

MALAYSIAN LEARNERS AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS TOWARDS ONLINE ENGLISH LANGUAGE COURSES

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ABSTRACT

With more emphasis given to the concept of lifelong learning, the number of learners who enroll for distance and online learning programmes in local tertiary institutions has increased. The flexibility of the online learning mode enables learners to prepare themselves to develop confidence and to learn with greater independence. This paper reports the findings of a study on the teaching and learning and technology factors of online English language courses at UNITAR (University Tun Abdul Razak), a virtual university in Malaysia. Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were employed in eliciting data via a questionnaire survey and in-depth interviews. Specifically, the paper reports on learners' perceptions towards the teaching and learning as well as technology factors during the online English course they were engaged in. The findings with regard to the perceptions of the learners brought more new perspectives which could be incorporated or taken into consideration for an online language learning programme.

Keywords: English language course; online learning; distance learning; perceptions; technology.

INTRODUCTION

Information technology and the Internet has brought new challenges to the education system. At the same time, the sophisticated technology has also opened up new avenues and provides new opportunities for the teaching and learning of language in general and English as a second language (ESL) in particular. In the Malaysian context, although these tools are still in the developmental stage, their potential for the purpose of learning is highly promising and the demand for them is increasing. Several scholars (for e.g. Mason and Kaye, 1989; Harasim, 1989, 1993; Hiltz, 1994; Berge and Collins, 1995; Warschauer, 2000) have discussed the effectiveness and impact of online learning. However, there are still many questions to be answered and issues to be resolved. According to White (2003), there is relatively little published research in distance language learning. In particular, there is an absence of 'close' research to investigate what distance language teachers and learners actually do - that is how lessons are conducted and how learners respond to the teaching that goes on. Warschauer (2000: 41) also notes that the great enthusiasm about the potential of computer networks for language learning has not yet been matched by research on what actually occurs in an online classroom.

This state of affairs is even more acute in Malaysia as this mode of learning is still relatively new. Thus, this study seeks to remedy the situation, at least in part, by investigating perceptions of a group of online learners learning English at Universiti Tun Abdul Razak (UNITAR), arguably the only virtual institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The findings provide a clearer pedagogic local scenario of distance and online language learning.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Online courses are place and time independent (Harasim, 1989). They involve many-to-many communication that can foster real collaborative learning and dependence on text-based communications to promote thoughtful and reflective commentary. Text-based communication refers to the kind of interaction more typical of speech, in the form of e(lectronic)-mail and text-chats. This combination contributes to making online education a new and unique domain distinct from that of face-to-face (FTF) or even distance education.

Definitions of an online course vary across a continuum. At one end of the spectrum, online courses include classroom based teaching which is supplemented by lecture notes posted on a website or those disseminated via electronic communication such as e-mail. At the other end of the spectrum, materials may be made available and interactions occur exclusively through networked technologies (Salmon, 2000). Additionally, the term 'online learning' has also been used specifically to refer to an approach to teaching and learning that includes the use of Internet technologies. Learners use the online learning environments not only to access information and course content but also to interact and collaborate with other participants in the same course. For the purpose of this study, the term 'online learning' is used to refer to the access and exchange of information as part of the learning activities in a course delivered through the network. The definition by White (2003: 27) is apt in this instance. She defines 'online learning' as a live connection to a remote computer.

Theoretical Perspectives

Although many researchers believe that the most efficient way of changing traditional classrooms into dynamic and open learning environments is through IT, its viability and implications in language learning must be studied further. According to constructivist theories of learning (see for e.g. Vygotsky, 1978, 1987; Piaget, 1973), learners learn better when they are active agents in the learning process whilst the role of the teacher is that of the 'guide on the side' or that of a facilitator. It is widely acknowledged that open and flexible technology-enhanced learner-centred learning environments, do not in themselves, lead to learning efficiency or effectiveness.

Indeed for some learners, the use of technology and the learner-centred nature of this learning environment can be quite daunting and pose a real threat to their success and motivation to learn. In addition, with virtual education, learners will have to take more responsibility for their own learning process and development. This leads to the notion of learner control, a concept proposed by Garrison and Baynton (1987). Extended, the concept is translated into learner autonomy. They suggest that learner control is a triadic relationship consisting of independence, proficiency and support, which can be found in the relationship between instructor, student and content (see Pramela, 2006; Pramela and Wong, 2004 a,b).

This leads to active learning, a major and crucial outcome of learning networks. The active learner takes part in the discussion and this involves a great deal of interaction with instructors and peers. Thus the learning is learner-centred and requires a different role for the teacher, that of facilitator rather than instructor. The teacher directs the instruction, leads the lessons, prompts responses and paces the class. S(he) plans the activities but follows the flow of the conversation, offering guidance as needed rather than strictly adhering to the pre-planned syllabus.

In addition, the notion of social presence is important. Social presence is the creation of a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, scepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas (Garrison and Anderson, 2003: 50). For this reason, the teacher or moderator must be particularly sensitive and responsive at the beginning of the e-learning experience in order to establish a learning environment which facilitates meaningful and worthwhile learning activities and outcomes. According to Salmon (2000), successful online learning depends on teachers and trainers acquiring new competencies to inspire the learners rather than mastering the technology. In this mode, learners will acquire knowledge by exploring on their own rather than receiving and accepting knowledge delivered through traditional methods where the teacher guides the learners through regular FTF interactions. In the virtual mode, the learners face great challenges, as they have to play several roles: that of an organiser, evaluator and monitor of their own learning activities. Learning can take place whenever and wherever it suits the learner, thus making the acquisition of knowledge more learner-centred than teacher-centred.

The young people of this generation must learn to capitalise on such opportunities and participate actively in leading the change. In this respect, Gan (2001) argues that the formal education system must strive to prepare these young people for the big challenge, by helping them acquire an inquiring, critical and creative mind, the ability and desire to continuously learn and seek new knowledge, and the necessary skills to cope with the change. However, as claimed by Sussex (1998), learners with poor linguistic ability and with less experience with the Internet may not have sufficient knowledge to evaluate and exploit the materials and advice that they find on the web. Such learners, according to Zuraidah Abdul Rahman and Ahmad Mohamad (2001) may need additional support with regard to study skills, motivation and the ability to handle personal problems. They also suggest that peer dialogue, social interaction and collaboration are powerful support for onlinelearners.

