Students' Perception of Face-to-Face and Online Instruction in Foreign Language Learning

Juan Carlos Olmos Alcoy* and Agnieszka Atthasit

*Corresponding author's e-mail: juancarlos.olm@mahidol.ac.th

Mahidol University International College, Thailand

Received: Oct 6, 2023 *Revised: May 31, 2024* *Accepted: Jun 6, 2024*

Abstract

This research explored students' perception vis-à-vis of the (dis)advantages of face-to-face and online learning of foreign languages in a tertiary education institution in Thailand. The research took a mixed methods approach utilizing a pre-set questionnaire and a multiple-choice question. Data were collected from 433 students using an online platform and then analyzed using simple statistics. Findings showed that the main advantages of studying online are easy access to the Internet, the self-determined pace of learning, while the main advantage of face-to-face instruction is better social interaction. Conversely, the main disadvantage of studying online is the difficulty of interacting with classmates and the instructor; the main disadvantage of face-to-face learning is students feeling more self-conscious of mistakes made. The findings also indicate the participants prefer learning either in the traditional classroom environment or via the hybrid mode.

Keywords: online learning, face-to-face learning, students' perceptions, foreign language learning

Introduction

Online learning has been used to varying degrees of success in recent decades based on cutting-edge technological advancements within educational contexts where face-to-face teaching is normative. However, the upsurge of the pandemic of COVID-19 has accelerated the use of online learning globally. There is a large body of academic research on the impact of online instruction on the learning experience of students at the university level (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2015; Bagata et al., 2020; Imsa-ard, 2020; Maican & Cocoradă, 2011; Poolperm & Boonmoh, 2024). However, the authors hope this research will add to the body of literature from the standpoint of an international tertiary institution within the context of Thailand where many foreign languages are being taught simultaneously and students have the option of studying more than one foreign language (FL) within one period of study. The scope of this study, therefore, is the perception of online instruction versus face-to-face instruction for FL learning. It does not cover the online or face-to-face learning experience of other subjects (e.g., business studies or communication arts). The research also excluded the study of English as the English language is not

considered an FL within the context of the study site. The results of this study will be relevant to the field of FL learning at the tertiary level specifically in the context of international undergraduate programs, and potentially paves the academic path for further research in this specific field.

The recent pandemic has had a profound and indelible impact on all aspects of human life within living memory. Not only has it changed the mechanics involved in social interaction but it has affected all the *artifacts* deployed in making any society successfully functional: economy, politics, medical care, the transport and tourism industries, and, of course, education. At our university prior to the onset of the pandemic, no classes were fully delivered online. Some courses, though, used online platforms intended to assist the students with their learning process (i.e., Edmodo, Google Classroom, or Mahidol University International College [MUIC] e-learning platform, to name but a few). However, these platforms—though important—were not generally considered of crucial importance in the delivery and management of the course content; instead, they were used as peripheral tools whose main purpose was that of providing extra help. All this shifted overnight when MUIC, like all the other educational institutions in Thailand, started a 100% online teaching policy in March 2020 due to the threat posed by the pandemic. This sudden—though not completely unexpected—change was strongly recommended by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Research and Innovation and all universities in the country followed the Ministry's advice (Mala, 2020). Under normal circumstances—without the presence of COVID-19—, the move from face-to-face instruction to full time online study would have probably taken many years and quite a few changes in academic and legal regulations. Therefore, the focus of this study is centered upon the perception of students regarding face-to-face and online FL (i.e., Chinese, French, German, Japanese, and Spanish) learning within the context of learning a foreign language.

Research Questions:

RQ1: What are the advantages and disadvantages that university students find in learning FL online?

RQ2: What are the advantages and disadvantages that university students find in learning FL face-to-face?

RQ3: In the specific context of FL instruction, which mode of instruction is more conducive to learning according to the university students: online, face-to-face or a combination of the two methods?

Literature Review

Online instruction in tertiary education is certainly not a new phenomenon. It has been deployed by many universities all over the world for many years (Kopp et al., 2019). Indeed, the University of Illinois had already developed in the 60s an intranet system that granted students easy access to courses and recorded lectures. The system was called PLATO (Programmed Logic for Automated Teaching Operations), and it was the precursor of many of the functions still in use today, such as screen shares, message boards, chat boards, and boxes (Bitzer et al., 1961). The very first *proper* online course,

however, was not offered until 1986 by the Electronic University Network (EUN). At this time the World Wide Web did not exist and students had to buy their own software and communicate over telephone lines. In the beginning, online instruction was primarily used in the context of distance-learning courses (Maican & Cocoradă, 2021), that is, courses whose target audience were typically students who needed to work and/or had family responsibilities, or students who lived far away from their university of choice. For these reasons, online teaching has necessitated a flexible timetable to maximize student motivation and participation (Arias et al., 2018). Since 1986 technology has come a very long way; it has become increasingly less expensive as well as more efficient and accessible, and as a result nowadays it is much easier to study online.

