UTAR STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE ENGLISH LEARNING: EXPERIENCES, ACCEPTANCE, AND CHALLENGES IN ENGAGEMENT AND DELIVERY

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Article Info:

Abstract:

This study explores the perceptions of UTAR students regarding online English learning, focusing on their experiences, acceptance, and views on its advantages and limitations. Through qualitative analysis of interview data from fifteen students, key themes emerged, including flexibility, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, motivation, communication challenges, and technological barriers. While the majority of students expressed a positive attitude toward online English learning, motivation was unexpectedly identified as a limitation rather than a benefit. The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of student engagement in online learning environments and provide insights into potential improvements in the delivery of online education.

Keywords:

E-learning, Student Perceptions, English Language Learning, Online Education, Qualitative Study

Introduction

In recent years, the rapid shift to online learning has accelerated by global events and technological advancements has reshaped the traditional classroom. For many students, particularly in higher education, digital platforms have become a primary medium for language acquisition. While online English learning offers notable benefits such as self-paced study, reduced travel time, and increased access to resources, it also introduces new dynamics that can influence how students engage with the material and with their instructors.

As institutions continue to integrate technology into their curricula, it becomes crucial to understand how students are responding to these changes beyond surface-level satisfaction. Their genuine experiences ranging from feelings of autonomy to potential feelings of isolation offer important clues about what works and what doesn't in a virtual language-learning environment. Exploring these lived experiences not only uncovers practical barriers such as technical issues or communication difficulties but also sheds light on deeper motivational and psychological aspects that impact learning outcomes.

By focusing on the UTAR context, this study brings attention to a specific student demographic whose voices can contribute meaningfully to the broader conversation on online education. The findings from this research are expected to offer practical implications that support the refinement of digital learning strategies, ensuring they are both learner-centered and pedagogically effective.

Research Objectives

The main aim of this study is to investigate the perceptions of UTAR students on learning English language through E-learning.

Specifically, the study is conducted to fulfil the following objectives:
1. To assess students' experiences of online learning for English Language, and their acceptance towards it.
2. To examine students' views regarding the advantages and limitations of learning English through online classroom.

Research Questions

The following questions will be drawn from both qualitative and quantitative component of this study:
1. How were students' experiences of online learning for English language, and their acceptance towards it?
2. What are the advantages and limitations of learning English through online classroom, from students' points of view?

Literature Review

This research is framed by two theoretical perspectives. The first theoretical perspectives, Deci and Ryan's Self-Determination Theory (1985) serves as a foundation for analysing students' motivation, distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic factors that influence learning behavior.

SDT emphasizes the importance of fulfilling three basic psychological needs which is autonomy, competence, and relatedness to foster intrinsic motivation and engagement in learning environments.

A study by Ojo et al. (2024) investigated factors influencing students' motivation to learn and their engagement in online learning platforms. The findings indicated that self-directed learning, computer and internet self-efficacy, and online communication self-efficacy significantly influenced motivation to learn, which in turn affected online learning engagement.

Apart from that, Rosli et al. (2022) conducted a systematic literature review analyzing 49 articles to identify advancements and research gaps in SDT application within university online learning. The review highlighted the need to incorporate additional SDT factors such as intrinsic motivation, external regulation, identified regulation, and amotivation, alongside autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Española and Ouano (2024) explored motivation loss and behavioural disengagement among tertiary students in flexible learning environments. The study identified need-thwarting behaviours from instructors, peers, and family members that led to psychological need frustration, resulting in issues like amotivation and poor concentration.

The second theoretical perspectives, Moore's Model of Interaction (1993) provides further insight into the interaction challenges of online learning by categorizing learner engagement into three dimensions: learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content interactions.
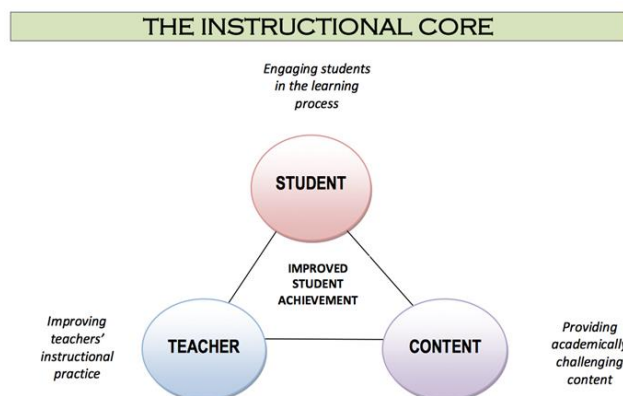

Figure 1: Moore's Model of Interaction

Existing literature highlights several benefits of e-learning. One of the most widely acknowledged advantages is flexibility, allowing students to access course materials at their convenience (Hannafin, 1984). Cost-effectiveness is another significant benefit, as online learning eliminates expenses related to transportation and physical resources (Kilby, 2001). However, research also points to several limitations, including reduced interaction between students and instructors, which can lead to disengagement and misunderstandings (Moore, 1993). Technological barriers, such as unreliable internet access and limited digital literacy, further complicate the learning experience (Macleod, 2005).

