

Students' Perception On Online English Learning: A Case At Hong Bang Secondary School, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City

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Abstract:

Online learning has a long history but is almost unfamiliar with education in Vietnam. Because of the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, the transition from face-to-face classes to online classes is more focused, especially for English subjects. The new way of learning leads to many challenges for both teachers and students. This study analyzes students' perceptions of online English learning at a secondary school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, and makes some recommendations to improve the quality of online English teaching and learning. The research results from 84 8th-grade students of Hong Bang School show that they have a positive attitude towards online English learning. However, 70% of participants think that they will not continue to participate in online English classes in the future. Based on these results, the researcher makes 3 recommendations for improving the effectiveness of online English learning: (1) increasing the awareness of the whole society about the role of online English teaching and learning, (2) improving the quality of the Internet connection for online English learning, (3) improving information technology competence for teachers of English.

Keywords: Online learning; English learning; COVID-19 pandemic; perception

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I. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus had its first infection case in Vietnam on January 23, 2020 and the isolation, monitoring, and restriction of people from epidemic areas, border closures, deployment of the medical declaration took place nationwide. Social distancing was one of the measures to limit the spread of this pandemic, but it caused a lot of damage as well as changes in the way many industries operate, especially the education sector (Rifiyanti, 2020). However, learning and teaching process could not be stopped. Along with many other countries in the world, it was not easy for Vietnam to build a solid scenario for the education sector due to the complication of the pandemic.

The term "*online learning*" is not new, but it only became popular in Vietnam when the pandemic broke out. The epidemic poses various challenges to Vietnam's education and training system. When schools closed due to the coronavirus, educational institutions and teachers face a huge challenge, which is how to ensure the continuity of teaching. English language teaching is also no exception. For students in Ho Chi Minh City, *online English learning* is the best way for them to connect with their teachers amid home isolation. However, "online teaching and learning are an unprecedented experience for most teachers and students; consequently, they have a limited experience with it" (Mailizar, Almanthari, Maulina, & Bruce, 2020). Online learning is a remedy in the context of COVID-19, but it has both advantages and disadvantages. We need the cooperation of families, schools, and society to transform its challenges into opportunities.

Because of realizing the potential of online English learning, this study mainly aims at investigating students' perception towards online English learning and students' suggestions for improving the effectiveness of online English learning. Therefore, it addresses the following research questions:

- (1) What is students' perception towards online English learning?
- (2) What are the students' suggestions for improving the effectiveness of online English learning?

The result of this study can assist teachers in changing teaching methods to suit new teaching contexts and improve teaching quality in schools, specifically at Hong Bang Secondary School, District 5, Ho Chi Minh city.

II. Literature Review

The concept of online learning

Online learning is one of the most popular forms of learning today that most young people know. It is considered a form of online education that makes it easy for us to receive information with just a phone, computer,

or tablet with an Internet connection. Therefore, students can learn remotely without having to go to school. Blake (2011) differentiates that “the term online language learning (OLL) can refer to a number of learning arrangements: a Web-facilitated class, a blended or hybrid course, or a fully virtual or online courses. However, there are different definitions of this term. Khan (1998) agrees that “online learning is a type of delivery method used in distance education that allows the synchronous and asynchronous exchange of resources over a communication network.” He also states that online learning is described by most authors as access to learning experiences via the use of some technology”.

The development of online learning

In recent years, a series of universities and organizations around the world have focused on developing E-learning systems to maximize the effectiveness of training. This is really a big turning point for education in the world. Harasim (2000) argues that the history of online learning begins in the 1980s. The growth of online learning is closely linked with developments in science and technology, especially the development of computer science. Hubackova (2015) believes that the first form of computer-based training (CBT) appeared in the late eighties and nineties of the last century and it is considered the foundation of online education today. There is also another opinion that the term E-learning that first appeared in October 1999 in the International Conference on CBT- Computer Based Training.

There is also some information that the first cases of online learning originated at the University of Illinois, USA. Students linked computers together by intranet to conduct their studies because the Internet was not invented at that time. In 1984, the University of Toronto in Canada opened the first online course. John F. Kennedy University (California - USA) was the first school in the world to organize an online course in 1986. The University of Phoenix introduced the online undergraduate course that offered bachelor's and master's degrees in 1989.

