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STUDENTS' PREFERENCES IN ONLINE DISTANCE
LEARNING DURING COVID-19

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Abstract:

The educational community is in shambles as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pre-diploma students have particular challenges since they are unfamiliar with higher education, lack the tools necessary for efficient online distance learning, and are not academically driven. Pre-diploma UiTM students are primarily from low-income families. This aggravates problems with their online learning environment. University students must be independent learners due to the high demand for online education when the epidemic occurs. This study aims to look into 35 pre-diploma students' views on their autonomy in online English classes. The information was gathered near the end of the semester. Students asserted that their level of control over their online learning was minimal at the start of the semester, as was to be expected. They spent weeks trying to take control of their academic lives. The students discovered, however, that by the seventh week, they had more control over their online learning, indicating that they were beginning to understand what was happening in their virtual English classrooms. Once they understood that this is the only way to learn during the pandemic, they felt more at ease with their liberty in learning. This study also discovered that these brand-new undergrads positively embraced and adopted online learning as a novel method of training.

Keywords:

Pre-Diploma Students, Students' Preferences, Online English Classrooms, Online Distance Learning

Introduction

Education has not been exempt from the COVID-19 pandemic's significant effects on various fields. To stop the virus from spreading to kids, all educational institutions in around 75 countries—including Malaysia—must close in March 2020 (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). By the end of April 2020, 186 had issued nationwide closure orders, affecting 73.8% of students (UNESCO, 2020). Undoubtedly, many students have been impacted by this.

Syllabi remain required to be finished within the time specified in the academic calendars, even if educational institutions are closed. This objective has witnessed the rising of educational digital innovations throughout the globe. In the emergency scenario of the Covid-19 pandemic, online learning was the only viable option for continuing the teaching and learning process. Despite having little or no experience with online learning, each institution has made every effort to continue educating students in Malaysia. Creative digital approaches which have taken over the place of the whiteboards and markers are indeed a blessing that comes disguised as a COVID-19 pandemic. The educational world has made a 360 degrees turn from the blackboard and chalk to online platforms such as Google Meet, Zoom, Webex and other online platforms.

The Malaysian educational system was forced to switch from traditional face-to-face learning to online learning as a result of the closure of the educational institutions to ensure that no students were left behind. To better understand the challenges faced by students in online distance learning (ODL), numerous studies were conducted to examine the effectiveness and quality of online learning (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Positive student attitudes toward using ICT may enable them to learn more efficiently and do better academically. As a result, it is no longer required to support technology-mediated education by outfitting classrooms with the newest equipment. Students should be taught to think positively about the advantages and virtues of e-learning, as well as how using online sessions can help them study more effectively. However, the major concern of this study is to investigate the students' perspectives on their preferences, specifically, in online English classes.

The result of this study will be beneficial to educational institutes in addressing the students' needs in ensuring the effectiveness of ODL. By better understanding the students' preferences over their own ODL, it will be easier for the instructors to design more suitable contents which can cater to the students' needs. Additionally, as life after the pandemic is still a blur, there is a high possibility that ODL will be here to stay. Although everyone is hopeful that we can go back to learning in a normal classroom, it will be a very long and uncertain time that we still need to embrace ODL. Therefore, the educational institutes need to be well prepared for, if not 100% ODL, at least hybrid learning which combines ODL and face-to-face learning. The result of this study can provide significant input for a better and more effective ODL.

Literature Review

For Malaysian education, online learning is relatively a new concept. It has not been thoroughly researched, and the literature on the subject is limited to teachers' professional development, educators' training programmes, or university students (Burns, 2013; Luschei et al., 2008; Sari, 2012). There is not a precise definition of online learning. According to the literature, the term has been associated with a wide range of meanings and concepts. Singh and Thurman (2019) discovered 18 terms in 46 definitions for online learning. This alters the educational landscape,

which includes not just instructional methods but also individual and group decision-making processes (Dhawan, 2020; Fatani, 2020).

