SYNCHRONOUS VIRTUAL LEARNING STUDENTS' EXPERIENCE AND THE PROSPECT IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to examine students' learning experience with Google Meet, a virtual learning tool in tertiary contexts in Vietnam. The explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used with the participation of 188 English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Vietnamese students at a private university in Vietnam. Findings from both the questionnaires and focus group interviews show that the students have a positive learning experience with Google Meet. Particularly, they perceive that breakout rooms in Google Meet enhance their interaction with their lecturers and peers and promote their sense of community in virtual learning classes. Additionally, the flexibility of virtual learning facilitates learners to solve learning-prevented problems, such as internet connection and power outage. Furthermore, blended learning is perceived as a highly preferred learning mode even after the pandemic. Based on the results, pedagogical strategies are implicated to maximize the effectiveness of virtual classes.

Keywords: Synchronous virtual learning, EFL, students' experience, blended learning, COVID-19.

INTRODUCTION

Teachers and students all over the world have experienced several waves of the COVID-19 since 2019. To deal with school closure, all school systems worldwide must abruptly shift from face-to-face classrooms to total online ones (Asian Development Bank, 2021). Likewise, the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training has approved to deploy an online learning platform to end the school closure period several times since May 2020. Although online learning is not a new term in education, which has been applied since the 1990s (Harasim, 2000), for the Vietnamese education system, full time online courses appear quite new. In fact, according to digital transformation policy in the period 2025-2030 approved by Vietnamese Government in June 2020, 100% of educational institutions offer distance learning programs and pilot teaching curriculum which have at least 20% online program (Government of Vietnam, 2020). Therefore, it is possible that such abrupt transfer may cause challenges for the whole system which is not ready to change (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020), which in turn possibly makes online learning during COVID-19 periods less effective (Asian Development Bank, 2021).

A plethora of studies have recently been conducted to gain insight into learners' difficulties in synchronous virtual learning in different learning contexts. Internet - related issues are the most popular problems that have been explored by Dinh and Nguyen (2020), Alolaywi (2021), and Dao and Ha (2021). In addition, Dao and Ha (2021) revealed the abundant obstacles faced by the learners, including geographical features, the economic status, culture and tradition, learner motivation, cost of internet access to the internet and

social interaction through their mixed method study with 1165 students at high schools and universities in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. Another challenge is that students find it difficult to maintain their concentration on teachers' instruction (Alolaywi, 2021). Apart from the difficulties, several researchers found contradictions on students' perception toward online learning. Synchronous virtual online learning, on the one hand, benefits learners in terms of COVID-19 related problems and traffic problems avoidance, mobility, convenience, and flexibility (Alolaywi, 2021), 80% of students acknowledged the convenience of virtual learning, 66% of their participants satisfied with their virtual learning, and 60% were confident in joining online classes (Karim & Hasan, 2020). Synchronous virtual learning platform, on the other hand, emerges less attractive compared with face-to-face classroom (Alolaywi, 2021). Regarding the prospect of online learning, the results from related literatures provide a positive vision for online learning in the future (Karim & Hassan, 2020; Dao & Ha, 2021).

Noticeably, previous work has failed to address the role of the online learning platform. Activity theory proposed that tools we use play a significant role in shaping our experience, without knowing the role of the tools we can miss the opportunity to understand the activity (Nardi, 1996). In other words, to gain insight into learners' experience with a virtual learning environment, it is significant to know the roles of the virtual learning platform. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate how EFL Vietnamese students experienced synchronous virtual learning through the roles provided with Google Meet. Particularly, the study addressed the following research questions.

1. What are the roles of virtual learning platform perceived by Vietnamese EFL learners?
2. From their experience, what learning mode do they prefer after the COVID-19?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Synchronous Virtual Learning Environment

Synchronous virtual learning environment refers to a form of online learning which is carried out through the real time interaction between students and teachers (Kaup et al., 2020; Racheva, 2018). In this sense, this form of learning is quite similar to a face-to-face classroom in the way that students and teachers have their meeting at appropriate time in accordance with the schedule. The only different feature is that every member in the classroom is in different locations while meeting. In this study, synchronous virtual learning refers to an online learning mode through an online learning platform which allows teachers and students to interact with each other in real time at different locations.

There are some popular virtual learning platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams and Google Meet. On these platforms, participants are able to make and join in video and audio conferences. In this study, synchronous virtual classes are conducted on Google Meet with the features, including breakout rooms, hand raising, meeting recording, white boarding, text messages, and screen sharing.

