The facilitator's main social role is the creation of a friendly environment for the students by giving welcome messages, using a personal tone, seeding students' feedback with specific examples and references. Good teachers also play a social role model of good online and intellectual behaviour for students and help them become better students. Correspondingly, this is the social presence. Finally, in the intellectual role, moderators facilitate the students' understanding through discussion, questions, probing responses, synthesizing, summarizing, and developing themes and resources. This is basically cognitive presence.

In addition, Oliver & Herrington (2003) demonstrate the constituent elements of online learning settings as in Figure 1.

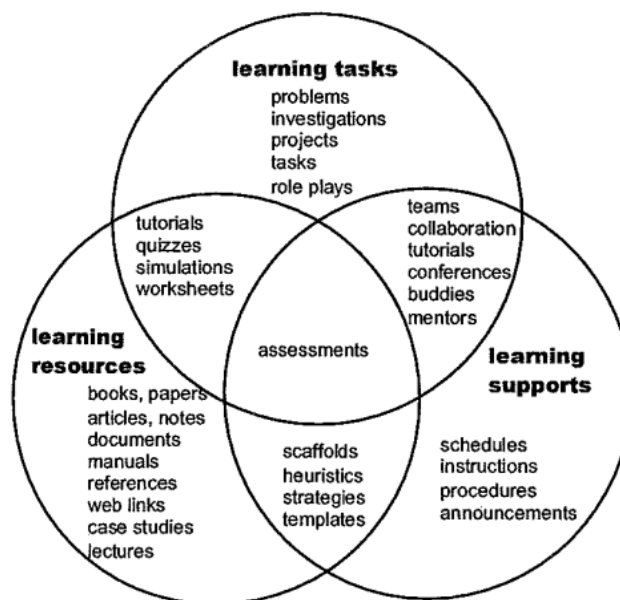


Figure 1. Constituent elements of online learning setting (Oliver & Herrington, 2003)

The online educational setting involves three elements: *learning tasks*, *learning support*, and *learning resources*. Designing learning tasks is 'the design and specification of tasks to engage and direct the learner in the process of knowledge acquisition and development of understanding' and 'characterized by learner engagement in cognitively complex tasks involving such activities as problem-solving, critical thinking, collaboration and self-regulation (Oliver & Herrington, 2003, p.113). They suggest that the learning activity be authentic. Planning learning support is arranging the strategies to enable learners to implement and complete the learning tasks successfully. The design and specification of supports are to scaffold the learning and provide feedback that is responsive and sensitive to their individual needs for the online learner. Selecting the learning resources is 'the design and specification of the learning resources needed by the learner to successfully complete the set tasks and to facilitate the scaffolding and guidance' (Oliver & Herrington, 2003, p.113). They recommend that instructors provide content with perspectives from a multitude of sources using both conventional materials and electronic sources and that the resources be relevant and authentic.

Scholars have also given a myriad of pedagogical recommendations for online education. Doolittle (1999) emphasizes the importance of an active learning environment for online students with eight recommendations: 1. Learning should take place in authentic and real-world environments. 2. Learning should involve social negotiation and mediation. 3. Content and skills should be made relevant to the learner. 4. Content and skills should be understood within the framework of the learner's prior knowledge. 5. Students should be assessed formatively, serving to inform future learning experiences. 6. Students should be encouraged to become self-regulatory, self-mediated, and self-aware. 7. Teachers serve primarily as guides and facilitators of learning, not instructors. 8. Teachers should provide for and encourage multiple perspectives and representations of content.

Furthermore, May & Short (2003) used the metaphor of gardening in cyberspace to demonstrate the process of enhancing online teaching and learning. There are well-matched analogues between the practices of gardening – positioning, conditioning soil, watering, and controlling weeds and pests – and the online pedagogical practices, including addressing individual differences, motivating the student, providing feedback, and avoiding information overload.

