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EFL LEARNERS' READINESS AND CHALLENGES FOR IMMEDIATE ONLINE LEARNING: A CASE STUDY IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The world has been grappling with a pandemic of unprecedented severity. This has affected both social and economic aspects of life, including education. In most parts of the world, schools and universities have been at least partly closed, and online learning has become more prevalent than ever before. The paper presents the findings of a quantitative study examining the readiness of EFL students for online learning in Vietnam and identifies difficulties in online learning in late 2021. A questionnaire with 7 parts was employed to gather data, which was then analyzed using SPSS. The participants were 1,099 EFL undergraduate students. The findings reveal that EFL students in Vietnam have a high level of readiness for online learning. There is no significant statistical difference in the level of readiness of male and female groups of students for online learning. However, students' class levels are found to have an impact on students' readiness. Students are found to experience challenges such as difficulties in a distracting environment, and technical issues. It is highly recommended that universities should provide students with consistent technical support and necessary training for their online learning. In addition, suitable online learning activities, specific guidelines for online learning, course requirements, and suitable teaching pedagogies with varied activities need to be designed carefully to increase students' online learning readiness.

Keywords: Online learning; EFL students; computer/ internet self- efficacy; self-directed learning; motivation for learning, learner control; online communication self-efficacy

Introduction

The world has been grappling with a pandemic of unprecedented severity since the outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020. All sectors have been seriously affected, especially education. Schools and universities have been suspended worldwide to prevent the fast spread of the coronavirus, resulting in a quick move from face-to-face learning to online learning. In Vietnam, the Ministry of Education and Training immediately enacted suitable policies and guidance[1] for the shift from face-to-face learning to online learning (Pham & Ho, 2020). However, the application of online learning without much preparation has caused many problems for both teachers and students. (Al-Mohair & Alwahaishi, 2020; Koo, 2008; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021). Teachers' lack of preparation and students' lack of experience in online learning is found to be responsible for boredom in online classes when the strategies adopted are not either suitable or sufficient for effective online classes (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022; Huang & Zheng, 2022). In addition, the quality of online learning is basically determined by students' readiness for learning in that form (Hung et al., 2010). According to Hung et al., the level of students' readiness for online learning is determined by five dimensions: computer/internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, motivation for learning, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy.

Many studies have been conducted recently on online learning and online teaching at the tertiary level. Specifically, Tang et al. (2021) investigated the readiness of students in higher education in regard to motivation, learning readiness, technology readiness, and students' self-efficacy. The study revealed that post-graduate students were better prepared for online learning than undergraduate students. Another quantitative study implemented in India indicated that learners in higher education had positive perceptions of online learning, and the level of acceptance of online learning was high (Khan et al., 2021). Research done in 13 European countries showed that although universities in those countries quickly adapted to the new teaching context, passive delivery of lessons, and a lack of interaction were recognized in online learning (Tartavulea et al., 2020). Learner readiness for online learning, however, varies from one institution to another, and the level of readiness is impacted by many factors, such as ICT skills, motivation, and training (Sulaiman et al., 2021). Chung et al. (2020) discovered that Malaysian learners' readiness for online learning was only at a moderate level. Facility, teaching methodology, and ICT skills are recognised as the major constraints of online learning and teaching (Allen et al., 2014; Daniel et al., 2016; Khan et al., 2021; Tartavulea et al., 2020).

During the COVID-19 era, online learning environments have been observed to elicit negative emotions such as boredom among learners. Students in Iran were found to experience more boredom in online classes than in normal classes (Pawlak et al., 2021). Similarly, teachers also encountered such boredom in their online instruction, as revealed in the study in China with the participation of 216 EFL teachers (Wang, 2023). Such feelings can be divided into three categories: student-related, task-related, and teacher-related ones. It is suggested to solve such negative feelings by the use of engaging tasks or materials, suitable teaching methods, and teachers' humor to enhance classroom interactions and students' participation (Wang, 2023).

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[1] From Ministry of Education and Training. (2020). *Official Dispatch: Guidelines for teaching via Internet, TV for general and regfor general and regular education institutions during the schools' closure by COVID-19 pandemic in 2019–2020 academic-year*. Hanoi, Vietnam.