Additionally, learner-centred learning environments create a demand for new skills in independent learning, management of complex information and development of higher order cognitive processes (Naidu, 2003). Thus, Hills (2003: 6) recommends e-learning for learners who are motivated and understand how to get the best use of the learning material. According to him, the learner should also be digitally literate, self-sufficient and self-motivated.

Another important feature of online learning is feedback. In language learning, this refers to information given to learners that can be used to revise language skills (Ellis, 1994).

The purpose of feedback is to enable learners to acquire the language items learnt. The instructor must make important decisions on what language items he needs to impart at a timely moment. The feedback learners receive aids them not only on how to acquire the language items but also how to acquire them well. Constant, prompt and timely feedback to what one knows and does not know helps in this process of language learning. And frequent feedback from instructors and interaction among learners and instructors can be a good motivator (Fisher, 2000). Therefore, to thrive in this mode of language learning, a learner must not only have access and be minimally competent in the use of available instructional and communication technology (ICT), s(he) must also be motivated, a pre-requisite for being receptive to feedback from instructors and possible, other fellow learners.

Framework for the study

Instructional technology and language learning are both complex areas of study. In order to examine possible relationships between these two areas, the researchers integrated features from three models to construct a conceptual framework for this study. UNITAR's Virtual Online Learning model is incomplete in terms of its online teaching and learning features. The E-Learning Academic Model used at UNITAR can be considered a constructivist model using IT. In this model, learners use IT as a means of accessing information and constructing knowledge in an online environment.

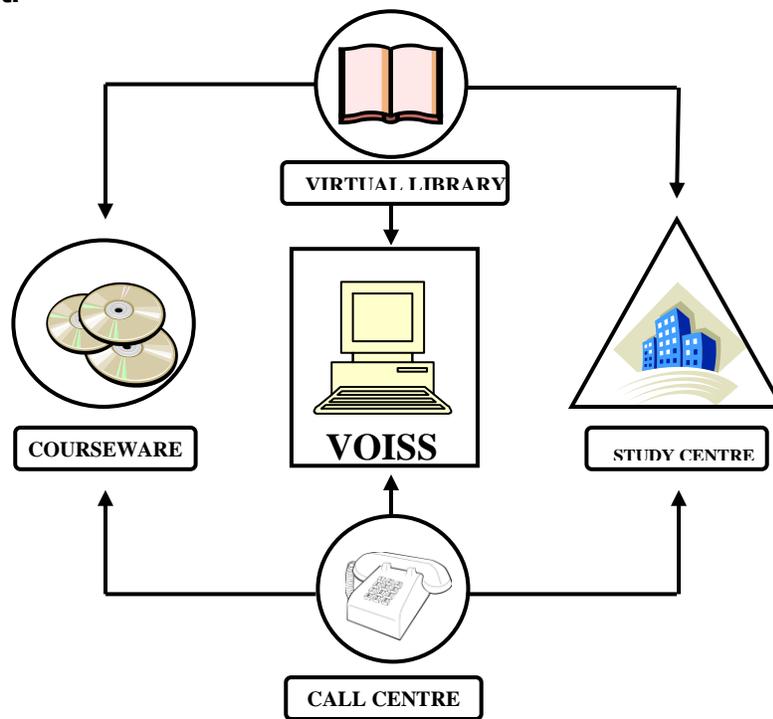


Figure: 1
Graphic representation of UNITAR's

A constructivist approach to instruction requires an understanding of how learners make meaning so that learning environments can promote knowledge construction. UNITAR's E-learning Academic model basically consists of six main components (<http://www.unitar.edu.my/elearning/child.html>). They are:

- Courseware
- Course Management System
- Tutorial meetings
- Study Centre
- Virtual Library
- Customer Relationship Management

E-Learning Academic Model

UNITAR adopts a hybrid² model in which e-learning is supported by face-to-face tutorials, use of CD-Rom, online tutorial and web-based system. The web-based system should assist the users to find and store all the announcements, class schedules, course forums and assignments.

The next model the researchers adopted is Spolsky's general model of second language learning. This is a general model of second language learning encapsulates the researchers' theoretical views on the relationship between contextual factors, individual learner differences, learning opportunities and learning outcomes. The rectangular boxes in Figure: 2 show the factors (or variables) which the researcher believes are most significant for learning. This is where variation can lead to different outcomes, such as success or failure. The arrows connecting the various boxes show directions of influence.

The social context in this model can be linked to the online learning environment at UNITAR where teaching and learning take place. Hiltz (1994: 69) points out that any use of virtual education is nested within a particular social context. The factors listed in Spolsky's model such as attitudes, motivation, personal characteristics, personality, capabilities and previous knowledge may be applicable in the context of online teaching and learning at UNITAR.

However, the age factor is not taken into consideration in this study because in an online environment at tertiary level, the age of the learners varies. They range from that of fresh school leavers to working adults.

White (2003) has introduced the term *learner-context interface* which she considers as dynamic in the distance language learning mode. This learner-context interface can also be linked to the online learning environment at UNITAR where self-instruction provides opportunities for ongoing experiences within the distance contexts.

The concept of learner-context interface has three dimensions: the individual distance learner, the learning context and the interface between the two.

² hybrid – The term is used to refer to a course that combines both online and FTF components, also known as *blended* (Ko and Rossen, 2004).