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, online education has become popular. Numerous studies on online teaching and learning have been carried out over the last year. Many studies focus on the advantages and disadvantages when implementing online teaching and learning in their own institutions, like most recently Nguyen, H.N. (2021), Nguyen, T.N. M., Tra, V. D., & Nguyen, P. H. (2021), Tran, V.M.Y., & Nguyen, T.U.N. (2021), Nguyen, H. U. N., & Duong, L. N. T. (2021), etc.

We know that effective online learning results from thorough instructional design and conscientious implementation. Instructors in an online class need to make a lot more effort than they do in a traditional classroom.

2 METHODS

2.1 Pedagogical Setting & Participants

The subjects are the students (n =172) in module 3 English classes at UEH. All of the participants had finished a 12-week English course taught by the author with an 8-week online period. The students were taught online via Google Meet.

2.2 Design of the Study

A questionnaire via Google form is utilized to measure the students' views on the items related to effective online English learning.

2.3 Data collection & analysis

The first part asks the students to rate the 14 items that can affect their online learning. The Likert scale is utilized, ranging from strongly disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, and strongly agree. The second part is an open-ended question asking for the student's contribution to the ideas of effective online learning and teaching.

2.4 Research Questions

The research aims at promoting effective online teaching and learning from students' perspectives. Through analyzing students' views, the writer identifies important elements that can engage students in online learning and then proposes some ideas for effective online English teaching and learning.

The purpose of the study is to answer the two questions:

1. What elements are considered important for effective online learning in students' viewpoints?
2. What should teachers do so as to promote effective online learning?

3 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Findings

The results of students' opinions on the elements that can engage them in online learning are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Students' ideas on the elements that can engage them in online learning

Items	SD=1		D=2		N=3		A=4		SA=5		Mean
1. Lecture content	6	4%	2	1%	4	2%	61	35%	99	58%	4.42
2. Bonus marks	5	3%	4	2%	14	8%	82	48%	67	39%	4.17
3. Up-to-date news	4	2%	2	1%	18	10%	73	43%	75	44%	4.24
4. The teaching method	5	3%	1	0.5%	3	1.5%	73	43%	90	52%	4.41
5. Teachers' voice and intonation	5	3%	1	0.5%	18	10.5%	74	43%	74	43%	4.23
6. Games	5	3%	5	3%	18	10%	88	51%	56	33%	4.08
7. Discussion questions	4	2%	5	3%	37	22%	81	47%	45	26%	3.92
8. Presentation activities	7	4%	16	22%	41	24%	77	45%	31	18%	3.63
9. Q& A section after a presentation	2	1%	17	10%	33	19%	88	51%	32	19%	3.76
10. Pair work and group work.	3	2%	10	6%	44	25%	83	48%	32	19%	3.76
11. Short questions	4	2%	2	1%	26	15%	101	59%	39	23%	3.98
12. Students' opinion poll	4	2%	5	3%	44	25%	86	50%	33	20%	3.81
13. Encouragement and praise	6	4%	4	2%	52	30%	75	44%	35	20%	3.75
14. Learning atmosphere	5	3%	2	1%	14	8%	76	44%	75	44%	4.24

Note. SD: Strongly disagree, D: Disagree, N: Neutral, A: Agree, SA: Strongly agree

Teaching content and teaching method are the two elements that are valued the most highly (mean = 4.42 and 4.41 respectively). The teaching method gets the highest number of total agreements (95%), including agreement and strong agreement, preceding lecture content which makes up 93%. However, lecture content is the element that receives the highest number of strong agreement (58%), while the teaching method gets 52%. On the opposite end of the scale, the teaching method is one of the elements that have the fewest number of disagreements (about 3%), while lecture content gets 5%.

A supportive learning environment stands out as the third significant element (mean = 4.24), which accounts for 88% of agreement in total. The students show a strong desire for bonus marks, with 87% of the students expressing their favour. Furthermore, the lecturer's voice is highly appraised in attracting students to the lecture (mean = 4.23).

