



Comparing the effectiveness of online and onsite learning in English proficiency classes: Learners' perspectives

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Abstract

Online education has significantly gained popularity due to new technology and more importantly, the growing impact of the digitalization of the economy. Despite its prominent advantages such as accessibility, affordability and flexibility, the effectiveness of online education is still a constant debate and needs extensive investigations in different research contexts. This study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of online learning in comparison to traditional learning in the context of English language teaching. This descriptive study was undertaken with learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) in English proficiency preparation classes, employing an online questionnaire together with final scores of proficiency tests. The results revealed that the participants had relatively positive perceptions towards online learning in all four aspects: course content, teachers, learning environment and course supports. The significant finding was that when comparing the final results of the VSTEP exams, the online learners generally were able to perform better than the learners in traditional classrooms, though the difference was not largely remarkable. Online education in the new normal will continue to excel and the effectiveness of this learning mode certainly needs further investigation from different perspectives.

Keywords: Comparison, Effectiveness, Learners' perceptions, Online learning, Proficiency, VSTEP.

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Contribution of this paper to the literature

This empirical study contributes to the existing literature of online education by exploring the effectiveness of online and onsite learning in English proficiency classes from learners' perspectives.

1. Introduction

Online education has been the main force behind educational development due to the widespread COVID-19 pandemic and the implementation of social distancing in many countries in the past few years. Online teaching and learning have become an important alternative to traditional learning (Asaqli, 2020). Since the pandemic has established a new standard for online learning it is reasonable to assume that online education will co-exist with conventional education to provide more options for teaching and learning, promote education equity and enhance education innovation (Xie, Siau, & Nah, 2020). Online courses have gained relevance and proved to be as effective as conventional classes (Gallani, 2020). Few studies have been conducted in the context of English teaching and learning particularly in Vietnam to examine the effectiveness of online learning in comparison with onsite learning from the learners' perspective. The current research attempts to narrow the research gap by investigating learners' perceived effectiveness of online learning and comparing their final scores in English proficiency tests.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learning Effectiveness

Learning effectiveness refers to the outcomes or academic performance that learners can achieve through participation in a learning process (Müller, Stahl, Alder, & Müller, 2018). Some other indicators of learning effectiveness may include learners' satisfaction and motivation. In addition, post-learning effects such as improved performance or changes to learning behaviors can be assessed for learning effectiveness. According to several researchers (Kintu, Zhu, & Kagambe, 2017), learning effectiveness can be measured by exploring learners' perceptions and academic performance such as final grades.

2.2. Online Learning and its Characteristics in Comparison with Face-to-Face Learning

Online learning refers to learning environments accessible through the internet generally requiring computers, laptops or smartphones and a high-speed internet connection (Sadiku, Adebo, & Musa, 2018). In a general context, the terms online education, online instruction and online teaching and learning can be used interchangeably. In comparison to traditional classroom instruction, effective online instruction can have numerous typical characteristics such as the ability to be accessed from anywhere at any time; the use of online tutorials and learning activities, interactive multimedia, simulations and virtual manipulative; the use of aspects of online learning to help students develop positive attitudes; the facilitation of various learning experiences; the provision of online tests and feedback on the outcomes; the facilitation of customizable and adaptive training; the provision of help for learner reflection; offering online learning scaffolds; facilitating distance learning through interactive online learning activities; encouraging cooperative learning; taking multiple intellects into account; adhering educational standards; offering guidance for highly accurate application in a variety of situations; providing online and offline professional development courses being adaptable to quickly adopt fresh and helpful instructional paradigms as they emerge (Meylani, Bitter, & Legacy, 2015).

2.3. Measuring Learning Effectiveness

Effective classrooms in either a physical or virtual environment can be mainly measured on several key aspects including course content, teachers, the learning environment and learner supports (Luu, 2021).