At MUIC initially, both groups—lecturers and students alike—were mainly concerned about the technological implications involved in this complete switch from face-to-face to digital (i.e., finding the most appropriate online tools, learning about or getting familiarized with new technologies, etc.). Since the second half of 2020, there has been a growing interest in the students' perception of online teaching in the context of tertiary education. Proof of this is the recent publication of a number of academic papers on this particular topic. In several Southeast Asian countries (which is the geographical area this paper is mainly focusing on), such as Indonesia, Thailand, and Vietnam, some papers relevant to this issue have also been published. However, these papers typically concentrate either on studying online in general, with no reference to any specific subject (Imsa-ard, 2020; Nambiar, 2020) or on the students' perception of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) online courses (Bagata et al., 2020; Kang & Duong, 2020; Mulyani et al., 2021; Suadi, 2021; Sukman & Mhukongdee, 2021). There seems to be a limited body of research as far as FL—other than English—is concerned, and it is the aim of this paper to shed more light on this issue.

The research carried out by Imsa-ard (2020) in Thailand and Nambiar (2020) in India does not focus on any particular discipline; instead, the participants come from a variety of academic backgrounds. Both papers display high levels of participation: 310 and 407 students respectively. The research tools are also similar: first, a 25-item questionnaire about different aspects of the digital course (i.e., organization, instructors, content delivery, etc.) and, secondly, either a semi-structured interview (Imsa-ard, 2020) or a couple of open ended (written) questions (Nambiar, 2020), both devised in order to gain further insight into the students' perceptions. The most significant finding is that in both cases more than 80% of the respondents prefer face-to-face instruction rather than learning online. A number of interrelated reasons account for this rather impressive figure. On a more positive note, many students in Nambiar's (2020) paper commented favorably on the fact the learning online saves time—no need to travel or commute—, is spatially flexible because the class can be attended from anywhere and, lastly, the lesson can be recorded and revisited later on (i.e., for revision purposes).

Conversely, the papers recently published by Bagata et al. (2020), Mulyani et al. (2021), Suadi (2021) in Indonesia, Sukman and Mhukongdee (2021) in Thailand, and Kang and Duong (2020) in Vietnam, concentrate mainly on the students' perceptions of one particular subject: learning EFL online.

Levels of participation are uneven; they range from 30 to 106 respondents. After the demographic details, all papers bar one use questionnaires with either a 4 or a 5-point Likert scale typically followed by an interview (Kang & Duong, 2020; Sukman & Mhukongdee, 2021) or open-ended questions (Suadi, 2021) to collect more in-depth information. The vast majority of the questions in all papers are exclusively about different aspects of online learning and make scant reference—if any at all—to traditional classroom instruction; only Mulyani's et al., (2021) paper includes two specific statements (out of 17 items) on face-to-face learning. The findings display a significant degree of overlap with the previous results found by Imsa-ard (2020) and Nambiar (2020). There are also, however, some important discrepancies. The students, when asked directly, expressed on average a mild preference for face-to-face instruction. Only in Mulyani et al.'s (2021) discussion, it is clearly stipulated that the students enjoy online instruction and do not seem to miss the conventional classroom: the majority of the 106 respondents in this paper claim that studying on-line is *attractive, challenging, engaging* and *exciting* (p. 204).

The main problem encountered by most students is, once again, poor or unstable Internet connection, particularly if they live in rural areas or belong to a relatively low socio-economic background. This is closely followed by the (significantly) diminished social interaction between teachers and students as well as the interaction among students; this is universally perceived as detrimental because, as Sukman and Mhukongdee (2021) point out, it is demotivating and it *deteriorates* the students' commitment to the subject. The last major problem commonly mentioned in most of these papers has to do with the difficulty in paying constant attention, that is, while studying online it is very easy to get distracted by other social media (i.e., mobile phones, smartphones, tablets, etc.). With regard to this point, it is also mentioned that lecturers should be more creative, innovative, and engaging in their delivery. On the positive side, the most prominent advantage is that students find online learning very helpful when they need to complete and submit their assignments. The other advantages are, not surprisingly, the flexibility and comfort associated with digital learning.

As evidenced from the results scrutinized in the above-mentioned papers, there is a lot of common feedback given by the participants with regard to the positive and negative aspects of online learning. There is also a tendency to prefer face-to-face traditional learning. However, this preference is not ubiquitous since there are students who clearly favor learning online. The authors of this paper hope to find results that will be germane to the field of FL learning at the university level specifically in the context of international undergraduate programs, shed more light on this ongoing debate, and contribute positively to this specific area of research.

Methodology

Participants

A total of 433 students participated voluntarily in this study. All of them were studying at least one of the following six foreign languages offered at MUIC at the time the study was conducted: Chinese, French, German, Japanese, Spanish, and/or Thai. Since MUIC is an international college English is the lingua franca; hence, Thai as a FL is also available for exchange students mainly. Furthermore, there were students from all four academic years. This means that those students who started at Mahidol less than two years ago have only studied through an online platform, Zoom, which, in MUIC's case, was a popular digital platform used as a measure to optimize public health during the pandemic. Conversely, those who have been studying for longer—since before COVID-19—were also familiar with the more traditional face-to-face interaction.

All the students were approached via an email sent by their respective language instructors detailing the focus of the study. Since most of the lecturers are in charge of different proficiency levels, data from all 4 years of language study became readily available. The participants in this study attended FL classes delivered predominantly online from March 2020 until April 2022. This study defines online learning as a combination of synchronous and asynchronous modes. Synchronous learning involves a virtual environment where students and instructors engage with the course material and each other in real-time, despite being in different locations. On the other hand, asynchronous learning allows students to learn at their own pace using materials such as pre-recorded lectures, discussion forums, or language learning apps. This mode was useful for grammar drills, reading comprehension, or independent study. The FL classes at MUIC were delivered through a combination of synchronous and asynchronous online learning. Students who enrolled from April 2020 onwards had their entire education via Zoom lectures, with additional activities of pre-recorded video watching and independent study through the materials provided online.

