

Ma'had Al-Zaytun Shifts to Online Learning: Are the Students Satisfied?

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Abstract

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic has caused disruption in the delivery of instruction at all educational institutions, whether those institutions are elementary, secondary, or postsecondary in nature. Due to the pandemic, a group of secondary school students from Malaysia were unable to participate in face-to-face classes at Ma'had Al-Zaytun International School in Indonesia, and forced to shift to fully online learning mode. This study aims to explore student satisfaction and motivation in online learning interaction among the Malaysian students at this international school. Based on the transaction distance theory, this study focuses on four modes of interaction, namely: (i) interaction between students and teachers, (ii) interaction between students, (iii) interaction between students and learning materials, and (iv) interaction between students and interfaces. A qualitative study was employed to investigate the satisfaction and motivation of students using a semi-structured interview, class observation, and daily class report. Findings indicate that the majority of students were satisfied with these online learning interactions and teachers represented the main factor that motivated them to learn. In addition, this study found that parents are also a motivating factor affecting student participation in online learning. Students who received encouragement and support from their parents were more likely to be satisfied with online learning. This phenomenon could be further examined in a future research.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, online classroom, online learning interaction, student motivation, student interaction, student satisfaction.

1. Introduction

Located at Indramayu, West Java, Indonesia, Ma'had Al-Zaytun is an Islamic boarding school or *pesantren* that integrates modernity and Islamic values. This *pesantren* was built on a 1,200-hectare area under the establishment of the Indonesian Pesantren Foundation (*Yayasan Pesantren Indonesia*, or YPI) in 1993, which was subsequently inaugurated by then President B. J. Habibie on 27 August 1999 (Tabroni et al., 2021). Thus, it is not surprising that The Washington Times (2005, August 29) called it the largest Islamic

madrasah in Southeast Asia (Crouch, 2014). The students come from various regions in Indonesia and abroad, including such countries as Malaysia, Singapore, Timor-Leste, and South Africa. Innovation and modernisation at Ma'had Al-Zaytun has resulted in the implementation of a continuous education system known as the One Pipe Education System (Tabroni et al., 2020), which has piqued the interest of the researchers of this study.

In 2020, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic caused schools around the world to close. COVID-19 prevention strategies and policies had been implemented by the Ma'had Al-Zaytun community, which enabled the school to continue conducting normal face-to-face classes following protocols set by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Prawoto et al., 2020). Despite this, new international students faced a serious obstacle as the issuance of student visas were halted at this time, thus preventing them from entering Indonesia. In accordance with one Qur'anic verse (4:9), "Let people fear the day when they leave small children behind them unprovided, and how concerned they would be for them", Ma'had Al-Zaytun therefore chose to collaborate with *Permuafakatan Ibu Bapa Ma'had Al-Zaytun Indonesia* (PERMAI) Malaysia (i.e., the parents' association for students from Malaysia), and began conducting online classes for its students who had to remain in their home country Malaysia.

This study on student satisfaction with online learning at Ma'had al-Zaytun is important as the shift to online learning is new at the school. Student satisfaction contributes to a positive learning environment in which students can feel invested in their education, leading to improved learning outcomes. By understanding student satisfaction, institutions can identify areas of strengths and those that require improvement. This feedback helps institutions make necessary adjustments to enhance the quality of online learning programmes, improve instructional approaches, and address student needs and concerns. By prioritising student satisfaction in online learning, institutions can create an environment that fosters student engagement, motivation, and success, ultimately leading to a rewarding and effective educational experience.

2. Literature Review

The main aspects of teaching and learning in a face-to-face classroom may seem different to an online classroom, but one thing that remains constant is the importance for teachers to meet the needs of all students (Beasley & Beck, 2017). In this section, we will briefly describe online learning, online learning interaction, student satisfaction, and student motivation.