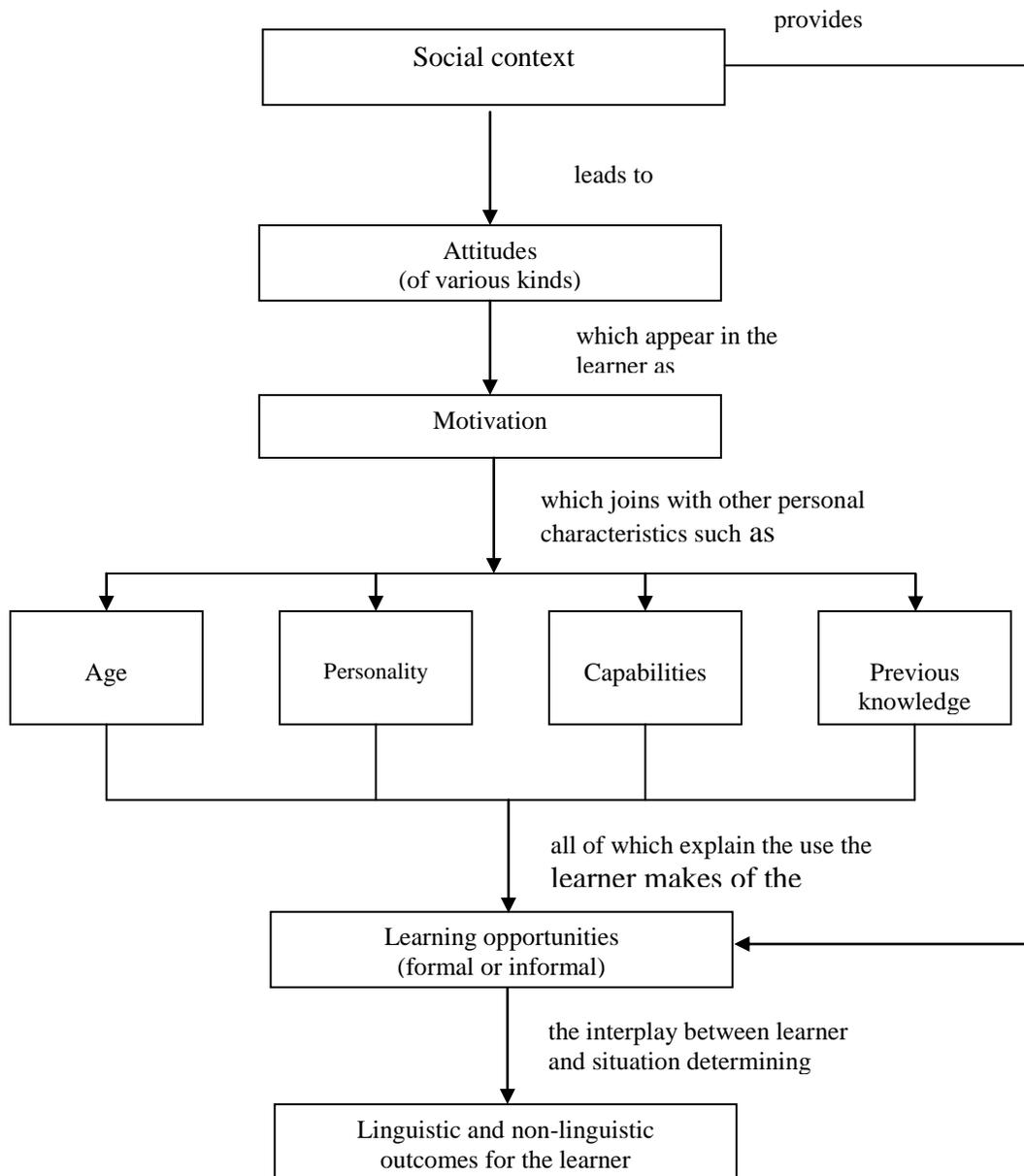
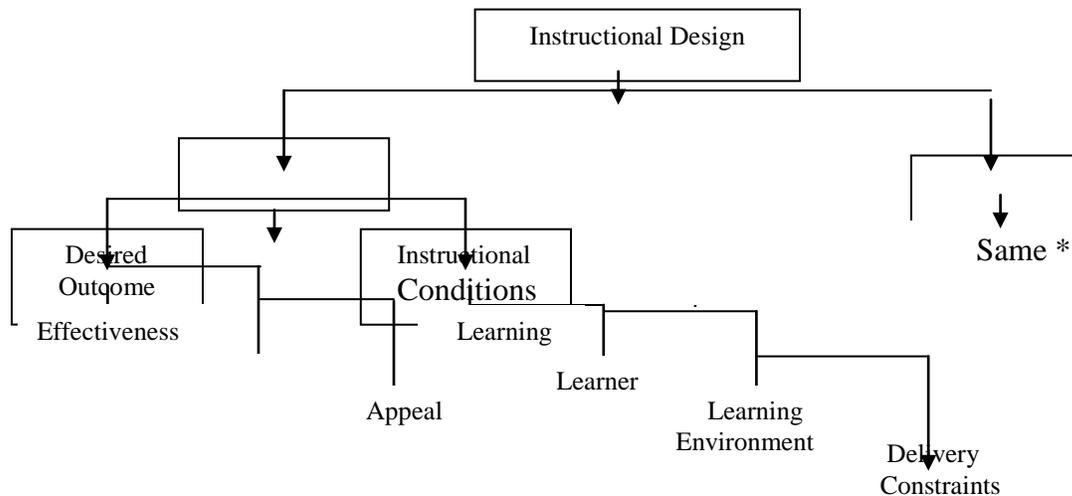


Figure: 2
Spolsky's general model of second language learning
 (Source: Spolsky, 1989: 28)

Reigeluth's (1999) model of instructional-design has two components for facilitating human learning and development:

- methods of instruction which relate to the context in which learning can take place; and
- situations for learning which affect the methods of instruction.

Reigeluth's (1999) model is illustrated in Figure: 3. The researcher combines the components in this model as they are applicable to the online learning environment at UNITAR. The *situation* refers to the online mode or the instructional condition where technology is used within the educational context. The *methods* refer to the teaching and learning issues when education technology is used. The management issues are related to the *desired outcomes*, that is, how well the learning goals are achieved.



* The same component under *Situation* apply to *Methods*

Figure: 3
Reigeluth's model of instructional-design (Adapted from Reigeluth, 1999)

The *methods* refer to the teaching and learning issues when education technology is used. The management issues are related to the *desired outcomes*, that is, how well the learning goals are achieved. As is evident, the UNITAR model only provides an outline or structure of how the online courses are managed. It does not take into consideration the instructors, the learners and the teaching and learning processes that take place. Therefore the researchers incorporated Reigeluth's (1999) instructional-design model to complement the UNITAR model in terms of the teaching and learning features. In addition, relevant components were sourced from Spolsky's general model of second language learning (1989: 28) to enhance the vigour of the framework.

