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## FOREIGN LANGUAGES AND VIETNAMESE

## CHALLENGES OF ONLINE LEARNING FACED BY FIRST-YEAR LANGUAGE STUDENTS AT HIGHER EDUCATION DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

TRAN KIEU ANH\* - NGUYEN THI LOAN\*\*

**ABSTRACT:** Educational systems worldwide as well as educational systems in Vietnam have faced many difficulties due to the impact of Coronavirus pandemic. The transition from face-to-face instruction to online learning setting is the optimum solution to maintain teaching and learning activities in this situation. Besides the enjoyable experiences, students also face many challenges when getting used to the new form of learning. This study set out to explore difficulties experienced by first-year English language students during this period. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected through the questionnaire. This paper finds how students were encountering environmental, technical and emotional challenges. As a result, some solutions are provided to encourage students to deal with these obstacles to study effectively.

**KEY WORDS:** online learning; Covid-19 pandemic; environmental; technical; emotional; challenges.

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### 1. Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic, which creates tremendous challenges of health for every nation, has seriously influenced people's lives. Not only socio-economic performance but also educational systems have been materially affected. In Vietnam, since the most recent outbreak of COVID-19 in May 2021, social distancing policy has been issued in many cities in order to prevent the infection of coronavirus. Universities have been shut down temporarily and there has been an enormous transition from face-to-face to distance learning. In the context of "stay-at-home" order, virtual education has been applied as an alternative delivery teaching method. This method makes it possible for learners to access to materials, to interact with the knowledge, collaborate with the instructor, and other learners; and to gain support in the learning course, which contributes to knowledge acquisition, construction of personal meaning and development of learning experience [Ally, p.7]. By contrast, the shift of teaching delivery mode from classroom teaching to distance teaching creates several obstacles to students which may impact students' learning adversely. Therefore, identifying the factors which may have negative influences on the satisfaction of students become the must for all educational organizations. Nevertheless, the issue has been paid too little attention. In this research, the challenges met by first-year students at the higher education during the pandemic will be discussed.

### 2. The implementation of online learning

In online education, learners are physically distant from the instructors or tutors and a medium is required to deliver knowledge. The use of forms of technology such as computers and other devices in learning is its major feature. It was indicated that online classes enabled learners to improve higher order and critical thinking skills and to acquire knowledge and meaning. Desirable characteristics of online classes also included cost reduction, the provision of convenient learning, as well as access to quality education. The benefit of increasing level of attention more on the content of the course was emphasized since issues such as parking and traffic were eliminated.

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Whilst many researchers highlighted the benefits of online classes, several shortcomings have also been reported.

#### ***Environmental challenges***

One of the most essential factors that must be called into question is the condition of students. Face-to-face classes provide students with sufficient facilities for learning. When the unplanned online learning was carried out, students were required to be at their place. Previous research suggested that home environments were not conducive for students' learning since students, especially who lived in crowded high-density locations were not able to concentrate during online lessons. The conditions were not well prepared; as a result, the learning process would not run well.

The lack of social interaction among distance learners was also flagged as one of the challenges faced by students. It was suggested that social interaction played a vital role in boosting students' learning and fulfilment with their courses. When students had a strong and active social life, they would probably be highly persistent and satisfied with their learning. In contrast, weaker sense of connectedness may cause lower persistence rates and learner's satisfaction.

#### ***Technical challenges***

Technological advances have undoubtedly contributed to the success of distance education. This can be inferred that the effectiveness of the learning process relies on the application of technology. When students had low knowledge of computer media, they might find it difficult to study online; consequently, students and teachers were not able to mutually engage and collaborate effectively [Bower, 2019].

In addition, Kaisara, G., & Bwalya, K. J. [2021] reported that students' learning process was potentially challenged by "high volume of user traffic on e-learning platform or the poor internet network". It was noted that student accessibility in poor network coverage areas was limited which severely impacted their perceptions of online learning and learning outcomes.

#### ***Emotional challenges***

Students' enjoyment and satisfaction toward the learning experience impacts their learning process. When students are at home for months, their emotional state is apparently affected. They might be worried about their health condition, be distracted by family matters, etc. Findings reported that there are negative connections between negative emotions and learning outcomes [Heckel & Ringeisen, 2019].

Another consideration is how to maintain student motivation. Motivation refers to learners' intrinsic or extrinsic stimulation to learn. It was described as the satisfaction fundamental in the activity and the intention to reach a target. Students with a lack of motivation overall had lower success rates than their counterparts. They tended not to have enough time to complete assignments which results in submitting poor quality work or late assignment. Though both internal and external motivation are influential, this study will be focused on external factors that are the major consequences of the change in the learning condition.