Up to this point, there have been 21 million total online enrollments on websites in America. According to a study by the Babson Survey Research Group, as of 2013, more than 7 million students have registered to study online. Online learning has been around for a long time and it creates a teaching-learning environment that harmonizes the process of hearing, seeing, and being active in learning. Online learning has become popular in recent years and it is possible to become a form of learning that many people choose in the coming years.

The characteristics of online learning

The online learning environment is still quite new for Vietnamese students because the online learning process has not taken place for a long time. However, online learning has a prominent feature that the teaching and learning process takes place on websites or teaching support tools. Because of the background from the Internet, learning online has some special characteristics:

- **Synchronous communication** is the first feature of online learning. Although teachers and students are not in the same place, learners can receive comments and communicate with the teacher at the same time. Learners and teachers experience synchronous e-learning as more social and avoid frustration by asking and answering questions in real-time. According to Hrastinski (2008), “learners and teachers experience synchronous e-learning as more social and avoid frustration by asking and answering questions in real time.” Synchronous learning allows students to participate in classroom learning at the same time as their classmates provided they can connect to the Internet.
- Online learning is a **mostly text-based** form of learning. The increasing of technology leads to easier lesson design, for example, teachers can use audio, images, videos... to make online lessons more lively and effective. However, online learning mainly relies on writing to convey the content of the lesson. Oral communication can be used, but written communication is never unnecessary. Judith (2002) considers that “the use of written text rather than spoken language has interesting consequences for the quality of the conversation”. In addition, he emphasized that simultaneous communication between online class participants can affect the quality of written texts.
- Online learning encourages **independent learning** because during online classes, teachers have no control over the concentration of learners. Wagener (2006) states that students are forced to act independently and focus on their work more because of the lack of direct feedback from the teacher. She also found that self-correction leads to longer retention of the language. Traditional learning methods focus on the direct interaction of teachers and students in the classroom, which cannot meet the requirements of safe learning in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Online English learning

“*Online learning*” will be used to refer to language learning that takes place fully online via the Internet, with no face-to-face component, within the context of both formal language courses and more informal learning scenarios.” (Hockly, 2015). He considers that learning English online can be more challenging than traditional

learning because it is related to many other factors such as Internet speed and learners' sense of self-study. In the social context of China, the online English learning system has been exploited and developed. Learning English online has also achieved certain achievements. In a research paper on the foundation of online English learning, they found some challenges and suggested some development directions for effective online English learning. They believed that online English learning has many prospects in the future, but this field is still relatively new, so the quality of teaching is still not impressive.

III. Methodology

Participants

Hong Bang Secondary School has long been an outstanding school with academic achievements as well as leading in sports movements of junior high schools in District 5. The number of students in all four grades up to nearly three thousands, especially there are 696 students in grade 8. In this study, the participants are 84 eighth-graders (from class 8A14 and 8A15 at Hong Bang Secondary School, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City). The selected students have an average to excellent academic performance and have "Good conduct", so it is a perfect fit for the survey in this study.

Research methods

This study uses a mixed approach (quantitative and qualitative research methods) to analyze students' perceptions of online English learning and some of their recommendations to learn English online more effectively. *The questionnaire* is designed with a quantitative method to collect and analyze information based on the data collected from the 8th graders of Hong Bang Secondary. From the data collected from the questionnaire, it is possible to verify the students' perception towards learning English online. Besides, *the interview* part of this study will be designed based on a qualitative research method so that the participants can freely express their personal views by answering the interviewer's questions. The interviewer then collects diverse information and analyzes it to find the necessary information for the research paper. Through the interview, the researcher also determines the future learning trends of the participants

Research site

The study was conducted at Hong Bang Secondary School in District 5. Hong Bang School is one of the largest secondary schools in Ho Chi Minh City. In the 2022-2023 academic school year, the school has 75 classes with nearly three thousand students. There are a total of 23 teachers in the Foreign Languages Department with university degrees, one teacher has a Master's degree. At Hong Bang school, each grade level has 3 to 4 Integrated classes (these classes are taught in parallel with the Vietnamese curriculum and the English curriculum), 3 to 4 Intensive English classes, 5 to 6 day-boarding classes, 4 to 5 normal classes. The participants are 84 students from class 8A14 (a normal class) and class 8A15 (a day-boarding class).

Research instruments

In this study, the questionnaire is adapted from the work of some other researchers who had research papers on related topics such as: Dashtestani (2012) and Karl & James (2006). The interview also focuses on asking students for some recommendations on how to help them learn English online more effectively.

