

## AN INVESTIGATION OF VIETNAMESE STUDENTS' LEARNING STYLES IN ONLINE LANGUAGE LEARNING

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### ABSTRACT

*Online language learning has seen impressive growth during the past decade with the widespread coverage of internet. Although this is a new trend in the language teaching and learning context of Vietnam, online language courses are finding their own ways into Vietnamese language classrooms. This article explores the concept of online learning and analyses responses from students in several online language courses in a university of Vietnam to see how ready the learners are for this new learning mode in terms of learning styles and whether or not students have any difficulties when switching to the new learning style.*

**Keywords:** Online learning, internet-based teaching, e-learning, learning styles.

### TÓM TẮT

#### ***Tìm hiểu phong cách học tập của sinh viên Việt Nam khi học ngoại ngữ trên mạng***

*Cùng với sự phủ sóng nhanh chóng của internet trong thập niên vừa qua, việc học ngoại ngữ trên mạng đã có sự phát triển ấn tượng. Mặc dù xu hướng học tập này vẫn còn mới mẻ trong bối cảnh học tập và giảng dạy ở Việt Nam, các khóa học ngoại ngữ vẫn đang dần xuất hiện trong các lớp học. Bài báo này tìm hiểu khái niệm học tập trên mạng và phân tích phản hồi của người học trong một số khóa học ngoại ngữ trên mạng để đánh giá mức độ sẵn sàng của người học ở phương diện phong cách học tập đối với hình thức học tập này và tìm hiểu những khó khăn mà người học có thể gặp phải khi chuyển sang hình thức học tập mới này.*

**Từ khóa:** học tập trên mạng, học tập với sự hỗ trợ của internet, e-learning, phong cách học tập.

### 1. Introduction

The rapid development of broadband connection recently has brought about a lot of opportunities for students to access quality online materials. The usefulness of online learning as an effective teaching and learning mode has caught the attention of not only language educators but also education administrators (Allen, 2007; Carliner & Shank, 2008). Besides the inevitable benefits, this new learning trend also generates challenges like digital divide within a classroom, access to learning devices, instructional methodology and learning styles that computer assisted language learning research is trying to address. By analyzing students' feedbacks

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from several online language courses in a university of Vietnam, this paper aims to investigate the extent of readiness of Vietnamese students for online learning in terms of learning styles.

## 2. The concept of online learning

Many people are using the term of online teaching to refer to all forms of learning involving the use of internet. This sometimes causes confusion in relation to other forms of learning such as computer-based learning, internet-based learning and e-learning. Actually, there are differences among these learning forms.

- The term “e-learning” is used to refer to all educational processes in which ICT is employed in face-to-face as well as online learning and teaching activities (Lamy & Hampel, 2007; Carliner, 2004). Merely using PowerPoint to present lectures is also considered a form of e-learning, even though this is not typical. Teachers solely using blogs to distribute handouts to students or other learning resources are also perceived to be a form of e-learning. Although many people are equating internet-based teaching with e-learning, e-learning involves many ways to integrate ICT into the teaching process. Therefore, when discussing e-learning, it is important that we make it clear what e-learning form is being discussed.

- “Online learning” involves the learning processes which are undertaken entirely through the learning management systems (LMS) such as Blackboard, WebCT, MOODLE, etc. Most of the interaction between teachers and students, and the interaction among the students themselves are carried out with the support from these learning management systems (Bender, 2003; Dron, 2007). In a typical online learning system, each student has an account to get accessed anywhere and anytime they wish to. The common learning activities in online learning systems include participating in discussion forums, watching videos of tutorials or lectures, reading materials posted by lecturers, submitting homework, taking tests or doing language practice.

- “Internet-based learning” can be understood as the use of local computer network or global internet network. However, this term was used more often in the 1990s to refer to the teaching programs implemented via the local computer network (Allen, 2007). A typical example of this learning form is the foreign language learning through the English language teaching system of Langmaster. The entire Langmaster software system includes totally 50 CDs which are installed on the teachers’ computers or the lab server. Each workstation shall connect to the server via an application dedicated for workstations. Sometimes, internet-based learning also means online learning, but this term is increasingly intended to refer to applications implemented in the local computer network.

- “Computer-based learning” includes all learning activities occurring on personal computers, typically without the support of the Internet. Students installing CDs into the computer for self-studying is an example of this case. Another example for this

form of learning is the schools installing teaching software into computers in the campus for students to use. In many foreign language centers in HCM City at the present time, we can easily find labs with CDs being installed to help learners prepare for the TOEFL iBT test such as Barron or Kaplan. This is a form of computer-based learning.

It is notable that the terms above are sometimes mistaken and interchanged between one another (Aldrich, 2004). In this article, we contend that online learning is the form of learning supported by an LMS like MOODLE with or without face to face instruction. In this learning mode, computers provide learners with all types of resources they need on the basis of the learners' choices and feedbacks.

