FACTORS INFLUENCING INTERACTION IN AN ONLINE ENGLISH COURSE IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study examines the factors that influenced learners' online interaction in an online English learning course offered at a Vietnamese university using mixed methods approach and principal component analysis. It explores which factors would have impact on learners' interaction with the content, peers and instructors in the course as well as the level of importance for each factor. The findings of the study indicated that factors related to the online course were its content and flexible delivery while those concerning the learners were their internet self-efficacy as well as their perceived usefulness of interaction processes. The factors related to the instructors included timeliness and usefulness of feedback and their online presence. In addition, in Vietnamese context, the cultural factors such as being passive, fear of asking questions to instructors also influenced learners' online interaction.

Keywords: factor, interaction, feedback, usefulness, online presence, Vietnam

1. Introduction

Online learning is becoming increasingly popular with more and more students having access to web-based courses at universities across the globe. In Vietnam, the setting of this study, language learners have few opportunities to practice the language they are taught, especially with native speakers of English. Hence, language teaching institutions have increasingly sought to provide learners with online learning courses with the aim of increasing learner-instructor, learner-learner and learner-content interactions – the three main types of online interaction (Moore, 1989).

Recent advanced technologies have enabled technological and content language experts to make the most use of computer assisted language learning (CALL), web-based learning (WBL) and mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) to offer language courses. In Vietnam, a few online learning courses have utilized updated technologies to teach the English language online, especially for speaking skills. For example, Augmented Reality is used as a platform to teach speaking by TOPICA NATIVE (https://topicanative.edu.vn/). Artificial intelligence technology is also exploited in a mobile application to teach speaking through short, fun dialogues (https://elsaspeak.com/).

To the best of the researcher's knowledge, studies about online language learning in Vietnam are still limited. Therefore, this study makes some contributions to research on influencing factors in an online language learning environment implemented in a developing country where technological conditions and online teaching pedagogy are yet as advanced as in the developed countries. This specific paper presents an updated part of a larger doctoral research project by the same author about learner interaction in an online language learning course (Pham, 2015).

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2. Literature Review

Review of the literature in online learning has revealed that there are many factors that influence learners' interaction with the course content, peers and instructors (Yukselturk, 2010; Zaili, Moi, Yusof, Hanfi & Suhaimi, 2019). These factors are divided into different criteria or elements such as satisfaction and attitude of learners and instructors about online learning, Internet speed, ease of use, course content and delivery. The following sections present an overview of the influencing factors that are related to learner, instructor and online course.

Learner-related factors: Learners have always been the key subject of studies about influencing factors of online interaction. For example, researchers have been studying the impact of learner prior internet experience on their online learning outcomes or satisfaction (Kim, Kwon & Cho, 2011; Yukselturk, 2010). The results of these studies have been inconclusive. While some researchers (Chang, Liu, Sung, Lin, Chen & Cheng, 2013; Chen, 2014) claimed that learners' technical prior experience or computer/internet self-efficacy was significantly associated with course satisfaction and confidence, studies by Kuo, Walker, Belland and Schroder (2013) have suggested that computer and internet self-efficacy was not a significant predictor of learners' satisfaction or perceived usefulness of an online course. Other learner-related factors were learners' availability of time, their self-regulated learning, feedback and online presence from peers and instructors (Kuo et al., 2013; Chen, 2014; Mekheimer, 2017, Pham, 2019).

Instructor-related factors: Instructors also have critical influence on the success of an online course. Their understanding about, commitment to, active participation in and attitudes about online learning are some of the key factors (Cho & Tobias, 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 2011). Other factors include their shift in pedagogy (from traditional to online

teaching), timely response and individual, group feedback to learners' queries, learner engagement (Cox, Black, Heney Keith, 2015; Cho & Tobias, 2016; Gómez-Rey, Barbera & Fernández-Navarro, 2017). Successful online instructors should connect their learners together, especially with native speakers or excellent speakers of the language they are studying so as to increase learners' motivation (Wu, Yen & Marek, 2011). However, online instructors often find it difficult to keep up with the pace of the discussion forums, especially in a large class (de Lima, Gerosa & Conte, 2019).