Data collection procedure

The study entitled "*Students' perception of online English learning: A case at a junior high school in District 5, Ho Chi Minh city*" is conducted in 15 weeks. The data for this study will be collected according to the following process:

Time	Research activities
Weeks 1-3	Conducting the pilot study.
Weeks 4-8	Having students join in this study and delivering the questionnaire to them.
Weeks 9-11	Interviewing the participants.
Weeks 12-15	Analyzing the data collected from the questionnaire and the interview.

Data analysis

The data collected from the questionnaire was used to answer the first research question: *What is students' perception towards online English learning?*. According to the questionnaire, students' perception was divided into three parts: *A - students' perception on the advantages and disadvantages of learning English online*, *B - students' perception on the role of teachers in the process of learning English online*, and *C - the students' initiative in the process of learning English online*. The questionnaire was designed on a five-point Likert scale (1= Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, 5 = Strongly). Therefore, the collected data was interpreted in terms of the mean score as follows: $M = 1.00 - 1.80 = \text{Strongly Disagree (SD)}$; $M = 1.81 - 2.60 =$

Disagree (D); $M = 2.61 - 3.40 =$ Neutral (N); $M = 3.41 - 4.20 =$ Agree (A); $M = 4.21 - 5.00 =$ Strongly Agree (SA). In addition, the data was also interpreted in terms of percentages (%) to facilitate the comparison of student responses with each item in the questionnaire.

Validity and Reliability

To increase the validity and reliability of the study, the researcher conducted a pilot study with a small group of participants. After receiving feedback from the participants, the questionnaire and interview questions were adjusted more appropriately. In addition, the questionnaire was reviewed by 2 teachers with more than 15 years of experience in teaching English at Hong Bang Secondary School (Ms. Tran Thi Thuong Thuong - Leader of The Foreign Languages Department and Ms. Phung Thi Ngoc Hoa – Leader of The English 8 Team) to adjust the content of the question as well as the use of words.

The reliability of each scale is evaluated through Cronbach's Alpha coefficient. Hoang and Chu (2008) defined Cronbach's Alpha coefficient as a measure of internal consistency, that is, how closely a group of items are related to each other. It is also considered a measure of the reliability of the scale.

According to Hoang and Chu (2008), the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is conventionally defined as follows: $0.9 \leq \alpha < 1$: Excellent; $0.8 \leq \alpha < 0.9$: Good; $0.7 \leq \alpha < 0.8$: Acceptable; $0.6 \leq \alpha < 0.7$: Questionable; $0.5 \leq \alpha < 0.6$: Poor; $\alpha < 0.5$: Unacceptable.

Table 1. Reliability statistics of the questionnaire

Cronbach's Alpha	N of items
.720	15

Accordingly, the Cronbach's Alpha of the questionnaire is 0.720, which means the items in the questionnaire are reliable.

IV. Results

Data analysis and interpretation of the questionnaire:

Students' perception on the advantages and disadvantages of learning English online

The data in Table 2 shows that most of the surveyed students agree with the statements in the survey about the advantages of learning English online (items 1 to 3). Accordingly, 50% of students agree and 33.3% strongly agree with the idea that learning English online is more comfortable than traditional learning ($M=4.07$; $SD=.89$). Simultaneously, nearly 54.8% of students agree and 26.2% of students completely agree with the view that learning English online helps students save time and money ($M=3.95$; $SD=.94$). Finally, nearly 40.5% of students agree and 42.9% of students strongly agree with the statement that the use of modern technology makes learning English online more enjoyable ($M=4.19$; $SD=.92$).

Table 2. Students' perception on the advantages of online English learning

No.	Students' perception on the advantages of online English learning	N = 84	
		M	SD
1	Online English learning is more comfortable than traditional learning.	4.07	.89
2	Learning English online helps students save time and money.	3.95	.94
3	The use of modern technology makes learning English online more enjoyable.	4.19	.92
Average		3.82	.92

(M: mean; SD: Standard deviation)

