

Students' Preferences for Learning English Literature: Balancing Physical and Virtual Instruction Post-Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Higher learning has undergone dramatic changes due to the COVID-19 where learners have to move from teaching and learning in person to online learning. With educational institutions transitioning to a blend of in-person and online learning after the pandemic, understanding



students' preferred methods for learning English literature is now crucial. This study explores students' preferences in learning English literature in terms of the physical classroom, the virtual, or a combination of the two in a post-pandemic context. It analyses the advantages and disadvantages brought by each type of instruction and how efficient they are, as well as how efficient are hybrid models as far as both types of instruction are concerned. The findings of the study show that even if students appreciate the ease and availability of resources provided by virtual learning, they still appreciate the interactive and social features of physical classrooms. It seems that if hybridisation of the in-classroom and the online environments is applied, students' needs are best met. The findings suggest that a balanced approach, incorporating both in-person and online components, can enhance students' learning experience and address the diverse preferences of students in a post-pandemic educational landscape.

Keywords: English literature, higher education, virtual instruction, face-to-face learning

INTRODUCTION

Covid-19 and its subsequent lockdowns have impacted teaching and learning in Malaysian higher education in many aspects. During the pandemic, online learning was deemed as the best mode of delivery as it allows for time and space differences, as long as relevant parties have Internet connectivity. Instructors and learners were forced to familiarise themselves with a myriad of platforms, applications, and technologies that are required for them to be connected, and to have access to materials and resources. Post pandemic, Malaysian HE institutions have reopened to recommence face-to-face learning. The question of whether online learning can continue to be relevant in the teaching and learning of literature, considering the current circumstances, requires an empirical answer.

Indeed, online learning comes with its own set of strengths and weaknesses (see Marevci & Salihu, 2023; Berber, 2022; Peytcheva-Forsyth & Aleksieva, 2021; Nayci, 2020), which are important to consider when designing and implementing educational programs. By acknowledging both the strengths and weaknesses of online learning, educators can work to maximise the benefits of online instruction while addressing its challenges to create more effective and inclusive educational experiences. The way learning is delivered is particularly important when using literature to build students' critical thinking and analytical abilities. To ensure students gain the full benefits of their learning, the teaching of literature requires careful consideration of its delivery formats. Hypothetically, given that face-to-face literature teaching and learning already present challenges (Jais & Ismail, 2023; Nawi & Nor, 2023), transitioning to online learning for this subject would likely introduce additional issues.

Statement of the Problem

Literature teaching and learning have been reported to present several challenges and difficulties. Based on their systematic review of literature, Nawi and Nor (2023) highlighted that the challenges in the teaching of English literature can stem from various factors including students' negative attitudes, students' personality, language proficiency and their basic literary knowledge. The authors also listed teacher-related factors, which are teachers' incompetence and



inappropriate teaching methods. Other challenges include text selection, poor learning environment and infrastructure and time constraint.

The pandemic forced educational institutions to shift to online learning, presenting considerable challenges for both students and educators. Research show that students adjusted to online learning, frequently highlighting the advantages of self-directed study and increased flexibility (Firmansyah et al., 2021; Santiago et al., 2021). Nevertheless, this shift also revealed drawbacks, including accessibility issues, diminished social interaction and difficulties with maintaining engagement (Abdullah et al., 2022). In the context of English literature, online formats offered digital resources and multimedia content that enriched the learning experience, yet some students missed the depth of face-to-face discussions and hands-on engagement with physical texts (Roig-Marín & Prieto, 2021).

Given these concerns, the study aims to explore students' preferences for learning literature in both online and face-to-face settings. Therefore, the study intends to answer three research questions, which are:

1. What are students' views of learning literature face-to-face?
2. What are students' views of learning literature online?
3. How can literature teaching and learning be improved from the perspective of the students?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The post-pandemic scenario revealed a rather intricate picture of students, as well as educational institutions, gaining insight through the transition from the mode of emergency remote instruction to other forms of education. To begin with, the rapid transition to an online mode of education was forced by the pandemic, and in all senses, more reliance than ever before on the use of technology became apparent. However, as this crisis starts to decline, students and instructors are making comparisons on the positive aspects and preferences of the COVID-19 pandemic and face-to-face teaching leading to varying and nuanced preferences. Many learners appreciate the features that help in learning in an online environment and are thus in support of this mode, whereas some believe and practise the need for live interactions implying real classrooms in which learners participate actively in the learning process. Such woven fabric of preferences hints at a larger paradigm shift in the way learning is perceived, and hence institutions are looking towards the implementation of blended and hybrid models that maximise the advantages of the two. The challenges now lie in creating educational spaces that correspond with these changes and solve the problem without affecting the quality of education and the learning process.