2.1 Online Learning

Online learning refers to learning experienced in synchronous or asynchronous environments using the Internet, in which students interact with instructors and fellow students from anywhere (Singh & Thurman, 2019). Based on this definition, many arguments can be given in support of online learning. Among these are accessibility, affordability, and flexibility, and in addition students can attend online classes from anywhere. It is an economical approach, and students can schedule learning at their own convenience (Dhawan, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced education institutions to discontinue the traditional way of teaching through physical classroom engagement, and focus on meeting the increasing need for virtual engagement. As a response to the global emergency involving the closure of educational institutions due to COVID-19, the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) suggested that educational institutions equip themselves with online learning technologies (Crawford et al., 2020).

studies have demonstrated the usefulness of online learning in the classroom (Kassih, 2021). Using educational technologies in teaching and learning in school settings has also been shown to provide a number of benefits, including encouraging more inquiry-based learning (Green et al., 2015), improving student engagement (Borup, 2016), and raising student motivation (Borup et al., 2020).

2.2 Online Learning Interaction

Interaction is of great importance to the success of online learning across all levels, but many studies examining online interactions have focused only on higher education (Lin et al., 2017). However, since the pandemic, online learning has become a necessity at all levels of education, from elementary to tertiary levels. Prior to online learning, distance learning had been an option for students who could not physically attend traditional classes (Tschetter, 2014). Distance learning is defined as students and instructors who are not located in the same place, but the learning process can be carried out across various settings. In line with technological developments, implementation of distance learning can be improved through the use of the Internet; some even define distance learning and online learning as two things in common (Moore et al., 2011).

Moore (1989) addressed the importance of three modes of interaction in distance education: learner-instructor, learner-learner, and learner-content. Later, Hillman et al. (1994) remarked that interaction between students and the technology that delivers teaching has been missing in the literature as distance education content had evolved during the telecommunication era. As a result, they expanded Moore's model to include a fourth mode of interaction, i.e., learner-interface interaction. This is defined as interaction between a learner and technical medium in order to interact with content, instructors, and other learners.

Interaction between the instructor and students is called learner-instructor interaction, and can include advice, assistance, evaluation, and encouragement (Moore, 1989). With or without an instructor, learner-learner interaction involves two-way communication between learners. Interaction with peers allows students to share ideas and receive feedback. A one-way process of elaborating and reflecting on the subject matter or course content is referred to as learner-content interaction. Learners' interaction with content starts an internal didactic discourse, which occurs when they communicate or reflect on the information, knowledge, or ideas they have learned (Moore, 1986).

2.3 Student Satisfaction

Student satisfaction is the result of students' expectations and experiences from their interactions with the educational environment for a particular subject, course, or programme (Stukalina, 2012). Student satisfaction is considered a key component in determining the quality of a programme in today's market as these students are an asset to the institution, and can contribute as alumni (Parahoo et al., 2015). This statement is also consistent with the opinion of Prebensen and Xie (2017), who stated that satisfaction has an important role in generating loyalty, positive word of mouth, and sustainable profits for service organisations such as those in education.

Student satisfaction reflects perceptions of their learning experience, which is a critical factor in determining the success of online learning (Alqurashi, 2019). Although numerous researchers have assessed student satisfaction with online courses and the online learning environment, and providing students with the overall reliance on the online learning system in the face of COVID-19, it has become more critical to understand the impact of online learning quality on student satisfaction.

2.4 Student Motivation

Being motivated helps people start and maintain their efforts towards achieving a specific goal. Motivation is crucial to the learning process and achievement in students' careers (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). Motivation can excite, guide and maintain behaviour, and help students to engage, focus, and continue probing. Learning motivation is defined as a consistent pattern of trying to achieve goals, pursuing faith, and maintaining emotions (Yang, 2022).

The self-determination theory suggests that if students are motivated to participate in a course, they will gain more from that experience than if they are disinterested (Thurber & Trautvetter, 2020). This is because an activity provides the basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2002). The ability to remain motivated is a significant aspect in improving learning results.

According to research findings, there is a strong relationship between participants' motivation to learn online as well as their success and engagement in online learning environments (Rahman et al., 2021).

This study aims to determine student satisfaction and motivation in online learning interaction at Ma'had Al-Zaytun International School. The main objectives of this research are to:

- i. Describe the students' experiences in four different interactions, namely (a) student-teacher interaction, (b) student-student interaction, (c) student-learning material interaction, and (d) student-interface interaction.
- ii. Describe the students' satisfaction in relation to students' interactions.
- iii. Describe the students' motivation in relation to students' interactions.