Research on immediate online learning, which has been implemented in Vietnam, shows that students have similar negative feelings, and their level of readiness for online learning is not very high. Nguyen and Nguyen (2021) found that lecturers were not very ready for their online teaching due to capability and pedagogical changes and a lack of ICT knowledge and skills, although universities had real-time support and policies for their online lesson delivery. Another study conducted at one university revealed that lecturers of English in Vietnam were not really ready for online teaching (Vo & Pang, 2021). EFL students at the University of Foreign Language Studies were observed to experience a decrease in motivation, self-efficacy, and cognitive engagement, while there was a significant improvement in their adaptability to new technologies (Phan et al., 2021). Nguyen and Le (2021) discussed the impact of Learning Management Systems (LMS) on EFL learners' autonomy. The research found that EFL learners in a university in central Vietnam had positive perceptions of LMS and that the use of LMS helped to improve learners' autonomy in English courses with "on/off" online mode in 2020. Similar levels of boredom to what was found in China and Iran (Pawlak et al., 2021; Wang, 2023) is identified in the Vietnamese context. Negative feelings in online classes, like boredom and anxiety among both learners and teachers in emergency virtual environments, caused by many factors such as ICT issues, teachers' lack of methodologies for online instruction as well as restricted activities are recognized in the Vietnamese context (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021; Vo, 2023; Vo & Nguyen, 2023).

The limitation of these studies is that they were all conducted on a small scale—i.e., in one university with a limited number of participants. Therefore, studies should be carried out on a larger scale to gain a greater insight into online learning among EFL students in Vietnam. In addition, such research focused on some specific aspects of online learning like students' motivation or the use of tools in online learning and teaching. Further studies should be done to gain insight into EFL students' readiness for online learning, which could help to clarify the findings of other studies on online learning and teaching.

The current study was conducted in late 2021 to contribute to the understanding of how ready EFL students were for online learning in Vietnam. The level of readiness for online learning was identified through quantitative research. The research aims to answer the research questions.
  (1) How ready were EFL students for immediate online learning in Vietnam?
  (2) What challenges did EFL students encounter in immediate online learning in Vietnam?
The two hypotheses are also tested in the study.
  (1) Gender affects EFL students' levels of readiness for immediate online learning.
  (2) Class level affects EFL students' levels of readiness for immediate online learning.

Literature Review

Computer-Assisted Language Learning and Online Teaching

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) dates back to the mid-1950s when technology was gradually applied in language teaching (Khamkhien, 2012). CALL is defined as "the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning" (Levy, 1997, p. 1). CALL is understood as "a research field which explores the use of computational methods and techniques as well as media for language learning and teaching" (Gamper & Knapp, 2002, p. 329). With the rapid development in technology, CALL has gained increasing popularity, especially since the internet has become available in most areas in the world.

Currently, amid the impact of COVID-19, online teaching has been implemented worldwide to maintain learning and teaching. Both asynchronous and synchronous modes have been adopted for fully online teaching (Vo, 2021; Vo & Pang, 2021). CALL tools like software, platforms, audio, or video are utilized for online teaching. However, the sudden move from face-to-face teaching to online teaching has caused teachers and students many difficulties, especially in developing countries where teaching conditions are poor (Al-Mohair & Alwahaishi, 2020; Chandrasinghe et al., 2020; Mohamad et al., 2020; Tartavulea et al., 2020). Constraints like changes in facility, lack of ICT skills and knowledge, and out-of-date pedagogical knowledge and skills commonly prevent the delivery of effective lessons (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2021).

Online Learning

Since the initial development of the internet, it has quickly become an essential technology for all aspects of life, including education (Richard & Haya, 2009). The terms "e-learning", "distant learning," and most recently, "online learning" refer to the use of internet-based technology in education. Online learning is defined as "the use of information and communication technologies to enable the access to online learning/teaching resources" (Richard & Haya, 2009, p. 30). Online learning can be implemented synchronously and asynchronously, or both modes can be combined (Nguyen & Pham, 2021; Vo, 2021). In synchronous online learning, online meetings are organized as virtual classes using different tools such as Zoom, Google Meet, or MS Teams. In this case, students are not allowed flexibility in scheduling their learning, and such meetings restrict their class activities due to their limited functions (Vo & Pang, 2021). For example, it is not easy for teachers to implement group work or collaborative learning activities in online meetings.

In contrast, with asynchronous online learning, students have the chance to create their learning paths and timetables, while online classes are created on such platforms as Learning Management Systems (LMS) or Modular Object-Oriented Dynamic Learning Environments (MOODLE). However, this kind of learning mode does not allow students and teachers to have meetings, resulting in fewer interactions. Therefore, some teachers and schools prefer to employ a combination of both kinds of learning.

Learner Readiness for Online Learning

The concept of learner readiness for online learning originated from some studies in the twentieth century. According to Warner et al. (1998), learner readiness refers to learners' choice of online teaching mode, their confidence in using electronic tools for online communication in learning, and the ability to get involved in autonomous learning. Sulaiman et al. (2021) defined learner readiness as the ability to continue and adapt to remote learning in regard to motivation, the ability to use technological devices, and the availability of electronic devices and software for online learning, as well as self-directed learning.

