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Title Online English Language Teaching in Hong Kong Higher Education during COVID-19

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Source ICSLT 2021: Proceedings of the 2021 7th International Conference on e-Society, e-Learning and e-Technologies / ACM. New York, NY, USA : ACM, 2021, p. 6-10

Version Accepted Version

DOI 10.1145/3477282.3477289

Publisher Association for Computing Machinery

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Online English Language Teaching in Hong Kong Higher Education during COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at establishing how teaching culture has been transformed by the implementation of online teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. In particular, the study seeks to establish how this paradigmatic shift towards online learning in the approach to teaching has impacted the teaching culture of Hong Kong from the perspective of teachers working in higher education who have moved to teaching online as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. How is online teaching affecting the experience and well-being of students? How may any negative impacts be offset? In what ways can benefits be maximised and enhanced by the implementation of digital devices in teaching? These questions are explored in this study through the undertaking of both primary and secondary research. The study introduces the contextual background to the topic in light of the implementation of online teaching in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic from both a global perspective and that of higher education in Hong Kong. The primary data admitted to this study for analysis consists of both questionnaire and interview data derived from teachers of English Language teaching online at higher education institutions across Hong Kong. This variety of primary questionnaire and interview data should allow for both quantitative and qualitative analysis of data, allowing for some triangulation of findings from either source.

CCS Concepts

Applied computing • Education • E-learning

Keywords

English Language Teaching; Online Education; Higher Education; Learning Styles.

1. INTRODUCTION

Central to understanding the effects of virtual learning environments on student behaviour, researchers (e.g. [1], [2]) have recently drawn on social learning theory to explain behavioural mirroring, reinforcement, and self-efficacy. [1] recognise that through social networking, intranets, and online discourse, students are able to develop new skill sets that not only improve their online learning capabilities, but their capacity as students overall.

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ICSLT 2021, June 10–12, 2021, Portsmouth, United Kingdom

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ACM ISBN 978-1-4503-7684-6/21/06...\$15.00.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1145/3477282.3477289>

Drawing upon this theory of learning effects, [2] observe that if effective, virtual learning environments ‘provide learners meaningful interactions with their professions and peers, foster a culture of learning, and support multiple learning styles.’ With universities continuing to adopt the MOOC format of online education, [3] confirm empirically that only those students who participate in group exercises and discussions gain access to the developmental skills and social support necessary to improve their overall learning experience.

By adopting a positive psychological approach to this study, the primary objective in surveying these tertiary students was to illuminate the positive behaviours and experiences with reference to virtual learning during this complex pandemic period. These findings, combined with an overview of the transition from traditional to virtual learning practices in Hong Kong is combined to highlight the transformative effects and influences of a new paradigm in higher education. The following sections demonstrate the triangulation of the evidence with the core concepts and theories in this field to illuminate a positive pathway towards the progression of digital teaching and learning experiences as a game changer.

2. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

In 2018, Hong Kong education officials introduced Responsive4U, a ‘blended learning experiment among four local universities’ that enabled students to take for-credit courses administered via a combination of online and in-person classes [4]. By 2020, the programme had expanded to encompass 11 courses which had been attended by 2,000 students [4]. With a budget expected to eclipse HKD\$781.2 million for the three-year programme (2019-2022), the anticipatory experiment proved visionary at the start of the 2020 pandemic, establishing the model for transitioning Hong Kong’s higher education into a remote learning sphere [4]. Inside programme feedback predicts that following the success of the intra-pandemic response, hybrid or flexible education programmes which combine both online and offline courses will be expanded as structural and temporal barriers are gradually eliminated from the higher education practice [4]. Through innovative technologies such as an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot, instructors are able to field questions from thousands of students without requiring on-demand responses, improving downstream communication efficiency, and providing support to students in the event of uncertainty or concern [4].

2.1 Overview of Online Learning in Hong Kong

Despite the potential advantages of programmes like Responsive4U, a recent assessment of student experiences with digital education conducted by [5] revealed a very low satisfaction rate (just 27%) across more than 1,200 responses from students at eight public universities in Hong Kong. Critical of the online

learning experience, student feedback suggested that online learning effectiveness was lower than face-to-face, whilst more than 54% indicated that their study time efficiency was negatively effected by the virtual environment [5]. Central to such problems were an array of concerns, with a lack of self-discipline (60%) and a poor learning atmosphere (56%) receiving the majority of the responses from these virtual learning students [5]. Academic research in this field conducted by [6] has demonstrated that the likelihood of student distraction in online environments is greater, creating barriers to effective study habits and information retention. Whilst, at the same time, Hong Kong educators have reported that hand's-on and face-to-face learning are especially essential for some specific programmes in higher educational levels (e.g. clinical studies, medicine, speech pathology [7].

With inside feedback from university educators across Hong Kong institutions suggesting that virtual learning will undoubtedly remain a part of the educational experience moving forward, the digital revolution continues to challenge normative paradigm of learning and online interaction [7]. By refocusing teaching curriculum and content, instructors have adapted to Zoom-based and virtual meeting sessions, encouraging students to engage in more productive work habits to maintain programme momentum [8]. Lecturers are equally challenged, oftentimes recording multiple videos and distributing content virtually without the advantages of face-to-face assessments, interactions, and communication [8]. By adopting new strategies for developing and sustaining rapport with students, [8] report that instructors are transitioning otherwise 'boring and difficult subjects' towards more positive, productive virtual solutions for resilient students engaged in intra-pandemic growth and education.