The two activities that are appreciated the most are the inclusion of up-to-date news (87%) and games (84%). Short questions get high approval of 82%, whereas discussion questions obtain 73%. In addition, students like to join in opinion polls, with 70% of the students

wanting the teacher to conduct regularly. Also, most students (64%) would like to be praised and encouraged regularly.

The presentation activity gets the least favour with only 63% of the students showing their approval. Moreover, this is also the factor which is disagreed the most (26%). Besides, after the presentation, the question and answer session is the second least favoured, with 11% of the students showing disagreement. The role of pair work and group work in enhancing student-student interaction is not highly appreciated, with 8% disagreeing, 25% showing neutral ideas, only 67% agree.

In the open question, the students are asked to give suggestions for effective online English learning. Most of the students place emphasis on more interaction between teacher and students as well as between students and students. They also show a preference for teachers frequently asking small questions so as to increase interaction and pull them back to the lesson as it is easy for them to lose their attention when studying online.

Many students propose modifying lessons with games, videos, etc., to make the lessons more interesting. They expect a fun, friendly learning atmosphere.

They suggest using another website for listening as sometimes the audio files are not clear when transmitted online. The students want more learning materials, exercises, resources for self-study, as well as more assignments with bonus marks. They recommend giving students some small topics to look for information, which they will share with one another in the next class meeting. After each lesson, they would like to have some small review exercises on LMS (learning management systems) to help them consolidate the knowledge.

There is also the idea that all students should turn on their webcams so that they see other students' faces in order not to feel lonely.

3.2 Discussion & Suggestions

The teaching method stands out as the essential factor that can engage students in the lesson. Thus, teachers should pay much attention to their teaching method development as the teaching method has never lost its vital role in the learning process.

Lecture content is considered the second most vital element. This is the cognitive presence element (Garrison et al., 2000) for effective online education. The teacher needs to concentrate their effort to design the course content which is meaningful and relevant. Educators should promote activities that are active, experiential, and authentic.

In the teaching presence element (Garrison et al., 2000), along with the teaching method, which is considered the most important aspect, the teacher's voice is also critical in promoting effective online learning. Teachers can use their voice and intonation to attract students. The cyberspace of online learning limits the teacher's interaction with the students. The only means by which the teacher can communicate with the students in his/her voice. Thus the teacher should try to use an appealing voice so as to engage the students. The voice should also show the teacher's enthusiasm. It is only enthusiasm that can pervade, transfuse and

provoke enthusiasm. How can the students be enthusiastic about the lesson if the teacher is not enthusiastic himself/herself?

Additionally, students like the inclusion of up-to-date news in their lessons, so teachers should integrate some news into their instructional designs to make the lessons more practical and updated. Students will pay more interest in the issues that are to their concerns, realistic, and useful.

Students also express their enjoyment in games. Games still play a significant role in involving students and creating a fun and appealing learning atmosphere. Teachers can make use of gamification in their instruction to make the lesson more interesting. The learning activity can be either gamified by adding competition mode or modified with game-playing via various tools like PowerPoint, online games with Kahoot, etc. Furthermore, creating games is the job of the teacher and the task that students like doing.

Interaction is identified as a vital element by the students. Teachers need to promote teacher-student as well as student-student interaction as much as possible, employing all kinds of vehicles at their best. The students prefer short questions for increasing interaction more than discussion questions or the question and answer session after the presentation. Therefore, it is necessary that teachers frequently ask interactive questions to involve students as it is easy for students to feel lonely and lose their focus when studying online. Teachers can ask questions about students' feelings and opinions during the lesson or put simple questions that students can answer easily. For the questions that require complicated answers, teachers should break the question into small parts to give students scaffolding. Teachers can, from time to time, conduct students' opinion polls during the lesson to increase students' participation in the lesson.