It is also important to take into account that the vast majority of the students in MUIC come from families within the upper strata of the Thai socio-economic structure and live in the urban areas of Bangkok or other large cities. A very small number of the respondents live in rural areas. All students have their own personal laptop and mobile phone; on top of this, it is not uncommon for them to have access to a tablet or other electronic devices as well.

Data Collection

This study was intended to generate and scrutinize qualitative data primarily by inviting students to provide (short) written responses to a qualitative questionnaire with 4 questions related to online and face-to-face instruction. This method of data collection is commonly used in research because it tends to elicit (in-depth) descriptions of a particular phenomenon which helps the researchers to gain a better understanding of the participants' perceptions (Denzin, 1989; Yin, 2015) in specific

contexts. The questionnaire was carried out online not only to observe the obligatory social distancing —at the time this study was carried out—but also because it is cost-effective and it generally gathers data reliably (Toepoel, 2017).

The questionnaire was conducted in English since this is the lingua franca at MUIC and all students have to use it frequently for communication purposes. In the questionnaire students were asked to point out the advantages and disadvantages of studying FLs both online and face-to-face. After the students considered the positive and negative aspects of both modes of learning FLs, they were also asked a multiple-choice question in which they had to indicate which mode of learning—online, face-to-face, or a combination of both—was more suitable for FL acquisition.

At the time this study was conducted, it was deemed important to ask this particular question because in the future MUIC would likely contemplate going back to full face-to-face teaching or a combination of both modes of instruction.

Once the students completed the questionnaire, their anonymous responses were analyzed. Further details of this analysis are explained in the next chapter. The researchers took an immersive stance to the data analysis. This included the following steps: first, both the authors immersed themselves in the data through familiarization with the answers of the research participants; second, the data were read through twice to allow the researchers to begin the exploration and identification of the detailed insights into the advantages and disadvantages of FL learning online or face to face; third, the responses were categorized into codes based on a thematic analysis as well as recurrence; and fourth, the researchers then used a color coding scheme to group the codes together to firm up the themes. After these four steps, both the authors who also acted as the coders, began a process of discussion to agree on specific themes and patterns with regard to the advantages and disadvantages of FL learning online or face-to-face learning. The authors developed this framework for analysis based on the guidelines of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss (2017) as well as the guidelines for content analysis by Krippendorff (2018). Keywords and concepts were highlighted and reported in different categories which led to clear patterns in the students' responses. For the last item of the survey—multiple-choice question—, the results were tabulated in the Excel program to classify them according to the student's year of study.

Results

As stipulated in the previous section, 433 students participated in this research, but many of them provided more than one answer per question. Each answer was counted separately, and a total of 2008 discrete responses were collected. Table 1 provides a break down the responses provided by the students.

All the students were bilingual—mainly Thai and English— and were studying a third language as a major or minor course. Figure 1 shows the response distribution amongst all FL students.

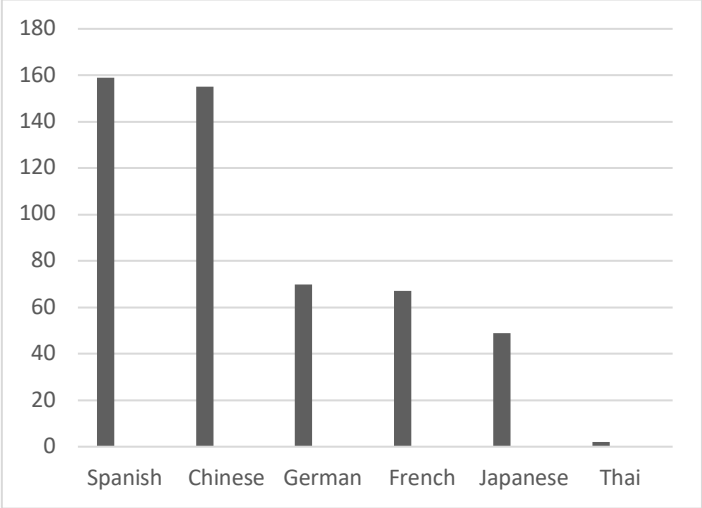
Table 1

Number of Responses per Category

Category	Number of responses	Percentage
Online advantages	552	27.49%
Online disadvantages	436	21.71%
Face-to-face advantages	657	32.72%
Face-to-face disadvantages	363	18.08%
Number of responses	**2008**	**100%**

Figure 1

Response Distribution amongst All FL



The data presented in Figure 1 above show that Spanish and Chinese received the highest number of responses, 159 and 155, respectively. German, French, and Japanese followed, with 70, 67, and 49 responses, respectively. Finally, two contributions were from students studying Thai as a foreign language. It is important to note that some students study more than one foreign language at MUIC; as a result, the total number of responses from the 433 participants was 502.

We will now proceed to offer a tabulated summary of all the (dis)advantages elicited by the participants. For convenience purposes, each (dis)advantage mentioned by the respondents has been allocated in a different row in the tables, but this arrangement does not necessarily mean they are independent from each other. In reality, the opposite scenario is more often the case than not. That is, many of the advantages are actually interrelated and, of course, the same applies to many of the disadvantages. In the Discussion section, these interconnections will be made explicit and then explored in detail.