The following sections analyse the results of the quantitative survey, critically comparing key perspectives offered by these university students in Hong Kong from 2020 to 2021 in order to assess their digital learning experiences and competency (both positive and negative).

2.2 Demographic Aspect

The initial prompts forming the basis for the independent variables were demographic or experiential. For example, the gender bias in this study was equitable with 52% of the participants identifying as male and 48% identifying as female. There was a substantial bias in the age range, with 98.3% between the ages of 18 and 30, a predictable response for a sampling of university students. From a programme perspective, Figure 1 visualises the weighted distribution, with 63.1% of the participants pursuing their Associate Degree or Higher Diploma and an additional 34.1% pursuing their Bachelor's Degree.

Figure 1. Programme Undertaking.

Important to the transition to digital learning, the students were asked to report their overall status as either a native or an immigrant

(Figure 2). The majority of the participants (71.6%) were technological natives who had had close contact with computers and the internet over the course of their development. A Pearson correlation test confirmed a strong, positive correlation ($PC=0.243$, $P=0.001$) between age and technology experience; however, the lack of variation in the age categories did not reveal a meaningful bias within the crosstabular comparison.

Are you a technological native (born in close contact with computers and the Internet) or digital immigrant (born before the widespread adoption of computers)?

176 responses

Figure2. Student Technological Experience.

2.3 Technological Aspect

Focusing on the technological solutions evolving out of the digital classrooms, the students were asked to reflect on their experience with English Language learning during the past years. Figure 3 summarises the overall contact hours afforded to these English lessons per week. The majority of students (71.6%) indicated that they had received 3 to 4 contact hours, whilst 20.5% received less than just 1-2 hours.

How many contact hours do you have for your English lessons per week? (in hours)

176 responses

Figure 3. Contact Hours for English Lessons.

Despite some higher education universities (See [3]) adopting large-scale solutions to virtual classroom integration, Figure 4 highlights the class densities reported by these students at a relatively low and traditional level. 89.3% of the sample population experienced classrooms with a range of 11 to 30 students, indicating a normative, small-scale learning environment.

How many classmates are there in each of your class?

176 responses

Figure 4. Classmates in Each Cours.

The transition to digital learning has directly affected students' learning practices, with environmental forces (see Figure 5) affecting the coping and stress-reduction measures used by these learners (See [9]). 62.5% of this sample population maintained private environments, whilst 33.5% utilised semi-private or shared environments to facilitate their learning.

How many classmates are there in each of your class?
176 responses

Figure 5. Classmates in Each Course.

Spatially, Figure 6 highlights a majority bias towards bedroom (62.5%) learning that likely affords privacy and noise reduction, whilst 13.1% of the students cited a sitting room and 10.8% indicated the dining room. Correlation tests for the relationship between the type of space and perceived adequacy of space failed to highlight a statistical relationship, indicating that spatial adaptation was likely a normal condition of digital learning.

What type of space do you use?
176 responses

Figure 6. Type of Space Used.

60.8% of the participants confirmed that they did not have to acquire any additional equipment for virtual learning, whilst 39.2% suggested they did equip themselves with additional resources including iPads, computers, phones, and notebooks. The majority of these students (62.2%) admitted that they self-funded their technology purchases, whilst the remaining 37.2% suggested that their family met their needs for additional equipment. Despite having to make these accommodations, 60.8% of the students confirmed that they had not encountered any difficulties in the classrooms. For the 39.2% of the students who did encounter challenges, the majority of the responses related to technology lag and the inability to access information needed in a timely and efficient fashion.

2.4 Online Learning Aspect

Given the suddenness of the 2020 pandemic, 61.4% of the students reported that they had not received any training or support for using virtual classrooms prior to their initial attendance. Among those students (38.6%) who did receive support, step-by-step directions and virtual instruction were the most common modes of preparation and training. To assess the effectiveness of digital learning on student experiences, comparisons were drawn between before and after-effects of this learning process.

A second set of prompts evaluated the perceived effectiveness of assessment before and after Covid-19 (Figure 8).

With a pre-Covid-19 mean of 3.08 and a post-Covid-mean of 3.23, these findings confirmed that student perceptions of effectiveness were higher following Covid-19 experiences. An ANOVA comparison of means revealed a statistically significant relationship between the After-Covid-19 perceptions of assessment and classroom size ($F=7.442$, $P=0.000$). Crosstabular analysis revealed that participants in smaller courses were most likely to find online assessment effective, whilst participants in larger courses felt more ambiguously about such assessment practices. A statistically significant relationship with Gender ($F=3.956$, $P=0.048$) was also observed in relation to after-Covid-19 assessment. Crosstabular analysis revealed that male students (30.8%) were less likely to find assessment to be effective or very effective than their female (45.2%) counterparts.