Online learner readiness is a very critical factor in deciding the success of online learning. Online learning readiness shows students' level of readiness to participate in the online learning mode. Readiness is explained by sub-dimensions in the literature (Martin et al., 2020). Readiness is found to involve some kinds of self-efficacy, the ability to perform tasks. In an online learning environment, efficacy is the student's ability to use equipment like computers to perform their online learning activities and to interact with peers and teachers for successful learning (Martin et al., 2020). Attitudes, abilities, emotional reactions, and personal characteristics of students in online learning, which is defined as self-directed learning (Hung et al., 2010), contribute to the

formation of learners' readiness in an online environment. In online learning when students have to study themselves in a rather isolated environment without real interaction, students need to have the ability to self-control so that they can manage their study effectively. Learner readiness is also decided by students' motivation, which drives students to move forward in their learning (Vo et al., 2022).

In other words, a review of the literature shows that learners' online learning readiness involves five dimensions: computer/internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, motivation for learning, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy (Hung et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2020; Nguyen, 2015; Rasouli et al., 2016; Sulaiman et al., 2021). Studies have been done to research the measurement of online learning readiness with instruments to measure students' online learning readiness (Hung et al., 2010; Martin et al., 2020; Sulaiman et al., 2021).

Computer/Internet Self-Efficacy

Online learning involves the process of online lesson delivery, so students' ICT ability is essential to their learning. The concept of "self-efficacy" is understood as people's judgments of their ability to organize and perform courses of action to obtain certain levels of performance. Computer self-efficacy is defined as people's ability to use a computer to perform a task (Bandura, 1986). However, computer self-efficacy does not simply refer to the ability to use computers/software but also denotes people's willingness to use computers/software. According to Hung et al. (2010), computer/internet self-efficacy is defined as learners' "perception of their ability to use computer to accomplish a task, such as using software to analyze data" (p. 1083). In this study, computer/internet self-efficacy is understood as learners' ability to use ICT skills and knowledge in online learning, as well as their perception of their capability for such ICT applications in online learning.

Self-Directed Learning

The term "self-directed" learning can be traced back to the 60s when it was identified as an important part of adult education (Loeng, 2020). In self-directed learning, learners take initiative and responsibility for their learning. They set goals for their learning and actively work to achieve such goals. In self-directed learning, learners are the center of the act of learning. In other words, self-directed learning refers to the process by which learners take responsibility for identifying their learning needs and objectives and assessing their learning outcomes (Hung et al., 2010; Knowles, 1975; Sulaiman et al., 2021).

Self-directed learning consists of three factors: Sociological, Pedagogical, and Psychological, which all emphasize the independence and learner-centered features in the learning process (Long, 1989). Sociological factor emphasizes learners' social independence in the learning situation (Long, 1990). Online learning with the use of websites is considered as one example of self-directed learning in this sense. The Pedagogical factor similarly emphasizes the pedagogical procedures learners use to achieve their learning goals. Psychological factor refers to the individual characteristics of learners such as skills and abilities to self-direct their learning.

In immediate online learning, when learners are isolated at home due to social distancing measures, self-directed learning plays a key role in the success of education. The ability to self-direct helps learners to proceed at their own pace of learning and depend less on teachers' monitoring in the virtual environment. In this research, self-directed learning is recognized as learners' initiative to control their learning to achieve their goals.

Learner Motivation

Another factor that greatly contributes to students' success in the process of online learning is learners' motivation (Saadé et al., 2007). Motivation, which includes both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, is defined as students' desires and efforts to achieve their goals (Gardner, 1988). Intrinsic motivation refers to the cognitive, social, and physical development linked to learners' growth in knowledge and skills, while extrinsic motivation relates to outside factors such as the wish to attain higher learning outcomes (Hung et al., 2010; Ryan & Deci, 2000). In online courses, motivation is associated with diverse factors such as teachers, classmates, satisfaction with course content, and so on. In this study, motivation is defined as a factor significantly driving students' efforts, performances, and desires/needs to achieve their goals in learning.

Learner Control

Learner control increases the effectiveness of lessons as well as maximises students' performance in learning. Learner control refers to learners' chances to have control of their instruction and opportunities to apply their individualized approaches in their courses. Students are permitted to choose the amount of lesson content, sequence, and pace of learning to give themselves maximum freedom in learning (Hung et al., 2010). In online classes, learner control reflects the level of students' preferences or choices of materials, learning styles, and pace of learning (Sulaiman et al., 2021). In online learning, students are easily distracted by outside factors such as noise, instant messages, and internet use. Therefore, the ability to take control of their learning is essential. In this study, learner control is understood as their control over their online learning activities like getting rid of online distractions, keeping on track with learning activities, and controlling learning activities.