Course content should successfully apply best practices and research on teaching and learning. It is ideal that high-quality course content should cover decisions and choices of pedagogical approach, instructional media and activities and exercises for learning and assessments. When developing specific course content, teachers can consider elements such as expected learning outcomes, course length, class activities and supplementary materials (Almaiah & Alyoussef, 2019).

It is widely accepted that teachers play a dispensable role in the teaching process as their teaching *strategies* and methods have a significant influence on learners' performance (Yao, Rao, Jiang, & Xiong, 2020). In the 21st century, in addition to having a broad and updated understanding of the subject matter, teachers in both a physical and virtual classroom are expected to have good knowledge of technology. In a given class, teachers can be evaluated through their professional and pedagogical knowledge, their effective interaction with learners and their flexibility in using technology in teaching (Kaur, 2019).

The term learning environment generally refers to either physical institutional learning environments such as classrooms, lecture halls and labs or virtual learning environments for online learning. In such cases, a learning environment that is conducive and suits the needs of the teachers and learners can help enhance learning effectiveness (Puteh, Che, Mohamed, Adnan, & Ibrahim, 2015).

Learner supports mainly refer to administrative resources that learners can access for their effective learning process which may include counselling, scaffolding and giving feedback (Pratt, 2015). In an online learning environment, support services are critically important to enable learners to cope with the academic and personal pressures of distance learning (Shabani & Maboe, 2021).

2.4. VSTEP Examinations

The Vietnamese Standardized Test of English Proficiency generally known as VSTEP was approved by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) on March 11, 2015 (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2019). This nationally accepted test is an adaptation of the common European framework of reference for languages and measures learners' proficiency through the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Test takers are rated and classified according to their proficiency level from level 3 (B1) to level 5 (C1).

3. Materials and Methods

3.1. Research Setting

The Center for Foreign Languages of Can Tho University (CFL) is a leading foreign language center in the Mekong Delta region. The center has over 30 years of experience in providing courses in English, French, Japanese, Chinese and Korean for learners and individuals who need to improve their foreign language skills in order to study and conduct research at universities or in their workplaces.

Since 2015, the center has provided VSTEP preparation courses and in 2020 under the influence of social distancing due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the demand for online learning, CFL started to provide online VSTEP preparation courses. Both online and onsite classes basically use similar course materials and the course duration is between 10 and 12 weeks.

3.2. Research Design

In this study, a descriptive research design was employed using an online questionnaire together with the final scores of VSTEP exams from one group of learners of onsite courses and one of online courses. Descriptive research is an appropriate method as it can help collect data from a large number of respondents in a short period of time (Nassaji, 2015).

3.3. Research Instruments

The data for this study were collected through an online survey instrument and the final scores of official VSTEP exams.

3.3.1. Questionnaire of Learners' Perceptions of Effective Online Learning

Learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of online learning were assessed by an online survey developed by the research team, consisting of 3 main sections. The first section requested personal information. In the second section, the participants were asked to rank their level of agreement with the four aspects of online learning using a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 0 (not agree at all) to 4 (agree the most). The third section comprised three open-ended questions asking about the advantages and challenges of online learning and suggestions to improve the quality of online learning.

3.3.2. Learners' Academic Performance

Learners' academic performance was measured by their final results in official VSTEP examinations conducted from January to June of 2022. The learners' level of proficiency was classified as level 3 (B1), level 4 (B2), level 5 (C1) or unrated if they were not satisfactory.

3.4. Participants

Participants in this study were online learners at the CFL during the first six months of 2022. A total of 166 participants completed the survey. The basic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Demographics details of participants (N = 166).

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
Gender		
Female	87	52.4%
Male	79	47.6%
Occupation		
Students	141	84.9%
Employees	25	15.1%

4. Results

The results are presented and discussed based on a detailed analysis of the data resulting from the survey and score comparison.

4.1. Learners' Perceptions of Online Learning Effectiveness

Learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of online courses are examined through the four aspects of content, teachers, learning environment and learner supports. The participants indicated their level of agreement with the statements in each aspect.