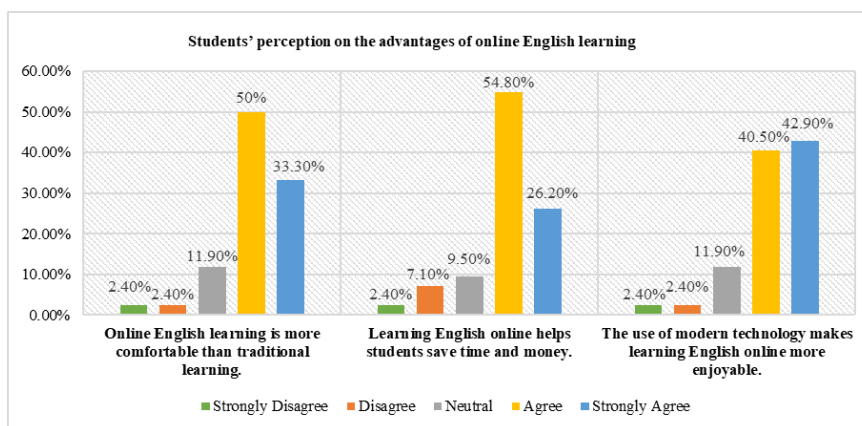


Chart 1. Students' perception on the advantages of online English learning

Besides the advantages of learning English online, this research also focuses on the difficulties that students may face. Three specific disadvantages mentioned in the questionnaire (items 4 to 6) are: *learning English online reduces interaction in the classroom, the assessment of online English learning is not valid and reliable and students are not familiar with the operation on phones, computers... in the process of learning English online.*

Table 3. Students' perception on the disadvantages of online English learning

No.	Students' perception on the disadvantages of online English learning	N = 84	
		M	SD
4	Learning English online reduces interactions in the classroom.	3.90	.88
5	The assessment of online English learning is not valid and reliable.	3.93	.92
6	Students are not familiar with the operation on phones, computers... in the process of learning English online.	3.81	.86
Average		3.88	.89

(M: mean; SD: Standard deviation)

Based on the data in Table 3, many students concur with the idea that learning English online reduces interactions in the online classroom (M= 3.90; SD= .88). In addition, the assessment in the process of online English learning is also considered by the majority of students not to be valid and reliable (M=3.93; SD= .92). Besides, for item 6 in the questionnaire, most of the students agreed that they are not familiar with the operations performed on computers, smartphones... when they participate in online English classes (M= 3.81, SD=.86)

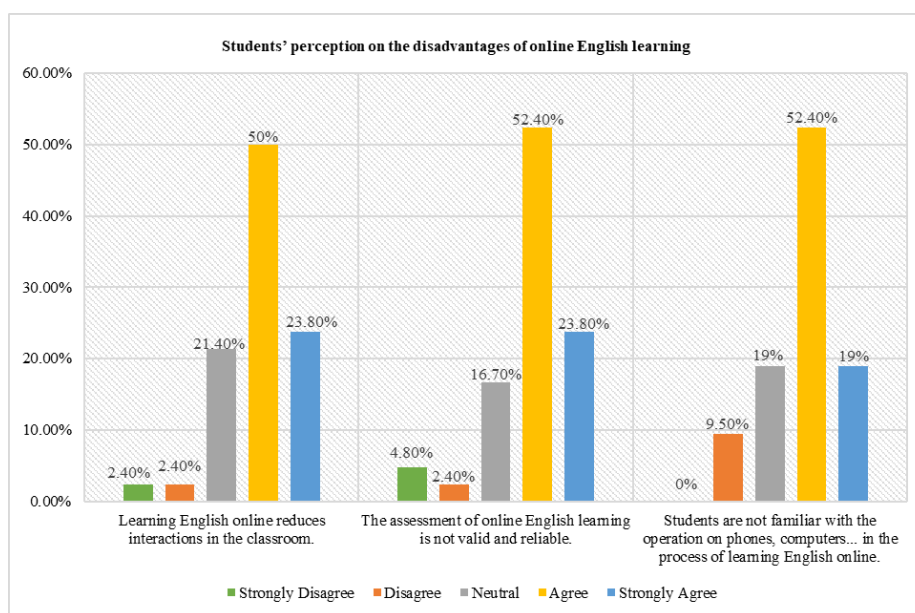


Chart 2. Students' perception on the disadvantages of online English learning

Students' perception on the role of teachers in online English learning

Table 3 shows the survey results on students' perceptions of the teacher's role in the online English learning process. The analysis of the collected data of items 7-11 indicates the positive attitude of the 8th graders toward the teacher's role in their online learning process.