3. Research Method

The present study employed the qualitative method as an approach to explore the students' experiences in online learning interaction and student satisfaction. Qualitative research aims to better understand how individuals interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what significance they assign to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). The data was gathered through observations during classes, class reports, and a semi-structured interview.

The questions given to students are as follows:

- i. Do you interact with the teacher either during class or outside of class? Are you or are you not satisfied with this?
- ii. Do you interact with students either during class or outside of class? Are you or are you not satisfied with this?
- iii. Are you able to interact well with the learning material? Are you or are you not satisfied with this?
- iv. Are you able to interact well with the interface? Are you or are you not satisfied with this?
- v. Are you satisfied with this online learning?
- vi. Which of these four interactions are you most satisfied with? Explain.
- vii. Which of these four interactions are you most motivated by? Explain.

3.1. Participants and Context

A total of 17 thirteen-year-old students from Malaysia who completed Class 7 of the first-year *Madrasah Tsanawiyah* or lower secondary school in the 2020/2021 school year were involved in this study. Table 1 shows that 11 of the students (64.7 percent) are male, and 6 (35.35 percent) are female. They were from five different Malaysian states. The majority (12, or 70.59 percent) were from the Klang Valley (an urban area comprising the Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya federal territories, and adjoining cities and towns in the state of Selangor).

Table 1. Participating Students by State

| State | Number of Students | Percentage (%) |
|--------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Selangor | 10 | 58.8 |
| Kuala Lumpur | 2 | 11.8 |
| Perak | 3 | 17.6 |
| Perlis | 1 | 5.9 |
| Johor | 1 | 5.9 |
| TOTAL | 17 | 100 |

During the first year of *Madrasah Tsanawiyah*, all students are required to take seven subjects, which are Indonesian Language, Arabic Language, English Language, History and Social Sciences, Mathematics, Science, and *Tafaqub fii Diin*. Classes were held on Thursday to Sunday afternoons in the first semester, and Monday to Thursday afternoons in the second semester. For this particular group of students, the sessions lasted between one and two hours each day.

4. Findings and Discussion

The following are the results of individual interviews with each student. The findings are also based on observations made in the classroom by Malaysian teachers, as well as their reflections on those observations.

4.1. Student-Teacher Interaction

Three primary communication platforms were utilised for communication: Google Meet (GM) (refer to Figure 1) as the online classroom, Google Classroom (GC) for assignment submission, and WhatsApp to allow students to interact directly with teachers via instant-messaging. According to the observations made during the online lessons, 83 percent of students communicated with the teachers. Due to Internet connectivity issues or problems associated with the rural locations of several of these students, the remaining 17 percent provided fewer responses. The following were the students' responses to these concerns:

"I did reply to the teacher's question, but the teacher did not hear me."

"...always lag, the Internet line was not okay."

"I can understand what the teachers are teaching, but sometimes I have Internet problems."