4.1.1. Content

Table 2 shows the percentage of respondents showing their level of agreement with the effectiveness of the content of an online course. Most of the participants indicated their high agreement with all five statements. The statement "program duration is reasonable" had the highest level of agreement reported by above 50% of the participants. The importance of online course length has been examined in a previous study (Luu, 2021) indicating that students were generally concerned about the class schedule and course duration when making their decision to choose an online course.

The statement "classroom activities are suitable" also had a high level of agreement. The result was much in accordance with existing literature on online learning (Surjono, Muhtadi, & Trilisiana, 2019) examining the importance of online activities in developing online course content. The statement "program content meets expectations" had a relatively lower level of agreement than other statements. It is possible that most of the participants in this study were relatively new to online learning and that their expectations were not completely satisfied. However, this explanation needs further investigation with a larger sample.

Table 2. Descriptive results of effectiveness of content (N = 166).

Characteristics	0	1	2	3	4
Program content meets expectations.	3 (1.8%)	7 (4.3%)	18 (10.8%)	77 (46.4%)	61 (36.7%)
The program duration is reasonable.	3 (1.8%)	7 (4.3%)	12 (7.2%)	60 (36.1%)	84 (50.6%)
Lessons are well-presented.	4 (2.4%)	8 (4.8%)	23 (13.8%)	66 (39.8%)	65 (39.2%)
Classroom activities are suitable.	6 (3.6%)	7 (4.3%)	18 (10.8%)	66 (39.8%)	69 (41.5%)
Exercises on the e-learning system are various and sufficient.	5 (3.1%)	9 (5.4%)	21 (12.6%)	64 (38.5%)	67 (40.4%)

4.1.2. Teachers

It is not surprising that most of the participants indicated their high level of agreement with the effectiveness of teaching staff in online courses as teachers can play vital roles to guarantee the success of online instruction (Huang, 2018). In this study, half of the respondents indicated their highest level of agreement with several features of online teachers' effectiveness as shown in Table 3. For the statement "teachers ensure class time and a lesson plan", 114 (68.7%) of the participants (students) reported their highest level of agreement. It is speculated that in an online course, discipline from both teachers and learners is highly expected. However, this explanation needs further investigation particularly from the teachers' perspective.

The statement "teachers have extensive knowledge of subject matter" also had a very high level of agreement. The result is relatively in line with a previous study (Albrahim, 2020) emphasizing the importance of teaching competencies for a successful online course.

The two statements "teachers have good interaction with learners" and "teachers use technology in teaching effectively" had a rather high level of agreement. It is understandable that these two factors are vital for conducting an online course (Rose, 2018).

The statement "teachers have good and intelligible methods for knowledge delivery" had the lowest level of agreement (45.2%). It can be explained that many participants in this study were familiar with traditional modes of teaching and learning and they could perceive online teachers as less efficient. It is worth examining this speculation in further research.

Table 3. Descriptive results of effectiveness of teachers (N = 166).

Characteristics	0	1	2	3	4
Teachers have extensive knowledge of subject matter.	2 (1.2%)	3 (1.8%)	14 (8.4%)	52 (31.3%)	95 (57.3%)
Teachers have a good and intelligible method for knowledge delivery.	3 (1.8%)	5 (3.1%)	19 (11.5%)	64 (38.4%)	75 (45.2%)
Teachers have good interaction with learners.	3 (1.8%)	7 (4.3%)	10 (6.1%)	54 (32.5%)	92 (55.3%)
Teachers use technology to teach effectively.	5 (3.1%)	5 (3.1%)	8 (4.8%)	62 (37.3%)	86 (51.7%)
Teachers ensure class time and a lesson plan.	1 (0.6%)	3 (1.8%)	6 (3.6%)	42 (25.3%)	114 (68.7%)

4.1.3. Learning Environment

Internet connectivity is vital for online learning (Mafruudloh, Arifatin, & Chasanah, 2021). However, in this study, participants reported a relatively low level of agreement with this factor as presented in Table 4. The statement "internet connections can support online learning" had 28.3 percent of the participants indicating their highest level of agreement. "The image and audio quality of the lesson is qualified" also had less than 50 percent reported their high level of agreement indicating the technical issue in providing online courses.