Advantages of Online FL Learning

A total of 167 (8.32%) responses (out of the 2008 total number of comments provided by the participants) regarded *easy access to the Internet* as the most important advantage. This was the case mainly because the students could immediately use digital tools to help them translate lexical items—either individual words or complete sentences—they did not know. This was followed by *learning at (their) own pace,* with 106 (5.29%) responses. The third place was held by different aspects related to *class participation* and *interaction* with both the teacher and classmates, with 60 (2.99%) mentions. In fourth place, there was *spatial flexibility* with 56 (2.79%) answers. Next, the fact that online learning is *more relaxed* ranked fifth with 46 (2.29%) comments. A number of responses were too vague to know exactly what was meant: 26 (1.29%) students only used one word, either *convenient* or *comfortable* but did not elaborate any further. Twenty (0.99%) students saw *no advantages* whatsoever in studying online. Lastly, 71 (3.53%) responses were lumped together because there were many and very diverse in nature. Each advantage mentioned here had less than 15 contributors. Despite these low figures, they were still considered relevant and were included when counting was carried out. All of these afore-mentioned advantages will be looked into in the Discussion section below. Table 2 provides a tabulated summary of the comments given by the students.

Table 2

Advantages of Online FL Instruction at MUIC

Online advantages	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
Access to the Internet	167	8.32%
Learning at own pace	106	5.29%
More class participation	60	2.99%
Spatial flexibility	56	2.79%
Less stressful	46	2.29%
Convenient/comfortable	26	1.29%
No advantages	20	0.99%
Others	71	3.53%
Number of responses	**552**	**27.49%**

Disadvantages of Online FL Learning

Online learning is generally perceived as a more than adequate alternative to onsite face-to-face learning. However, it also brings a number of disadvantages, especially in the context of FL acquisition. This study found that the principal disadvantage of online learning is the prolonged lack of social interaction and communication with classmates and instructors expressed by 154 comments (7.67%). Having difficulties concentrating on online language learning activities due to constant distractions or multitasking is accentuated and reported by 86 contributions (4.28%). The next disadvantage expressed

by 59 responses (2.94%) was linked to vocabulary memorization and decreased self-effort to actively use (new) lexical items. This is explained by the instant access to a large number of online resources, applications, and translating devices. Another disadvantage identified in 48 answers (2.39%) was confusion and a gap in communication between lecturers and students. Sometimes the sound is distorted; the pronunciation and intonation become unclear which can lead to confusion and lack of confidence in speaking, and volunteering to answer questions. Communication interval and less accurate feedback are pointed out next in 20 feedback (0.99%). As stated before, the participants of this study have relatively good access to the internet and generally the speed of the internet connection in Thailand is of a very good quality. Eight remarks (0.4%) were concerned about Chinese characters' handwriting as they mainly use keyboards and online applications for translating and copying. Five responses (0.25%) did not observe any disadvantages while studying online. Fifty-six comments (2.79%) also mentioned health-related issues due to the prolonged time spent in front of the screen in a sitting position causing symptoms related to the office syndrome such as headache, soreness around the eyes or chronic muscle pain. This negatively affects the students' health and their general wellness. This category was classified as *Others* since this item is not directly linked to FL learning but to the general impact of *screen-time* on human health. Table 3 provides a summary of the comments given by the students.

Table 3

Disadvantages of Online FL Instruction at MUIC

Online disadvantages	Frequency	Percentage
Less interaction	154	7.67%
Multiple distractions	86	4.28%
Less self-effort	59	2.94%
Pronunciation confusion	48	2.39%
Less feedback	20	0.99%
Less handwriting	8	0.4%
No disadvantages	5	0.25%
Others	56	2.79%
Number of responses	**436**	**21.71%**

Advantages of Face-to-Face Learning

To begin with, most of the feedback, 168 (8.37%), answers placed *more and better interaction* as the best advantage in the traditional classroom setup. Secondly, with 156 (7.77%) mentions, was a *better learning environment.* This was followed by *easier to ask questions right away,* with 102 (5.08%) responses. Next came *easier to focus* on the contents of each lesson, with 84 (4.18%) contributions. *More opportunities to practice pronunciation* with classmates as well as the teacher followed with 60

(2.99%) answers. Emphasis on *making or meeting friends* was the main advantage for 50 (2.5%) respondents. Lastly, the remaining 37 (1.83%) of the responses consisted of many different opinions and comments, and hence, it was decided to cluster them together. All of these advantages of face-to-face FL learning will be thoroughly looked into in the Discussion section below. Table 4 provides the tabulated summary of the comments facilitated by the students.