Course-related factors: The third important set of factors that influences online interaction is related to the online course itself. These factors include such elements as course content, design and technology or course quality as a whole. Studies have shown that there was an association between learners' interaction with the course content and their learning outcomes and grades (Murray, Pérez, Geist, Hedrick & Steinbach, 2012; Pham, 2018; Zimmerman, 2012). In this regard, Sun, Tsai, Finger, Chen & Yeh (2008) claimed that course quality "is the most important concern in this e-learning environment" (p. 1196). In order to have a quality online course, it is important for computer experts and content teachers to work collaboratively so as the course is well designed technologically, academically and flexibly to ensure learners' and instructors' satisfactions (Chen & Yao, 2016; Kuo, Walker, Schroder & Belland, 2014). Similarly, a study by Kuo et al. (2013) has suggested that "the design of online content may be the most important contributor to learner satisfaction" (p. 30). Chen and Yao (2016), however, viewed that design is the second most important factor.

The above review of literature reveals that there are many factors that may promote or hinder learners' online interaction. Therefore, in this study, the researcher attempted to use mixed methods approach and principal component analysis to explore which factors

would have impact on learners' interaction with the content, peers and instructors in an online English language course as well as the level of importance for each factor.

3. Methodology

The participants

The participants of the study were first-year students who used the online course as part of a four-year study in a Bachelor of Arts degree specialising in interpreting and translation. In the first two years of this degree, they focus on English language practice, both in traditional face-to-face lessons and online study. At the beginning of their first academic year, every learner was provided with an account to access the online course together with a hands-on orientation session. They were required to complete 80% of interaction with the content of assigned levels by the end of each semester. Failure to do so meant that they were not allowed to sit for the end-of-semester tests. Two hundred and seven students voluntarily took part in the survey, ten in the semi-structured interviews and nine in the focus group discussions respectively.

The instructor participants were the lecturers of the university where the online course was delivered. They taught learners in the traditional face-to-face lessons and were also assigned to supervise online study. The instructors' online duties included assigning the learners with homework, answering their queries, and reminding learners of the online study. They were also requested to write monthly reports to course managers about online learning situation of the groups they were supervising. Twelve instructors took part in semi-structured interviews and six participated in focus group discussion.

The online course

At the time the research project was conducted, the online English course (called English Discoveries Online) was a commercially available online language learning platform. Its main content was divided into three levels of language learning: basic, intermediate and advanced, which provided the learners with learning materials and interactive practice in reading, listening, speaking and grammar. At each level there were eight units covering different topics such as family life, sports and business. The learners received instant and automated feedback from the course Learning Management System (LMS) about the correctness of their answers. There were five forums for interpersonal interactions: one for learner-instructor (Support) and four for learner-learner (Class Discussion, Community Discussion, You!Who? and Webpal). The Community Discussion Forum was designed for all the users who had access to the course. The topics in this forum were created and moderated by the course developers. There were eight general discussion topics in this forum. Each topic had a lead-in statement which invited opinions from the course users. For example, the topic *'Getting To Know You'* had the following lead-in statement:

> This is the place to write all about yourself: the country you come from, your interests, your family, etc. Read about others and what their lives are like (sic).

The learners took part in the discussions by selecting the topic(s) of their interest and created a new message or commented on a pre-created post.

Research design

A sequential explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell, 2009) was used for data collection and analysis. Data about factors that influenced interaction were obtained through a survey questionnaire, online messages, and then focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. The study is guided by Moore's (1989) model of online interaction to answer the following research question: Which factors influence learners'

interactions in an online English language learning course?

Instruments and data analysis

A questionnaire consisting of 21 Likert-type scale questions was administered to 207 learners of the English Department who were present during face-to-face lessons. Prior to its administration to the target population of the study, the questionnaire was emailed to five instructors who had experience with the online course for feedback and to obtain their professional comments to ascertain validity and clarity of the instrument. This resulted in the deletion of a few items in the questionnaire to make it more focused.