University students are obliged to study online from one day to the next, either in isolation, in student housing, or in family contexts, exposing them to numerous distractions. Furthermore, further stress may have been produced by concern and confusion about the unexpected scenario (Son et al., 2020). Overall, students faced numerous obstacles as a result of this abrupt shift to online education, which was dubbed "emergency remote education" and afterwards "emergency remote learning" (Hodges et al., 2020). At the same time, the emergency change in remote education allowed students more preference and raised the requirement for students to be in charge of their learning Dillon and Greene (2003), Garrison (2003) and Moore et al. (2011) agreed that distinguishing between e-learning, online learning, and distance learning was difficult. The vocabulary used to describe different forms of learning was uneven, and the phrase was occasionally used interchangeably without a clear definition. Furthermore, mobile technologies are particularly effective in fostering student preference because learners can be given the duty to learn on their own when out of school and away from the teacher (Hidayati & Diana, 2019; Pasaribu, 2018). The availability of learning resources and materials for pupils means that teachers are no longer the only source of knowledge and information. It is possible to encourage students to take an active role in their education and become less dependent on the teacher. By utilising the readily available resources provided by technology, the teacher in this situation must permit the pupils to exercise choice and grow more independent in their learning (Reinders & White, 2016).

Although it was found that there was no significant difference between online learning and traditional face-to-face learning, Adam et. Al. (2012, as cited in Muthuprasad et al., 2021) also claimed that online learning can be a perfect replacement for traditional face-to-face learning if they are designed suitably. However, it is worth noting that, when it comes to online learning, the learning quality heavily depends on the level of digital access and efficiency (Muthuprasad et al., 2021). Learners' motivation, satisfaction and interaction in online learning vary greatly if compared to learners in a traditional face-to-face classroom. Through ODL, students could improve their language skills and increase their enthusiasm and involvement by composing texts, chats, and postings (Dansieh, 2011). As a result, kids become self-sufficient and excellent learners. Furthermore, Behjat (2011) investigated how students express positive attitudes when using a technology device through writing, such as investing more time and freedom in constructing their ideas. Lin and Overbaugh (2007) also emphasised the importance of using Zoom sessions to share ideas and receive feedback. Russell (2010) stated that Zoom could help students improve their language abilities in a unique and effective method. Furthermore, chat messages can improve students' speaking and writing skills by increasing contact and communication (Liang, 2006). Therefore, online studies are proving to be a success for students in isolation.

Several recent research publications have looked at the intrinsic and extrinsic effects of these instructional innovations, indicating that they can support learning in completely online or mixed academic environments, even when switching from one medium to another is required due to the current pandemic situation. Chick et al. (2020) provide numerous options to reduce the danger of viral propagation, including the FC model, teleconferencing, and online practice,

with favourable results, since participants liked the format and wanted to learn more without having to attend face-to-face lectures regularly.

Since the strike of the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous research had been carried out by researchers from around the globe in their effort to better understand the students' and instructors' perspectives toward ODL. Aldossary (2021), in his study which explored university students' and instructors' perceptions about the utilization of e-learning platforms, found that the students are affirmative that ODL increases their learning preference due to the opportunities offered by ODL for them to be more active learners. The students also state that with the extra tasks assigned to them through ODL, they found themselves greatly contributing to their overall learning preference. Aldossary (2021) also claimed that the various online communication tools, such as Youtube, Google Classroom, and Zoom, do not only provide more opportunities for the students and instructors alike to involve in collaborative work, but these tools are also able to improve communication skills. Another study carried out during the COVID-19 period was done by Karakiş (2020). This researcher evaluated the correlation between university students' views on ODL and the success of English courses. This study found that students have positive perceptions towards all aspects of ODL environments which include teacher support, student communication and collaboration, personal relevance, authentic and active learning, student preference and satisfaction. However, research done by Arik (2021), which investigated students' perspectives on ODL environments, shed somewhat contrary results. This research found that in general, students are uncertain about ODL environments. This shows that they are unsure of whether ODL environments can provide students with preference and fulfilment. Arik (2021) claimed that effective learning cannot take place if learners are being inactive in receiving information. In his study, the participants partially agree with the active learning and students' preference features of their ODL environments.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a quantitative approach adopting a survey design. In this procedure, a structured questionnaire was designed based on the literature survey and informal discussions with the instructors who were teaching the respondents of this study. The questionnaires were constructed using Google form and were distributed online for easy access by the students. These questionnaires were distributed to 43 pre-diploma students in UiTM Perlis Branch and only 35 of the students responded. Convenient sampling was used in this study because it allows the researcher to generate more samples in a short period. It is also accessible to the instructors involved. The data were then analysed based on the feedback filled in by the students in the form provided.