The statement "technological assistance from teachers and supportive staff is timely and appropriate" received a relatively high level of agreement. The result is relatively in line with a previous study (Luu, 2021) emphasizing the importance of instant and continuous assistance from teachers as well as class tutors to increase the students' confidence and engagement.

Table 4. Descriptive results of the effectiveness of the learning environment (N = 166).

Characteristics	0	1	2	3	4
Internet connections can support online learning.	10 (6.1%)	9 (5.4%)	27 (16.3%)	73 (43.9%)	47 (28.3%)
Apps like Zoom and Google Meet are easy to use.	3 (1.8%)	4 (2.4%)	14 (8.4%)	59 (35.5%)	86 (51.9%)
The image and audio quality of the lesson are qualified.	5 (3.1%)	5 (3.1%)	28 (16.9%)	58 (34.8%)	70 (42.1%)
Technological assistance from teachers and the supportive staff is timely and appropriate.	3 (1.8%)	4 (2.4%)	15 (9.1%)	56 (33.6%)	88 (53.1%)
E-Learning systems are logically displayed.	4 (2.4%)	9 (5.4%)	20 (12.2%)	65 (39.1%)	68 (40.9%)

The statement "apps like Zoom and Google Meet are easy to use" also had above 50 percent of the participants' agreement. This result also supports a previous study examining the effectiveness of several common tools for online teaching (Serhan, 2020).

4.1.4. Learner Supports

In general, the participants (students) reported a relatively high level of agreement with different features of course support as shown in Table 5. The results of this factor can help the center's administration improve the quality of its services particularly in online teaching and learning.

Table 5. Descriptive results of effectiveness of learner supports (N = 166).

Characteristics	0	1	2	3	4
The registration method is convenient.	3 (1.8%)	5 (3.1%)	20 (12.2%)	64 (38.4%)	74 (44.5%)
The payment method is convenient.	3 (1.8%)	5 (3.1%)	15 (9.1%)	64 (38.4%)	79 (47.6%)
Supportive teams are enthusiastic and timely.	4 (2.4%)	3 (1.8%)	17 (10.2%)	63 (37.9%)	79 (47.6%)
Technological guidance is sufficient and timely.	3 (1.8%)	3 (1.8%)	16 (9.6%)	65 (39.1%)	79 (47.6%)
Course information is sufficient and updated.	3 (1.8%)	3 (1.8%)	14 (8.4%)	59 (35.5%)	87 (52.4%)

4.2. Comparison of the Results of VSTEP Exams

The results of the VSTEP exams were presented in Table 6. In general, the success rates of both groups were above 70% as shown in Table 6. Comparing the results of the VSTEP examinations of both groups, the online learners had better results than their friends in face-to-face courses.

At level B1, both online and face-to-face groups almost had the same rate of exam success (59.12% and 59.04%, respectively). At level B2, the online group had a relatively higher percentage (18.67%) than their counterparts (11.82%). However, it is also worth noting that there were some face-to-face learners (1.01%) who could gain the level C1 while there were no online learners who could achieve this level.

Table 6. Results of VSTEP examinations.

Levels of VSTEP	Onsite		Online	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Level 3 (B1)	175	59.12%	98	59.04%
Level 4 (B2)	35	11.82%	31	18.67%
Level 5 (C1)	3	1.01%	-	-
Unrated	83	28.05%	37	22.29%
Total	296	100%	166	100%

4.3. Open-ended Questions

4.3.1. Advantages of Online Learning

The participants were asked to present their favorite things about online learning. All of the responses were thematically analyzed and several key themes were identified including effective teachers, flexibility of online learning, various types of exercises and assignments and learner supports.