Online Communication Self-Efficacy

Online communication self-efficacy is the final important aspect to be considered in students' readiness for online learning. In order to maintain the effectiveness of online lessons, interactions among students and between students and teachers should be created through different forms of online communication, such as forums and chat boxes (Vo & Pang, 2021). Students with different characteristics may have various levels of willingness to participate in online communication. It is found that shy students may engage more in online communication than face-to-face (Hung et al., 2010; McVay, 2001). In other words, online communication self-efficacy is an essential dimension of online learning readiness.

Method

The study was conducted in late 2021 in Vietnam when the COVID-19 pandemic was still ongoing. Many universities located in large cities where COVID-19 was prevalent, such as Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Danang, had been suspended, and online learning had been implemented throughout the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year. In other parts of Vietnam, hybrid learning was selected to maintain students' learning.

Research Setting

In late 2021, students at most universities in Vietnam finished their first semester of the 2021-2022 school year. Students in some universities experienced online learning for the whole semester. Due to the seriousness of the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam, they stayed with online

learning during the first month of the second semester and were expected to return to normal learning after the Lunar New Year when they had two shots of the COVID-19 vaccine.

Research Design

In order to obtain a thorough description of how ready EFL Vietnamese students are for online learning and the challenges they encounter, a quantitative approach was selected for the study on a large scale. The study was carried out with 1,099 EFL students in Vietnam. The research focused on undergraduate students at the tertiary level.

Research Instrument

The research is grounded in the framework developed by Hung et al. (2010) and Sulaiman et al. (2021), in which learner readiness is measured through the five dimensions: computer/ internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, learner motivation, learner control, and learner motivation. The questionnaire consisted of 7 parts as well as open-ended questions for assessing difficulties in online learning.

Research Validity and Reliability

The research validity and reliability were obtained through the careful design of both the research and its instrument, the questionnaire. The questionnaire was developed from previous studies (Hung et al. (2010); Sulaiman et al. (2021). The questionnaire was sent to two TESOL experts for validation. Both of them are Doctors of Philosophy in TESOL who have more than 20 years' of experience in language teaching and researching. Thanks to their comments, the questionnaire was edited to serve the research better.

A high level of reliability was obtained through a pilot study. The pilot study was conducted with 100 students, of whom 34% were first-year students, 20% second-year students, 26% third-year students, and 20% fourth-year students. The reliability of the pilot study is excellent, with Cronbach's alpha of .962. After the pilot study, some minor changes related to the comprehensibility of the questionnaire items were made. In addition, the main study also has a very high level of reliability with Cronbach's alpha of.956 The reliability of each dimension of the questionnaire was excellent, with Cronbach's alpha of .854 for computer/internet self-efficacy, .849 for self-directed learning, .849 for motivation for learning, .902 for learner control, and .808 for online communication self-efficacy.

Research Sampling

The study focuses on regular undergraduate students majoring in English in Vietnam. Although Vietnam was seriously affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, not all universities transitioned completely to online learning. Some universities might have hybrid learning or some days of the semester with online learning. The questionnaire on Google Forms was sent to EFL undergraduate students in universities via email, Facebook, and Zalo. Participants were selected based on two basic criteria. First, they must be undergraduate students majoring in English. Secondly, they must have completed online learning during the first semester of the 2021-2022 school year. Students from universities where hybrid learning was implemented were not eligible for the study.

Overall, 1,123 EFL students responded to the questionnaire, but 24 of them were ineligible for the study because they were either post-graduate or high school students. The final number of participants in the research was 1,099. All of the participants studied online for the entire first semester of the 2021-2022 school year. In terms of level, 27.8% were first-year students, 36.7% were second-year students, 21.2% were third-year students, and 14.4% fourth-year students. As might be expected in the field of language education in Vietnam, the percentage of female students outnumbered that of males, accounting for 93.2% and 6.8%, respectively.

Table 1: Demographic Features of Research Participants

Levels	Gender		Total
	Males	Females	
First year students	22 (7.2%)	283 (92.7%)	305 (27.8%)
Second year students	25 (6.2%)	378 (93.7%)	403 (36.7%)
Third year students	11 (4.7%)	222 (95.2%)	233 (21.2%)
Fourth year students	17 (10.7%)	141 (89.2%)	158 (14.4%)
Total	75 (6.8%)	1024 (93.2%)	1,099 (100%)

Data Analysis

The quantitative data was analyzed using the IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), version 16. In the study, descriptive statistics, including mean values, standard deviation values, maximum values, and minimum values, were calculated. In addition, inferential statistics such as independent sample T-tests and MANOVA tests were conducted to check whether there were significant statistical differences among groups of male and female students and groups of first-year, second-year, third-year, and fourth-year students.