Table 3. Students' perception on the role of teachers in online English learning

No.	Students' perception on the role of teachers in online English learning	N = 84	
		M	SD
7	Your English teacher can use technological devices effectively.	3.52	.87
8	Your English teacher can effectively manage the online English classes.	3.64	.90
9	Your English teacher provides more theory than practical tasks.	3.83	.85
10	Your English teacher can completely check students' attendance during online lessons.	3.74	.91
11	It is difficult for your English teacher to keep track of students' learning during class.	3.38	.82
Average		3.62	.87

(M: mean; SD: Standard deviation)

Through Table 3, a large number of students are undecided that their English teachers can use technology devices effectively (item 7: M= 3.52; SD = .87). They also have a neutral opinion that the online classes can be

managed (item 8: M= 3.64; SD = .90). Besides, the idea that teachers provide more theory than practical exercises is also supported by many students (item 9: M= 3.83; SD = .85). The data analysis in Table 4.3 also demonstrates that checking attendance in online English lessons is also performed quite well by the teacher (item 10: M = 3.74; SD = .91). In addition, in the last item in this section, students have a neutral view of the teacher's monitoring in the online English learning process (item 11: M = 3.38; SD = .82). In fact, item 11 is also the only item in the questionnaire with a mean score lower than 3.41.

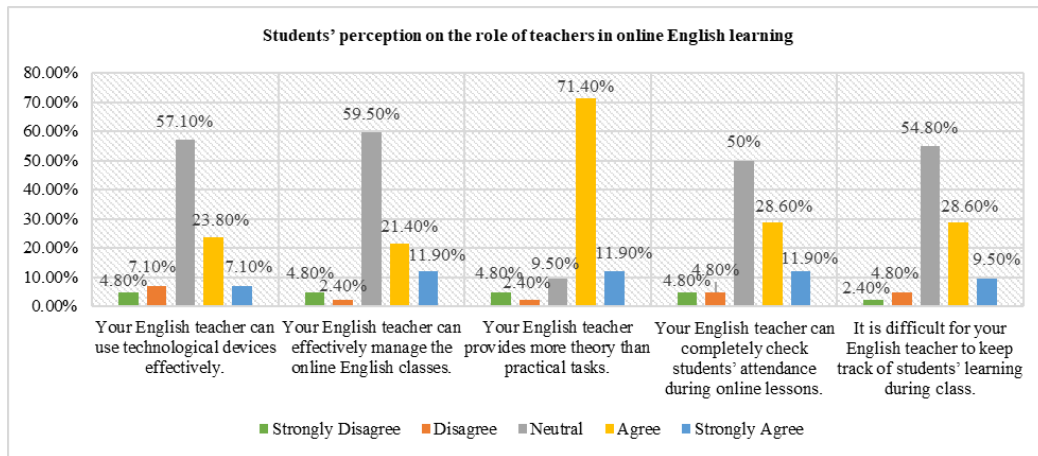


Chart 4. Students' perception on the role of teachers in online English learning

Students' initiative in online English learning

The results in Table 5 indicate that the participants agree with the view that students cannot fully concentrate on online English lessons (item 12: M=3.83; SD = .73). Besides, they also have the same opinion that assignments are usually submitted on time (item 13: M = 3.71; SD = .89). Next, "Students are fully equipped with technological devices (computers, laptops, smartphones...) for online English classes" is the opinion that also received a lot of support from the participants (item 14: M = 3.48, SD = .77). Finally, most students admit that they often encounter some technical problems during online English learning (item 15: M = 4.02, SD = .98).

Table 5. Students' initiative in online English learning

No.	Students' initiative in online English learning	N = 84	
		M	SD
12	Students cannot fully concentrate on online English lessons.	3.83	.73
13	Students tend to complete their assignments on time.	3.71	.89
14	Students are fully equipped with technological devices (computers, laptops, smartphones...) for online English classes.	3.48	.77
15	Students often encounter technical problems when participating in online English classes.	4.02	.98
Average		3.76	.84

