STUDENT TRANSITION DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: A CASE OF HO CHI MINH CITY

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Abstract: The purpose of this study is to examine further the reason students made a smooth transition from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. To do this, the researcher compares the data collected for the previous study (Kang & Duong, 2021) with the data collected in 2022 still amid the pandemic. The previous study by Kang & Duong (2021) was on student perceptions of first-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. According to the results of the data analysis by Kang & Duong (2021), flexibility (time, learning), live platform(s), such as Zoom and Google Classroom, comfort with online technologies, and lesson delivery were ranked in the top four helpful components of first-time online learning; internet access, technical problems, harder to pay attention, and lack of community were ranked in the top four challenging components. Based on the survey conducted in 2022, the researcher could find out further why the participants in the previous study (Kang & Duong, 2021) could make a smooth transition to their first-time online learning.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, transition, social networks

Introduction

When the Vietnamese government announced the closure of schools on March 27, 2020 (Vietnamese Government, 2020) at the devastating initial stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, all education was conducted online in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam. With students back on the campus at the Saigon International University in the fall of 2020, Kang and Duong (2021) conducted a study on student perceptions of first-time online learning during the pandemic to assess how students went through the unprecedented first-time online learning at their university. The study (Kang & Duong, 2021) revealed that participants showed certain levels of familiarity with the technology and their challenges were outside factors that were out of their reach. According to the results of the study, the helpful components of first-time online learning ranked as the top four among all respondents were flexibility (time, learning), live platform(s) such as Zoom and Google Classroom, comfort with online technologies, and lesson delivery. The helpful components were related to the participant's familiarity with the technology and its effect on their perceptions of first-time online learning. Challenging components of first-time online learning ranked in the top four among all respondents were internet access, technical problems, difficulty paying attention, lack of community, and less social interaction. These implied some difficult or negative aspects of students' transition to the online learning model with the negative aspects being outside factors. The result of the study in 2021 led the researcher to

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question whether there was a particular way through which participants gained familiarity with the technology in addition to the perceived accessibility to the technology outside the classroom.

The purpose of the current study was to find out further why students could make a smooth transition with their proven familiarity with the technology from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, by comparing the results found in the survey 2020 with those found in the survey 2022. The purpose of the survey 2020 was to discover student perceptions of first-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. The purpose of the survey 2022 was to learn about students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English among non-English majors in their freshmen year. The research questions that guided this study were:

1. During the school closure in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic outbreak, what were the components of first-time online learning that learners recognized as helpful and challenging?
2. What are students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English?

The significance of this study is that it will reveal how participants might gain familiarity with the technology so they could make a smooth transition from a face-to-face to an online learning model amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

Student Perceptions of Online Learning

Since the mid-1990s there have been studies evaluating students' perceptions of online learning. As a result, studies identified flexibility as the strength of online learning: flexibility with time in group work (Petrides, 2002) and time management (Hill, 2002; Song et al., 2004). Studies identified convenience as a strength of online learning: student participation in online discussions at their convenience and easy access to course materials (Poole, 2000). Other strengths identified were interaction in the discussion forums (Ophoff & Johnston, 2014); strengths of a blended and online learning mode (Adam & Nel, 2009) because of its face-to-face teaching, digital media, and digital communication; online course components, such as responding in writing in the asynchronous online learning environment (Petrides, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003), the availability of the video lectures (Ophoff & Johnston, 2014), and required discussion board participation (Morris, 2011). In addition, the design of the course (Song et al., 2004), the quality of the online course structure (Yang & Durrington, 2010), and tools such as tutorials (Huss & Eastep, 2013) were found to help students better perform with the technology or content being taught in the modules.

The weaknesses of online learning were also identified in the previous studies, such as a lack of immediacy in responses (Petrides, 2002) and the delay of immediate feedback from the instructor (Vonderwell, 2003), lack of a sense of community (Hara & Kling, 2001; Song et al., 2004) and/or feelings of isolation from faculty (Vonderwell, 2003) or both faculty and other learners (Woods, 2002), and peer interactions (Yang & Durrington, 2010). By contrast, in Huss and Eastep's (2013) study, only 10% of respondents expressed that regular interaction with classmates was very important in an online course.

Studies on student perceptions of online learning continued during the COVID-19 pandemic after school closures that were associated with the pandemic. The impact of the pandemic was also navigated among many studies. Online learning was found to be effective in times of school closures and social distancing during the pandemic (Ali, 2020; Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020). The needs for online and remote learning were agreed upon (Ali, 2020), and e-learning tools were perceived as effective for English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) (Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020). Participants indicated that transitioning to online learning was appropriate during the COVID-19 pandemic (Demuyakor, 2020). Online learning was conceived to work better for some disciplines (Khalil et al., 2020). Convenience was reported as another strength of online learning (Nambiar, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020).