An online ESL course should take into consideration the e-learning mode, the L2 learners' characteristics, and the instructional design of the whole course. An adapted version of a model is culled and formulated from the three mentioned models for use as a guide in dealing with the data collected from the online teaching and learning virtual classroom.

In other words, the three models contribute to the realisation of the adapted model which governs the framework of the study. The adapted model is shown in Figure 4.

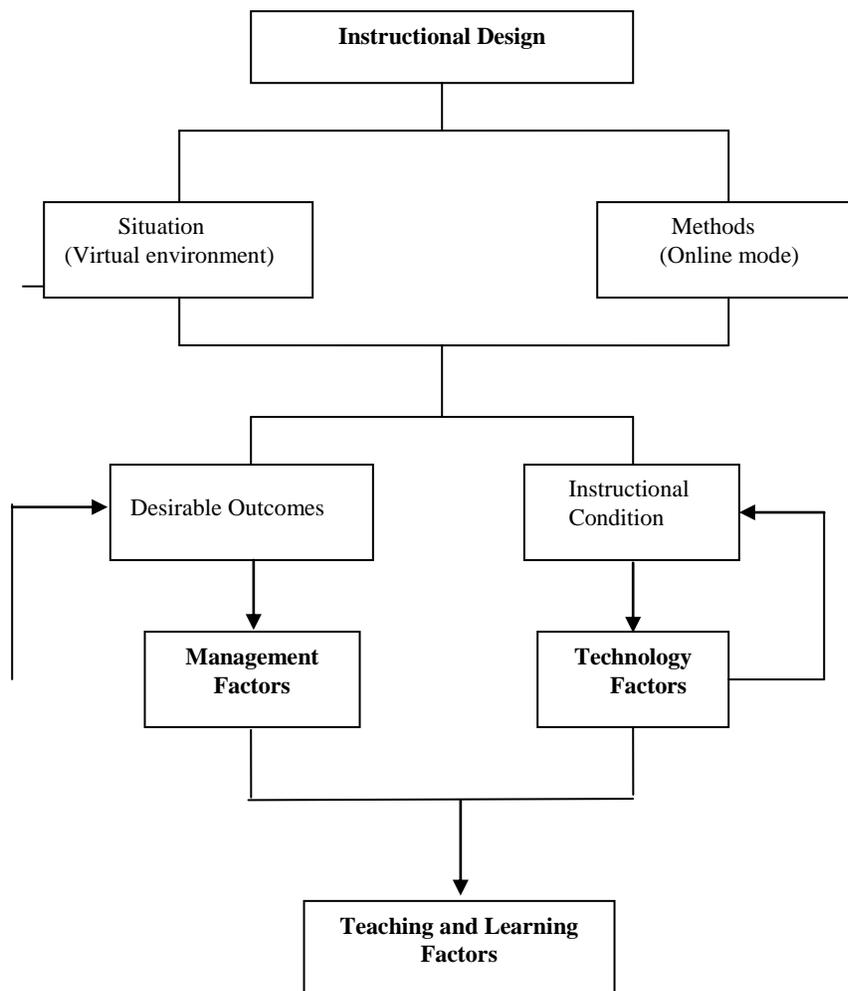


Figure: 4
Framework used in this Study

THE STUDY

Scope and objectives of the study

This study aims to explore and analyse the perceptions of learners towards the online delivery of English courses at UNITAR, the only virtual university in Malaysia. In this virtual university learners and faculty members engage in learning and teaching activities through the mixed mode of FTF, online and multimedia environments. The study also aims to investigate factors related to teaching and learning as well as technology that could contribute to and affect the online delivery of English courses. The following research questions were addressed:

- **What are the perceptions of learners towards the delivery of English courses online at UNITAR?**
- **What are the learning and teaching factors that emerged during the delivery of online English courses?**

Instruments and Procedures

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were utilized to provide a descriptive report of the online delivery of the English courses at this virtual institution. This provided a more macro scenario of the learning environment and also information on the learners' characteristics. Hence, the data was elicited through the use of a questionnaire. Part A of the questionnaire comprised questions on learner characteristics and Part B on learner perceptions toward the online learning of English courses. To complement the quantitative data, ten (10) learners were interviewed to elicit more in-depth insights on their perceptions towards the delivery of English courses online. The participants were interviewed individually and each interview was audio recorded. The data was transcribed verbatim and analysed. The in-depth interview comprised a list of semi-structured probing questions forming the interview schedule. This interview schedule was devised after carefully considering data obtained from an earlier informal general interview. The key areas covered in the interview were learners' knowledge and skills of computers, learner participation, motivation, self-initiated learning and feedback received during the English language lessons.

Parameters for selection of learners included experience in the learning of English through the online mode. The questionnaire was distributed to a total of 251 learners with the help of the instructors at the institution during the FTF classes at the end of the semester. Thus the majority of them who took part in the survey were in the second, third and fourth year of their study. This was to ensure that the participants had adequate exposure to the online courses which in turn would enable them to answer the questions. Out of the 251 distributed only 200 completed sets were returned.

As for the qualitative input for this study, ten (10) learners who were highly recommended by their instructors were interviewed. These learners had undergone online tutorials (OLTs) regularly and were considered mature enough to understand, evaluate and give valuable and informative feedback on the OLTs. The quantitative data obtained from the questionnaire survey was analysed with the use of SPSS (Version 12). This data was reported using descriptive statistics: frequency counts, percentages and ranking of mean scores. The data from the interviews were analysed according to the following themes that emerged although the questions would elicit responses on learners' knowledge and skills of computers, learner participation, motivation, self-initiated learning and feedback received during the English language lessons.

FINDINGS

Description of the Learner Characteristics

A total of 200 learners, 40% males and 60% females, responded to the questionnaire, copies of which were distributed to them by instructors who taught them.