The Roles of Synchronous Virtual Learning

Successful online learning should provide learners with interaction, a sense of community, flexibility, and usefulness for their learning (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). These aspects have been paid close heed by a plethora of researchers.

Interaction

Interaction is a vital factor in second language acquisition since learners can obtain input and constructive feedback from their peers to improve their knowledge (VanPatten & Benati, 2015). As a platform of learning, therefore, a synchronous learning environment is believed to be a place to enhance students' engagement (Sweetman, 2021). According to Moore (1989), there are three main types of interaction in online learning including interaction between students and content, interaction among students and interaction between students and teachers. These types of interaction are supported by the available tools on virtual learning platforms, such as video and audio, visual hand raising, small group discussion, chat, and white boarding (Sweetman, 2021). With the help of these available gadgets, learners in a synchronous

classroom environment are easy to express their opinions and listen to their classmates (Gedera, 2014). In several current related research, there have been several mismatched findings in terms of the role of interaction in synchronous classroom environments. Some researchers indicated that students experienced lack of interaction (e.g., Abbasi et al., 2020; Dao & Ha 2021) whereas others concluded that virtual learning enhanced learners' interaction (e.g., Aljuaid, 2021; Ironsi, 2021). Therefore, it is worth examining whether the virtual learning platform enhances student's interaction.

Sense of Community

A sense of community refers to the feelings of being and belonging that each member has within a group (Yuan & Kim, 2014). It is argued that distance learning may cause feelings of an isolation because it is very hard for students to build relationships and a sense of belonging when they have no peers to "measure progress against" and their teachers just move from lessons to lessons (Carrier et al., 2017, p.144). However, synchronous communication through virtual learning tools is considered one of the ways to enhance a sense of community in online learning because real time interaction allows questions to be responded simultaneously (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Apart from interacting in the whole class, students can work in pairs or groups in their own breakout rooms, which enables them to be more comfortable to socialize with their peers to complete their given tasks or give and receive feedback from each other (Carrier et al., 2017). To address the role of interaction in promoting learners' sense of community, Berry (2019) interviewed 20 students and analyzed more than 50 videos from online classes in a doctorate program. He concluded that synchronous virtual learning with the features of video call and text chat enhances students' engagement and sense of community. Additionally, collaborative learning strategies including group discussions and group projects are reported to possibly enhance students' sense of community because they can share learning experience with each other (Oliphant et al., 2016). In addition, a sense of community can be established by creating a positive learning environment through building positive relationships among members in the virtual learning classroom (Ratliff, 2019). Particularly, having discussions about any daily topics such as movies also helps to establish an ideal learning environment (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). As a result, we hypothesize that virtual learning platform promotes students' sense of community, which is associated with the interaction and the quality of the learning environment.

Flexibility

Online learning is flexible, which allows learners to learn from anywhere and anytime (Palloff & Pratt, 2013). As a form of online learning, the synchronous online classroom environment provides students with the opportunity to learn from different geographical sites, without getting together in the same classroom like the face-to-face classroom. Hence, it saves students' cost of traveling (Aji et al., 2020) as well as commuting time (Thamarana, 2016). However, in synchronous learning, students have to follow a fixed schedule, so they are unable to choose the most appropriate time for themselves to study, which inhibits learners' ability to change their learning time themselves to avoid some common problems related to quality of internet access (Dinh & Nguyen, 2020; Mursyidin et al., 2021), and technical issues (Dahmash, 2020; Dinh & Nguyen, 2020). Although the lessons are synchronous, they are recorded and this makes learning flexible. Therefore, we hypothesize that the flexibility of synchronous learning facilitates students to overcome learning problems.

Usefulness

Virtual learning enhances learners' information and communication technology (ICT) skills and learning outcomes. According to research, online courses help learners improve their technological skills. For example, Aji et al., (2020) found that one of the benefits of blended courses is enhancing learners' ICT skills. Apart from ICT enhancement, Francescucci and Rohani (2019) concluded that a synchronous course could provide students with outcomes that are comparable to those from face-to-face learning ones after conducting their research on 698 learners. Their findings support Simonson's equivalent theory (1999) that a proper online course can provide online learners with equivalent experiences in learning to those in face-to-face classroom. However, this contradicts Adnan and Anwar (2020)'s result that online learning was less

effective than face-to-face learning in achieving learner's expected learning outcomes. However, it is noticed that Adnan and Anwar (2020) undertook their study when educational institutions were forced to suddenly switch their teaching mode to face-to-face instructions to online ones because of the outbreak of the global pandemic. This abrupt transfer is argued to possibly cause tremendous obstacles for student's learning such as lack of internet access and monetary issues (Adnan & Anwar, 2020). Consequently, the online learning in Adnan and Anwar (2020)'s context was ineffective regarding producing the desirable learning outcomes. In our current context where we were in the second year experiencing the pandemic which means we had more time and experience to better our online teaching practice. Hence, we hypothesize that the virtual online platform is perceived to be useful.