Prior studies have generally suggested that online learning enhances student motivation. Ryan and Deci (2000) found that students in online environments often develop greater self-regulation skills. However, other research indicates that students who rely on extrinsic motivation may struggle with online learning due to the lack of direct supervision and structured engagement (Thomson, 2010).

Recent studies have further explored these dynamics. For instance, a systematic review by Akpen, et. al. (2024) examined the impact of online learning on student engagement and performance, providing a comprehensive analysis of existing studies. Additionally, Almahasees, Mohsen and Amin (2021) investigated both faculty's and students' perceptions of online learning, identifying challenges such as adapting to online education, lack of interaction and motivation, and technical issues. These studies contribute to a nuanced understanding of the complexities involved in online learning environments.

A study published in Heliyon (2024) applied Moore's model within the Stimulus-Organism-Response (SOR) framework to examine the impact of online learning interactions on student learning outcomes. The findings revealed that online learning interactions enhanced learners' perceptions of usefulness and ease of use, which in turn influenced their learning outcomes.

The significance of interaction types in shaping students' online learning experiences and outcomes by integrating SDT and Moore's Model to provide a comprehensive framework to analyze UTAR students' experiences with online English learning, focusing on both motivational factors and interaction dynamics.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to gain an in-depth understanding of students' perceptions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen UTAR students who had experience with online English learning. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure diverse perspectives from students across various faculties. Methods used for conducting this research include interviews, and data analysis. Triangulation is the use of multiple methods to research a question. A combination of approaches or methods is less vulnerable to errors caused by biases arising from the use of a single method and thus provides cross data validity check.

Data collection was carried out through video interviews, which were recorded, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Ethical considerations were observed, with all participants providing informed consent before the interviews. Thematic analysis was employed to identify common patterns in student responses, categorizing their experiences into advantages and limitations of online learning.

Findings and Discussion

Students' Experiences

Table 1 classifies students' experiences into two main categories: positive and negative. The key benefits include ease of use, financial savings, and flexibility. However, common challenges reported include internet instability, lack of engagement, delayed responses, and initial difficulty in adapting to online learning.

Allocated Questions:
1. How would you describe your overall experience with online English learning?
2. Can you share any significant positive experiences?
3. What challenges or negative experiences did you encounter?

Table 1

Positive Experiences	Negative Experiences
Easy to use	Technology issues
Highly flexible	Distractions
Comfortable learning	Delayed responses

Positive Experiences

Ease of Use
Seven out of 15 participants expressed that online learning was straightforward. Many highlighted how digital platforms simplified access to learning materials and minimized the need for travel.

Flexibility
All 15 participants agreed that flexibility was the biggest advantage of online learning. Six emphasized the ability to manage their own learning schedules, with two part-time working students particularly valuing the adaptability of online education.

Comfortable Learning Environment
Several participants appreciated the ability to learn in a relaxed setting, with some noting that studying from home allowed them to be more productive.

Negative Experiences

Technological Issues
Three participants reported that poor internet connectivity negatively impacted their academic performance. One student shared an experience where unstable Wi-Fi disrupted an important teaching assessment.

Distractions
A few students admitted that studying at home made them more prone to distractions, such as social media or gaming, which reduced their engagement with online classes.

Delayed Responses
Eight students noted difficulties in communication, both with teachers and peers. Delayed responses from instructors led to setbacks in assignments, while some participants struggled with group discussions due to miscommunication.

Students' Acceptance
The findings reveal that most students had a favourable perception of online English learning. Out of the fifteen participants, seventy-three percent expressed strong acceptance of online

learning, while twenty percent had mixed feelings. Only six percent of students weakly rejected the learning method.

When asked to rate their acceptance of online English learning, the following results were obtained:

Table 2

Level of Acceptance	Number of Participants
Highly Accept	11
Weakly Accept	3
Weakly Reject	1
Highly Reject	0

Summary

Regarding students' experiences, online learning was generally seen as easy to use, highly flexible, and comfortable. However, common challenges included technological issues, distractions, and delayed responses. In terms of acceptance, 11 students "highly accepted" online learning, three "weakly accepted" it, and one "weakly rejected" it, though no participants "highly rejected" it.