Most of the participants reported positive comments on the teachers as being responsible, enthusiastic and supportive. They also mentioned some specific teachers they loved to study with. The following were some of the common comments:

The teachers are great. They help me with difficult exercises.

I always receive feedback from my teachers. They have good interaction.

They are responsible and effective. I can learn a lot from them.

The participants also recognized the teachers' good discipline in online teaching. The learners highly appreciated when teachers followed the class schedule and provided feedback timely.

I like the teachers because they always follow the schedule strictly.

The teachers are highly responsible and have good discipline.

I can learn a lot from my teachers' timely feedback.

Flexibility in online courses is obviously the main attraction for learners. This is expected and is largely in line with previous research about online learning (Al Rawashdeh, Mohammed, Al Arab, Alara, & Al-Rawashdeh, 2021). In this study, many participants shared this advantage of online learning.

I like online learning because it is more convenient and flexible.

Online learning is more suitable for me because I can review recordings for those classes I missed.

I prefer online classes and decided to take this course because of its flexible schedule. I can both attend Zoom sessions and watch the recording as many times as I want.

Many participants also mentioned the reason for having a wide range of exercises and assignments when attending online courses. In addition, it is advantageous for online learners to practice and get useful experiences of reading and writing on screen which will help them in official computer-based tests.

I can complete different exercises that can prepare me for the official examination.

The exercises and assignments are very practical and strengthen my knowledge.

I prefer online exercises because I can check for immediate answers.

Learner supports are more important in online learning as many learners may face technical challenges in a virtual classroom. Effective and easily accessible learner supports are necessary to guarantee the success of online learning (Rotar, 2022). In this study, many participants indicated good learner support as a prominent advantage of online learning.

Learner supports in my online course are timely and can solve my problems effectively.

Although I do not have online learning experience, I can receive good technical support from both teachers and course technicians.

The course guideline is very detailed and the learner services for online learning are very professional and effective.

4.3.2. Challenges of Online Learning

Several common issues of online learning are presented in this study including stable internet connection, self-motivation, assessment, and health issues.

The most stated problem indicated by many participants was an unstable internet connection. The result was almost in accordance with a previous study in the Vietnamese context (Kang & Duong, 2021).

My internet is not stable and sometimes I cannot continue my learning.

Lag is very common and I cannot turn on the camera during class.

My Wi-Fi system at home is very weak and it is not really effective for online learning.

Although flexibility is the most prominent reason for many learners to choose online learning, self-motivation can be a challenge when learners are not fully committed to their learning. As reviewed in the literature of online learning, lack of motivation is the common cause for many learners' dropouts in online learning (Gustiani, 2020). Some participants shared this concern.

It is not easy to stay motivated as an online learner because I can find many excuses for not learning as scheduled.

Online learning requires much intrinsic motivation but I am usually distracted and can hardly stay concentrated for a long time.

When I am at home, many things interrupt my learning and it is difficult to stay focused during the course.

In terms of assessment, online learning generally is more subject to piracy, plagiarism and cheating. In the Vietnamese online environment, the issue seems more serious when not many educational institutions can equip anti-plagiarism software and teachers find it difficult to control fairness and cheating by just looking at and marking students' assignments (Pham & Tran, 2018).

Online assessment in my course is not always effective when learners refuse to turn on cameras and cheat in exams.

Plagiarism is rather common and it is not easy to solve because teachers have a heavy workload and lack effective tools.

Dishonesty and technical problems in online learning can affect academic performance. Teachers should apply more assessment practices especially formative assessment for better assessment results.

4.3.3. Suggestions

The learners in this study were asked to propose effective ways to improve online teaching. It is interesting that many participants were greatly satisfied with their online courses and did not have specific suggestions. For many others, the suggestions were relatively positive and classified into several key themes including teachers' pedagogy, learning materials, course length, interactions and learning supports.