Theoretical Framework

Activity theory initially developed from the work of Vygotsky (1978) and subsequently extended by Leont'ev (1978) and Engestrom (1978). The underlying principle of the theory is to provide an insight into human activity with its social context. In the first generation, an individual activity includes three key components consisting of subject, object and the mediating artefacts (Vygotsky 1978) in which tools serve as meditators for the subject's accomplishment of the object (Nguyen, 2020). The original model was expanded with social contextual factors such as rules, community and division of labour in which rules are established by the community who takes responsibilities for assigning individual work or division of labour (Yakubu & Dasuki, 2021). In other words, these sociocultural factors affect the process of the subject's use of mediating tools to achieve the object (Nguyen, 2020). In this sense, these elements are interrelated and together make up an activity system which is considered as a basic unit of analysis (Engestrom, 2001) through which to understand human activity (Gedera, 2014). Throughout the generations of this theory, the role mediation of tool is a key component (Engestrom, 2000). In line with this, tools used play a significant role in shaping users' experience, so it is impossible to gain insight into our activity without knowing what roles of tool are (Nardi, 1996). The activity is widely adopted as a theoretical framework to examine the role of technology in the educational field (Bakhurst, 2009). In this regard, the study is shaped by this theory in the way that it highlights the role of digital technologies serving as a meditating tool by which participants use to achieve desired outcomes in social learning contexts (Bower, 2019). Particularly, we hypothesize that students can achieve learning outcomes such as interaction, a sense of community, flexibility, and usefulness by using Google Meet, as shown in figure 1. In this study, the components of Activity Theory refer to Google Meet (tool), students (subjects), learning tasks (objects), virtual classroom rules (rules), teachers and students (community), division of tasks (division of labour).

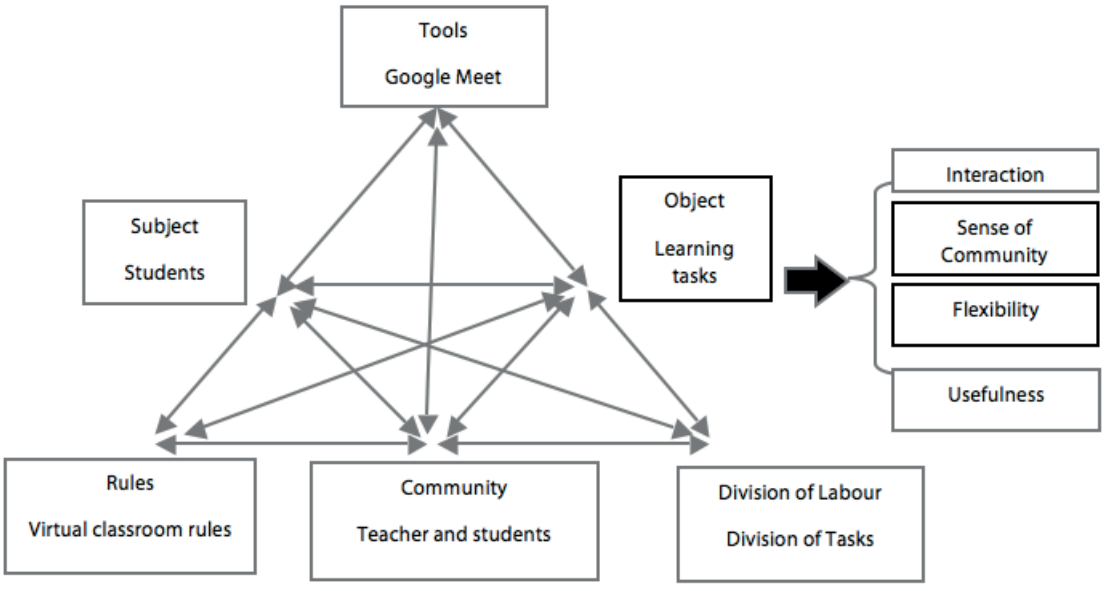

Figure 1. A proposed framework for this current study. Adapted from Engestrom (2002)

METHODOLOGY

Mixed Method Design

The study used the mixed methods design because it allows researchers to collect both quantitative and qualitative data, helping to reduce bias and subjective judgements (Creswell, 2009) and generate triangulating results (Williams, 2021). The explanatory sequential design in which quantitative data is collected first before qualitative ones was used in this study. By doing this, we can make sure that the quantitative data we acquire may be enhanced and expanded and then used to explain in a broad context by the qualitative data (Creswell, 2012). As a result, this design enables us to gain more in-depth insight into participants' views on their experience of virtual learning (Creswell, 2018; Williams, 2021).