Results

Students' Learning Conditions

As shown in Table 1, laptops are the equipment most used for online learning (84.9%), followed by smartphones (15.1%). Desktops and other items like tablets fill out the table at 1.9% and 0.9%, respectively. In other words, laptops are the most common and preferable devices for EFL students' online learning.

Table 2: Devices for Online Learning

Devices	Laptop	Smartphone	Desktop	Others
Percentage	84.9%	15.1	1.9%%	0.9%

Overall, 84.9% of devices for EFL students' online learning are their personal property, while 13.6% of the devices belong to their families. The percentage of participants who have to rent devices for their online learning is 1.5%.

Table 3: Device Ownership

Ownership	Personal Property	Family-Owned	Rented
Percentage	84.9%	13.6%	1.5%

Of the EFL students surveyed, 67.8% have moderate internet speed, while 16.1% and 0.6% have fast or very fast internet speed, respectively. Only 1.4% of students suffer from very slow internet connections.

Table 4: Internet Speed

Speed	Very Slow	Slow	Moderate	Fast	Very Fast
Percentage	1.4%		67.8%	16.1%	0.6%

The result of the questionnaire also indicates that 75% of the participants used Wi-Fi for their studies while 17.9% have cable internet, and 6.9% use 3G or 4G for their internet connection. Most students study online at home (98.2%), whereas 0.5% go to an internet cafe and 1.1% study at relatives' or friends' houses.

Generally, EFL students have relatively good conditions for their online learning, and because they have had a whole semester of online learning, most of them do online learning at home.

Learners' Readiness

A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was utilized for the research. The interval is 0.8 (i.e., interval =N-1/N, N=5). It indicates that 1.00 to 1.80 means a very low level of readiness; 1.81 to 2.69 represents a low level of readiness; 2.61 to 3.40 shows a moderate level of readiness; 3.41 to 4.20 represents a high level of readiness; and 4.21 to 5.00 indicates a very high level of readiness (Dorsah, 2021; Hung et al., 2010).

Table 5: Descriptive Statistics

Dimensions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Computer/Internet efficacy	1,099	1.00	5.00	3.8276	.71104
Self-directed learning	1,099	1.00	5.00	3.7636	.68314
Learner control	1,099	1.60	5.00	3.8491	.61985
Motivation for learning	1,099	1.43	5.00	3.9717	.61591
Online communication efficacy	1,099	1.29	5.00	3.6389	.71366

The mean values for all the dimensions vary from 3.6389 to 3.9717. According to Dorsah (2021) and Hung et al. (2010), such mean values indicate that the surveyed participants generally have a high level of readiness for all five dimensions. The COVID-19 pandemic first affected Vietnam in early 2020, and Vietnam quickly took action to prevent the fast and widespread spread of the virus with the closure of schools and universities in areas where COVID-19 was traced (Phan et al., 2021). Therefore, students in major cities underwent several times learning online beginning in early 2020. That explained why, in this study, students were identified as having a high level of readiness for online learning.

Among the five dimensions, EFL students are found to be the least ready for online communication efficacy (mean value=3.6389), while they are most ready in terms of motivation for online learning (mean=3.9717). In an online environment, interaction is limited and requires support from online platforms and teachers (Vo & Nguyen, 2023). That is the reason why the mean value of this dimension is the lowest, denoting that students are least ready for online communication. Surprisingly, students show the highest readiness in the motivation dimension. Students were familiar with online learning after 2 years, and studies reveal that students accepted online learning because they understood the situation and wanted to avoid being affected by COVID-19 (Phan et al., 2021). Therefore, their motivation for online learning is high. The readiness for learner control dimension (mean value=3.8491) is the second highest,

higher than self-directed learning and computer/internet efficacy (mean value=3.7636, mean value= 3.8276). Students' high level contributes to the level of readiness to control and self-direct themselves.

All in all, EFL students in Vietnam were found to have a high level of readiness for online learning as of late 2021. Among the five dimensions, students are the least ready in terms of online communication efficacy, while they are the most ready in terms of motivation for learning.