In a plain form, online learning can involve websites with texts, images and hyperlinks. Teachers use these websites as an alternative to traditional textbooks. In more sophisticated forms, however, online learning involves a variety of multimedia learning resources (Morrison, 2003). Learners can work it out with interactive video tutorials in the form of flash files. As a part of the video tutorial has ended, learners have many choices about what they want to watch next. The online learning system can include complex learning objects such as simulation applications which show students how to take off or land an aircraft (Becker, 2004).

Materials for online learning can simply be a handout in a PDF file, or test questions saved in a Word file. They can also be rather complicated, including flash games, interactive lessons, or tutorial videos. Besides, these materials can be established in the forms of texts, hyperlinks, audio files, video files or a combination of all of these forms.

Nowadays, thanks to the rapid development of Internet, online learning systems have become more diverse and flexible. Currently, online courses combined with synchronous online conferencing tools are available to take advantage of both asynchronous and synchronous interaction. In order to further support their students in online learning, many universities are now recording face-to-face lectures by professors, uploading video tutorials onto YouTube, and putting them in the online learning system. These tutorial videos can last several hours. In online courses, we also find detailed records of what students have done when they log into the system, from what they click, how much time they devote for certain learning activities to what they type on the screen. Figure 1 is an example of one of the reports we received from an online course:

*Figure 1. Full student report in an online class*

Online learning can be applied in teaching in almost any course. The courses which require practices or thinking at a low level would be more relevant for online learning. For this reason, we are nowadays seeing that there are many online courses devoted to computer skills training. Of course, the courses that require much interaction between teachers and learners such as dancing, musical instruments playing, or foreign language speaking cannot rely too much on online teaching (Donnelly & McSweeney, 2009). However, the availability of supporting materials shall help learners of such courses a lot. In those online courses, the learners' learning styles are supposed to be quite different from traditional practice and learners should also face new learning challenges. As a result, the purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which learners are ready for online language courses in Vietnamese learning context. The key research questions are

1. How ready are Vietnamese students for online language learning in terms of learning styles?
2. With the identified learning styles, what difficulties do they have?

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants and procedure**

The university in this study began to use the MOODLE based online learning system in the fall semester of 2013. Since this was a pilot project, only a few interested lecturers volunteered to join and build their own courses. The sample of classes for this study included 2 courses taught during the spring 2014 semester. The total enrollment

for the semester in these 2 courses was 137 students, 80% of whom were females (n=88). 40% of the enrolled students (n = 44) lived in Ho Chi Minh City. Most of the learners were at upper-intermediate level of proficiency in English. Generally, the learners were very conscious of their Grade Point Average and thus tried to score as well as they could in the courses.

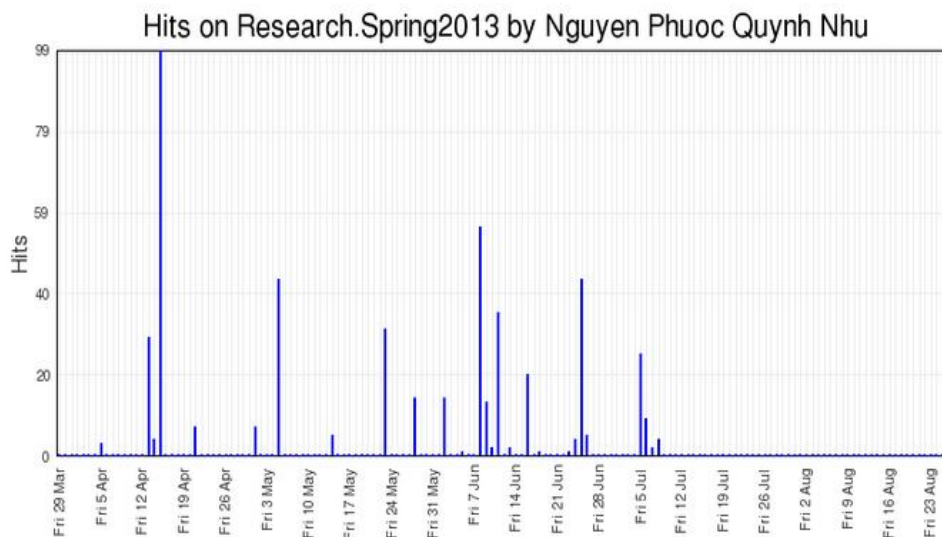
The courses lasted 15 weeks. Every week, students would have 2 class hours of face to face meetings in multimedia computer lab of their department. During these face to face meetings, they were sometimes encouraged to log into the system and do some learning activities. The majorities of the activities were designed for students' self-learning outside the classroom however. Some of the class time was also spent to ensure that the learners knew how to complete the learning activities since many of them experienced online learning for the first time. Learners were requested to view all learning materials posted, join discussion forums and complete the learning activities created by the end of the course. Participation in all of these learning activities would count as 40% of the final course grade.