The questionnaire was then given to 41 learners who also used the online course as part of their curriculum but studied in a different English department of the same university. This was aimed to enable the researcher to decide if the items included in the questionnaire would produce data from which meaningful conclusions could be drawn to answer the research questions. It also aimed to make sure that the data could be processed by the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 20, with meaningful results. In addition, it double-checked the level of clarity with learners, whose English was apparently at a lower level than the instructors. The participants involved in the pilot testing were not included in the final administration of the survey and data analysis. Although the sample of the pilot study was small, a test of reliability showed an acceptable internal consistency among test items with the Cronbach Alpha coefficient of 0.76. The researcher also extracted asynchronous messages of these participants in the discussion forums for triangulation purposes where appropriate.

Once preliminary analyses of the quantitative data were completed, two separate focus group discussions were organized with the participation of nine learners. The focus group discussions aimed to confirm and develop some of the results emerged in the analyses of survey questionnaire and online messages. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in parallel with the aforementioned focus group discussions. There was a constant comparison and contrasting of both numeric and text data to explore empirical evidence to answer the research questions. The survey questionnaire was in English but the focus group discussions and interviews were conducted in Vietnamese to enable the participants to easily express their opinions.

The quantitative data from the survey were analysed using simple descriptive statistics (Byrne, 2002) while qualitative data were processed using content analysis (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). A triangulation technique (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009) was also adopted in the analysis of data in which the results of analysing quantitative data were supported and/or explained by findings from analysing qualitative data of the focus group discussions and interviews.

4. Results

The following sections present the results and discussion for the part about influencing factors of online interaction in the aforementioned doctoral research project.

4.1. Analysis of quantitative data

a. Descriptive analysis

Table 1 shows the results of the learners' response to the survey question about the factors that influenced their online interactions with the course content, peers and instructors. The survey question was: *How important is each of the following factors in facilitating your online interactions in the course?* Due to low count in some cells, responses were collapsed into three categories. The original variables were *extremely important, very important, important, not important* and *no opinion*.

Table 1. Factors influencing interaction

Factors	Important (%)	No opinion (%)	Not important (%)
Ability to communicate in English	94.6	0.5	4.9
Content of the online course	81.9	2.0	16.1
Learners' availability of time	76.9	6.4	16.7
Sense of belonging to a virtual group	45.4	18.7	35.9
Linkage between interaction and learning goals	74.3	8.0	17.7
Interaction preferences: face-to-face vs. online	57.2	11.4	31.4
Technical support	80.7	5.9	13.4
Regulations about online interaction	47.0	12.5	40.5
Level of confidence in using the Internet	49.6	6.4	41.0
Typing skills	41.7	9.2	49.1
User-friendliness of the communication tools	52.0	15.0	31.0
Cost of the online course	67.7	7.8	24.5
Internet speed	79.8	5.4	14.8
Regularity of online presence by instructors	71.2	10.7	18.1
Usefulness of feedback from instructors	86.8	3.4	9.8
Timeliness of feedback from instructors	68.5	9.4	22.1
Joy of interaction with the instructors	63	13.3	23.7
Regularity of online presence by peers	46.9	13.8	39.3
Usefulness of feedback from peers	62.6	11.3	26.1
Timeliness of feedback from peers	47.0	14.8	38.2
Joy of interaction with peers	63.2	11.8	25.0

The results show that the major factors influencing interaction in this course were related to **learners, instructors, technology** and **course content**. These factors were classified into two categories: having influence and not having influence on the interaction process. The influencing factors are those that have important values accounting for 60% and above of the total respondents. Although this is not a clean procedure for cutting up the threshold, as a working device, it might work in differentiating the factors (Byrne, 2002).

b. Principal component analysis

In order to investigate further the relative importance of each factor, a principal component analysis (PCA) using SPSS was conducted. The 21 items that facilitated the learners' interaction processes were subjected to this analysis. Initial analysis results showed that three items (1, 8, 17) had low loadings (e.g. under 0.3) suggesting that these components be removed from the

analysis. Examination of communalities values also showed that six items (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8) had low values (e.g. less than 0.3) indicating that these items did not fit well with other items in its component. Altogether it was decided that seven items (1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 17) be removed from analysis.