To address the second research question, Table 3 summarizes the advantages and limitations of online English learning based on participants' perspectives:

Table 3

Students' Perceptions of Online Learning	Number of Participants
Advantages	
High Accessibility	8
Increased Motivation	3
Cost Savings	13
High Flexibility	15
Limitations	
Limited Accessibility in Remote Areas	2
Reduced Motivation	8
Poor Communication	14
Technical Challenges	3

Flexibility emerged as the most frequently mentioned advantage, with all participants recognizing the benefits of being able to learn at their own pace and schedule. Many students highlighted how online learning allowed them to balance their academic responsibilities with other commitments. This supports Thomson's (2010) research, which found that students value the ability to work independently and learn at different paces.

Accessibility was another advantage cited by most students, although perceptions varied depending on geographic location. Eight students viewed online learning as highly accessible, while two expressed concerns about difficulties in accessing online courses due to unreliable internet connections in rural areas. This aligns with Dhawan's (2020) findings, which emphasize internet availability as a critical factor in online education.

Cost-effectiveness was also recognized as a significant advantage. Thirteen students noted that online learning helped reduce expenses related to transportation, accommodation, and course materials. One participant mentioned that the flexibility of online learning allowed them to work part-time while continuing their studies, highlighting the financial benefits of digital education.

While previous research suggested that online learning enhances motivation, the findings of this study revealed the opposite. Contrary to expectations, motivation was more frequently identified as a limitation rather than a benefit. Students who demonstrated strong engagement with online learning tended to be intrinsically motivated, taking personal initiative in managing their learning. In contrast, students who struggled with online learning relied on extrinsic motivators, such as direct instructor supervision and peer interactions, to stay engaged. This distinction aligns with Ryan and Deci's (2000) definition of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation.

Interaction challenges were identified as the most significant limitation, with fourteen students expressing difficulties in communicating with peers and instructors. The lack of direct engagement led to instances of misunderstandings, delays in feedback, and a sense of isolation. These challenges correspond with Moore's (1993) Model of Interaction, which identifies learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content interactions as essential components of an effective learning experience.

Technological barriers further compounded these challenges, with students reporting issues such as unstable Wi-Fi connections, limited system support, and occasional difficulties in navigating online learning platforms. The role of digital literacy was also highlighted, as students with lower technical proficiency faced greater difficulties in adapting to online learning environments.

Recommendations

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the experiences of UTAR students in learning English through online platforms. While students generally expressed a high level of acceptance toward e-learning, their perceptions were influenced by a range of factors, including flexibility, accessibility, cost-effectiveness, motivation, interaction, and technological challenges.

Flexibility was the most widely recognized advantage, with students appreciating the ability to learn at their own pace and manage their schedules effectively. Accessibility was another key benefit, although students from rural areas faced connectivity issues that limited their access to online learning. Cost-effectiveness was highlighted as a major advantage, as online learning reduced travel expenses and allowed students to balance work and study.

However, significant limitations were also identified. Interaction challenges were the most frequently mentioned issue, with students struggling to communicate effectively with peers and instructors in an online setting. The unexpected finding regarding motivation suggests that online learning may not be suitable for students who rely on external factors such as teacher guidance and peer support to stay engaged. Technological challenges, including unstable internet connections and limited digital literacy, further impacted the learning experience.

Implications for Educators and Institutions
The results of this study have several implications for educators and institutions offering online English learning. First, to address motivation-related challenges, educators should implement strategies that foster both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Gamification, personalized learning experiences, and interactive activities can help students stay engaged. Instructors should also provide timely feedback and create opportunities for meaningful interactions to counteract the lack of direct engagement in online classrooms.

Second, institutions should work towards improving accessibility, particularly for students in remote areas. Partnering with telecommunications providers to offer stable internet connections and providing offline learning resources could help bridge the digital divide. Universities should also ensure that students receive adequate training in digital literacy to enhance their ability to navigate online learning platforms effectively.

Limitations and Future Research
This study focused on student perceptions based on qualitative interviews with a small sample size. While the findings provide valuable insights, the results may not be generalizable to a broader population. Future research could adopt a mixed-methods approach, incorporating quantitative data to provide a more comprehensive analysis of online English learning experiences.

Additionally, this study did not explore potential solutions to the challenges identified. Future research should investigate strategies for improving student motivation, enhancing interaction in online classrooms, and addressing technological barriers. A comparative study examining different online learning models or platforms could provide further insights into best practices for digital English education.

Conclusion
Overall, this study highlights both the strengths and challenges of online English learning from the perspective of UTAR students. While most students appreciate the flexibility and cost-effectiveness of e-learning, issues related to motivation, interaction, and technology remain significant barriers. As online learning continues to evolve, educational institutions must strive to enhance the quality of digital education, ensuring that students receive a well-rounded and engaging learning experience.

By addressing these challenges and implementing evidence-based solutions, online English learning can become a more effective and inclusive educational approach, benefiting a diverse range of learners in different contexts.

Acknowledgement

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