Challenges identified in the studies during the pandemic were: staff and student readiness for online learning (Ali, 2020, p. 22), technical support (Nambiar, 2020), technical issues, such as internet connection and the use of online tools (Khalil et al., 2020), and slow internet connection (Layali & Al-Shlowiy, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020). Further, the lack of a sense of a community in an online environment (Demuyakor, 2020), negative student attitudes toward the effectiveness of online learning (Nambiar, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020), and quality assurance in and the implementation of the content delivery (Khalil et al., 2020) were also identified as challenges.

Social Networks as Learning Sites

With the speedy rise of mobile technologies, social networks have been globally accessible. On social networks, students have opportunities to explore the media, share knowledge, and get almost everything they need in the learning process (Maung & Win, 2019; Gikas & Grant, 2013).

In academic settings, numerous social networks have been employed for a variety of reasons. Previous studies on how social networks can contribute to language learning and teaching revealed that many universities around the world encourage students to use social networks as learning sites or as course management programs (e.g., Al Arif, 2019; Al-Jaf, 2017; Derakhshan & Hasanabbasi, 2015; Ko et al., 2012; LaRue, 2012). Social networks (including Facebook) support the learning process since they help students exchange learning materials and share experiences. Posts making, pictures, and videos uploading are important factors to help students use social networks as tools for language learning. Participants in the previous studies (e.g., Al Arif, 2019; Al-Jaf, 2017) indicated that social networks (such as Facebook) can be effective tools to improve their English language skills.

In Vietnam, teachers in language classrooms began incorporating technology before the COVID-19 pandemic following a project called the Foreign Language Project 2020 launched by the Vietnamese government (2008). The COVID-19 pandemic serves as an obvious example of the advantages of learning via social networks (Kang & Duong, 2021) since the COVID-19 lockdown demanded that all activities including teaching and learning be taken at home. In Vietnam, social networks are most commonly used by students to learn English language skills (Hoi, 2020; Le, 2018).

Materials and Methods

The study adopted a quantitative research methodology: a quantitative (online survey) data collection method. The researcher made this decision for the current student perceptions study because the world

was still under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was understood that an online survey could be the most effective tool to collect data from participants. Previous studies (e.g., Nambiar, 2020; Demuyakor, 2020) also proved that an online survey would be effective to learn about student perceptions of online learning. Further, it is cost-saving and effective in getting authentic data (Toepoel, 2017).

Research Site and Participants

The site for this study was Saigon International University (SIU) in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. Before closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, primary learning and teaching were conducted through face-to-face classroom instruction.

Participants in the online survey 2020 were undergraduates in Business and English. In spring 2020, students in English participated in their first-time online learning through Google Classroom for official course meetings, and Business students, through Zoom, according to their class schedules. The university recorded the lessons and provided the recordings as a part of course resources. Participants in the online survey 2022 were non-English majors as a mixed group in their freshman-year English reading course. In spring 2022, participants took face-to-face classroom instructions at their university. But, they were still under the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Data Collection

Online surveys were conducted. The online surveys were created to address the initial research questions. For this study, survey questions 6-7 (see Appendix A) were used from the survey 2020 (Kang & Duong, 2021). Survey questions 6–7 had multi-select answer options to determine the range of student perceptions. Respondents were also allowed to provide further opinions in writing. For this study, relevant survey questions were also selected from the survey 2022 (see Appendix B). As a result, five (5) Yes/No questions and two (2) short answer questions were selected. Questions were selected to learn about students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted quantitatively to learn about student perceptions of the aspects of their learning addressed through the research questions. The areas the researcher focused on in the data analysis were: student perceptions of helpful and challenging components of first-time online learning (addressed in the survey 2020), and students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English (addressed in the survey 2022). Analysis of the survey data was completed using SPSS software.

Results and Discussion

A total of 101 respondents anonymously participated in the survey 2020 (Kang & Duong, 2021).

Regarding the research question, During the school closure in the spring of 2020 due to the pandemic outbreak, what were the components of first-time online learning that learners recognized as helpful and challenging? the majority of the participants identified the following components ranked in the

top four as helpful: flexibility (time, learning), live platform(s) such as Zoom and Google Classroom, comfort with online technologies, and lesson delivery. The participants identified the following components ranked in the top four as challenging: internet access, technical problems, difficulty paying attention, and lack of community and less social interaction.

The results of the survey 2020 (Kang & Duong, 2021) revealed students' perceptions of the components of first-time online learning that they recognized as helpful and challenging. The helpful components of first-time online learning ranked as the top four among all respondents (i.e., flexibility (time, learning), live platform(s) such as Zoom and Google Classroom, comfort with online technologies, and lesson delivery) were mainly about the participants' familiarity with the technology and its effect on their perceptions of first-time online learning. In alignment with the previous studies (e.g., Petrides, 2002; Song et al., 2004), flexibility (time, learning) was one of the primary helpful components identified in this study. Live platform(s) such as Zoom and Google Classroom, comfort with online technologies, and lesson delivery, in that order as the most helpful components probably indicated that participants were performing flexibly with online platforms. According to the results, it seems that the participants were already digital citizens displaying their familiarity with the technology and other online components necessary for lesson delivery. This indicated the influence of learners' experience with the technology on their first-time online learning, as in the previous studies (e.g., Hill, 2002; Song et al., 2004). This aspect of participants' preparedness through their daily lives was in contrast to previous studies, though, in which most students coming from developing countries who were accustomed to traditional face-to-face learning (Ananga & Biney, 2017) reflected negatively on their learning habits.