### **3.2 System description**

The technology used in this research was the MOODLE based learning management system. This system had different interface designs for desktop screens and mobile devices and it could automatically recognize the user device to switch to the appropriate interface. Both interfaces were accessible via the same web link. The two systems shared the same database, learning activities and could be done interchangeably on either platform.

The system offered a variety of learning activities to support students' learning. Some popular learning activities in the two courses of this study were discussion forums, video tutorials (embedded via YouTube), glossaries, journals, blogs, quizzes and resource links. This system also supports latest technologies that allowed oral discussion (Nano Gong server) and online workshops. Most of these learning activities were designed with focus on constructivist pedagogy so that learners could interact a lot with each other in order to develop all language skills.

To help the instructor keep track of students' activities for evaluation, the system also includes a report function. With the outline or full report tool, the instructor can see all details fetched from the server logs like what students posted in the forum, how well they scored in the quizzes and how many times they viewed a learning resource.



Displaying 777 records

Page: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 (Next)

Time	IP address	User full name	Action	Information
Mon 8 July 2013, 7:46 AM	58.186.156.71	Nguyen Phuoc Quynh Nhu	glossary view	Ethnography key concepts
Mon 8 July 2013, 7:46 AM	58.186.156.71	Nguyen Phuoc Quynh Nhu	assign view submit assignment form	View own submit assignment page.
Mon 8 July 2013, 7:45 AM	58.186.156.71	Nguyen Phuoc Quynh Nhu	assign view	View own submission status page.

**Figure 1.** A report for student's activities in the system

### 3.3. Data collection

The data were collected through a survey administered anonymously at the beginning of the course. The initial survey asked students about their background information, the type of device they used to access course contents, their habits when getting online, how ready they were technically for mobile learning, their perception about advantages and disadvantages of mobile learning as well as their learning styles and habits using Likert scale ranging from “Never or almost never true of me” to “Always or almost always true of me”. Open questions were used to explore learners’ perception of advantages and disadvantages about online learning.”

When the course is finished, semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore students’ responses and feedbacks about how they learn in the system and the difficulties they may experience with their learning style.