The learners in the sample comprised 54.5% Malays, 33.5% Indians, 7.5% Chinese, and 4.5% others (other indigenous groups residing in Malaysia). More than 50% of the sample was in the age group of 21 to 23 years. Learners who possess the *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (Malaysian Certificate of Education) were the most numerous followed by Diploma and *Sijil Tinggi Pelajaran Malaysia* (Higher School Certificate of Education).

These learners were from the faculties of Business Administration (FBA), Humanities and Social Sciences (FHSS) and Information Technology (FIT). The majority of the learners were in the second and third year of their studies. Only 39.0% (78 learners) supplied information regarding their specialisation. This is because learners in years 1 and 2 were not sure of their area of specialisation yet.

Out of the 200 learners, 83.0% owned personal computers (PC) and 98.0% considered the PC an important tool for e-learning. Less than half of the sample, i.e. 46% had IT qualifications either at certificate or diploma level prior to joining UNITAR. Only 37.5% had e-learning exposure at school, college or other educational institutions. The data clearly show that the majority of them joined UNITAR without any IT qualifications or e-learning background. In fact, IT qualifications and e-learning experience are not prerequisites to enroll in this virtual university.

It is clear that the learners who joined UNITAR were attracted to the flexibility of its programme. In fact, 46.2% of them said that flexibility was reason for enrolling on the programme. Slightly less than half of the learners (45.2%) indicated that they work at their own pace. The same number of learners also indicated that they were comfortable with the online mode. These may be some of the reasons why they preferred this mode of learning. Although this mode is considered to be more suitable for working adults due to their job and family commitments, the findings indicated that this mode also appealed to younger full-time learners. More than 50% of the learners in the sample were between 21 and 23 years of age. Not many of the students may have joined UNITAR because they were attracted to the programme and technology. Only 35.5 % said they joined UNITAR because the programmes offered were different from those of other universities. Another 30.5% said they were attracted to the technology.

These were the learners who wanted to keep pace with the current technological development in education. A smaller number of learners (13.7 %) joined the programme upon consultation with other learners. It is quite interesting to note that only 10.2% joined the university with the idea that their computer skills would benefit them in learning. Only about 7.1% of them said they were not anxious or threatened to study via this mode.

More than half of the learners (59.8%) logged on for their OLT from home. The findings suggest that learners were comfortable working from their homes and these learners probably owned personal computers (PCs). Logging on from home also saves time which would otherwise be spent on traveling to the campus. 36.2% of the learners chose the cybercafé. These learners probably did not possess PCs. Only 22.1% claimed to log on from the workstation. Learners who logged on from the workstation probably did not own PCs.

They could have preferred logging on from the workstation either to socialise with other coursemates in the workstation or they could have found accessibility in the workstation better and more convenient. There is also a possibility that this group of learners lived close to the campus. A small number (15.1%) of learners logged on from their workplace. This group of learners was part-time learners who found it convenient to log on after work or during their free time. A very small number (7.5%) logged on from their friends' houses. These learners could be sharing the same PC and were dependent on their friends' help during the OLT. Another reason is that they may have preferred to study together.

The majority of the learners (74%) went online to obtain information from websites. These learners visited the links³ given by their instructors to obtain additional information or references in order to complete their assignments. The findings also suggest that besides enhancing their knowledge, learners go online for entertainment. 71% of the learners go online to read announcements on VOISS (Virtual Online Instructional Support System). Logging on to VOISS is an important routine for all learners at UNITAR as information on the course, deadlines for assignments, messages from instructors and the management is available on VOISS. Learners could read these announcements anytime and anywhere as they are available 24 hours a day. Course-related matters were next in line but they did not seem to be significant reasons to the learners. Less than half of the sample (45.5%) claimed that they go online to e-mail their instructors. 42.5% of the learners go online to discuss assignments with coursemates. A small number (32%) share views with coursemates via online. Only 28% said they go online to 'socialize'. The majority of the full-time learners probably did not socialise over the Net because they were in regular contact with their coursemates at workstations or during FTF classes. Some full-time learners probably did not socialise over the Net as they were employed on part-time jobs and whatever time they could spare was used for their coursework.

Learners discussed several issues with their peers and instructors either synchronously during the OLTs or asynchronously through e-mails. The main issue discussed online with course mates concerned assignments. Completing the assignments well is important to obtain good grades for the English courses because assignments make up to 50% of the evaluation component. This could be the reason why more than 90% of the learners discussed assignments with their coursemates. Although learners who discussed their assignments with their instructors were fewer in number (72.5%), the results still showed the importance given by learners to this mode of assessment.

It is also interesting to note that 65.5% of the learners discussed examination matters with instructors. Learners were more concerned about preparing for examinations and they were aware that their instructors were in a better position to give them guidance and perhaps, provide them with some tips on the format of the examination papers. Slightly less than half of the sample discussed the course content with coursemates and even a smaller number of learners discussed the matter with their instructors. The learners may have considered that discussion on course content may not be so important. Discussing methods of learning with their instructors and coursemates were also considered to be less important.

³ Hyperlink- an element on the web page (an image, icon or highlighted word or phrase) that makes something happen when you 'click' on it with the mouse. Typically, it takes you to another web page. It is also known as a link (Ko and Rossen, 2004).

Technology is an important aspect of the OLT. Without connection and accessibility of the OLT, the session can come to a standstill and the delivery of knowledge becomes impossible. More than half of the learners (54.5%) identified slow network connection as the main problem during the OLT. Slightly more than one-third of the learners, (37.0%) faced difficulty in logging on during the OLT because of server breakdowns. 32.5% claimed that they often got disconnected during the OLT. The least important complaint seemed to be the system itself. Technical support is always available during the OLT with immediate rectification of the technical problems.

Perception of learners

Part B of the questionnaire investigated the learners' perceptions of the online delivery of the English courses. Learners were asked to respond statements concerning teaching and learning, technology, and management issues in the online delivery of English courses using a 4-point Likert scale. Learners responded to each item by selecting the number next to the item or statement on a scale of 1 to 4, ranging from *strongly agree* to *disagree*. The range was 4=Strongly Agree, 3= Agree, 2= Disagree, 1= Strongly Disagree.