Research Instruments

Two research instruments including a survey questionnaire and focus group interviews were used in this study. The first instrument was the questionnaire adapted from students' experience of features and characteristics of virtual learning questionnaire developed and validated by Parker et al. (2010). The face and content validities of the questionnaire were established by six experts including four instructional technologists and two survey research instrument constructors. Additionally, its reliability index and correlated factor index was 0.9 and 0.54 respectively (Parker et al., 2010). After considering 38 items from the original version, 15 items on features of virtual learning were removed as they did not meet our study's purpose. Additionally, two items related to technical problems and internet bandwidth were excluded because we would like to focus on the roles of the learning mode itself instead of objective obstacles. Then, we also changed the name of this factor from synchrony to flexibility. Likewise, the factor Usefulness was renamed from the original name Usefulness and Easy to Use to make it closely related to our research objectives. The participants were asked to rate their virtual learning experience on the 1-4 Likert scale, ranging from 4 = strongly agree to 1= strongly disagree. The questionnaire was translated into Vietnamese, participants' mother tongue language to make it comprehensive for the participants. The translated version was checked and proofread by our colleagues who have been teaching translation courses for more than five years. To ensure the reliability of the questionnaire, a pilot test was conducted with a group of 44 participants, a qualified number as suggested by Johanson and Brooks (2010), who stated that the minimum number of participants for the pilot test is 30. After piloting the questionnaire, four items including "My typing hindered me; I could not talk freely because I could not see my classmates face to face; I was not confident using the VC, and the class was monotonous" were removed as the Correlated Item –Total Correlations are below 0.3.

These respondents from the pilot test were excluded from the main study to ensure the quality of the research design (Haralambos et al., 2004). After removing disqualified items, the overall values are over 0.6 and the Correlated Item –Total Correlations are over 0.3, meaning that the questionnaire is qualified to collect the data (Creswell, 2018).

Table 1. Cronbach Alpha of each cluster in the questionnaire

Clusters	Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
Interaction	.924	6
Flexibility	.864	3
Usefulness	.875	4
Sense of Community	.800	4

Apart from the 17 items, one open – ended question included in the questionnaire to shed light on student's preferred learning mode after the COVID-19.

In this study, an EFA with the Promax rotation was employed. 17 qualified items related to the features of virtual learning tools were loaded into four factors. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy (KMO) was 0.846. Additionally, the initial eigenvalues were greater than 1, which is considered significant. Bartlett's Test is .000, meaning that all variables are correlated.

Table 2. Total variance explained

	Initial Eigenvalues		
Components	Total	% of Variance	Cumulative %
Interaction	6.652	39.127	39.127
Usefulness	1.900	11.174	50.301
Flexibility	1.569	9.230	59.531
Sense of Community	1.155	6.793	66.325

Table 3. Pattern Matrix[a]

	Factors			
Components	1	2	3	4
Facilitated instructor to student Interaction	**.620**	.409	-.091	-.052
Facilitated student to student Interaction	**.860**	.168	-.164	-.040
The quality of class discussions was High	**.947**	.008	-.139	.005
I learned from my fellow students in this class	**.882**	-.057	.000	.039
Instructor frequently attempted to elicit student interaction	**.684**	-.245	.242	.066
It was easy to follow class discussions	.477	.240	.274	-.012
It reduced my travel time to the campus to attend face - to- face class	-.103	.100	**.892**	-.018
It reduced my travel cost	-.129	.147	**.901**	.006
It helped me collaborate with peers without having to be in the same location	.161	.029	**.713**	-.003
it enhanced my effectiveness	-.060	**.854**	.059	.037
It improved my performance	.000	**.791**	.113	-.005
It was easy for me to become skillful in using VC	.277	**.315**	.204	.099
I found it easy to get the virtual classroom to do what I want it to do	.189	**.591**	.125	-.082
I felt isolated	.224	-.210	.055	**.757**
There were not many collaborative activities	-.208	.325	-.155	**.755**
I did not feel a sense of belonging in the classroom	.026	.231	-.115	**.699**
I worked on my own for most of the projects	-.009	-.307	.216	**.611**

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Promax with Kaiser Normalization. a. Rotation converged in 6 iterations.