Table 4

Advantages of Face-to-Face FL Instruction at MUIC

Face-to face advantages	Frequency	Percentage
Quality of interaction	168	8.37%
Learning environment	156	7.77 %
Easier to ask questions	102	5.08%
Easier to focus	84	4.18%
More pronunciation practice	60	2.99%
Make/meet friends	50	2.5%
Others	37	1.83%
Number of responses	**657**	**32.72%**

Disadvantages of Face-to-Face Learning

In this part, 363 responses were obtained, and 125 comments (6.22%) stated that the main disadvantage of onsite learning is apprehension and nervousness to interact in front of the class, the fear of making mistakes and difficulties in coping with a stricter and more formal classroom environment. This phenomenon is described in the literature as FL anxiety, and it is represented as a feeling of tension or nervousness, especially in speaking and oral comprehension tasks. Some students mentioned that they could somehow *hide* behind the closed camera because it felt less intimidating to talk while participating without showing their face. This scenario would not be possible in a face-to-face interaction. For 83 remarks (4.13%), there were no disadvantages in learning FL on campus as, for them it is the most efficient way of learning and interacting. However, 36 answers (1.8%) mentioned that limited access to online tools for translation/online dictionaries would be an important disadvantage in the onsite classroom, and more work and effort in vocabulary memorization would be necessary, n = 26 (1.3%). Also, for 14 responses (0.7%) distraction from classmates might have a negative impact on their learning progress. Moreover, 6 comments (0.3%) perceive the lack of class recording and e-materials as an important disadvantage. Lastly, the remaining *Others* with 73 responses (3.63%) identified commuting, time management, and risk of exposure to COVID-19 as disadvantages of going on campus. Table 5 provides a summary of the comments given by the students.

Table 5

Disadvantages of Face-to-Face FL Instruction at MUIC

Face-to-face disadvantages	**Frequency**	**Percentage**
More stressful	125	6.22%
No disadvantages	83	4.13%
No access to online tools	36	1.8%
More vocabulary memorization	26	1.3%
Distraction by classmates	14	0.7%
No class recording	6	0.3%
Others	73	3.63%
Number of responses	**363**	**18.08%**

In this section, we will summarize the results of the students' perception of the best learning environment for an FL learning context. Four hundred and twenty-three students responded to this multiple-choice question by choosing only one option; 10 students did not respond for unknown reasons.

From the total students' perspectives presented in Table 6 below we see that for 181 students (42.7%) the combination of online and face-to-face learning could be a potential platform for providing the most effective FL instruction. Face-to-face instruction was also largely selected with 176 responses (41.7%). The online instruction as the main platform to learn a FL was chosen by only 29 students (6.9%) and for 37 respondents (8.7%) it makes no difference whether the instruction is online or face-to-face.

Table 6

Total Students' Perception of the Best FL Learning Environment

FL learning environment	**Percentage**
Online instruction is better than face-to-face	29 (6.9%)
Face-to-face instruction is better than online	176 (41.7%)
A combination of the two methods of instruction would be the best approach	181(42.7%)
It makes no difference whether the instruction is online or face-to-face	37(8.7%)
Total	**423 (100%)**

Discussion

Advantages of Online and Face-to-Face FL Learning

To begin with, we will start discussing the advantages of online FL learning. As can be clearly appreciated from Table 2, the most appealing advantage for the participants is by far that of having at their disposal an array of digital tools freely available on the internet. The most popular response within this category was being able to search immediately for either new or forgotten lexical items. Suadi (2021) reports a similar finding (though it is not reported what percentage of the students gave this particular answer). It is worth noting that nearly all students at MUIC have at least two electronic devices. This allows them to actively participate in online Zoom lessons by using their laptops while simultaneously searching for the meanings of unfamiliar words.

The second most important advantage mentioned here was that students felt they could study at their own pace. They elaborated on this point by stating that they had more control over their own learning because the materials were always accessible online. This made them feel they could better manage their revision schedule and optimize their learning experience. However, the nature of foreign language learning might not be limited to just recorded lessons or solely asynchronous learning. Since asynchronous learning provides flexibility and personalized learning through recorded lessons and learning materials, it allows students to progress at their own pace, revisit challenging concepts, and focus on specific skills like grammar or reading comprehension independently. On the other hand, synchronous learning is crucial for speaking and interaction. The real-time online sessions allow students to practice conversations, get pronunciation feedback, and participate in discussions, all of which are essential for fluency. Ideally, foreign language learning should involve a blend of synchronous and asynchronous elements. The results in Table 6 reflect this assumption accordingly.

The participants also pointed out that the pace at which the lessons were delivered was slower than that of a traditional classroom environment. Similar findings are reported in Nambiar's (2020) and Mulyani et al.'s (2021) papers where the *better time management* facilitated by the online environment was considered a very appealing feature. Indeed, online learning can offer several advantages that translate into better time management for students. It can be improved by offering flexibility in scheduling coursework around existing commitments, eliminating commutes, allowing them to progress through materials at their own pace, facilitating time-blocking techniques, and keeping them organized with centralized learning materials in online platforms.

Thirdly, the students stipulated that the digital environment facilitated more class participation, especially with classmates. We hypothesize that the regular use of the break-out rooms, which is common practice in FL acquisition, was the main reason for this response. Not surprisingly, the spatial flexibility provided by digital learning was the next advantage the students mentioned on their list of preferences. This means that they appreciated having the option of studying either at home or somewhere else like, for instance, a coffee shop (as some of them actually did). Similar findings were

reported by Nambiar (2020) and Kang et al. (2021). Next on the list of advantages is that online learning creates a more relaxed environment than the traditional classroom setting. It is not uncommon to read comments, especially amongst shy students, that they often feel self-conscious if they are asked to answer a question or perform another task in front of the class. Hence, the online interface provides a more optimal learning context for these students who, then, feel less exposed and stressed. Once again, a similar response is reported by Nambiar (2020) and Suadi (2021).