Challenging components of first-time online learning that were ranked in the top four among all respondents (i.e., internet access, technical problems, difficulty paying attention, lack of community, and less social interaction) implied some difficult or negative aspects of students' transition to the online learning model. Similar to the findings in previous studies (e.g., Demuyakor, 2020; Khalil et al., 2020), internet access was found to be the most challenging. As reported in previous studies (Nambiar, 2020; Ali, 2020), technical problems were something that played a crucial part in the participants' first-time online learning. Difficulty paying attention, ranked in the top three, indicated that some participants might feel more challenged than others due to a lack of experience with the online learning model. Both lack of community and less social interaction, ranked in the top four, align with previous studies (Song et al., 2004; Yang & Durrington, 2010; Hara & Kling, 2000; Morris, 2011) that revealed that the sense of community was important to many students. Probably, the COVID-19 pandemic boosted students' perception of the lack of community in online learning in this study because there was no face-to-face interaction at all during the initial period of online learning at their university.

A total of 54 non-English majors in their freshman year English reading course anonymously participated in the survey 2022. Regarding the research question, what are students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English? 50 participants agreed that they are using social networks to learn English. 45 participants said they prefer using English on social media. 43 students believed that using social networks was the best way to learn English. 46 students felt comfortable practicing English with their friends on social networks. 50 students agreed that chatting on social networks helps them improve their English writing. To the question of what social network they use to learn

English, all participants mentioned at least one social network. To the question on the name of a particular channel or a program, all participants except for two mentioned at least one channel or a program.

The findings in the survey 2022 revealed student perceptions of their use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English. The findings demonstrated that English is prevailing among participants although they are non-English majors. They preferred to use social networks as a tool to learn English. Particularly, chatting on social networks seemed to help participants with their writing skills. As in the previous studies (e.g., Hoi, 2020; Le, 2018), learners exchanged suggestions and comments on each other's posts. That probably helped students strengthen their writing skills to write something on social networks. The results were in line with previous studies (e.g., Maung & Win, 2017).

Conclusion

The study in 2020 revealed that the participants from the Saigon International University in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, have some familiarity with the technology, which turned out according to the survey results helped them make a smooth transition from face-to-face to online learning. On the other hand, the biggest challenges they encountered during their initial period of online learning in spring 2020 (i.e., internet access, technical problems, difficulty paying attention) provided some indicators that it would be urgent to improve the overall infrastructure of the University and provide relevant training on the online learning model for faculty, staff, and students.

In addition to the perceived accessibility to technologies outside the classroom in daily life according to the previous study by Kang & Duong (2021), the current study could find out further the student's familiarity with the technology during the initial implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the survey 2022, whose focus was on discovering students' use of and beliefs about social networks in learning English, the sample group of 54 non-English majors in their freshman year demonstrated that they were frequently using social media to learn English. This may prove that students, in general, prefer to use social networks in Ho Chi Minh, Vietnam, to improve their English skills. Therefore, students might have been able to make themselves familiar with technologies while using social networks as a platform for learning English and could make a smooth transition from face-to-face to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This student perception study proves that the Vietnamese government policy (2008) on incorporating technology into teaching and learning through the project called Foreign Language Project 2020 facilitated student familiarity with technologies and their effective use of them for their learning. However, it also reveals that students need to be able to access other services moving forward, such as relevant facilities and training, to be successful in their experience of online learning.

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Appendix A: Online Survey 2020

6. What were the helpful components of online learning environments? Check on all that are relevant to you.
____Lesson delivery
____Lesson materials
____Comfort with online technologies
____Motivation
____Fewer distractions
____Live platform(s), such as Zoom and Google Classroom
____Flexibility (time, learning)
____Discussion
____Convenience
____Other (Please describe below)

7. What were the challenging components of online learning environments? Check on all that are relevant to you.
____Technical problems
____Lack of community
____Less social interaction
____Harder to practice learned skills online
____Less hands-on experience
____Harder to pay attention
____Harder to retain information
____Internet access
____Feedback from a lecturer
____Communication with a lecturer
____Other (Please describe below)

Appendix B: Online Survey 2022

A. Choose your response (Yes or No) to each statement below.

	Yes	No
I use social networks to learn English.	☐	☐
I prefer using English on social networks.	☐	☐
I believe that using social networks are the best way to learn English.	☐	☐
I feel comfortable practicing English with my friends on social networks.	☐	☐
I think chatting on social networks helps me improve my English writing.	☐	☐

B. Answer the questions below.

1. What social network do you use to learn English (e.g., YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, TikTok, etc.)?
_____

2. What is the specific name of a program or a channel (e.g., BBC Learning English, English Around the World, etc.)?
_____