## 4. Results and discussion

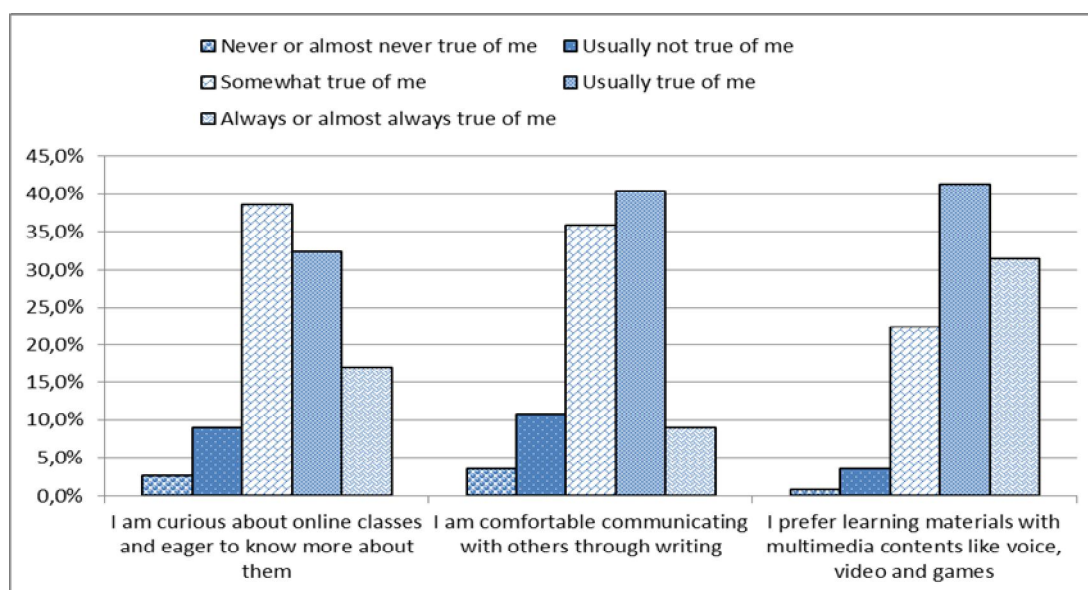
### 4.1. Learning styles survey

The total number of returned responses received was 120 out of 137 students. As table 1 shows, the majority of students prefer written information to be supplemented by visual aid with 32,5% claiming this being always true and 37,7% claiming this being usually true for them. Written information in the online learning system of this study includes reading materials in the form of webpages, PDF or Word documents and sometimes forum text discussion. As for memorizing strategy, a large number of the learners surveyed also believe that the best way to remember something is to visually create a mental image about it in their brain with 28,8% for “Always true” and 56,8% for “Usually true”. However, when asked about the necessity of face-to-face interaction, the biggest proportion of responses goes to the neutral value “Somewhat true of me” (40,5%) although there are slightly more respondents on the upside (11,7% for “Always true” and 27,0% for “Usually true”) than the downside of the Likert scale survey item (17,1% for “Usually not true” and 3,6% for “Never or almost never true”). Results from the first 3 survey items reveal that while students embrace the visual and multimedia contents offered in online courses they are still far from learning without face-to-face interaction with the teachers.

*Table 1. Students’ learning styles readiness for online language learning activities*

Learning styles readiness	Never or almost never true of me	Usually not true of me	Somewh at true of me	Usually true of me	Always or almost always true of me	N	Mean
I prefer written information to be supplemented by visual aid	1,8%	5,4%	22,5%	37,7%	32,5%	120	3,84
I think the best way to remember something is to picture it in my head	,9%	2,7%	10,8%	56,8%	28,8%	120	4,10
I understand that quality learning can take place without face-to-face interaction.	3,6%	17,1%	40,5%	27,0%	11,7%	120	3,26

The students' perceptions of their learning styles for online learning activities and learning materials are represented in chart 1. Most of the responses from the 3 survey items show a positive trend in students' learning styles for online learning. With all learners being internet natives (born after 1990), there is little surprise that the majority of them are curious about online classes and eager to know more about them (17,1% for "Always or almost always true" and 32,4% for "Usually true of me"). Also, an important part of the online learning culture - communicating through writing – scores quite high on the positive trend with 9% for "Always true" and 40,5% "Usually true" when asked if they are comfortable with communicating with others through writing. The biggest difference can be seen with multimedia contents. Very few students say that they do not like learning materials with multimedia contents like voice, video and games (0,9% for "Never true" and 3,6% for "Usually not true").



**Chart 1.** Students' perceptions of their learning styles for online learning activities and learning materials

#### 4.2 Learning styles interview

The findings from the survey were confirmed with responses from the semi-structured interview that we carried out on the students. As for the benefits of online learning for their learning styles, a lot of students believe that multimedia contents like videos, images and sounds help them learn better:

*"The advantage I have for online learning is that I can learn more effectively, not easily lose concentration nor feel sleepy when learning with videos, pictures, etc. which attract me." (S2)*



*“Images, videos and voice help me remember the lesson better than writings. Online learning has all of that. ...” (S17)*

*“Some videos and pictures are my favorites to watch because it helps me remember knowledge longer than some boring textbook, and I think it is a good way for me in learning foreign language” (S92)*

When asked about the difficulties they have in terms of learning styles, most students were not so confident about whether online learning and online interaction would benefit them without face-to-face interaction. Without face-to-face interaction, a fair number of students believed that quality learning could not take place. A few students felt not comfortable communicating with others through writing: *“I am quite familiar with traditional learning method for a long time and I’m afraid it’ll take time for me to adapt new way of learning as online learning” (S48).*

Other students say they recognize the benefits of online learning in accommodating different learning styles but they find it frustrating to deal with technical problems like recording a video presentation or simply typing faster in discussion forums.

*“I prefer visual, auditory and reflective style and online learning contains those. However, I still haven’t got used to this because my computer skill is weak. I can only type slowly.” (S85)*

*“When the teacher asks me to upload a video presentation or do an audio reflection, I don’t know how to do it. I have to get a lot of help from my friends. Anyway, I will try to improve my computer skill after this course” (S21)*

In addition, a number of students also complain about lacking experience with online learning. They appreciate the chance to take an online course but online learning skill is something quite new to them: *“I haven’t taken an online learning course before, so it seems too strange for me. But, I have heard about it through many channels and I am much interested about that.” (S32)*

## **5. Conclusion**

Although the study is limited in scope and timespan, it can be concluded that online learning is relatively new in the teaching context of Vietnam but this mode of learning is catching up quickly. Based on a learning management system, this learning mode offers the ability to create different types of materials that can meet the demand of different learning styles. The findings from this study confirm what have been found earlier about online learning styles. Far from being reserved or going against a new way of learning, most of the students, born in the digital age, welcome the changes and are willing to adapt their traditional learning styles. While participants in this study are happy with the rich multimedia contents that help them learn visually and enrich online interaction, quite a few students are concerned about the lack of face-to-face interaction and group work that they are familiar with. Weak computer skill is another obstacle that several students have to deal with when shifting to learning online. In order to better support students, it is recommended that an official online learning skill training course is provided.

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