Prior to performing the PCA, the suitability of data for factor analysis was assessed. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the presence of many coefficients of 0.03 and above. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) value was 0.71, exceeding the recommended value of 0.6 (Kaiser, 1974) and the Bartlet's Test of Sphericity indicated statistical significance, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrix. Principal components analysis revealed the presence of seven components with eigenvalues exceeding 1, explaining 19.9%, 8.1%, 7.3%, 6.7%, 5.4%, 5.2%, and 4.8% of variance respectively as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Principal component analysis – total variance

Component	Initial eigenvalues			Extraction sums of squared loadings			Rotation sums of squared loadings[a]
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative%	Total	% of variance	Cumulative%	Total
1	4.170	19.859	19.859	4.170	19.859	19.859	2.914
2	1.711	8.147	28.006	1.711	8.147	28.006	2.218
3	1.535	7.309	35.315	1.535	7.309	35.315	1.846
4	1.407	6.700	42.015	1.407	6.700	42.015	2.398
5	1.141	5.432	47.446	1.141	5.432	47.446	1.630
6	1.098	5.227	52.673	1.098	5.227	52.673	1.242
7	1.013	4.823	57.496	1.013	4.823	57.496	1.781
8	.969	4.616	62.112				
9	.911	4.336	66.448				
10	.868	4.133	70.581				
11	.845	4.024	74.605				
12	.829	3.949	78.553				
13	.714	3.398	81.952				
14	.687	3.269	85.221				
15	.636	3.028	88.249				
16	.555	2.645	90.894				
17	.518	2.466	93.360				
18	.452	2.150	95.510				
19	.404	1.923	97.433				
20	.292	1.389	98.823				
21	.247	1.177	100.000				
a. When components are correlated, sums of squared loadings cannot be added to obtain a total variance.							

Before accepting the factors, additional criteria were used such as Scree plot and parallel analysis. The Scree plot is a graph of eigenvalues. It is recommended to retain components lying to the left of the elbow which is a break from linearity. An inspection of the Scree plot (Figure 1) revealed a clear break after the fourth component.
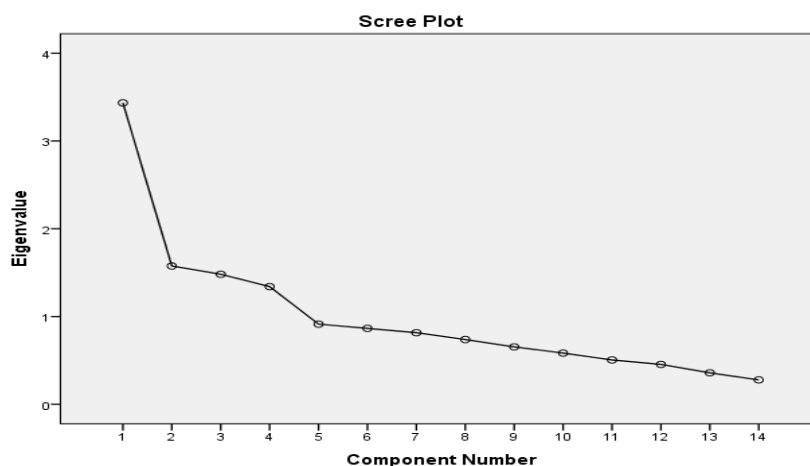

Figure 1. Scree plot of four groups of factors

The findings from the Scree plot were further supported by the results of parallel analysis, which showed only four components with eigenvalues exceeding the corresponding criterion values for the randomly generated data matrix of the same size (21 variables × 207 respondents). Table 3 shows the results of parallel analysis.

Table 3. Eigenvalues from PCA versus parallel analysis values

Component number	Actual eigenvalue from PCA	Criterion value from parallel analysis	Decision
1	4.170	1.6180	Accept
2	1.711	1.5137	Accept
3	1.535	1.4244	Accept
4	1.407	1.3517	Accept
5	1.141	1.2860	Reject
6	1.098	1.2279	Reject
7	1.013	1.1705	Reject

The four-component solution explained a total of 55.9% of the variance, with Component 1 contributing 24.5%, Component 2: 11.3%, Component 3: 10.6% and Component 4 contributing 9.6% as shown in Table 4.