Some respondents only said that studying online is either *convenient* or *comfortable* but since there were no further explanations, it is not possible to be completely sure of what these monolexical comments actually mean. Consequently, they cannot be categorized with any degree of certainty in any of the advantages discussed above. A minority of respondents saw no advantages whatsoever to studying online. Lastly, for convenience's sake, a number of contributions were amalgamated into one category—Others—in the last row in Table 2 because they were mentioned very few times and were not considered especially representative of the whole group. A few examples of these are: *it's cheaper, no uniform, no need to wake up early,* etc.

As can be appreciated from Table 4, the most oft-quoted advantage of face-to-face instruction has to do with social interaction. This is not surprising because at the time this study was conducted, the students had been studying online for about 2 years, and many of them missed being in a real physical classroom with their classmates and the lecturer in charge. At the beginning of the pandemic, when Zoom was relatively new for everyone, the main focus was on getting familiar with this digital platform and exploring its possibilities. However, as time went by and the novelty of Zoom wore off, there was this gradual realization amongst the student population that practicing mainly vocabulary and grammar online was not enough in the specific context of FL. The human component, that is, being able to communicate with others in the target FL in simulated real-life situations, was either missing or greatly diminished.

A very close runner-up to the first advantage is the fact that studying FLs in a classroom provides a much better learning environment. This was the case for a number of reasons. The most frequent comment is that it was (much) easier to hear the classmates and the teacher in class than in Zoom. This is interesting because, although the students reported hardly any technical problems, they still sometimes found it difficult to understand what was being said via Zoom. We hypothesize that it is easier for students to mentally *disconnect* from the lesson or get distracted and, therefore, miss what has just been explained. Also, the students stated that doing activities in the actual classroom is more fun, especially when these activities involve pair work or tasks to be completed in groups where they have to speak to each other for successful completion.

In third place, students think that the lecturer is more accessible in the actual classroom and feel more confident to ask questions either right away or wait till the end of the class to speak to the lecturer individually. A sense of immediacy, that is, obtaining or checking answers quickly is important for the students. The next important advantage the respondents mentioned is that there were fewer distractions

in the classroom, and it was easier to focus in class. More opportunities to practice pronunciation in class was the next advantage. The next item on the list was the fact that either meeting or making new friends was important to them. Lastly, a relatively small and varied number of answers as to why face-to-face is better than online was reported, such as *more challenging, more relaxed* or *it's faster.*

Disadvantages of Online and Face-to-Face FL Learning

The data compiled in this study support that students learning an FL online were significantly less satisfied with the learning environment. The lesson content was more arduous, and the importance of live interaction in FL learning was perceived as crucial. Social engagement and interaction are important aspects of a student's learning experience, and they are most commonly defined in three ways: positive conduct, personal involvement in learning and academic tasks, and participation in university-related activities (Martin & Bolliger, 2018). According to the students, studying alone at home also has a negative impact on self-discipline, time management, and general academic behavior. Students mentioned more laziness, more absenteeism, and also lower academic performance. In the comments, we observed terms such as *a false sense of freedom, permanent distraction, one-way communication* and *limited feedback.* Similar results were mentioned by Imsa-ard (2020) as *challenges of online learning.*

As seen in Table 3, online instruction significantly limits spontaneous participation and direct interaction with both the instructor and the classmates. This issue, especially in the context of FL learning, influences and modifies the students' performance. The feedback is an integral part of communication, and it allows the students to judge how effectively they can perform in any given interaction. Those trial and error-based communication attempts, even when often erroneous and challenging, are necessary and crucial for FL acquisition. If the corrective feedback from the lecturer is limited, delayed, or less accurate, it has an important impact on FL communication mechanisms. In a study conducted in Vietnam, the students also preferred immediate feedback to delayed feedback (Van Ha et al., 2021). Feedback is the final component in most communication activities so it needs to be carried out successfully, otherwise it can strongly affect the learner's progress. Some students reported a lack of full focus during the online class as they were under the impression that the lecturer paid less attention to their performance.

The first aspect that we can observe in the disadvantages of face-to-face responses is that students exclusively apprehend learning in-person after a significant period of online learning. Some students said that they might be afraid or nervous to speak or ask questions and to practice speaking an FL in front of other people. We could observe from this research that after a long period of online learning, an onsite setting, a real classroom environment, and more generally social re-entry might cause some tension and stress. For some students, it has been approximately two years of remote learning, and as a result, they have adopted new learning habits and new FL learning strategies. Most of the time, students rely on electronic devices rather than on the lecturer's or their peers' help. This created a form

of independent learning and less socially connected learners. As mentioned by Pichette (2009) relative anonymity inherent to distance learning, coupled with one-on-one contact between students and their instructors, could make students less reluctant to express their anxiety than in classrooms surrounded by their peers.

This research also identified several learners who felt more comfortable with answering questions in online classes because of the enhanced anonymity when others do not look at them. Another study conducted by Kaisar and Chowdhury (2020) found that students in FL classes "feel comfortable, anxiety-free, and relaxed as they are not bound to expose their physical appearance in the virtual class" (p. 137). The physical classroom and face-to-face interaction might make students more nervous and hesitant to participate in class activities. The terms *less flexibility, more rigid, more serious, and limited access to digital tools* were observed in the responses. Regardless of their study preferences, students express a new view on on-site instruction and wish that some aspect of the online learning experience could be integrated. This also explains the tendency to choose blended learning (as observed in Table 6) as the preferred way of learning a foreign language.

