

University Student Attitudes Towards On-line English Instruction: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

The sudden 2021 covid-19 surge in Taiwan forced university classes online with very little notice. Most studies on how students responded to this have examined Taiwan's higher performing universities. This mixed method study surveyed and interviewed thirty-five students enrolled in English and EMI programs at a lower tier, private Taiwanese university. It examines student attitudes about their online learning experience and preferences for it moving forward. Results showed strong student support for online learning while qualitative follow up revealed a variety of factors such as convenience and a perceived easing of standards accompanying online learning were the primary motivators to continue and social interactions with peers was the primary motivator for wanting to resume a traditional classroom environment.

Keywords: Online Learning; Taiwan; ESL; EMI; Student Preferences

I. Introduction

Although extensive research into student attitudes toward online learning have been widely conducted for decades, they generally made the same set of assumptions: students were opting into the online learning, the teachers teaching the online classes had proper training and time to create an online learning environment, and in most cases the online learning environment was supplemented by other classes that were not held online. All of these conditions were disregarded on an emergency basis with the worldwide covid-19 pandemic.

Taiwanese universities and their students were widely spared the worst of the pandemic throughout 2020 and the first half of 2021 due to a highly effective and early government response to quarantine the island. While their counterparts in most other nations faced school closures and compulsory online learning, education in Taiwan went on with few modifications.

All that changed in May of 2021 when the island's defensive quarantine net was finally breached and an outbreak of covid-19 began to rage out of control across Taiwan. University classes were moved online, and although systems were in place for synchronous online teaching, there was little time to test or prepare (in some cases as little as two days) and neither students nor instructors were adequately trained or prepared for the shift. Additional challenges presented themselves to English language instructors who rely on classroom interaction as a fundamental part of an effective pedagogy.

Understanding student opinions about this emergency online shift during the last third of the semester, particularly among Taiwanese students attending private universities, can offer valuable data to both university administrators and government policy makers.

Studying students at private Taiwanese universities is particularly valuable. According to government statistics, since 2008 over 95% of high school students have moved on to higher education (Prudence, 2016). The most coveted university spots are in the nation's public universities, meaning the private universities are generally recruiting lower-achieving students with lower motivation levels especially when it comes to English learning (Chang, 2006). Previous studies of student attitudes towards online learning have focused on Taiwan's more prestigious universities. See (Lin, 2020).

II. Methods

This following data was collected from students at a lower-tier private university in Taiwan through oral interviews. Thirty-five students from multiple departments were interviewed. While they were all enrolled in at least one EMI class, they were also asked about all of their opinions on all of their online classes. Students were asked to categorize their online learning classes as synchronous or asynchronous and asked to rate their satisfaction with the classes and their preferences for online learning. For the qualitative follow up, participants were then asked whether they would hypothetically prefer to move all of some of their classes online for the next semester even if not forced to because of the covid-19 outbreak. They were then asked reasons why, regardless of answer, and allowed to give any number of reasons. The following results were obtained.

III. Results

Question 1: For each online class, is your online classes synchronous or asynchronous?

Students reported only 5% of their online classes were asynchronous learning. In fact, the majority of this 5% were the same writing class. This indicates that when teachers were forced to move to online learning, the preferred method was lecture and/or class discussion and testing delivered in real time.

Subjects were then asked about their opinions about online synchronous learning. They were asked whether they preferred their classes having been moved online. Students were asked to consider only the nature of the class itself and to disregard considerations such as safety during the pandemic outbreak.

The results were quite surprising. By a nearly two to one margin, students preferred the online learning experience to the more traditional classroom environment (See Figure 2). However, follow up inquiries revealed that the primary motivators were primarily non-academic and often did not positively address the effectiveness of the class itself.

The most common answers given were related to the convenience of online learning, the time saved, and the lack of a commute. Specific comments included “I only have to wake up ten minutes before class”, and “I can sleep much later because I don’t have to commute”. Over 90% of respondents reported some variation of convenience as a reason they would like to continue learning online.

The second most frequently sighted category was comments suggesting the classes themselves were easier or that one’s presence in class, for some classes, was a technicality that could be worked around. Specific comments included “the online quizzes to check our comprehension of the lecture are really easy and can be completed quickly”, and “after I sign in (to attendance) my camera is off, so I can do whatever I want”. Approximately seventy percent of participants commented on some variation of the theme suggesting that online learning was easier in either grading, participation, or both.

The final category of support for online learning was spending more time at home with family. Approximately twenty-five percent of students cited spending more time with family as a positive of online learning. Some participants specified time with parents while others specifically mentioned siblings attending a different university or working in a different location but had returned home for the pandemic. See Figure Three.

Overall there was little diversity in the range of responses as no reasons were cited that fell outside these three categories.