To improve online course quality, many participants indicated teachers' pedagogy was a direct and determining factor. Teachers should apply appropriate online teaching techniques to increase active learning such as using games, concept mapping and collaborative group activities. Some comments were as follows:

Learning materials are important for enhancing learning behaviors and have a direct effect on academic performance (Alenezi, 2020). In this study, many participants suggested further materials for self-learning, particularly on the e-learning system. Some of them said:

My learning would be better if I could have more learning materials especially vocabulary exercises.

I would love to have more exercises for self-learning.

The teachers can provide additional learning materials so that learners will have more practice outside the classroom.

Many participants were also concerned about the course duration. They suggested additional exercises during the course. However, it is also notable that although the participants preferred to extend the course duration, it was suggested that the time for each class meeting be shortened so that the learners could have better concentration. Some specific comments were as follows:

If the course duration is longer, I will have sufficient time to complete the suggested exercises.

It should be better if the course duration is extended for more lessons and practice.

I prefer the shorter class sessions, 90 minutes instead of 120 minutes because it is very tiring to read the screen for so long.

Interactions play a vital role in any type of learning and are more necessary in online learning because the learners generally feel isolated without much social interaction in an online environment. However, it is interesting to note that the existing literature on online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that interactions in online learning can be equally effective as those in face-to-face learning particularly in a synchronous setting (Fabrizz, Mendzheritskaya, & Stehle, 2021). Similarly, in this study, several participants proposed some specific techniques to enhance social interactions.

Learners should turn on cameras so that communication can be real and interesting.

Teachers can have more interactive and collaborative activities to engage individual learners.

The breakout room function in Zoom can help learners interact more effectively.

The last theme of suggestions reported by many participants is related to learner support. As many learners were unfamiliar with the online learning environment, the support services should be immediate, ongoing and accessible. In this study, the participants shared some practical suggestions:

The center can prepare a video tutorial of the online learning procedure.

The center should have a hotline number to provide immediate assistance to solve technical problems.

Teachers should have immediate feedback to support learner learning.

5. Discussion

Face-to-face and online learning have similar key features and both can be beneficial, depending on the goal of the lesson plan (Ananga & Biney, 2017). In either a physical or virtual classroom, learners are required to learn materials, complete class exercises and submit assignments. Traditional classroom learning is a well-established modality but several learners can view online learning negatively and the comparison of each style of learning needs further investigation from the learners' perspectives (Darkwa & Antwi, 2021). In this study, with regards to the learners' perceptions of the effectiveness of face-to-face and online learning, the results revealed that learners

have an obviously positive perception of online learning through the four main aspects of it including content, teachers, the learning environment and course supports.

In this study, the role of teachers in online classes is emphasized as a key factor affecting the effectiveness of online instruction. Learners reported a high level of agreement with various features of an effective teacher such as being a great resource of knowledge and a classroom facilitator or scaffolder. The result is closely in line with extensive literature, (Mayasari & Kemal, 2020) which categorizes an online teacher as a demonstrator, a motivator and a manager to guarantee the learners' success in online programs.

To evaluate the effectiveness of the online course compared to the face-to-face course, a comparison of standard performance metrics such as test mark or final grade can be a feasible and effective method (Mahlan, Shamsuddin, Kadar, Othman, & Wahab, 2022). In this study, the final scores of VSTEP examinations were used to compare the effectiveness of two groups of learners. It is interesting to note that the findings are relatively different from several previous studies (Lestari et al., 2022; Little & Jones, 2020) indicating that online learners generally are able to perform better than their friends in traditional classrooms, though the difference is not largely remarkable to some extent. A very important contribution of this study is to provide further empirical evidence to propose online learning as an effective learning mode in terms of learners' attitudes and academic performance.

6. Conclusion

The current study has significant evidence that online learning is equal to or even better than face-to-face learning in terms of academic performance.

Online teaching and learning continue to play a vital role in the long-term survival of many educational institutions. The effectiveness of this mode of learning will surely need further investigation from different perspectives.

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