The issue of online learning in Vietnam during Covid-19 pandemic has been discussed in several studies. Dinh, L.P., & Nguyen, T.T. [2020] investigated students' satisfaction with their online learning experience. Though some problems were reported, there was little quantitative analysis of each factor impacting students' learning. Students' obstacles in online education were also examined in the study of Van, D.T.H., & Thi, H.H.Q. [2021] but the focus was on the student's barriers to the possibility of implementing online learning in high schools in the South of Vietnam. Hence, this

study adds to literature by clarifying several challenges that were faced by language students in a university in Vietnam.

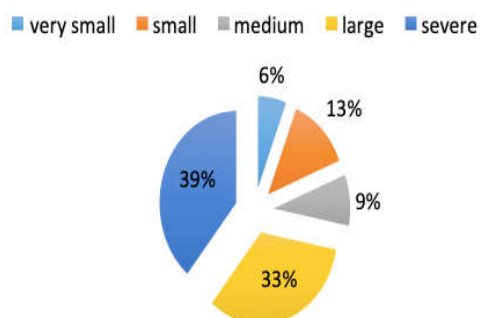
### 3. Investigating the challenges faced by FFL freshmen

Language classrooms can be defined as sociolinguistic environments and discourse communities in which interaction is believed to facilitate learners' language development. Therefore, the transfer from face-to-face class to online class would probably hinder the performance of language students. That was the reason for choosing participants including 138 English-majored students.

Students participated in face-to-face learning activities since the beginning of the semester in March, 2021. Nevertheless, due to the severity of Covid 19 pandemic, online learning became an alternative for the last two-thirds of the semester. Previously, teachers and students already had experience of online learning and teaching in a short time, only 2 weeks of revision in the first semester.

To get fully insight into the challenges faced by students, the study was conducted based on the investigation in both qualitative and quantitative data. The questionnaire was designed based on the constructs of Aguilera-Hermida, A. P. [2020]. The questions were divided into 3 categories referring to environmental, technical and emotional challenges. The levels of online learning challenges are reflected on the Likert scale of 0 (very small) to 4 (severe) in which large and severe options show great influence. An open-ended question which aimed at getting students' explanation on their option for each question was added. The questionnaires were then distributed to all participants via Google Forms™ and the data was gathered after one week. 138 out of 138 participants responded to the close-ended questions while 92 out of those answered open-ended questions. The data were then grouped and analyzed thoroughly.

#### 3.1. Environmental challenges

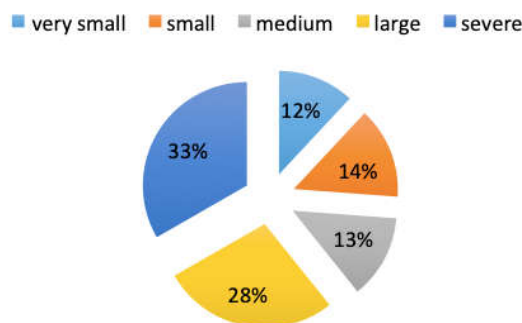


**Figure 1.** Concentration difficulties living at home

Figure 1 as seen above shows the percentage of respondents who claimed to face concentration difficulties living at home. It is apparent that a significantly great number of students reported problems in focusing while they were at home (over 70%). Family members and ambient noise distracted students from their learning. Here are some representative quotes: *'my house is in a crowded neighborhood and it keeps noisy all day which sometimes makes me unable to listen to the teachers'* and *'sometimes my mom seems to forget the fact that I am having online classes, she keeps talking to me even when I am wearing the earphones'*. In addition, students alluded home to a place of relaxation so paying full attention to the lessons was difficult. Students stated: *"I am more*



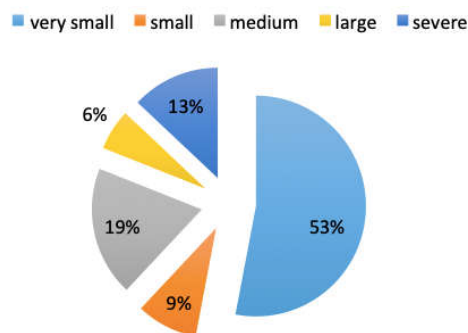
*productive when being in a separate space which is away from home. Home is associated with winding down so it takes a lot of effort to work well".* This finding is in agreement with Aguilera-Hermida, A. P. [2020]'s study which showed that the most considerable challenge perceived by online learners was the concentration problems being at home.