Table 4. Total variance explained by each of four groups of factors

Total variance explained			
Component	Initial eigenvalues		
	Total	% of variance	Cumulative%
1	3.434	24.532	24.532
2	1.576	11.258	35.790
3	1.482	10.583	46.372
4	1.341	9.577	55.949

To aid the interpretation of these four components, oblimin rotation was performed. The rotated solution revealed the presence of simple structure with four components showing a number of strong loading, and most variables loading substantially on only one component. The interpretation of four components was consistent with a study on factors influencing interaction in an online course (Chen & Yao, 2016) with high loadings on aspects such as online course (content, cost), learner prior experience (Internet skills, typing) and instructors (pedagogy, presence, feedback). The Cronbach alpha values for all the retained items were over 0.70, which suggests acceptable internal consistency among the items (DeVellis, 2003).

Table 5. Principal component analysis of influencing factors

Factor	Pattern coefficients					Cronbach's alpha if item deleted
	Item	Component				
		1	2	3	4	
Other learners	20. Timeliness of feedback from peers	**.831**	−.124	.099	.143	.712
	19. Usefulness of feedback from peers	**.758**	−.041	.224	.065	.715
	18. Regularity of online presence by Peers	**.531**	.397	−.181	.124	.718

Prior experience	09. Level of confidence in using the Internet	.087	**.710**	−.144	.108	.737
	10. Typing skills	.073	**.601**	.039	.054	.735
Online course	02. Content of the online course	.093	−.095	**.689**	−.095	.746
	13. Internet speed	−.056	.304	**.559**	.110	.727
	03. Learners' availability of time	.120	−.089	**.555**	.099	.734
	12. Cost of the online course	−.161	.421	**.548**	.034	.738
Instructor	14. Regularity of online presence by Instructors	−.150	.213	−.238	**.780**	.740
	16. Timeliness of feedback from Instructors	.216	−.126	.089	**.744**	.725
	15. Usefulness of feedback from Instructors	.049	−.073	.228	**.712**	.726

The data contained in Table 5 reveal four distinctive groups of factors that had an impact on the learners' interaction process. The first factor (items 18, 19, 20) concerns other learners, more specifically their social and cognitive presence in the interaction process. The highest loadings for items 19 and 20 (0.76 and 0.83 respectively) show that learners wanted timely and useful feedback from peers.

The second factor (items 9, 10) is mainly related to the learners' prior experience – more specifically their competence in using the Internet and typing skills. Although these two items had rather high loadings of 0.71 and 0.60, the simple descriptive results mentioned above did not show levels of importance (only 49.6% and 41.7% respectively). Hence, these items were not used in focus group discussions and interviews with the students.

The third factor (items 2, 3, 12, 13) was about the online course with the exception of item three (learners' availability of time). Most of these items had rather low loadings (around 5.5) excepted the content of the online course (loading of 6.9). This accords with the results of simple descriptive analysis in which 81.9% of learners put a high level of importance on the course content.

The fourth factor (items 14, 15, 16) that emerged from the principal component analysis was related to the regularity of presence of the instructors, timeliness and usefulness of their feedback (rather high loadings of 0.78, 0.74 and 0.71 respectively). These loadings complemented the aforementioned results of descriptive analysis (71.2%, 68.5% and 86.8%).

4.2. Analysis of qualitative data

Taken together, the above quantitative analyses revealed that course content and feedback from peers and instructors were considered important factors. These issues were discussed in the focus group discussions and interviews, together with online messages extracted from the LMS.

Regarding course content one learner stated in the focus group discussion,

All students look forward to quality. And the content of the course has to guarantee quality study outcomes. That's why I think content is the most important. (sic-learner 8)

The learners commented that the content of this course was at a lower level than their English ability. Hence, they could do all the exercises without having to seek support. This is an excerpt from the open-ended question of the survey.

And the level of the test annoys me a lot. I'm a student in a university and I have to do more extremely easy tests just for grade 5 students (sic).