Figure 7. Quality of Training or Support Received.

Figure 8. Perceived Effectiveness of Assessment (Before and After Covid-19).

3. IMPLICATIONS

Despite the digitalisation of higher education solutions following the Covid-19 outbreak, the transition away from classroom experiences has not wholly distanced students from their instructors, educators and peers. Instead, new strategies for engaging students in online learning including breakout rooms, class discussions, Zoom meetings, and message boards have been developed to support student participation [9]. Such communities of practice (CoPs) integrate teacher moderators and student leaders in the negotiation of the learning process, requiring both productive collaboration and active engagement to improve the nature of these exchanges [10]. The CoP insights drawn from [3] reveal the social advantages of collaborative learning in MOOC courses and large-scale educational environments where individual consideration is marginalised by the scope and integration of the classroom itself. The feedback from the students in this survey confirms that due to the accelerated nature of this transition, many students did not receive the training and support they needed to thrive online. Moving forward, it is imperative that educational institutions consider such needs and develop additional support tools to improve the seamlessness and effectiveness of the digital instruction.

Despite the flexibility of digital learning and the critical role played by virtual learning during the global pandemic, Marshall and [11] acknowledge that many students lack self-regulation and motivation to participate effectively in such solutions over the long term. As a result of these skill deficiencies and behavioural limitations, [12] observe attitudinal barriers that have created conflicts between the idealised educational scenario and student experiences. Such findings are confirmed in the current study that has revealed a perceptual division amongst English students wherein some have found English learning to be effective, whilst others have failed to achieve similar outcomes and feel under-supported in their learning. [12] conform to a similar phenomenon in relation to student burnout, whereby some students viewed digital learning as a positive challenge, whilst others adopted a negative attitude which shaped their course perceptions and their perceptions of their instructors as well. In reviewing the open-ended findings from the participants in the current study, the evidence suggests that students who thrive in digital learning will

develop productive coping strategies such as modifying their learning environment, engaging in recorded materials, and communicating with educators directly. Other students who exhibited frustrations cited a lack of social experiences and motivation, as well as poor performance as their core frustrations and sources of burnout. These findings offer a baseline for support students in the future through study habits and coping strategies that target student-centred needs.

4. CONCLUSION

First and foremost, the authors would like to thank their academic fellows who kindly disseminated and encouraged their students to join this research project. Since 2018, Hong Kong has established its position as a digital leader by introducing online and hybrid courses designed to meet the changing needs of students and educators in higher education in Hong Kong. As a result of the 2020 pandemic, the unprecedented shift towards virtualisation of most university courses has resulted in positive and negative experiences among students and educators. Accordingly, the primary aim of this study is to critically assess the effects of Covid-19 on a paradigmatic shift towards online learning and the influences on tertiary education and its teaching culture in Hong Kong. By initially reviewing the core concepts and theories in the field of study, insights regarding the transformative effects of digital learning experiences are introduced, whilst intra-pandemic findings from prior research are illuminated. Subsequently, this research captures empirical feedback from university students in Hong Kong and applies a positive psychological analysis to the consideration of future teaching strategies and educational opportunities.

This study has determined that that students must develop coping mechanisms and stress-reduction strategies in order to thrive and engage in digital classroom activities. Educators can help achieve such outcomes by integrating multiple layers of pedagogy into the educational process including group work, direct discussions, video lectures, and summary insights [13]. For learners in English Language, practice and participation are always needed. Utilising various technological resources and tools should be considered before designing future curriculum [14]. Ultimately, the significance of this unplanned Covid-19 experiment in Hong Kong has manifested a growing range of online courses that will be

supported by a teaching population that is increasingly aware of student needs, capable of self-regulation and stress management, and are flexible in the delivery of effective, integrated classroom experience.

5. LIMITATIONS

The empirical findings presented over the course of this study were extrapolated from a structured questionnaire that was administered to students across major universities in Hong Kong. However, this study did not conduct any specific analysis testing the moderating effects of these variables, nor did it conduct a mediation analysis to test if effects of online technologies in shaping the teacher-student relationship. The regionalisation of this study is limited and purposeful to allow direct comparability of the results. By focusing on student experiences and perceptions, these insights have highlighted opportunities for educators to support future learning outcomes and address some of the hurdles and challenges that were identified during the pandemic. This limitation has restricted perspectives from educators and universities; however, secondary evidence from industry reports and university feedback was used to supplement these findings.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The current study has extrapolated insights from student perceptions regarding the effects of digitalisation on intra-pandemic learning experiences. Additional research is needed to explore the effectiveness of learning strategies and habits, whilst further feedback from inside stakeholders should also be considered. The following two studies are recommended for expanding the scope of research in this field:

Recommendation 1: A University-Based Case Study of Digitalisation: By capturing insider perspectives regarding the process of digitalisation and the underlying effects on pedagogy, it is predicted that strategies for improving digital learning can be introduced at the levels of educators, universities and managerial administrators.

Recommendation 2: A Student Assessment of Digital Learning Habits: Through an experimental assessment of the effects of positive digital learning habits on student learning capabilities, it is predicted that blueprints for improving student learning in digital environment can be developed to support future student development.

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