Preference for a Hybrid Class

As indicated by Table 6, a hybrid mode of instruction in the future is preferred by more than 42% of students. Specifically, in a particular class, some students would prefer to attend on-site teaching while others would prefer to join the same class online via Zoom. This mode of instruction, where students can choose between attending the same classes in-person or remotely, seems gaining popularity as it can provide flexibility and convenience to students. We hypothesize that some students prefer the adaptability afforded by being able to choose whether they prefer to come to campus on a particular day or stay at home. In our experience, at the beginning of a trimester, the classes on campus are well attended but as the trimester progresses, more and more students choose to learn from home.

The students' preference for face-to-face instruction emerged as a very close runner-up, garnering nearly 40% of the responses. This is not surprising because the students feel they learn more when studying in class and enjoy the social interaction facilitated by face-to-face instruction. It is surprising to see that exclusive online instruction and no preference received less than 10% of responses. Two years of consecutive online learning have probably caused screen fatigue which could also decrease learning outcomes, leading to this trend.

Additional Remarks and Future Teaching Implications

This study examines students' preferences for online versus face-to-face foreign language learning, including French, Spanish, German, Chinese, and Japanese. Those findings could also be highly valuable for English as a Second Language (ESL) or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instructors who can tailor their teaching approaches and design effective classes, whether fully online, in-person, or through a blended approach, thereby ensuring optimal learning outcomes for the students.

Upon examining the data from a more holistic perspective, we noticed several observations. Rather than analyzing the four tables separately, we compared all (dis)advantages together to identify patterns. The total number of responses across all four tables showed that participants specified many more advantages in both online and face-to-face learning contexts than disadvantages (online: 552 advantages versus 454 disadvantages; face-to-face: 657 advantages versus 363 disadvantages). We conjecture that most of the students at MUIC come from highly educated families who place a lot of emphasis on a well-rounded education. As a result, the students tend to be highly motivated and perceive advantages in learning one or more FLs despite the mode of instruction. There is also a common denominator, we would argue, in the *perceived* advantages of both modes of learning. Easy access to the internet (online) and easier to ask questions right away (face-to-face) give an indication that the students need some kind of immediate response or guidance the moment they get lost or miss something. Not only does this indicate that the students are motivated, but they also need to get back on track as soon as possible in order to keep their motivation and interest going.

The current study shows that regardless of their study preferences, students expressed a new view on on-site learning and wished that, in the future, some aspects of the online learning experience could be integrated from now on. The creative learning activities are designed on a variety of online platforms such as Google Classroom, Padlet, Kahoot!, and Quizlet, to name but a few, which would be significant alternatives to the FL lecture/textbook-based classroom. By actively using online tools, learners can engage more in language learning activities, and this could boost their learning motivation and improve their academic performance. In addition, students could continue to develop their previous online learning experience. The following are a few suggestions to improve the foreign language classroom activities:

- Hybrid teaching for one or two weeks during the term to allow students easy access to the internet resources such as research on a particular topic, presentation preparation;
- online resource platform as an alternative to the text-book;
- regular use of online platforms for homework, pair-work, or other assigned project-based activities;
- pronunciation and phonetics practicing online, speaking recording and submitting via online platforms, access to online videos and in-class sharing; and
- participating in online discussion forums, games, and interactive activities.

Limitations

This study is, however, not without limitations. To begin with, precisely because of the inherent nature of the open-ended questions, some answers are either too vague or irrelevant. It may be the case that some students did not really know what to say or were simply not interested in providing more detailed feedback. This is, however, not a major concern since very few answers of this kind were registered. Theoretically, one possible way to palliate this minor problem would be to interview the

students personally after completing the questionnaire in order to elicit more elaborate data. In addition, it appears that some of the participants may not be fully familiar with the difference between live, interactive sessions (synchronous) and self-paced learning with recorded lectures (asynchronous) or a blended approach that combines both. To bridge this gap in future research, providing more information to participants about the specifics of online learning may be beneficial.

Conclusion

In this paper, the advantages and disadvantages of online and face-to-face FL acquisition from the student's point of view have been outlined, contrasted, and discussed. According to the data, students see more advantages than disadvantages in both modes of learning. The main advantages of studying online are easy access to the internet and the fact that the students can learn at their own pace; the main advantages of face-to-face instruction are better social interaction and an environment—the classroom—more conducive to successful FL learning. Conversely, the main disadvantage of studying online is the difficulty of interacting satisfactorily with both classmates and the lecturer; the main disadvantage of face-to-face learning is the fact that the students feel more self-conscious because they are afraid of making mistakes in front of the class. Lastly, the vast majority of the students reported that they would prefer learning an FL either in the traditional classroom environment or via the hybrid mode.

There is clearly more need for research in this particular area of learning FLs, whether online, face-to-face, or following the hybrid mode. In the near future, it is hoped that further research will be carried out to shed more light on this topic.

Ethics declaration: This research study was approved by Mahidol University Central Institutional Review Board (Approval for Protocol Number: MU-CIRB 2021/386.0109)

References

Adedoyin, O. B., & Soykan, E. (2020). Covid-19 pandemic and online learning: The challenges and opportunities. *Interactive Learning Environments, 31*(2), 863–875. https://doi.org/10.1080/10494820.2020.1813180

Arias, J. J., Swinton, J., & Anderson, K. (2018). Online vs. face-to-face: A comparison of student outcomes with random assignment. *E-Journal of Business Education & Scholarship of Teaching, 12*(2), 1–23.