Gender Difference

The means for all the five dimensions are not much different between the two groups of male and female EFL students, as shown in Tables 6 and 7. As illustrated in the tables, the number of female students surpassed that of their male counterparts, as is usual in language education in Vietnam. Both share the highest mean values in the motivation for learning dimension (mean value =3.9698 for female students, mean value= 3.9981 for male students). Yet, while female students have the lowest mean value in online communication efficacy, male students have the lowest mean value in self-directed learning. Male students are found to have higher mean values for computer/internet efficacy and online communication efficacy, but they have lower mean values than female students in all other dimensions.

Table 6: Gender Group Statistics

Dimensions	Gender	Number	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean
Computer/Internet efficacy	Female	1,024	3.8198	.71106	.02222
	Male	75	3.9333	.70711	.08165
Self-directed learning	Female	1,024	3.7666	.68510	.02141
	Male	75	3.7219	.65881	.07607
Learner control	Female	1,024	3.8515	.61734	.01929
	Male	75	3.8173	.65664	.07582
Motivation for learning	Female	1,024	3.9698	.61282	.01915
	Male	75	3.9981	.66042	.07626
Online communication efficacy	Female	1,024	3.6321	.71453	.02233
	Male	75	3.7314	.69984	.08081

The independent sample T-test reveals no significant difference between female students and male students' readiness for online learning when all significant values are greater than 0.05, as shown in Table 7.

Table 7: Independent Sample T- Test- Gender Difference

Dimensions	F	Sig.	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference
Computer/Internet efficacy	.227	.634	.182	-.11351
Self-directed learning	.271	.603	.585	.04470
Learner control	.585	.04470	.646	.03413
Motivation for learning	.646	.03413	.701	-.02830
Online communication efficacy	.042	.837	.245	-.09931

Level Difference

Table 8 shows that there are differences in means for all dimensions among the four groups of students by academic year. Specifically, for computer/Internet efficacy, the level of readiness increases according to students' levels. The fourth-year students have the highest level of readiness for computer/Internet efficacy (mean value =4.0475), followed by the third-year students' readiness for that dimension (mean value =3.8677), while the first-year students have the lowest one (mean value= 3.6978). Regarding the second dimension (self-directed learning), the highest level of readiness belongs to the third-year students, with a mean of 3.8124. The fourth-year students have the second highest level of readiness for this dimension (mean value = 3.7785), while the first- and second-year students fill the third and fourth places in the table with mean values of 3.7621 and 3.7306, respectively. Interestingly, for the other three dimensions, the third-year students also have the highest level of readiness (mean value=3.8464 for learner control, mean value=4.0193 for motivation for online learning, mean value=3.7149 for online communication efficacy). For learner control and motivation for learning, the fourth-year students have the lowest level of readiness (mean value=3.8304, mean value=3.8892, respectively), while the first-year students have the lowest level of readiness for online communication efficacy (mean value=3.5082).

Table 8: Level Difference Statistics

Year		Computer/Internet efficacy	Self-directed learning	Learner control	Motivation for learning	Online communication efficacy
First year	Mean	3.6978	3.7621	3.8410	4.0150	3.5082
	N	305	305	305	305	305
	Std. Deviation	.70790	.68089	.63057	.62220	.75144
Second year	Mean	3.8164	3.7306	3.8643	3.9438	3.6657
	N	403	403	403	403	403
	Std. Deviation	.73437	.70559	.63294	.64716	.73220
Third year	Mean	3.8677	3.8124	3.8464	4.0193	3.7149
	N	233	233	233	233	233
	Std. Deviation	.69154	.64872	.60007	.55432	.64087
Fourth year	Mean	4.0475	3.7785	3.8304	3.8892	3.7107
	N	158	158	158	158	158
	Std. Deviation	.62759	.68037	.59848	.60090	.66342
Total	Mean	3.8276	3.7636	3.8491	3.9717	3.6389
	N	1099	1099	1099	1099	1099
	Std. Deviation	.71104	.68314	.61985	.61591	.71366

A MANOVA test was used to test whether the level of students affects their readiness for online learning, revealing that the levels of students significantly impacted their readiness for online learning when p=0.00 was less than 0.05.

Table 9: MANOVA Test: Level Difference

Value	F	Hypothesis df.	Error df.	Sig.
.919	6.209	15.000	3.012E3	.000

Generally, the third-year students have the highest level of readiness for online learning with the highest mean values for the four dimensions. The fourth-year students have the highest level of readiness in regard to computer/Internet efficacy, but they have the lowest readiness for learner control, motivation for online learning, and online learning communication efficacy.

EFL Students' Challenges in Immediate Online Learning

Open-ended questions were used to collect data about constraints EFL students in Vietnam had to confront in immediate online learning. There are two themes found in the analysis of the data: difficulties due to distracting environment and technical issues.