**Figure 2.** *Lack of social interaction*

It can be seen from the data in Figure 2 that a great number of respondents was greatly affected by the lack of social interaction (61%). According to the participants, online learning did not maximize the ability of interaction between teachers and learners and among learners. They agreed that cyber-interaction via e-learning platforms were not really natural and it could not completely replace the traditional face-to-face interaction. However, what students claimed to be a big issue was the interaction they should have had in their social life. *"Teachers often organizes interactive activities so to a certain extent, learners are able to interact with them and with each other. This increases the level of collaboration and mitigates the lack of socialization."* - noted one student. Nevertheless, *"we could not participate in clubs at university or have face-to-face conversations and discussions. Consequently, we are likely to be less active and less persistent in the process of learning"*. The result supports arguments in literature [Van, D.T.H., & Thi, H.H.Q., 2021] which revealed that face-to-face teaching and learning optimized socialization while such was the weakness of online education.

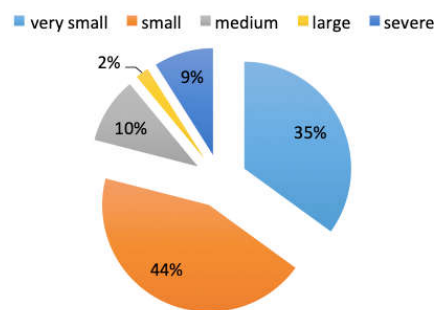
### 3.2. Technical challenges



**Figure 3.** *Difficulties with Internet connection*

It is noteworthy that the percentage of students facing problems with Internet connection was remarkably lower than that of those who did not. 19% stated that unstable Internet access hindered them in learning whereas 62% indicated that they were not affected. Some respondents reported experiencing slow connection, which prevented their attempts to access the e-learning platform. One

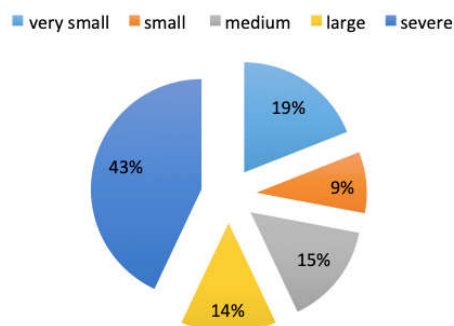
student reported: "Because my siblings had to study online and my parents were working online as well, during the peak Internet hours, it took several minutes to access the learning platform. When the weather was terrible and I was not lucky enough, I would miss a part of the lesson". However, others expressed that they did not have any troubles with the Internet connection. Many expressed: "It took me a few seconds to log in", "I never had any problems with the Internet access. The system run smoothly all the time". One possible explanation for this result might be that though the network coverage is widespread and network carriers ensure to provide high speed Internet access, the number of people working and learning online has increased abruptly. In addition, a lot of distance workers and learners using the internet simultaneously may contribute to accessibility challenge. This result accords with the earlier observations, which showed that Internet access did not significantly impacted students' learning experience [Dinh, L.P., & Nguyen, T.T., 2020].



**Figure 4.** Unfamiliarity with technology

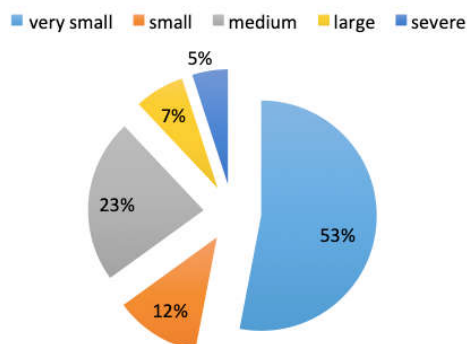
The figure points out that just a small number of students found it unfamiliar or difficult to apply technology for online learning. Only 11% of the students were impacted by the unfamiliarity with online learning applications or challenges in the adaptation to the use of those technological tools while there were no troubles for 79% who mastered the online learning technology. These students revealed that they learned Computer Literacy and Science subject at high school; thus, they are already accustomed to the basic steps such as logging into the class, submitting the assignments, communicating with the teachers and other students or using the applications and websites for online learning. In addition, in their first semester at university, students had experience of uploading their homework on an online group, peer-checking online essays and giving feedback on their classmates' videos. Here are representative quotes: "It took me just a few minutes to be used to the learning platform," and "I had almost no troubles with technology at all". These opinions seem to be consistent with the previous research, which stated that if students lacked confidence in the technology they were using, the result might affect negatively the students' learning outcomes [Bower, 2019].