Arkorful, V., & Abaidoo, N. (2015). The role of e-learning, advantages and disadvantages of its adoption in higher education. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, 12*(1), 29–42.

Bagata, D. T. R., Umamah, A., & Fikri, D. (2020). EFL university students' perception of the use of online learning platform in the COVID 19 pandemic. *Jurnal Penelitian, Pendidikan, dan Pembelajaran, 15*(34), 1–12.

Bitzer, D., Braunfeld, P., & Lichtenberger, W. (1961). PLATO: An automated teaching device. *IRE Transactions on Education, 4*(4), 157–161. DOI: 10.1109/TE.1961.4322215

Bozkurt, A., & Sharma, R. C. (2020). Emergency remote teaching in a time of global crisis due to Corona Virus pandemic. *Asian Journal of Distance Education, 15*(1), 1–4.

Denzin, N. K. (1989). Interpretive interactionism. Sage publications.

De Oliveira Dias, M., De Oliveira Albergarias Lopes, R., & Correira Teles, A. (2020). Will virtual replace classroom teaching? Lessons from virtual classes via Zoom in the times of COVID-19. *Journal of Advances in Education and Philosophy, 4*(5), 208–213. DOI:10.13140/RG.2.2.34995.45601

Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (2017). *Discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. Routledge.

Imsa-ard, P. (2020). Thai university students' perception towards the abrupt transition to "forced" online learning in the COVID-19 situation. *Journal of Education Khon Kaen University, 43*(3), 30–44.

Kaisar, M., & Chowdhury, S. (2020). Foreign Language Virtual Classroom: Anxiety Creator or Healer? *English Language Teaching*, *13*(11), 130–139. DOI:10.5539/elt.v13n11p130

Kang, M., & Duong, A. (2020). Student perceptions of first-time online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Vietnam. *Inquiry in Education, 13*(1), 1–17.

Kemp, S. (2021). *Digital 2021. Thailand.* Datareportal. https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2021-thailand?rq=thailand%20

Krippendorff, K. (2018). *Content analysis: An introduction to its methodology*. Sage Publications.

Kopp, M., Gröblinger, O., & Adams, S. (2019). Five common assumptions that prevent digital transformation at higher education institutions. INTED2019 Proceedings (1448–1457).

Maican, M. A., & Cocoradă, E. (2021). Online foreign language learning in higher education and its correlates during the COVID-19 pandemic. *Sustainability, 13*(2), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.3390/su13020781

Mala, D. (2020). *Covid-19 fear pushes classes online.* Bangkok Post. https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1876594/covid-19-fear-pushes-classes-online

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning Journal*, *22*(1) 205–222.

Mulyani, M., Fidyati, F., Suryani, S., Suri, M., & Halimatussakdiah, H. (2021). University students' perceptions through e-learning implementation during COVID-19 pandemic: Positive or negative features dominate? *Studies in English Language and Education, 8*(1), 197–211. DOI:10.24815/siele.v8i1.17628

Nambiar, D. (2020). The impact of online learning during COVID-19: Students' and teachers' perspective. *The International Journal of Indian Psychology, 8*(2), 1–11.

Pichette, F. (2009). Second language anxiety and distance language learning, *Foreign Language Annals, 42*(1), 77–93. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2009.01009.x

Poolperm, R., & Boonmoh, A. (2024). Differences in Thai students' anxiety when speaking in English in onsite and online classrooms. *THAITESOL Journal 37*(1), 1–23.

Rattanakhamfu, S. (2020). *Covid-19 emphasizes the need to bridge the digital divide and reduce online educational inequality.* Thailand Development Research Institute. https://tdri.or.th/en/2020/05/covid-19-emphasizes-the-need-to-bridge-the-digital-divide-and-reduce-online-educational-inequality/

Suadi, S. (2021). Students' perceptions of the use of Zoom and WhatsApp in ELT amidst COVID19 pandemic. *Study of Applied Linguistics and English Education, 2*(1), 51–64. https://doi.org/10.35961/salee.v2i01.212

Sukman, K., & Mhunkongdee, T. (2021). Thai learners' voices on learning English online during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of English Language Teaching, 9*(2), 1–9.

Toepoel, V. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Online Research Methods*. Sage publications.

Van Ha, X., Nguyen, L., & Hung, B. (2021). Oral corrective feedback in English as a foreign language classroom: A teaching and learning perspective. *Heliyon, 7*(7), 1–8. DOI: 10.1016/j.heliyon.2021.e07550

Yin, R. K. (2015). *Qualitative Research from Start to Finish.* Guilford publications.

About the Authors

Juan Carlos Olmos Alcoy holds a Doctorate in Applied Linguistics and was a former director of the Intercultural Studies and Languages Major Program and is also a lecturer in Spanish. His research interests include productive vocabulary estimation, error analysis in Spanish as L2, and online versus onsite FL instruction.

Agnieszka Atthasit is a full-time lecturer in French and a former director of the Foreign Language Program at Mahidol University International College. Her research interests include language portfolio, autonomous learning, and self-assessment in language acquisition.

E-mail : agnieszka.att@mahidol.edu