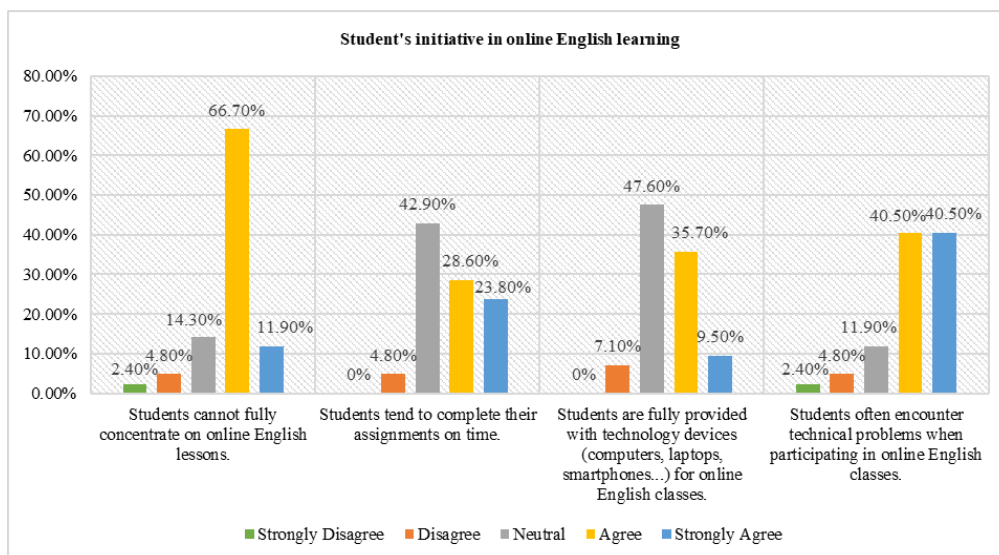


Chart 5. Students' initiative in online English learning

The data analysis is detailed in Chart 5. Accordingly, item 15 (Students often encounter technical problems when participating in online English classes) has the highest total "Agree" and "Strongly Agree" rates (81%). More interestingly, none of the students selected "Strongly Disagree" for item 13 (Students tend to complete their assignments on time) and item 14 (Students are fully provided with technological devices...). Furthermore, the number of students with a neutral opinion accounted for the highest percentage in item 13 and 14 (42.9% and 47.6% respectively), while this percentage was quite low in item 12 and item 15 (14.3% and 11.9% respectively)

The data collected from items 12, 13, 14, 15 shows the 8th graders of Hong Bang Secondary School agree with the statements in section C of the questionnaire (the average mean score value is 3.76). They are in agreement with *they cannot fully focus on learning English online; they have a habit of completing assignments on time; they are fully provided with technological devives; they often encounter technical problems during online English learning.*

Survey results through the interview

The responses in the interview were used to answer the second research question: "*What are the students' suggestions for improving the effectiveness of online English learning?*"

There are 5 questions used in the interview:

1. In your opinion, is the duration of each online English lesson reasonable? (If not, would you recommend that online English lessons be shorter or longer?)

The duration of an online English class at Hong Bang Secondary School is 45 minutes. When surveyed about the length of time that students want for a lesson, 5 students think that the lessons should be shortened. On the contrary, two students proposed to increase the length of online English lessons. Beside the mixed opinions about shortening or extending the duration of online English lessons, the remaining 3 students interviewed said that it is reasonable to keep the length of 45 minutes for each lesson.

2. In your opinion, of the four skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), which skills should be given more attention in online English lessons?

The highest percentage of suggestions for skills that need more attention is speaking, with 60%. Meanwhile, writing skills are suggested by 30% of students to focus more on online English lessons. In contrast, listening skills are only account for 10% of the total suggestions and reading skills are not chosen by any single student.

3. What would you like to change in your online English lessons?

Only one student wished the Powerpoint slides were more vivid to attract students' attention. In addition, 20% of students suggested that the amount of homework should be reduced and 30% of students said that they want to interact more with their friends and teachers. The remaining 40% of students said that they want to join in games more in learning process. They added that learning through songs or movies also makes learning more effective. In addition, the two students added to their proposal that the assessment should be made more rigorous to ensure fairness.

4. In your opinion, is learning English online through Google Meet software effective and is it necessary to change to another software?

All surveyed students think that online learning through Google Meet software is effective and they do not want to change to another software.

5. Will you continue to take online English classes? Why?

Most students choose to attend face-to-face classes instead of online English classes. Only 3 out of 10 students interviewed think that they will continue to take online English classes in the future. The number of students who decide not to participate in online English classes in the near future accounts for 70%.

V. Discussions

Findings on students' perception on online English learning

Online learning brings students certain benefits, such as helping them feel comfortable in the process of acquiring knowledge, saving travel time and reducing study costs. In general, the majority of students think that online English lessons become more interesting thanks to vividly designed lectures with PowerPoint. Therefore, teachers must constantly improve their skills in applying information technology to teaching. Educators will have to work hard to improve classroom interaction - an issue that many students consider one of the limitations of learning English online.