The highest mean score of 4.0 showed a high frequency of learners selecting that item and the lowest mean score of 1.0 showed the least favoured selection. The following section is an analysis of all the items categorised into teaching and learning and technology issues. The teaching and learning issues comprising 27 items are further grouped into three components. The first component on *the instructor* comprises the ten (10) items related to the online instructor. The second component, *the learner*, comprises 14 items related to the online learner, and the third component on *the learning material* consists of three (3) items related to the online learning material. *The technological* issues comprise ten (10) items.

Table: 1
Mean scores and standard deviation of the components of the Instructor, the Learner, the Learning Material, Technology and Management

Components/elements	Mean score	S.D
The Instructor		
IT Skills and knowledge	2.97	0.5923
Enthusiasm	2.89	0.4330
Feedback	2.88	0.4383
The Learner		
IT Skills and knowledge	2.74	0.8097
Language Skills	2.67	0.5193
Interaction	2.66	0.4111
Self-initiated learning	2.78	0.4651
Learning Material	2.68	0.4916
Technology	2.46	0.3287

Table 1 summarizes the mean scores and the standard deviation of the data obtained for the components.

Table 2 presents the ranking of the mean scores for all the learners in the sample in descending order.

Table: 2
Ranking of mean scores obtained for all learners in descending order for the items

Items	N	Mean	SD
28a. The number of FTF sessions is sufficient to help me understand the OLT lesson.	200	3.16	0.833
27a. Instructors helped in the learning during the OLT.	200	3.10	0.6421
28g. The feedback I received from my instructor helped me to understand my work better.	198	3.02	0.645
28e. My instructors have good computational skills to teach the OLT.	199	2.97	0.607
28h. I also learn from the feedback/corrections made by my instructor for other learners.	198	2.97	0.616
28c. When I face difficulties the instructors help me.	200	2.97	0.502
29b. I call the CRM/technical support for help.	200	2.97	0.708
27o. I have gained confidence to be an independent learner.	198	2.96	0.640
28f. My instructors provide me feedback on my work immediately.	199	2.96	0.634
28i. I learn a lot about the language from the feedback.	199	2.94	0.583
28d. The instructions prepared by my instructors for the web activities are easy to follow.	200	2.93	0.619
28j. I learn a lot about the content from the feedback.	199	2.91	0.618
27k. Activities/tasks help me to improve my grammar.	200	2.91	0.669
29c. I log out when I experience connection problems.	199	2.89	0.720
27l. I find several opportunities to practice my grammar.	195	2.88	0.588
27n. I have learned to be resourceful in finding the meanings of words and phrases difficult or new.	199	2.86	0.586
27s. I can correct my work without wasting much time.	199	2.77	0.721
28l. My instructor assigns roles like group leader, coordinator and editor for assignments.	197	2.71	0.751
27t. I make use of my consultations hours to clarify what I couldn't follow in the OLT.	199	2.70	0.703
28b. My instructor's enthusiasm keeps me motivated during the OLT	199	2.69	0.684
29g. The technical people are approachable.	196	2.64	0.781
27p. Some assignments and tasks are dependent on other learner/s.	197	2.62	0.750
27r. The OLT sessions give me enough time to think before answering questions.	199	2.62	0.755
27q. The instructor's voice and enthusiasm in the OLT sessions keep me motivated.	200	2.60	0.694
30a. The management assists learners in course selection.	198	2.60	0.760
29f. The technical people can easily be contacted.	199	2.59	0.841
27h. The online material motivates me.	199	2.57	0.755
29a. When I experience technology problem my instructor solves the problem for me.	198	2.55	0.797
30b. The management makes sure the OLT is conducted smoothly.	199	2.54	0.730
27m. I feel satisfied on the content learned through the OLT.	198	2.54	0.717
27i. My reading skills have improved through the OLT sessions.	200	2.53	0.795
29d. My instructor refers me to the technical people for help.	196	2.52	0.781
30c. There is no problem in contacting the management for help on the OLT.	199	2.51	0.751
28k. I receive private messages from my instructors on my work.	199	2.47	0.815
27j. My writing skills have improved through the OLT sessions.	199	2.38	0.820

N No of learners who responded to that item

SD standard deviation

The elements in *the instructor* component are on 'IT skills and knowledge', 'enthusiasm' and 'feedback'.

The elements in *the learner* component are on 'IT skills and knowledge', 'language skills', 'interaction' and 'self-initiated learning'. This is followed by the components on *learning material* and *technology* issues. A mean score with a rating of 2.5 is considered as an average response and any score of less than 2.5 (out of a maximum of 4) indicates a negative response. It is interesting to note that out of all the elements listed in Table 1, only the component of *technology* has a mean score of 2.46. This score of less than 2.5 indicates a negative value overall. However, the mean score is not too far below the average of 2.5. All other components - *the instructor*, *the learner*, and *the learning materials* - reveal mean scores approaching 3.0. Thus these findings suggest that learners perceived online English tutorials positively. An item analysis was carried out on the sample population. The aim was to identify some general trends in order to have a better understanding of how learners in the sample responded to each item individually.

The top ten (10) statements scored high mean scores ranging from 3.16 to 2.94. These statements are all related to the instructor except for Item 27o which is related to the learners gaining confidence as an independent learner as a result of attending an online learning language course. This result suggests that the learners were dependent on the instructors and lacked autonomy to handle the OLT without the instructors' help. Feedback to learners during the OLT was considered important and much appreciated as it promoted better understanding of the lesson.

Table: 3
Ranking of mean scores of the negative items

Items	N	Mean	SD
27d. Online learning takes up much of my time because of technical problems.	197	2.48	0.812
27g. I find it difficult to express my thoughts on the computer because I lack computational skills.	200	2.26	0.810
27f. There is often difficulty in getting the line when trying to follow the OLT sessions.	199	2.16	0.735
27b. Online learning can be boring due to poor interaction with other learners.	200	2.13	0.829
27e. The connection to the instructor is often disrupted due to technical problems.	199	2.07	0.721
27c. Online learning can be boring due to technical problems.	197	1.75	0.765

The negative statements in Table 3 on technology, computer skills and interaction registered low mean scores ranging from 2.48 to 1.75 in descending order. The data suggest that learners had a few problems in these areas. Even when they faced such problems they could rectify them through technical support or with the help from instructors.