Results and Discussion

The respondents that took part in this study were from two different English codes namely ELC030 (54.3%) and ELC010/020 (45.7%). The majority of 57.1% of them were male and the other 42.9% were female students between 18-21 years old

Table 1: Students' Demographic

Code	Male	Female	Total
ELC030	25.7%	28.6%	54.3%
ELC010/020	31.4%	14.3%	45.7%

In the questionnaire, we asked the students a few questions regarding their experiences with the implementation of ODL in ELC030 and ELC010/020 classes throughout the semester. The majority of them thought that ODL was challenging in the first few weeks with 37%. However, the number decreased to only 28.6% at the end of the semester. This happened because they somehow got used to the learning style and already felt comfortable with it. In the beginning, the number of students who thought ODL was easy increased slightly from 31.4% to 37.15%. In the beginning, they felt unfamiliar with the system and said that it was a different situation between high school and university and they still cannot adapt to the environment in the class. Towards the end, they managed to adapt a little bit with the implementation of ODL in these codes. Another reason why they thought ODL was challenging was that they cannot ask the teacher face-to-face, especially in language classes. Some of them also thought it was difficult to manage any group-based tasks as they were in different places. Meanwhile, the number of students who thought ODL was hard increased to 5.7% from 2.9% in the early semester. This might be due to their busy schedule to catch up with the submission at the end of the semester.

Table 2: Students' Perception Of ODL

Level	Easy	Difficult	Challenging	Hard	Others
What do you think about ODL in the early semester	31.4%	25.7%	37%	2.9%	2.9%
What do you think about ODL towards the end of the semester	37.1%	22.9%	28.6%	5.7%	5.7%

Regarding the type of platforms used, most of them preferred the use of Google Meet and WhatsApp with 91.4% and 71.4% respectively. The third highest score was Google classroom with 62.9%. Only a small percentage of them preferred the use of Cisco Webex and Facebook Live with only 2.9% each. None of them (0%) preferred the use of Facebook and MOOCs for their online classes. Their options were influenced by their familiarity with the platforms used in the classes. The other reason was that the other platforms may need a better internet connection or data coverage such as Cisco Webex and Zoom.

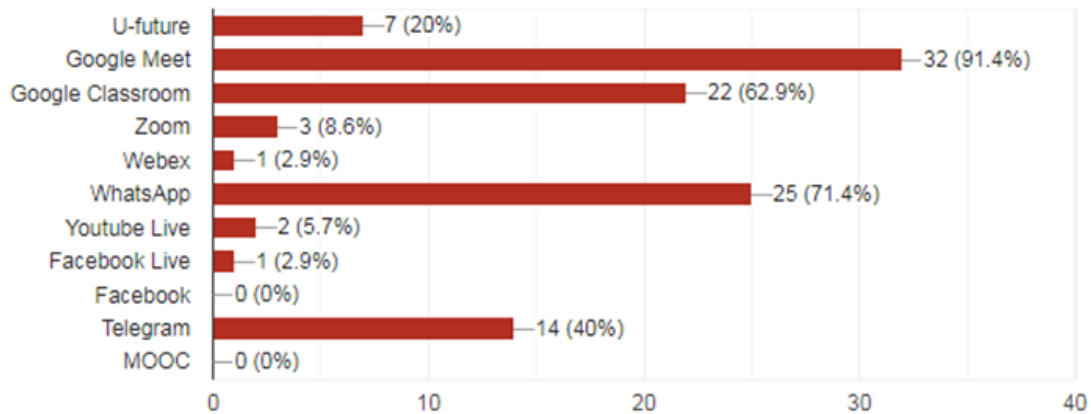


Figure 1: Preferred Platforms for Students

Preferred Platforms Used in Online Classes

When we asked them about their internet connection, 88.6% of them agreed that they had some connection problems throughout the semester. And the majority of them (91.4 %) believed good internet facilities (internet connection and gadgets) are important with ODL. They mentioned poor internet connection and low data coverage as the major problems that they faced while having ODL this semester.

Table 3: Students' Internet Connection

Statement	Yes	No	Not really
Do you experience any connection problems while having ODL for the entire semester?	88.6%	11.4%	-
Do you think having good facilities helps you with ODL better?	91.4%	5.7%	2.9%

For the learning activities, these students preferred live lectures the most with 80%, followed by group chat and group discussion with 68.6% and 65.7% respectively. They preferred live lectures as compared to recorded material since it was easy to interact with the lecture if they have any inquiries regarding the lesson or task given. For the recorded material, they said they might have some difficulty in understanding the ideas presented on their own. Thus, they selected live lectures as a better option.