The quantitative methods of marking their doing of reading, listening and grammar exercises, mostly in the form of multiple-choice, did not seem to accurately measure their performance either. In response to the question about required interaction with the course content, while some learners stated that it was necessary, others expressed their concerns in the focus group discussion, *"I think the required interaction does not represent quality. The fact is most learners finish it just because they have to"*.

In the interviews, the learners suggested that songs, films and television series should be included to make learning enjoyable. While the instructors agreed that course content was important, *"I think this one [content] is the most important"* (instructor-ID 05), they mentioned other factors such as required interaction, discussion topics, and even promotional activities such as organizing contests to motivate the learners.

Examining the way that the instructors assigned online study levels to their learners showed another factor concerning the course content: flexibility of learners' interaction with it. In this course, all the learners were required to complete the same levels of study, usually from basic English, before moving on to the next level without taking into account their actual level of English proficiency. Only one of the instructors tried to individualize the learners' study basing on their language competence as seen in the following statement:

> *With the class that I assign different levels to different learners, if a learner fails to complete the tasks, I would mark that red, and then give a warning […] so they are afraid and do as told. (instructor-ID 04)*

The learners of this course highly valued the usefulness of feedback from peers and instructors. However, in the focus group discussion, most of the participants stated that they always turned to the instructors when they were not sure of the peers' answers. One of the learners commented, "*If we are not sure who's right, or if we're not sure of the*

answer, then the instructor will have the last say" (learner 6). They demanded more work and online presence from the instructors as expressed in some answers to the open-ended question of the survey.

> *The interaction between instructor and students is necessary so teachers should do many things to help students (sic).*
> *There should be a more regular and fixed online meet up between instructor and learners as well as between learners and learners (sic).*
> *Instructor should regulate a specific time to be online so learners know and interact easily (translation)*

The content analysis of the instructors' online posts also revealed that they used corrective feedback method to show the learners how to correct sentences. Underneath is an example of a learner' online message:

> *i don't know how to start my edo. can u suggest me what i should do the first.the second.......etc when i do my edo for the first time. thaks u so much! (sic-learner-ID 224)*

The above message contained many linguistic errors related to grammar, spelling and lack of capital letters. The instructors often replied to messages like this without explicitly correcting the mistakes. Instead, they applied the corrective feedback method as shown below:

> *I do not really understand your request, I think. You said you did not know how to start EDO, but at least you know how to log in the site, right? (sic-instructor-ID 06)*

An analysis of the instructors' online messages showed that the majority of them aimed to inform the learners of their study progress, remind to complete required interaction with the course content and even suggested technical solutions as in the following message:

> *It just came to my mind that probably you did your work at our university using wifi. [] That's why you could not log in[]. Could you try with another computer or your wired connection at home? (sic-instructor-ID 02)*

These messages were considered useful to encourage the learners to interact with the course content, and possibly resolve technical glitches.

In respect of the timeliness of feedback, the descriptive analysis of the instructors' online messages shows that almost three quarters of the learners' posts (72%) were replied to within one to five days. However, there were a few occasions when the learners' questions were answered very late and some were not responded at all. The instructors had different frequencies of checking and responding to their learners' messages. While some did it regularly and instantly, others were only online on certain days of the week, "*I often check my email on Tuesday and Saturday to answer interesting questions*" (instructor-ID03).

5. Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the factors that influenced learners' online interaction in an online language course. The results of this study will now be compared with the findings of other works.

It was indicated in the findings of the study that course content was considered one of the most important factors. In this study learners placed high value to the importance of course content when answering the survey. However, they reported that the content of the existing online course was not useful because of uninteresting study materials, easy exercises, and most importantly the quantitative method of measuring learner-content interaction. This method of evaluating online learning has been questioned by earlier researchers (Chen, Zhang & Liu, 2014). The learners also expressed their doubts about the effectiveness of the required interaction with the course content. These findings seem to be consistent with earlier researchers viewed that it was the quality that mattered, not quantity of interaction (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). In some instances, higher education institutions made interaction with content

compulsory to ensure highest possible frequency of interaction. Nonetheless, some researchers have suggested that standard for online teaching need not contain arbitrary thresholds for required interaction (Grandzol & Grandzol, 2010).