The second instruments were focus group interviews that enable the researchers to gather a small group of participants to explore perceptions, feelings, and ideas about specific topics (Denscombe, 2010). In this sense, the participants are given the chance to argue and challenge each other's ideas, which compels them to think and possibly revises their perspectives (Bryman, 2012). Consequently, it provides realistic explanations about their experience of virtual learning. The interviews were undertaken after analyzing the data in the questionnaire aiming at seeking the participants' confirmation and detailed explanations regarding the clusters in the questionnaire. Therefore, the interview questions were created based on four clusters including interaction, usefulness, flexibility, and a sense of community. Particularly, sample questions include: What do you think of interaction (between you and your classmates; you and your lecturer), usefulness, flexibility and sense of community in your virtual classes? and do you want this virtual learning mode to be continued when the COVID-19 is decontrolled?

Participants

228 first-year students including 98 females and 93 males who took English preparation courses via Google Meet in a private university in the southwest of Vietnam participated in this study. Their age ranged from 18 to 20 years old. The students were from different majors. In the university, all first-year students are required to take English preparation courses before they study their major subjects. These participants

had experienced virtual learning through Google Meet, Zoom, Microsoft Teams when they were in high school because of the pandemic. They were selected using the convenience sample technique, which allows researchers to choose volunteers who have key characteristics related to the aim of the study (Airasian et al., 2009; Dornye & Taguchi, 2009). We applied this technique because we believed that when participants voluntarily participate in the study, they are more motivated and willing to share their experience of virtual learning, meaning that they would provide us with fruitful results. In terms of focus group interview, due to the pandemic, we conducted three online focus group interviews with six participants in each group, an appropriate number as advised by Denscombe (2010). We selected the participants based on their responses to the questionnaire that they were willing to participate in the interviews. Among 155 responses, we randomly selected 24 participants for the focus group interviews. Each interview took about an hour. The informants participated voluntarily in the research without any compensation. Their consent forms were obtained before they completed the survey and participated in the focus group interviews. In addition to this, a pseudonym was used to address each participant during the interview to protect their anonymity.

Procedure

The study comprised two phases of data collection. Firstly, an online questionnaire was sent to the participants via Google form at the end of the course in the Fall semester from September to December 2021. After removing faults or duplicated data, 188 responses (82.5 %) were qualified to be processed to SPSS to generate results. Secondly, after collecting the quantitative data, four focus group interviews including 24 voluntary students lasted about an hour to gain further explanation of their virtual learning experience.

Data Analysis

There were two phases of analyzing the data. Firstly, we used the IBM SPSS version 20 to run the descriptive statistical procedure and Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) to analyze the quantitative data. Secondly, we followed three analyzing steps including preparing and organizing the data for analysis, coding and condensing the codes, representing the data suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018), and adapted a thematic analysis to analyze the data of the open – ended questions from the questionnaire and the focus group interviews.

FINDINGS

In this section, we firstly report an overview of EFL Vietnamese student's experience of roles of virtual learning platform generated from the questionnaire and the focus group interviews. Secondly, we present students' preferable learning mode after the pandemic.

EFL Vietnamese Students' Experience of Virtual Learning Platform

Quantitative results as presented in Table 4 show that the participants had a positive experience of the roles of the virtual learning tool in virtual classes. Particularly, they rated virtual learning classes as flexible with the highest mean score (M = 3.4504; SD = .62567). Interaction was rated as the second feature (M = 3.3309; SD = .62745), which is followed by useful and easy to use (M = 3.1263; SD = .60716) and sense of community (M = 3.1090; SD = .66175) respectively.