However, even less diversity in qualitative responses was given for those who wished to return to a traditional classroom environment. One-hundred percent of respondents reported some variation of wanting to see their friends and classmates. Sixteen percent of students also reported that they would learn better in a traditional classroom environment. See Figure Four.

IV. Analysis

While strong support for online learning—especially when it had to be implemented so suddenly—has to be seen as a net win for institutions and instructors, the reasons behind that support should give pause. This is particularly true in the context of previous research such as that by Vilkova and Shcheglova (2021) which demonstrates that students’ ability to self-regulate and self-motivate are strong indicators of their success in online learning.

Given student responses in this study did not indicate high levels of self-motivation among students, administrators and instructors at institutions charged with teaching lower-motivation students

should carefully weigh student responses to online learning without neglecting to investigate the motivations behind these responses. Only then can informed policy decisions be made and necessary adjustments implemented to make longer-term online learning a viable alternative at such institutions.

V. Graphs and charts

Figure 1: Are Your Online Classes Synchronous or Asynchronous?

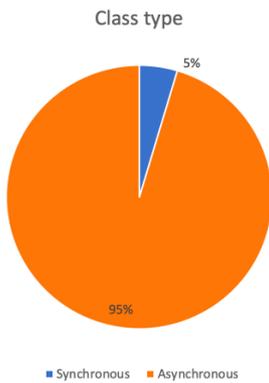


Figure 2: Preferences for Online Learning

Do you prefer your classes being online?

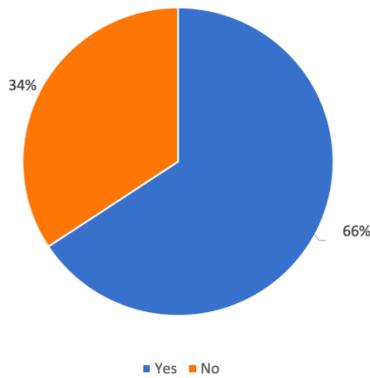


Figure 3: Reasons Cited for Support of Online Learning

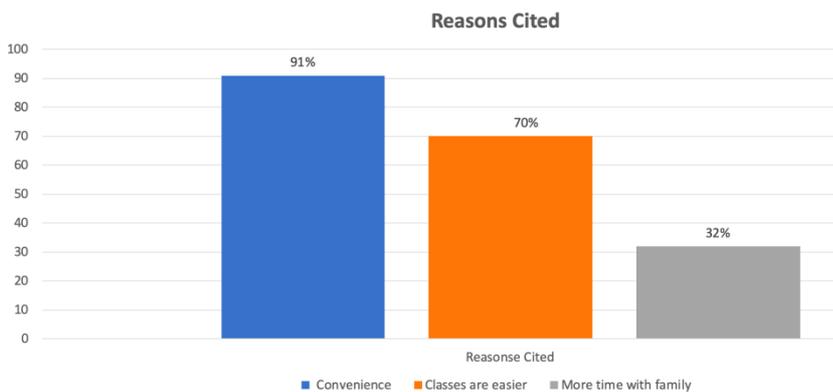
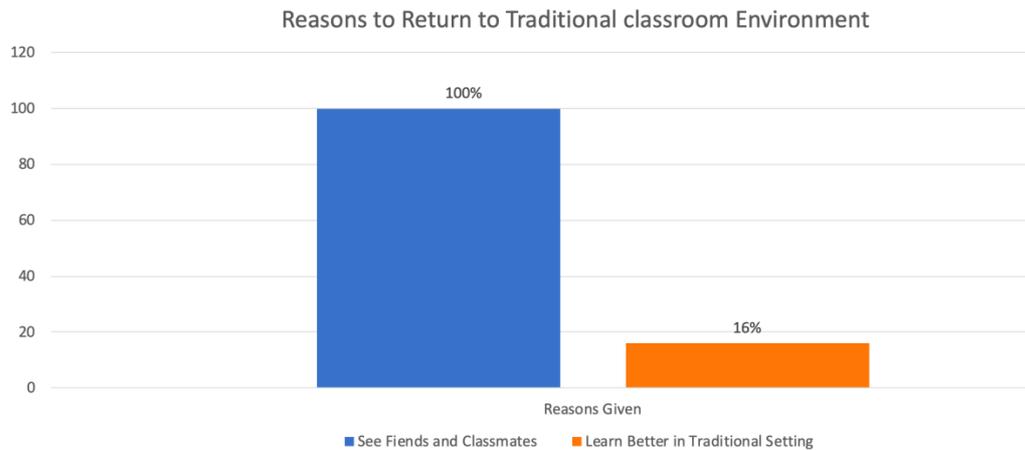


Figure 4: Reasons Students Prefer to Return to a Traditional classroom Environment

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