Many students at Hong Bang Secondary School think that online learning is more comfortable than learning in the traditional way. *Firstly*, many students also believe that learning on online platforms negatively affects the interactions between students and teachers as well as the interactions between their classmates. Students often turn off their cameras and mute their voices when taking online classes. The shyness of communicating online makes students less inclined to express their opinions in class. *Secondly*, many students believe that online assessment is unreliable, even when acting in classrooms, under the supervision of teachers, the honesty of students when doing tests is also very difficult to be controlled. *Thirdly*, online English classes need teachers to put more effort into creating a successful online course. Instructors need a deep understanding of different teaching and learning methods to avoid missing out on all the additional advantages and tools that E-learning has to offer.

They also think that online learning makes their English teachers face a lot of difficulties in the teaching and learning process. More than 50% of students have a neutral opinion when asked if their teacher manages the class effectively, which means that the teacher has not completely implemented the classroom management process well. For example, in the traditional classroom, the teacher can walk around the classroom to observe and support students throughout the learning process, but it is almost impossible for teachers to monitor the entire learning process of each student when they learn online.

Besides the objective factors, the effectiveness of online English learning depends a lot on the learners themselves. Nearly 78.7% of students said that they cannot fully focus on online English lessons. There are many factors that influence students' concentration. In general, according to educational psychology, learning without teacher supervision is easy to distract students. Besides personal needs and eating, electronic devices such as phones, tablets, or laptops will be a cause of distraction in learning. This will negatively affect the learning process because the human brain will not be able to do many things at once. The choice of study space is also an important factor for effective learning. In fact, it is difficult to have a quiet place when everyone is at home during the pandemic. Whether unintentionally or intentionally, people make noise during activity hours. Even some students may be distracted from studying because online English lectures are not really attractive.

Findings on students' suggestions for improving the effectiveness of online English learning

During the interview, students gave a lot of useful ideas related to their online English learning. Most of them are satisfied with learning English online during the epidemic season because this is considered the only and safest way to make students' learning uninterrupted. There were conflicting opinions recorded in the interview. Students are still interested in learning English online because it is a new way of learning and maybe this is the first time they can use their phones, computers, or laptops comfortably. There are 8 recommendations compiled after the interview with ten 8th graders:

1. Shortening the duration of English online classes
2. Increasing interactions
3. Making PowerPoint slides more vivid
4. Using more games to keep students interested in the lesson
5. Improving Internet connection
6. Reducing the number of students in the online English classes
7. Closely supervising when students take tests
8. Using Google Meet software effectively

VI. Conclusion

The research results also clarify the perception of 8th graders at Hong Bang Secondary School about learning English online. The students also made suggestions to improve the quality of online English learning. They agreed that the Internet is a useful tool for teaching and that it can contribute to making their learning more effective. Anshari et al. (2016) also identifies certain benefits of online learning, which include its convenience because learners can learn from anywhere as long as there is an Internet connection. With the same point of view, the 8th graders at Hong Bang Secondary School do not deny the benefits of this new learning method, however, there are also quite a few limitations for them. Therefore, they do not have a positive view of continuing online learning in the near future. Along with the development of science and technology, learning English online will definitely become a trend soon, but we need to promote its strengths and overcome its limitations. Learning English online will be more effective when there is coordination between school, family, and society. Finally, whether participating in online classes or face-to-face classes, students' awareness and initiative are always a prerequisite for success in the teaching and learning process.

VII. Recommendations

Basically, learning English online is not a completely new concept, but for middle school students, especially 8th-grade students of Hong Bang School, this is a new experience. Since this is the first time teachers

and students organize and participate in an online English class, there are certainly still many limitations. After analyzing students' perceptions of online English learning as well as listening to their suggestions to improve the quality of online teaching and learning, some recommendations are given as follows:

1. Increasing the awareness of the whole society about the role of online English teaching and learning
2. Improving the quality of the Internet connection for online English learning
3. Improving information technology competence for teachers of English.
4. Improving students' initiative in learning English online

In the 21st century, students are exposed to information technology from a very early age. Cakrawati (2017) assesses that learners have the ability to acquire and use technology devices competently. Besides, they have easy access to innovations in information technology. Online learning requires learners to be very active in studying materials, interacting with lecturers as well as interacting with other learners to acquire knowledge. In addition, due to the characteristics of learning mainly through information technology tools, learners increase their responsibility and initiative to ensure maximum exploitation of the benefits that information technology brings to students' online English learning process.

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