Teaching and Learning and Technology factors

To Item 28e 'my instructor has good computational skills to teach OLT', 82.4% reacted positively. Item 27a 'My instructor helped me in my learning during the OLT' had the highest percentage (88%). For Item 28c 'instructor helped me when I face difficulty during the OLT', 83% responded positively.

The results suggest that the learners were highly dependent on the instructors in this new mode of learning. They also perceived the instructors as being competent with computer skills. This group of learners could have also benefited during the OLT from their instructors' help. The FTF mode is the only mode learners had been exposed to during their primary and secondary education. Slightly more than half of the sample (59.5%) felt strongly that the instructors' voice and enthusiasm motivated them in their learning. This does not mean that the instructors were not competent in delivering the language lesson. The findings suggest that enthusiasm shown by the instructors is important and can motivate the learners to learn better during the OLT.

The finding is in vein with the notion of social presence proposed by Garrison and Anderson (2003: 50) who say that a supporting and encouraging climate of the virtual class that is created by the teacher would contribute to enhanced learning. This is supported by Salmon (2000) who states that teachers who are able to inspire the learners would establish a learning environment which facilitates meaningful and worthwhile learning activities and outcomes.

This, in turn, would help learners to become more linguistically competent and gain more knowledge of the Internet, problems predicted Sussex (1998). In addition, learners would gain in terms of use of appropriate study skills, increase in motivation and ability to handle personal problems as such difficulties have known to have impede learners' ability to learn in this mode (Zuraidah Abdul Rahman and Ahmad Mohamad, 2001).

Item 28h 'I also learn from the feedback/corrections made by my instructor for other learners' received the highest number of positive responses. 83.9% of the learners were attentive to the feedback given during the OLT. These learners either listened attentively or read the text chats for feedback that was given to other learners. 83.3% of the learners agreed that the feedback from their instructors helped them understand their work better. A total of 82.9% of the learners said that their instructors provided them with feedback immediately. The data clearly show that the instructors were keeping track of their learners' progress in order to maximise learning outcomes.

Clearly then, feedback from instructors played an important role in guiding learners to improve their work online. The statement 'I learned a lot about the language from the feedback provided by my instructors' received 81.9% positive responses. Only a small percentage of learners (18.1%) felt otherwise. Probably this latter group of learners needed personal attention or guidance to enable them to keep pace with others during the OLT. A total of 79.4% of the learners felt that through feedback given by the instructors, they also learned a lot about the content. Learners taking the ESP courses like Business Communication *I* or Business Communication *II* which are content-orientated could have given favourable responses to this item.

In addition to this, 50.7% of the learners obtained feedback in the form of private messages from their respective instructors. The private messages were in response to e-mail messages or feedback given in one-to-one consultations outside class hours. The value of feedback given to learners on the online mode and FTF differ greatly.

Learners who were intrinsically motivated must have found the feedback in the OLT beneficial, while learners who had difficulty adapting to this mode of learning may not have clearly understood the importance of such feedback. The data indicate that 64% of the learners did not find it difficult to express their thoughts on the computer because they had good computational skills. Almost one-third of them felt otherwise. It can be concluded that while the majority of the learners in the sample had adequate knowledge of computational skills and ability to perform during the OLT, there were others who faced difficulty in this area.

Thus it can be argued that in order for learners to appreciate feedback, they must overcome their lack of confidence and competence or motivation in the use of this mode. But as clearly seen by the responses of the motivated learners, feedback is indeed crucial. As stated by Ellis (1994), such information can be used to revise language skills. In fact, frequent feedback from instructors and interaction among learners and instructors can be a good motivator, making the learning process one of a cyclical process. As for the items on language skills, 79% of the sample felt that the OLT provided them with several opportunities to improve their grammar. For the item 'The activities/tasks helped me to improve my grammar', 78.5% provided positive responses.

These results clearly show that the learners had benefited from this mode of learning because there were more opportunities to practice their grammar. Thus, this mode can address the claim made by Sussex (1998) that learners with poor linguistic ability and with less experience with the Internet may not have sufficient knowledge to evaluate and exploit the materials and advice that they find on the web. As learning is a cyclical process, learners with poor linguistic ability can enhance their skills through the mode and the mode itself helps to promote their grammar skills. This can only be a win-win situation for the learners. Slightly more than half of the sample (53%), agreed that their reading skills improved through the OLT sessions. Probably these learners could have visited the links for reading given to them to enable them to improve this skill. However, a smaller number of the learners (46.7%) said their writing skills improved. These learners could have felt anxious or apprehensive when they had to write and send entries on the text chat as they felt the presence of their coursemates. Many instructors also gave exercises which included multiple choice questions, gap-filling items and sentence completion items. Listening and speaking skills were limited in the OLT lessons and were covered during the FTF classes. However listening for comprehension and knowledge was an important skill in the OLT as learners had to listen clearly for explanations and instructions during the OLT.

In order to engage with the learning materials, interaction with learning material, peers and the instructor during the OLT are important. However, it is interesting to note that 71.5% of the sample did not agree with the statement 'online learning can be boring due to poor interaction with other learners'. These learners did not see the importance of interactions during the OLT. Hence they could have participated in the OLT with little or no interaction with peers and had to get more help from their instructors. The need for interaction may not have been considered important in the OLT as group work was also limited. This could be the reason why 81% of the learners find the number of FTF classes sufficient to understand the OLT lessons.

This is probably due to the increase in opportunities for interaction during the FTF class with fellow coursemates and their instructors. 66.3% of the learners responded positively to Item 28/ 'my instructors assigned roles like group leader, coordinator and editor to do assignments'. This result revealed that more than half of the learners stated that interaction with peers was necessary for completing assignments. A total of 57.2% of the learners agreed that they were dependent on others for certain assignments and tasks. Probably learners interacted outside OLT hours to complete such tasks which required group work and therefore interaction was necessary. In other words, feedback from peers is also important. A total of 80.8% of the sample indicated that they had gained confidence to become independent learners. 79.9% claimed to be resourceful in looking for meaning of words and phrases that were new and also difficult to them. 70.4% of the sample claimed that they could correct their work in the OLT without wasting much time. 65.8% made use of their consultation hours to clarify with their instructors what they could not follow in the OLT.