The learners' views indicated that in order to make learning enjoyable, it was necessary to include songs, films and television series to the course content. This is in agreement with the result of other studies which indicated that enjoyment had a major impact on the long term study of learners (Yükselir, 2016; Wu et al., 2011). It is also supported by earlier studies which have shown that by watching TV shows, video clips and songs, together with doing interactive exercises, learners can be in control of their learning; at the same time, they feel more motivated (Wu et al., 2011).

Another factor concerning the course content, or interaction with it is the flexibility of interaction. In this course, all the learners were made to start from basic English despite their different language competence, which reduced course flexibility and learner autonomy - critical factors for success of an online course (Boelens et al., 2017; Tuncer, 2009). According to Kuo et al. (2013), a rigid course made learners less autonomous. However, providing individualized learning requires a radical pedagogical shift on behalf of the instructors (Cox et al., 2015; Sun, 2011).

Regarding interaction with peers and instructors, the participants stated that interpersonal interaction should not be made compulsory. For them, the interaction should be for a reason and meaningful which should consist of exchange of messages to solve some real tasks. This finding corroborates findings of other studies that interaction must lead to mean making and that in language learning producing meaningful sentences is important (Hwang, Shadiev, Hsu, Huang, Hsu & Lin, 2014; Woo & Reeves, 2007). Thus, instructors' application of various moderating strategies to create meaningful interactions might be more effective than required

interaction (Ernest, Heiser & Murphy, 2013). However, this may be a big challenge to the instructors because of their lack of time (Park & Son, 2009; Yükselir, 2016).

The next group of important factors were related to feedback from peers and instructors, more specifically, the timeliness and usefulness of the feedback. The longitudinal mining of online messages showed that most of the learners' queries were responded between one to five days. According to Hew and Cheung (2008), an average response time of two to three days or even less would be more acceptable to learners. However, in order to provide timely feedback to learners, teaching assistants would be needed for several hours each week to respond to students' queries (Chang, Chen & Hsu, 2011; Ntourmas, Avouris, Daskalaki & Dimitriadis, 2018). No such assistance was available in this online course and an instructor had to supervise nearly 100 learners. Hence, some of them might have not been able to respond to the learners' feedback in a timely manner. This finding mirrors those of another study that examined the difficulties instructors had in moderating online discussion forums (de Lima et al., 2019).

Concerning the usefulness of the instructors' feedback, the analysis of focus group interview data reveals that the learners of this course valued the instructors' messages. This finding matches those observed in other studies (Ghadirian et al., 2017; Gómez-Rey et al., 2017) which showed that learners participated more if instructors' posts were of high quality and usefulness. In this study, however, the majority of instructors' messages, interestingly, aimed to inform the learners about their study progress, to respond to technical questions and remind students about undone exercises. These findings support the idea of the need to have frequent reminding to make the learners study hard throughout the course, including regular participation in online discussion forums (Verenikina, Jones & Delahunty, 2017).

Instructors, however, did not comment on or correct learners' assignments or messages despite them having linguistic errors. Instead, they applied the corrective feedback methods through modelling correct ways to use the language. However, it was evidenced from other studies that there was not significant learning as the result of online corrective feedback, at least through indirect error correction from instructors (Loewen & Erlam, 2006; Shooshtari, Jalilifar & Ostadian, 2018). Feedback needs to explain learners' mistakes and be direct for language learning (Gibby, 2007; Shooshtari et al., 2018).

In this study, the majority of learners also placed a high level of importance on the regularity of instructors' online presence. These findings seem to be consistent with other research which found that the instructors' teaching presence plays a crucial role in pedagogical instruction, using different types of interactional matrices (Cox et al., 2015; Gómez-Rey, 2017). However, the instructors themselves had different levels of online presence: some were online only twice a week. These inactive instructors might have held the attitudes that their online presence did not encourage learning. This interpretation accords with other observation, which showed that instructors' presence did not promote learning (Cho & Tobias, 2016).