Table 4. Roles of virtual learning platform

Features of virtual learning (N=188)	Mean	SD
Interaction	3.3309	.62745
Flexibility	3.4504	.62567
Usefulness	3.1263	.60716
Sense of Community	3.1090	.66175

Regarding the qualitative findings, the participants provided us with examples or explanations about the roles of Google Meet platform, namely interaction, a sense of community, flexibility, and usefulness. These findings are consistent with the quantitative results in the way that the students have positively experienced their virtual classes. The results, together with the quantitative results, offer significant insight into their experience. The aspects are presented as follows:

Interaction

The participants generally perceived that virtual classrooms enabled them to easily interact with their lecturers and peers. They could take their turns by raising their hand, talk by video calling function, write the messages on the box chat and work with their peers on Jamboard. For example, Hue, Vu, and Hau in Group 1 said,

> *"I preferred texting with friends through text chat."* - Hue
>
> *"I did lots of cooperative tasks on Jamboard and box chat."* - Vu
>
> *"I preferred making video call because it was quicker than chat"* - Hau

In terms of interaction with teachers, the majority of students said that their lecturers could assist their learning as much as in traditional classes because they could ask and receive directly their lecturers' explanations. As reported by the participants in group 4, in virtual classes, their lecturers could help them learn as in a face -to- face classes. Additionally, some students claimed that they found it easier to communicate with their lecturers in online classes. Hoa claimed, "*in virtual classes, every student had the same distance to their lectures, which means there was no front row or last row positions like in traditional face-to-face classrooms*". Similarly, An in group 3 said, "*It was easier for me to interact with my teacher in (virtual) class than in a (face-to-face) classroom because in a face -to- face classroom, teacher might not hear what students at the last rows said*". Regarding their interactions with the classmates, the students commented that they would interact with their peers better in the break-out rooms where there was a small number of students working in groups, compared to their interactions in the main room where the whole class studied together, which made them shy and afraid of making mistakes. All students in groups 1, 2, 3, and 4 respectively asserted that breakout rooms made it easier for them to freely talk with their peers as there were small numbers of participants who they understood well. Particularly, they said that

> *"I preferred interaction in the breakout room because we could communicate very well"* - Lan in group 4
>
> *"We worked well in our breakout room. We sang and we talked"* - Hue in group 1
>
> *"In the small room, we all interacted. It was more comfortable than in the main room. We were more confident".* - Phuc in group 2

It is noticeable that interaction was the most effective where they were able to work in harmony groups where they could work with those who were friendly, easy to get along well and open rather than those who were passive or had dominant behaviors. Trang in group 3 said "*I was sometimes randomized to a new group which was passive, I felt so unhappy*". In addition, Hong in group 2 added "*Once I worked with him/her, she/he sounded so aggressive, so I was scared and did not want to share any ideas with him/her*".

Sense of Community

The participants reported that virtual learning promoted their sense of community in the way that they were able to interact with classmates who were open and active. Dao in group 1 said that:

> *"Before starting or ending our classes, we turned on the microphone and talked. We shared our personal stories and discussed some issues from our lessons. We felt a strong connection and were happy to spend time with our classmates. However, we hoped that the others who were quite silent would be more active to join us."*

Similarly, Cuc in group 3 added "*I had a close-knit relationship with my classmates but not all of them. I could not communicate with some friends who were introverts [….] or whenever I joined class late, my close friends*

called me […] they cared for me." Similarly, Lam in group 3 commented "*Outgoing classmates could create a positive classroom environment.*"

The participants claimed that they had a greater sense of community in the breakout rooms rather than in the main room because they could interact with their favorite group members. Sang in group 4 recalled *"Breakout rooms could create our sense of community because it enabled all members in my group to interact together*". In line with this, Vu in group 1 reported "*In our breakout room, after we finished our task, we talked about our daily stories or shared our learning experience, so we understood each other*". Similarly, Kim in group 2 stated "*We usually chatted, watched movies and sang karaoke in our breakout room at break time*". However, the participants reported that they had a sense of community when they could work with their favorite peers. Ho in group 2 asserted "*I did not have the sense of community in both the main room and breakout room when I worked with peers who I was not compatible with. However, when working with my favorite friends, I felt this sense*."

Apart from the breakout rooms, the participants claimed that their lecturers also played a significant role in promoting their sense of community in the way that they created a positive classroom atmosphere and reduced a sense of isolation. Tram in group 2 claimed *"My lecturer was friendly, enthusiastic, humorous, and caring […] she called us my darlings, which made us feel comfortable and engaged*". Hieu in group 3 also added "*My lecturer often called passive students to prevent them from having a sense of isolation*."

It can be concluded from the extract that breakout rooms promoted learner's greater sense of community as they enabled them to interact with their favorite classmates. Additionally, lecturers were of significance in promoting student's sense of community.