This result indicates that the learners were autonomous to a certain extent. However, the instructors' input in terms of feedback and peer feedback during the online lesson is crucial for learners to be successful in language learning. 57.8% of the subjects said the OLT gave them enough time to think and reflect before they answered questions posed during the session. This group of learners seemed more enthusiastic to give immediate responses to the questions. The others could be weak in the language or apprehensive to answer or did not find it necessary to participate.

The majority of them (79.5%) agreed that the instructions provided in the online activities for the lessons are easy to follow. 52.8% of the sample also considered the online learning material prepared by their instructors as motivating and that they spent more time on this course than the other OLT courses. Materials definitely play an important role in the online learning process. Hills (2003) holds the view that materials which entertain and excite also motivate learners to stay focused. Most importantly, if materials are designed well, they will motivate the learners and allow them to practise independent learning without much anxiety. Learners expressed satisfaction with the instructions for the web activities. This could be because such instructions for learning activities were presented in simple ways to enable learners to understand. Online learning materials must be well-planned and improved by the instructors so that they are clear for the learners to follow in order to achieve desired learning outcomes. However, only 56.1% of the learners expressed satisfaction with the contents of the online learning materials. This could be because the slides or presentations only covered the main points and learners needed to read further for better understanding of the points covered in the lessons. Having to read more may not have been well received by the learners.

Technology is very important in the virtual learning mode. However, it is interesting to note that majority of the learners (85.3%) did not agree that learning can be boring when technical problems are present. This could be because technical problems could be easily rectified. 76.4% supported this claim that the connection between them and the instructor was not disrupted due to technical problems. Those who encountered such problems (55.6%) were referred to the technical support group for help by the instructors.

The learners (56.3%) also found that the technical people could be easily contacted and 63.8% felt that they were approachable. It seems that technical problems were not an obstacle to the learners during the OLT. On the other hand, 73.4 % of them said that when they faced connection problems they did not spend too much time trying to get connected but instead, they chose to log out. Probably this group of learners was confident that they could follow the FTF lessons in order to understand lessons missed in the OLT.

Results of the interview

Several factors emerged from an analysis of the data collected from the in-depth interviews. These factors are categorised and discussed under the following sub-headings:

- Skills and preparation
- Learner participation
- Motivation
- Self-initiated learning
- Feedback

Skills and preparation

Most of the learners interviewed highlighted several useful skills that were needed in order to follow the OLT. The learners were unanimous in acknowledging the importance of basic computer skills. They stressed that they needed to familiarise themselves with the procedures of logging on for the OLT and getting used to the OLT programme especially in the use of the icons⁴. Some of them learned the skills through trial and error while others sought the help of their instructors or peers. Again this finding confirms the claim by Sussex (1998) that linguistic and ICT knowledge are important for maximum and positive learning to occur.

Learner participation

All learners expressed that the learning materials were interesting and clear. They also agreed that activities or tasks prepared for individual work is easily manageable and time saving compared to pair work and group work. Others felt that pair and group work was more interesting because learners had the opportunity to check their answers with other learners' answers. The setback for group activity was mainly poor attendance and staggered logging on for the OLT by the learners. In group work, learners sent in many entries and the instructors had difficulty reading all of them. This resulted in instructors giving feedback on answers from selected learners only.

Motivation

All the learners interviewed perceived motivation as an important factor in the OLT. However, they reacted differently to what motivated them during the OLT. According to the learners, the instructors played an important role in motivating them during the OLT. A student reported that he was also motivated to participate because by participating the instructor will get to know him. This will make it easier for him to interact with her online and offline. Generally, instructors who are committed would find ways and means to motivate learners. Online learning is beneficial for learners who are motivated and know how to get the best from this learning mode.

⁴ Icons refer to symbols used during the OLT like *clap*, *smile*, and *microphone* which are available on the computer screen

Self-initiated learning

The OLT generated self-initiated learning in many ways. Learners read reference materials given to them earlier by the instructors or notes downloaded from VOISS in order to prepare for the OLT. Such learners are considered autonomous and this practice promotes confidence and independent learning. Another aspect of self-initiated learning is peer corrections. When learners look at entries in the text chat and start correcting their peers' work without being instructed by the instructors, this can be considered as self-initiated learning.

This finding is in line with the constructivist view that learners learn better when they are active agents in the learning process. In other words, the learner becomes more autonomous and has control over his or her learning (see Garrison and Baynton, 1987).

Feedback

All the learners interviewed valued feedback. They appreciated the feedback given by their instructors which they considered supportive and they were comfortable in accepting the corrections. While feedback given by the instructors was valued, feedback from their peers was limited. Probably these learners treat feedback from their peers as criticisms and thus to be avoided. This finding concurs with the finding from the questionnaire that feedback from the instructor (Ellis, 1994) is important.

CONCLUSION

On the whole, the findings revealed that the mean scores of all items related to *the learner, the instructor, and the learning material* were positive which means that the learners reacted positively towards the OLTs. Although the component *technology* revealed a negative mean score, it must be clearly noted that technical problems were not considered a reason that threatened their learning process during OLT.

The in-depth interviews with the learners also provided more insight into the factors that contributed to the online delivery of the English courses. Hence the findings with regard to the perceptions of the learners brought more new perspectives which could be incorporated or taken into consideration for an online language learning programme.

Although UNITAR adopts a technologically-based delivery mode, the transition to this mode had not reached a level that is required of an online learner because of the availability of the other supporting systems used in this transition phase. In other words, online learning in Malaysia is still in the developmental stage and it needs continuous expansion both in terms of infrastructure and training of instructors and learners with effective skills in teaching and learning through the online mode. In fact, research and development in the virtual classroom in Malaysia has been limited so far. Further research in this area is necessary.

Researchers should take note of the experiences and difficulties encountered by learners and instructors in similar online setups in order to improve and validate the issues discussed in the study.

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