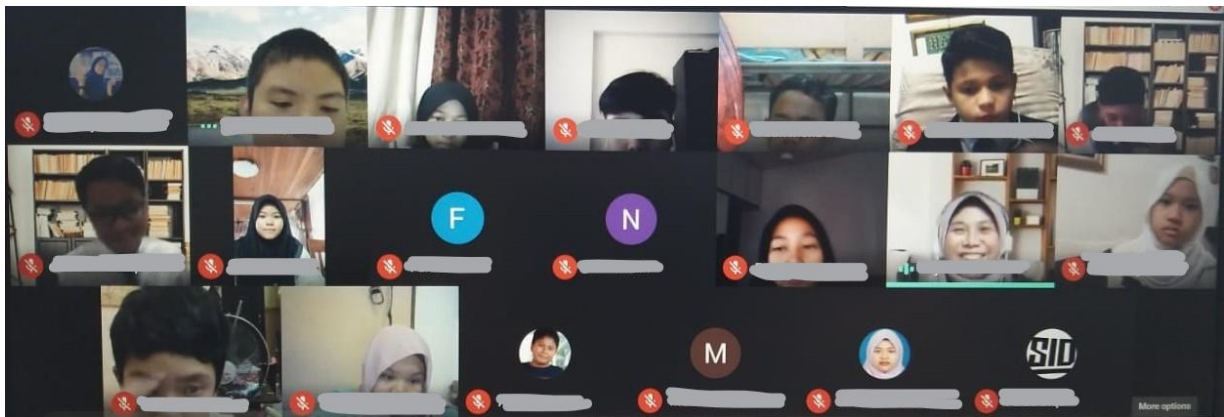


Figure 1. A screenshot of an Online Class in Session

When asked if they contacted their teacher outside of the class, 59 percent of students said they did. They contacted their teacher for a variety of reasons, including:

"I can understand what the teacher is teaching. If I don't understand, I will contact the teacher through WhatsApp personally to ask and the teacher will help..."

"There are difficult subjects such as *Ilmu Pengetahuan Sosial*. I will ask the teacher outside the class ... (and I am) very satisfied with the teacher's answers."

"I will ask the teacher especially about group assignments."

"Sometimes, I would just text the teacher to say hello..."

4.2. Student-Student Interaction

More than half of the students who took online courses reported that they had contacted other students to ask for help with assignments. Those who did so believed that their friends knew more or were more intelligent. Additionally, one student was regularly contacted by others since he or she consistently completed the assignments on time.

"I prefer to ask friends first and then teacher, but sometimes I worry about disturbing them..."

"Notes... I don't understand them very much; if I don't understand, I will ask

friends...text them and see who responds..."

"If it's easy to do the task, I will do it myself... If it's not, I will ask my friends, some of them are smarter."

"I do contact my friends but sometimes... just asking about the class."

"I do not contact my friends, but they always contact me to ask about assignments..."

4.3. Student-Learning Material Interaction

When asked about learning materials such as notes or slides provided by their teachers, and whether the students read or referred to them when they had problems understanding, or if they were used as reference to do assignments, the following were among the students' comments:

"I read the notes to better understand, parents told me to read... easy to understand."

"I read the notes... easy to understand."

"It's readable... easy, simple and concise..."

"... also helps to understand, especially mathematics..."

Some of the students do not prefer to read notes or materials given by their teachers. One of the students mentioned that he preferred to read books than the given learning materials, while others only read the notes for preparation for examinations, or if their parents asked them to do so.

"I don't really like notes... I prefer books."

"... can understand the notes, but I only read for the exam..."

"I don't read except during class time, there are a few things that I don't understand... but okay."

"I read sometimes (if my mom tells me to do so), I don't really understand..."

4.4. Student-Interface Interaction

Observations throughout class revealed that students have no difficulty using Google Meet (GM) as a synchronous learning medium. A few students faced Internet connectivity issues, but this did not impede their studies. Even when asked, the majority of students said they were comfortable using GM as a learning medium, and some, albeit not many, connected with each other using GM.

"GM is used to..."

"GM at first felt difficult, then it became okay."

"GM is comfortable..."

"I was on GM with some friends..."

Most teachers used Google Classroom (GC) for assignment submission. As the number of students in this group is small, some teachers preferred direct assignment submission through WhatsApp. Only a few students were familiar with using GC for assignment submission. They stated that they still sought parental assistance when they needed to do so.

"GC is easy to use..."

"GC is easy, there is a record, there is a notification and it is organised... it's easy to ask the teacher there."

"I feel GC is a little difficult... as I do not understand how to use it. My father would help me send assignments."

"I did ask for help from my parents when using GC..."

"Every time I wanted to submit an assignment, I asked my father or mother for help."

4.5. Student Satisfaction and Student Motivation

Overall, the students were satisfied with Ma'had Al-Zaytun's online learning classes, while some students voiced that it would be preferable if they could study face-to-face with the teachers. A few students even remarked that they felt more at ease during the morning lessons because they felt a little tired during the afternoon classes.

“Enjoyed, excited to have a class with the teacher there, proud...”