Flexibility

The participants admitted that virtual classes were flexible as it allowed them to learn anywhere or view the recorded lessons. Trong in group 4 commented "*Thanks to Meet, we could learn from home and felt safe from COVID-19*". More importantly, students could solve their problems such as finding a place with better internet access. Sang in group 2 added, "*We could learn at any place with an internet connection. Once there was a power cut in my house, I went to a milk tea coffee nearby to study*". Additionally, students could find a place where they had better concentration for learning and escaped from distractions at home. Thanh in group 3 recalled "*I liked to go to a coffee shop near my house to study. In the coffee shop, there were people around that prevented me from falling asleep. Otherwise, when I studied at home on my bed, I could not help myself sleeping*". They could learn while waiting for being vaccinated, as reported by Luc in group 3 "*When I was scheduled to get vaccinated, I brought my phone with me to study so that I did not miss an important part of the lesson*". Similarly, they could re-study some missing lessons by self-learning from recording or having a meeting with their classmates or lecturers. Hung in group 1 stated "*When I could not join the class, I had some ways to catch up with the knowledge for that day by asking my friends to record the lesson, having meetings with my classmates or lecturers for tutoring*".

Usefulness

In terms of effectiveness the majority of the participants confirmed that the Meet platform was useful for their learning. For example, Hau in group 1 commented "*Meet was simple and easy to use. I loved Meet*." They also reported that their learning was effective thanks to Meet. For instance, Giau in group 4 said that "*I felt fine to learn on Meet because it helped my learning easier*". In the same vein, Viet in group 3 said "*Meet enhanced my learning because it allowed me to record my lessons that I could easily use for my revision*". Hoa in group 1 added "*My lecturers could provide their lesson effectively. I found that my performance was much better through the courses on Meet. I was more confident in answering questions and solving difficult tasks*". Apart from the effectiveness, some students also reported the negative sides of this learning platform. Thien in group 3 said that "*Sometimes I could not concentrate on the lesson and my lecturers could not know whether I was learning or doing other stuff*". Similarly, Dao of group 4 mentioned that "*There were problems with internet connection and lecturers could not observe or manage students in class*".

Student's Preferable Learning Mode Post the COVID-19

Table 5. Student's selected choices of their preferable learning mode after the COVID-19

Preferable learning modes	N	% of respondents (N=188)
Synchronous online learning mode	34	18.1%
Face-to- face learning mode	117	62.2%
Blended learning mode	120	63.8%

Percentages of each learning modes were rated to show EFL Vietnamese student's acceptable learning mode after the pandemic. As shown in table 5, the most preferable learning mode was blended learning (63.8 %). Face-to-face learning closely stood as the second favorite one (62.2 %) whereas synchronous online learning mode was the least preference (18.1%). Qualitative results show that the students selected blended learning because of its effectiveness. Particularly, Dao in group 1 said "Blended learning could be more flexible as it could combine both online learning and face-to-face learning". Additionally, Son in group 4 claimed "Blended learning enabled me to change my learning environment, which made me feel more comfortable with learning [….] thus made me learn more effectively."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

Experience of Virtual Learning

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to shed light into the Vietnamese students' experience of synchronous virtual learning on Google Meet platform in their Fall semester 2021. The general results recommend that the learners have been quite positive toward Google Meet. Specifically, Meet features provide them with the experience of interaction, sense of community, usefulness and flexibility.

The first important finding is that using the Meet platform can enhance the students' interaction with both their teachers and peers. However, there are differences in their interactions in the main room and breakout rooms. In the main room, the students are more satisfied with their interaction with their teachers than their peers because in the main room students are so quiet and internet-related problems sometimes occur, inhibiting students from interacting with one another. However, when working with their cohesive groups in breakout rooms, they are satisfied with their interaction with their peers. While our finding is consistent with Aljuaid (2021) who also found that virtual classes can enhance learners' interaction, it is different from Dao and Ha's findings (2021) that learners experienced lack of interaction in virtual classes. The possible reason for such inconsistency is the matter of time. For instance, Dao and Ha (2021) conducted their study in the time when both Vietnamese teachers and students just experienced online learning for about two months, which is believed to be way too sudden for them to prepare for the new style of learning and teaching. However, in our context, both teachers and learners have already experienced online teaching for approximately one year. In our study, the students accept that their online classes are interactive through the support of the available tools such as breakout rooms together with Jam board, hand raising and box chat.

As the aforementioned from the literature, there is the relationship between interaction and students' sense of community (Berry, 2019; Carrier et al., 2017; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004) In fact, the successful interaction among the members establishes the feeling of attachment among them. We found that the core factor for successful communication comes from the warm atmosphere students have with their classmates and lecturers, which is compatible with Ratliff's finding (2019). In addition, it is noticeable that breakout rooms, where students collaborate in groups, are the places where most students feel most comfortable working with their favorite classmates. This finding is in accordance with Oliphant and Branch-Mueller (2016) who concluded that working in groups could enhance students' sense of community because they could share things together apart from learning.