Distracting Environment

A distracting environment was a major challenge for Vietnamese EFL students in their immediate online learning. Immediate online learning was conducted when students were at home; as a result, they had to confront many issues regarding their learning environment. 36% of students responding to the questionnaire stated that they did not have a quiet environment for learning. Some sub-themes also emerged, including a noisy learning environment and lack of privacy. In Vietnamese families, especially in rural areas where the living standard is low, not all family members have a room. Often, children in one family have to share a room. Some students have to study in the living room, where all family members often gather to watch television.

Furthermore, in Vietnam, many families are extended, with grandparents living with their children and grandchildren. In such crowded families, students may face difficulties with regard to a lack of privacy for their online lessons. Another subtheme is students having to study in a noisy environment. In a situation where all family members are at home due to the application of a large and strict social distance, students hardly have a quiet environment for their learning. In addition, when shops, restaurants, and small businesses are closed, singing karaoke for entertainment is common in Vietnam, which causes great difficulties for online learning.

> *"I could not concentrate on my studies, especially when social distance was implemented. All the family members were at home, and our small house was noisy. My younger sister is naughty, and she wanted me to play with her and kept interrupting my online classes."*, said one fourth-year student.

> *"I found it difficult and stressful when staying at home and learning online. I do not have my room and three of us, me and my two brothers, have to study in the living room. I could not turn on the camera and mic for my classes."*, cited a second-year student in response to a question regarding difficulties in online learning.

> *"My neighbors sing Karaoke all day and I cannot have time to rest and study. I was a little ashamed when I turned on my mic to answer my teacher's questions in such noise"*, complained a third-year student.

Technical Issues

Though EFL students were found to have a good level of computer-efficacy for their, technical issues are mentioned as difficulties during immediate online learning by 24% of EFL students. According to a number of students, technical problems may occur during their virtual classes, causing a low efficiency of their online learning. The subthemes that emerged from the research are internet connection and the stability of platforms. Internet connection is cited as one challenge in online learning by 67% of those who considered technical issues as their challenges. The stability is mentioned by the lower percentage (36% of those listing technical issues as their difficulties in online learning). One student complained, *"I have to stop learning several times because of the unstable internet. As a result, I missed some parts of the lesson."*

Discussion

The research shows that Vietnamese EFL students show a high level of readiness for online learning in the COVID-19 context in 2021. After approximately two years with "on/off" modes of online and offline learning, students have gotten used to online learning and generally have better conditions and preparedness. The study conducted by Hung et al. (2010) revealed a similar result, in which a very high level of readiness for online learning was recorded in Taiwan. Pre-service teachers in Ghana were also found to be ready for emergency online learning in 2021 (Dorsah, 2021). In India, though students have to face many challenges, they still have positive attitudes and readiness for the sudden use of online learning. Malaysian students are discovered to be generally ready for online learning (Chung et al., 2020). A study conducted in early 2021 at a university in Vietnam indicates that university students in Vietnam generally accepted the switch from face-to-face learning to online learning and became familiar with and were well-prepared for online learning in 2021 (Phan et al., 2021). In Indonesia, students have a high level of enthusiasm for online learning, contributing to their readiness for remote learning (Purwadi et al., 2020). According to Nguyen et al. (2021), Vietnamese students have a high level of acceptance of online learning in the COVID-19 context due to their high level of readiness for online learning after two years of experiencing such online learning mode.

According to the findings of this research, there is no significant difference between the readiness of male and female EFL students in Vietnam. Similarly, in Taiwan, there is no difference in the level of readiness for online learning between male and female groups (Hung et al., 2010). Yet, research from Malaysia found that female students are more ready for online learning (Chung et al., 2020). According to Tang et al. (2021), differences are identified in regard to the readiness of male and female students for online learning in Hong Kong, where female students are more ready for online learning than male students.

Students' levels by academic year are found to influence the level of readiness among EFL students in Vietnam. This finding agrees with those of previous studies on learner readiness for online learning. Rasouli et al. (2016) found that there is a significant statistical difference in readiness for online learning between undergraduate students and post-graduates. In Malaysia, degree students are more ready for online learning than diploma students. In Hong Kong, post-graduate students are found to be more ready for online learning than their graduate counterparts (Tang et al., 2021). In other words, students at higher levels are more ready for online learning than those at lower levels.