### 3.3. Emotional challenges



**Figure 5.** Lack of motivation from teachers and other students

It can be realized from the figure above that more than a half of the students (57%) blamed their ineffective online learning on the lack of the direct motivation from teachers and other classmates; meanwhile one-third of the students (28%) confirmed not to be impacted by insufficient motivation from teachers and other classmates. In response to the open-ended question, a majority of the students reported that their teachers were always enthusiastic and supportive anytime they ran into troubles with online learning. Furthermore, *"My teacher often organizes exciting activities to raise our interest in the lessons"* was a popular comment from many students. Nevertheless, most students added that despite of the tremendous support from teachers and classmates for online learning, several obstacles still remained due to the space constraints which prevented several interactive learning activities. If they had received direct support from teachers and other students, the learning result would have been much improved. *"I would prefer interacting with my teacher and my classmates to absorbing the knowledge through the Internet and exercise system"*. This outcome supports the conclusion of the prior research which showed that lack of motivation in online learning might result in overall poor - quality work [Albelbisi &Yusop, 2019].



**Figure 6.** Negative emotions

It is obvious that a minor number of the students had negative emotions which resulted from environmental and technical problems (12%). Some students found themselves struggling with unstable internet connection which sometimes consequently disrupted the online learning progress. Students also worried about their health and their family members', especially when the Covid-19

pandemic was becoming more complicated and spreading rapidly. In contrast, it was a surprise that 65% of the students announced to have no unwanted feelings caused by e-learning. Some of them confided that: *"I have more positive emotions than negative ones because I am around with my family members", "I feel more comfortable to study online compared to face-to-face since I do not have to travel a long distance in uncomfortable weather to get to school", "I am always optimistic because I am aware that online learning allows me to continue my study"*, etc. This finding appears to be compatible with the previous research which indicated that emotions were an integral part of the learning environment and influenced students' learning experiences [Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2006].

#### 4. Conclusion

The investigation of challenges of remote education encountered by students in the context of Covid-19 pandemic has shown significant results obtained from the questionnaire. It is concluded that home is not a proper place for study so students may have negative experience in the process of online learning. Teachers should be conscious of this factor to deliberately promote them in order for them not to be radically affected. Further work is also required to alleviate the lack of social interaction and external motivation as well. Using mall nudges to show encouragement may be a possible solution. Another measurement to take into account is developing a supportive learning community. However, establishing and maintaining the performance of this kind of community takes time and effort. Further studies should be conducted to examine strategies to build and cultivate a kind of virtual community which encourages interaction and generate motivation for online learners. In terms of technical aspects, guidelines on the use of virtual learning platforms should be provided to help students be more knowledgeable of the tools. It is also imperative for teachers to understand whether a student is facing problems related to internet connection or the use of devices or not. Teachers' insight may help reduce negative emotions which are likely to influence learners' outcomes negatively. Likewise, a positive attitude towards the urgent transfer of learning among learners needs to be developed and maintained. The teacher who plays role as a motivator should explain how learners' attitude affects the education experience, academic performance and learning outcomes. Consequently, students may attempt to consciously promote their attitude towards this method of learning.

Taken together, these findings suggest the teacher actively stimulate students' online learning process. It is recommended that further research regarding the roles of the teacher in online education would be worthwhile. Moreover, the issue of supportive learning community is an intriguing one which could be usefully explored in a further study.

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**Một số thách thức sinh viên chuyên ngành ngôn ngữ năm nhất bậc đại học  
đối mặt khi học trực tuyến trong đại dịch covid-19**

**Tóm tắt:** Hệ thống giáo dục trên toàn thế giới cũng như hệ thống giáo dục Việt Nam đã và đang đối mặt với nhiều khó khăn do ảnh hưởng bởi đại dịch Covid 19. Việc chuyển đổi từ học trực tiếp sang học trực tuyến trong bối cảnh đại dịch là giải pháp tối ưu để duy trì hoạt động dạy và học. Bên cạnh những trải nghiệm thú vị, sinh viên cũng đối mặt với nhiều thách thức khi làm quen với hình thức học mới. Nghiên cứu này được tiến hành với mục đích tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà sinh viên năm thứ nhất, ngành ngôn ngữ Anh gặp phải trong giai đoạn học trực tuyến. Dữ liệu định lượng và dữ liệu định tính được thu thập thông qua bảng hỏi. Bài viết nhằm mục đích chỉ ra mức độ ảnh hưởng của các yếu tố môi trường, kỹ thuật và cảm xúc đối với sinh viên. Từ đó, đề xuất một số giải pháp để giúp sinh viên học trực tuyến đạt hiệu quả.

**Từ khóa:** học trực tuyến; đại dịch Covid-19; môi trường; kỹ thuật; cảm xúc; thách thức.

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4. Bài viết trình bày theo thứ tự như sau:

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