Regarding flexibility of virtual classes, we found that this nature characteristic provides students with benefits, such as saving time and money to travel from home to school and the flexible learning place, which are in line with Aji (2020) and Thamarana (2016)'s findings respectively. Interestingly, we found that the flexibility

of virtual classes can help solve some issues with internet connection or other technical issues. Particularly, the students can find out better places for learning to deal with some online-related issues. Additionally, they can have appointments online with their friends or lecturers at appropriate time to retake the knowledge from their missing lessons.

In terms of usefulness of virtual classes, our finding regarding improving student's skills in using an online learning platform corresponds to the previous finding by Aji et al. (2020). In terms of the learning outcomes, our students express their satisfaction toward their learning outcomes which contradicts the findings of Adnan and Anwar (2020) that rejected the role of online platform in facilitating desired learning outcomes. In addition, our result confirms Francescucci and Rohani (2019)'s finding that supports the equivalent learning outcomes between online students and face-to-face students, indicating that online learning can provide satisfactory learning outcomes. This positive result reflects the effectiveness of using Google Meet platform in the current context, supporting the previous hypothesis.

Online learning in the current context at this time is a quite new learning mode, which can cause some difficulties for both lecturers and students (Asian Development Bank, 2021). However, online platforms have been established to optimize such online teaching and learning activities (Palloff, 2013). Consequently, Google Meet features allow students in the context to actively participate in their online classroom. The more effectively these features are employed, the better experience students can have with their online classes (Alliance for Excellent Education (2016), as cited in Carrie et al., 2017). In fact, we found that the participants have positively experienced the Google Meet tool. Our findings support the Activity theory in the way that there is interplay between the tool we use and the experience we have. In other words, the online learning tool plays significant roles to optimize students' online learning.

From the findings, we have several implications for teachers and learners in online learning. For teachers, breakout rooms and other interactive features in virtual learning platforms such as video, audio, hand raising, jam board and chat box are beneficial to learners' interaction. Therefore, we suggest that the features should be applied in designing group work or pair work activities for cohesive groups to enhance students' interaction and sense of community. In addition to that, a positive learning environment should be made by having daily communications between teachers and students (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004) to enhance learners' relationships, which fosters their sense of community. For students, they can take advantage of the flexibility of virtual platforms to revise missing lessons by having online meetings with their classmates or watching recorded lessons.

The Prospect of Blended Learning Post COVID-19

63.8% of participants prefer blended learning as the future form of learning post COVID-19. They believe that this new form is better than any other forms, such as full online or face-to-face ones because it can provide the positive aspects of both face-to-face and synchronous online learning. The majority of learners who prefer this learning form indicate that learners can save time and cost of traveling. In addition, they prefer attending online sessions because they find it easier to engage with their lecturers while face-to-face sessions allow them to interact with their classmates and take advantage of school amenities. This result of this study is consistent with Dao and Ha (2021)'s finding that students perceive online learning as their favorable future learning. Additionally, it is in line with the Vietnamese Government's policy. Therefore, it is in the literature that supports the innovation of syllabus for blended learning in the future.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic has made a significant alternative in Vietnamese education where face-to-face classes are considered as dominant. The transition from physical to virtual classes is viewed as a positive experience. EFL Vietnamese students perceive that virtual classes enable them to easily interact with their lecturers and peers and promote their sense of community in virtual classrooms. Furthermore, there has been a light change in the student's perspective of learning mode that blended learning is perceived as the potential for Vietnamese higher education in the post COVID-19.

Limitation and Recommendation

There are two limitations of this study. Firstly, our findings are limited in self-reported data which is sometimes argued that the participants might be less truthful (Nanni & Pusey, 2021) due to social desirability bias (Dornye & Taguchi, 2010). However, our careful explanation of the purposes of the research and emphasis of their confidentiality would make them feel most comfortable and are willing to share their views (Dornye & Taguchi, 2010). Hence, we suggest that future studies can be conducted by using this method in combination with others such as observation, interviewing lecturers or analyzing content through video recordings, which allows researchers to generate findings from multiple data. Another limitation is related to the small sample size within an institution although triangulation of the mixed methods design can provide reliable results. This sample size could limit the potential to generalization. Therefore, future studies can be undertaken with larger sample sizes in varied contexts to generate a whole picture of virtual learning.

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