In spite of the high level of readiness, Vietnamese EFL learners have to confront many difficulties in immediate online learning. Specifically, difficulties in distracting environments

and technical issues are what EFL Vietnamese students encounter most during their online learning. According to Phan et al. (2021), students in Vietnam have to deal with many obstacles including technical issues, making online learning less effective. In some Asian countries, facilities also cause certain difficulties for both teachers and learners in the process of implementing online learning (Ergene & Türk Kurtça, 2020). Even in more developed countries like Turkey or Poland, the facility is also an obstacle to online learning (Bączek et al., 2021; Şenel & Şenel, 2021).

Implications

Although the level of readiness for online learning in Vietnam is recognized to be high, several suggestions are made to increase the level of students' readiness and diminish students' difficulties in online learning, as it is considered to be the key factor in online learning success (Dangol & Shrestha, 2019; Vo et al., 2022). Firstly, training on how to use online tools and platforms involved in online learning should be organized for students so that they are well-equipped with the proper technical skills. Secondly, real-time support should be provided. The university ought to employ some technical support teams that are available to assist students in a timely manner when they encounter technical issues during their online study. In addition, lecturers should facilitate students' online learning with specific guidelines for online assignments, discussions, or tests. The computer/ internet efficacy level of students should be one element to be included in the curriculum, especially for English major students who may be working as teachers later. Computer-assisted language learning and computer literacy should be compulsory subjects of the curriculum so that student's ability to use technology in their learning, as well as their future careers, is enhanced. As found in the study, students' class level has certain effects on students' readiness for online learning due to their various experiences with online learning. Therefore, more training and support from teachers should be delivered to first-year students so that they can quickly adapt to the new learning environment.

In the study, online communication efficacy is found to be the least ready factor among the five, as discussed in the findings section. In order to improve students' online communication efficacy, it is suggested that the following needs to be applied. Despite the availability of online learning tools, online instruction is still found to focus more on student-to-content and student-to-instructor interactions, which results in fewer student-to-student interactions (Thompson & Ku, 2006). In order to increase interaction among students, online collaborative learning can be conducted through classroom activities such as project-based learning, online discussions, or peer assessment (Vo & Nguyen, 2023). Interesting and varied online activities are also necessary to enhance communication efficacy in online learning. Forums, online discussions, and group work should be organized frequently to increase students' interactions in online learning.

Online communication efficacy is also pertinent in relation to the issue of boredom in online learning. According to Derakhshan et al. (2022), due to fatigue from the pandemic and social distancing measures combined with less engagement in the process of teaching and learning in the virtual environment, students are likely to feel bored in emergency online classes even with regular activities like routine homework checking, writing-based activities, and reading based activities. More activities that increase learner engagement are recommended to increase students' interaction for a decrease in boredom (Derakhshan et al., 2021; Derakhshan et al., 2022). According to Wang et al. (2021), teachers in language education should be equipped with a better understanding of positive psychology, which serves as a basic foundation for teachers to create enjoyable learning environments for their students so that negative feelings in learning can be reduced.

This study has revealed that students' self-directed learning and learner control are at a good level in online learning. This high level of readiness, however, can also be enhanced with some following suggestions. Self-directed learning and learner control can be facilitated if lecturers have specific guidelines and support for students during the online learning process. The level of self-directed learning can be raised if students are provided with concrete requirements whereby students are able to navigate their learning appropriately. In addition, detailed testing and assessment guidelines, as well as the inclusion of expected learning outcomes, are useful for students to know exactly what they are expected to gain from the course so they have a better sense of self-directed learning and learner control during their study. The institution also needs to take part in the process of increasing students' self-directed learning and learner control through regular support and updated policies.

Conclusion

This study provides a detailed picture of the readiness of Vietnamese undergraduate EFL students for online learning in late 2021. The findings reveal that students have a high level of readiness for immediate online learning. There are no significant differences in the level of readiness between EFL male and female students, while the students' level has a discernible impact on their readiness for online learning. Despite the high level of readiness, EFL students in Vietnam face many difficulties due to distracting environments and technical issues.

To increase EFL students' level of readiness and reduce the challenges students encounter in online learning, it is recommended that support from the university in the form of training should be provided. Furthermore, appropriate teaching pedagogies with more interactive activities should be implemented with careful and specific guidelines for more effectiveness.

Though the research has some limitations because the sample may not represent a very large population, the research is a good source of references for further studies on online learning in Vietnam. As the research sample in this study is a pioneering effort that focused only on undergraduate students, further research with a greater variety of participants should be conducted to gain a better understanding of the readiness of Vietnamese students at all levels for online learning. Some factors like learning styles, individual capabilities, or teaching methods that may affect students' online learning should also be taken into consideration in further research. In addition, the five dimensions of learner readiness for online learning (i.e., computer/internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning, motivation for learning, learner control, and online communication self-efficacy) can be further studied separately for deeper insights into each dimension.

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