“Enjoyed and satisfied, other than studying here (in Malaysia).”

“Enjoyed and felt comfortable, but I prefer face-to-face classes...”

“It's the best, but if I could go there (to Indonesia), it would be better...”

“Fun, can add knowledge... satisfied.”

“I like online classes, but I prefer classes in the morning... in the afternoons, I was sleepy.”

“I like online classes. If they were face-to-face, I would feel nervous.”

When asked about the interactions during this online learning process, the students said that they were most satisfied with interaction with their teachers. While they communicated with their peers as well, they were more satisfied if they could communicate directly with the teachers. However, some students felt more at ease with referring to notes or soliciting assistance from their parents.

When asked about their source of motivation, the majority cited their teachers. Here are the students' comments:

“Because of the school itself, the teacher is good.”

“Lucky to be able to study with the teacher there... The teacher really teaches, but sometimes lags... The teacher still continues.”

“... because the teacher always motivates during class.”

“The teachers there are kind and don't make us do a lot of school work.”

“Teachers educate us to succeed, not only to pass the exams.”

“The teacher gives the most motivation to learn.”

Additionally, some students stated that friends encouraged them, and one student stated that he was delighted with the slides presented by the teacher. There were numerous illustrations, which made the lessons easy to comprehend.

Even in online learning, students still value interaction:

- They value their interaction with their teachers both in and out of the classroom.
- The students preferred asking their friends first rather than the teacher for a variety of reasons, including the belief that their friends were smarter or knew more than they did. Learning materials also aided student learning, yet many students still required parental supervision to study.

It was found that many students were at first unfamiliar with the interface, after a few weeks of instruction they could utilise it effectively. There were also students who required their parents' assistance to send assignments using GC. Most students preferred face-to-face lessons if given the option, but they were nevertheless satisfied with the online classes that they attended. Motivating factors include the teacher's patience and manageable homework assignments.

Online learning differs from face-to-face learning, hence there was a certain amount of uncertainty that had been predicted to be magnified in a crisis situation like COVID-19 (Marshall et al., 2020). The fundamental advantage of online learning is that it overcomes time and space constraints, thus allowing students to engage in self-directed learning. However, it lacks the teachers' oversight that traditional schooling provides. Consequently, students are left feeling alone and unconnected. As a result, online learners must be self-regulated and independent; otherwise, their online learning efficacy may be low. For this age group, parental support plays an important role in motivating students to learn. Some students

also commented that the role of mentors (i.e., volunteer teachers from Malaysia who supported their learning) also helped in motivating them to learn.

5. Conclusion

Participants in this study were in a unique educational context because they were the only Malaysian international students who attended completely online classes at Ma'had Al-Zaytun International School, Indonesia. Based on the transactional distance theory, this study sought to determine how students interacted with teachers, other students, learning materials, and interface or technology while they studied remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to the findings, each student had a unique preference for type of interaction based on their level of comfort. The four interactive components investigated, i.e., between students-teachers, students-students, students-learning materials, and students-interface, revealed that teachers are the primary contributor to student motivation and satisfaction. It is also important for students to have the ability to effectively communicate and use technology or interfaces because the online learning environment requires students to be involved in continuous communication and interaction with content, teachers, and other students. In addition, this study found that parental involvement is another element that can influence student engagement in online education: students are more likely to be satisfied with their online learning experience if they receive encouragement and support from their parents. It is recommended that future research investigates additional elements associated with student motivation and satisfaction with their online learning experience. Further research is required to investigate the collaborative aspects of taking a course, as well as student expectations and perceptions of the teacher. The current study emphasises the importance of interaction in online learning, but more needs to be done to shed light on how students view online classes. In particular, student-interface interaction can increase online learning knowledge by providing insights on how students interact with online learning materials. Online learning platforms can provide useful data on how students use and navigate the platform by capturing student behaviour and interactions with the interface, which can inform the design of future platforms and improve the overall learning experience. Furthermore, effective student-interface interaction might boost student interest in online learning. Student motivation, attention, and memory of learning materials can all be improved by a well-designed interface. This can result in improved learning results and a more enjoyable overall experience for students.

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