There are several possible explanations for some of the instructors' limited online presence in this course. Firstly, English lecturers in Vietnam often have a high teaching load (Le, 2011); thus, their online presence might have been limited to performing the required tasks. In other words, their lack of time might be among the inhibiting factors (Park & Son, 2009; Yükselir, 2016). Secondly, it might have been because of their different online teaching attitudes and behaviours accordingly: while some of the instructors were active in facilitating participation and replying to the learners' queries, others were not. Thirdly, their weekly face-to-face meeting with the learners may also have diminished the need

to interact online as has been suggested by Marden and Herrington (2011).

Finally, concerning usefulness of feedback from peers, although the learners valued peer feedback, they tended to rely more on the instructors' answers. There are several explanations for the above results, one of which could be that these learners were of newly enrolled students, thus they might have been reluctant to comment on peer's posts; furthermore, they could have been unsure of the correctness of their answers or comments. These findings match those observed in earlier studies which revealed that learners did not provide enough input and feedback in their discussions (Vrasidas & McIsaac, 1999; Yukselturk, 2010). The learners' limited interaction with peers in English was possibly due to their fear of 'losing face', a feature of collective community in a country like Vietnam (Borton, 2000). They tend to have difficulties in asking questions for clarification or give different views (Dan, Mai, Da, Chau & Hai, 2018). They are also passive in engaging in classroom activities (Le, 2011; Raymond & Choon, 2017).

6. Conclusions, limitations and suggestions for further studies

This paper presents the findings of a study examining the key factors that influenced learners' interactions in an online English language course in a Vietnamese university.

First, the factors relating to the course consisted of its content and flexibility of interaction with it. In this course, the language practice exercises were easy for the learners to complete; hence, it demotivated their interaction with it. The rigid requirement making all of them start from basic English did not produce much learning enthusiasm either. Furthermore, it seems that the required level of interaction with the content resulted in superficial performance of the learners. This issue should be further investigated.

Second, the key factors relating to the learners and instructors included their feedback

and online presence. While the learners might have been reluctant to give feedback to peers due to their own limited language proficiency level and cultural reasons, the instructors might have been too busy to respond to each and every message from the learners. The provision of online feedback to the learners, especially in English, required a great deal of instructors' time; hence, they should be trained and motivated on how to make sure that their feedback was both timely and useful. It also means that their online presence has to be improved. Further investigation of the instructors' views on this issue should be conducted.

The findings in this study are subject to a number of limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted with only one cohort of learners, and thus could not provide a comprehensive picture of factors influencing learners' online interactions. Thus, it is suggested that future studies should be implemented with different groups of learners who use the same online course. Secondly, this study did not take into account the relationship between learners' online study and their learning outcomes at the end of study semester (conducted in traditional mode). Hence, it was not possible to draw a definite conclusion about the effectiveness of the course content or online discussions. Future research should include investigation of the contribution of online learning to their final semester results. This would help obtain a fuller picture of learner-learner, learner-instructor and learner-content interactions in online English language learning courses.

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CÁC YẾU TỐ ẢNH HƯỞNG ĐẾN TƯƠNG TÁC TRONG MỘT KHÓA HỌC TIẾNG ANH TRỰC TUYẾN Ở VIỆT NAM

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Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này khảo sát các yếu tố ảnh hưởng đến sự tương tác của người học trong một khóa học tiếng Anh trực tuyến ở một trường đại học ở Việt Nam, sử dụng phương pháp nghiên cứu kết hợp định lượng, định tính và phân tích nhân tố. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy các yếu tố liên quan đến khóa học bao gồm nội dung và tính linh hoạt khi triển khai, trong khi các yếu tố liên quan đến người học bao gồm khả năng sử dụng interenet và quan điểm của họ về hiệu quả của học trực tuyến. Các yếu tố liên quan đến giáo viên bao gồm tính kịp thời, hiệu quả của ý kiến phản hồi và tần suất truy cập. Ngoài ra, trong bối cảnh ở Việt Nam, một số yếu tố văn hóa như sự bị động, ngại hỏi giáo viên cũng làm ảnh hưởng đến sự tương tác của người học.

Từ khóa: yếu tố, tương tác, phản hồi, hiệu quả, tần suất truy cập, Việt Nam.