A few students (8%) express their dislike, and 25% show their reluctance to pair work and group work since the online environment makes it difficult for them to interact with each other directly. Hence, pair work and group work can be exploited by project-based learning or task-based learning with the students' presentations about their job. The presentation should be short, concise and have a time limit as other students will easily lose their attention and get bored with long presentations.

Regarding the social presence element (Garrison et al., 2000), teachers should try to promote a supportive learning environment, which is regarded as the third significant aspect by the students. A supportive learning environment must deploy both good teacher-student relationships and student-student relationships. Students like praise and encouragement, so teachers need to commend students' achievements and give encouragement when necessary frequently. On the ground that students show a strong desire for bonus marks, teachers can utilize bonus marks as stimulation for their participation. In addition, students may be encouraged to find a studying companion. The lack of physical presence in a real classroom will make it easy for students to feel lonely and distracted. Good companions can take care of each other in the learning process. Teachers sometimes also need to ask students to turn on

their webcams so that they see other students' faces, which helps create an atmosphere like a face-to-face classroom to lessen the feeling of being lonely.

In today's 4.0 era, teachers should take advantage of technology to facilitate learning and engage students. Teachers can integrate with other websites together with LMS, etc. and can deploy the channels like Youtube, TED talks (Ted-ed), etc.; the apps for creating presentations like Mentimeter, Flipgrid, Padlet, AnswerGarden, etc.; the apps for quizzes like Quizizz, Quizlet, etc. in order to enrich the lessons.

4 CONCLUSION

In sum, seven main elements for effective online English teaching are recognized as: teaching method, course content, learning activities (updated news delivery, games, polls, and student presentations are favourable), myriad interaction (short questions are preferable), learning incentives (bonus marks), supportive learning environment (teacher voice, praise, encouragement, good teacher-student and student-student relationships) and supplementary materials (revision, extra resources, etc.). To promote effective online learning, teachers must pay attention to four primary dimensions: structuring an effective course design, creating community and engagement, facilitating online interaction, and supplying adequate learning support. Online education emphasizes an interactive learning environment; therefore, effective online instructions have to facilitate and enhance interaction with both teacher to student and student to student dimensions. Teachers have to learn how to make the most of the advanced learning tools in the 4.0 era. The study has a fairly small number of respondents and a limited number of learning activities. Further research can exploit more learning activities and online resources.

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Biodata

Le Thi Tuyet Minh is a lecturer of School of Foreign Languages at University of Economics Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She has got an M.A. degree in TESOL and has been teaching for more than 15 years. She mainly teaches Business English and TOEIC. Her major research interests are student motivation, Computer Assisted Language Learning, Educational Technology, and ELT Methodology.

Appendix

The questionnaire in English

Dear students,

In order to enhance the online learning of English, please help me answer the following questions.

Thank you very much for your valuable contribution.

Part 1. Please choose the degree which shows your agreement/disagreement.

Items	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1. Interesting lecture content is very important.					
2. Bonus marks for students' participation in the lecture create great motivation for students to join the class.					
3. The inclusion of up-to-date news in the lecture is very attractive to students.					
4. The teaching method is very important in attracting students to the lecture.					
5. Teachers' voice and intonation can help attract students to the lecture.					
6. Games in class make students more interested.					
7. Discussion questions help increase interaction in class.					
8. Presentation activities help students become less boring.					
9. The Questions & Answers session after the presentation creates an opportunity for students to interact with each other.					
10. Teachers should enhance student-student interaction through pair work and group work.					
11. Teachers often ask short questions can increase interaction with students, which will make students more attentive in class.					
12. Teachers should regularly conduct students' opinion poll during the lesson to increase students' participation in the lecture.					
13. Teachers should regularly encourage and praise students.					
14. Teachers should create a friendly, fun online learning atmosphere, which can help engage students.					

Part 2. What are your suggestions for the online learning of English to be more effective?

Thank you for completing the questionnaire.