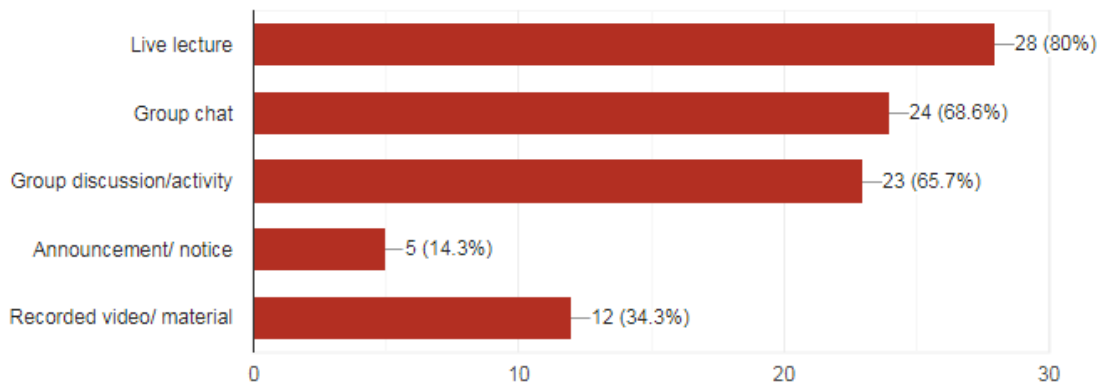


Figure 2: Preferred Activities for Students

Preferred Activities in Online Learning

When the students were asked if they like ODL or face-to-face, 75.8% of them liked the traditional classroom better. Only 24.2% of them preferred online learning better than the former one. For them, having a physical English classroom is better because they can focus more and feel more comfortable learning, asking or discussing something with the lecturer. They said the traditional classroom setting helps them to understand better and feel like it is an easier option to study. Despite that figures, they also acknowledged some boons of the ODL. They said with this new approach, they have more personal space and can cater for their own learning pace. It is also more convenient for them since they can choose to stay in their own home while continuing with ODL. Most of these students are not from affluent family backgrounds, and by having this option, they can save a lot and cope with their financial difficulties. Having ODL is also convenient since they can record the lesson and use the available gadgets that they have to access the lessons for their English classes. According to other studies, rather than favouring one type of education over another, people prefer to blend them. According to Alsaaty et al. (2016), a large proportion of students in the study's sample absorbed material more effectively through face-to-face learning than through e-learning. Despite initial difficulties with utilisation, they have a favourable assessment of their e-learning experience. According to American researcher Michael Tagoe (2012), students prefer blended classes that combine online and face-to-face activities.

Table 4: Students' Preference On Medium Of Instruction

If given the chance to choose, which one do you prefer?	
Online Distance Learning	24.2%
Face-to-face learning	75.8%

Some of these students also took the initiative for autonomous learning. They used the videos recording made by the lecturers to help them understand the lessons better. Some of them also learned together with friends using social media platforms to conduct any of their group tasks or to discuss any related matters to their English classes. Some of them also took the initiative

to search for extra materials online and watch any related educational topics on YouTube, for instance, to aid them with the lesson.

Conclusions

In a nutshell, these students were positive in accepting ODL as a form of their new medium for learning in this new era. Even when they thought it was challenging at first, they still tried their best to cope with the instruction. Their perspectives changed for the better as the semester went on. They also preferred the platforms which were more familiar to them as compared to the other options. These students chose face-to-face instruction better than online classes since it is more convenient for them and they need direct communication with the lecturers in learning the English language. However, they still acknowledged the benefits that ODL could offer them.

As for the suggestion, the students think that having a good language lab with a proper internet connection might be a good idea to help the students on the campus with ODL. They are also hoping for a stronger WIFI connection in the campus area to ease them with online learning for the language classes. Authors such as Agung et al. (2020) drew attention to some technology-related issues when they discovered that most students surveyed were uninterested in online learning, owing to a lack of access to the internet and other technological resources, potentially revealing the problem of the digital divide. Due to the marked contrast caused by the teaching-learning environment switch, the abrupt shift towards e-learning since spring 2020 has had other tangible web-based limits, which have been indicated by similar studies, such as over-reliance on the proper functioning of technology or lack of personal contact in video conferences (Goksu and Duran, 2020, Clark-Wilson et al., 2020).

Educators' troubles may be attributed to their inability to deal with growing technology in such a short time. ElSaheli-Elhage (2021) found that some educators admitted that they are not technologically literate enough to deal with regular online teaching activities during the school year. Lecturers, on the other hand, consider the need to adapt courses to new teaching environments to be the major disadvantage of the online education system, followed by the student assessment system and students' low efficiency in learning new material. The main causes of student dissatisfaction include a lack of student-teacher interactions, a lack of peer socialisation, and a lower level of teaching quality. Therefore, both parties need to be satisfied to ensure a successful partnership in online learning.

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