Benefits and Challenges of Physical Instruction

Physical classrooms have long been associated with enhanced engagement and interaction (Hill & Epps, 2010), crucial for subjects like English literature that benefit from discussion and collaborative analysis (Roberts & Langer, 1991). Face-to-face instruction facilitates immediate feedback, richer discussions, and a stronger sense of community. Nissen (2024) contends that



engaging in dialogues with students during literature instruction is essential, because it serves as a means for teachers to promote students' literary competence. Engaging in discussions about texts helps students to articulate their understanding, reflect on different perspectives, and develop their interpretative skills.

While instruction in physical places is the most effective, there are certain factors which undermine it, for instance accessibility of means and space, especially in bigger and remote classes. The rate of attendance among the students in an Australian regional university tends to vary greatly due to how the students perceive perceptions of the value of traditional lectures coupled with the presence of class recordings and online resources (James & Seary, 2019). Additionally, traditional teaching methods may not align with the learning preferences of today's students (Shorey et al., 2021).

Online classes, on the other hand, have often been perceived by students as passive, lacking the spontaneous exchange of ideas between teachers and students in real-time (Das, 2023). Similarly, Mondol and Mohiuddin (2020) highlight various external factors that influence the teaching-learning process in online classrooms of university students. These factors can disrupt the flow of teaching and learning, leading to fluctuations in motivation and reduced student participation.

Advantages and Limitations of Virtual Instruction

Virtual instruction offers several advantages, including accessibility to a wider range of resources and the ability to engage with diverse multimedia content which are crucial for retention rates (Singh et al., 2023). Online platforms enable students to access lectures, discussions, and supplementary materials at their convenience. However, issues such as technological barriers, lack of personal interaction, and difficulties in maintaining academic integrity pose significant challenges for faculty and instructors (Singh et al., 2021). For English literature students, the lack of physical interaction with texts and peers can impact their overall learning experience.

Berteau (2009) highlights the importance of effective communication in online education, arguing that the absence of in-person interaction can negatively impact student performance, motivation, and lead to social isolation. Dhawan (2020) also anticipates that students may encounter difficulties in fully grasping the essence of a particular topic due to the predominantly one-way interaction in online classes (teacher to student). Islam (2021) who explored Bangladeshi university students' attitudes towards online English literature classes, found that the students are keen to return to physical classrooms for learning English literature, and they prefer their instructors to prioritise discussions. Similarly, Ong and Quek (2023) assert that online learning limits face-to-face interactions, which can affect student motivation and engagement, making positive teacher-student interactions essential for effective learning, community building, and student confidence.

Based on his findings, Islam (2021) argues that there are various aspects of online classes that require attention, and the feedback from students can play a pivotal role in addressing them. Not surprisingly, Dhawan (2020) based on the experience of Indian educational institutions, suggests



that personalised attention could be instrumental in establishing a conducive learning environment. According to He and Amini (2023), an online communication channel can serve as a helpful alternative to mitigate feelings of discomfort of English majors in China when engaging in face-to-face conversations with their instructors.

Hybrid Models: Balancing Physical and Virtual Instruction

Hybrid models have emerged as a viable solution to balance the strengths and weaknesses of both physical and virtual instruction. Singh et al. (2021) suggest that hybrid approaches can provide the flexibility of online learning while retaining the benefits of face-to-face interaction. In English literature courses, this might involve using online platforms for lectures and discussions while reserving physical classroom time for in-depth analysis and collaborative activities.

According to Dziuban et al. (2018), blended learning (BL) in higher education institutions can improve student success, satisfaction, and sense of community compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Institutional support for course redesign and planning is crucial for successful BL implementation. However, access to educational technologies remains a challenge, with the potential of online technologies to bridge gaps for nontraditional and underserved students.

Means et al. (2013) found that, on average, college students in online learning environments performed slightly better than those in face-to-face instruction. The benefit was particularly notable in studies comparing blended learning with traditional face-to-face instruction, but not in those comparing purely online learning with face-to-face instruction.

Student Preferences and Satisfaction

When the pandemic hit, Sim et al. (2021) found that university students in Malaysia express a moderate level of acceptance for online learning, citing factors such as enhancement of language skills, enthusiasm, self-efficacy and satisfaction to have facilitated their online learning experience. Despite the benefits of online learning, students were found struggled with group discussions, likely due to their prior experience with traditional, in-person collaborative learning. Similarly, Feubli et al. (2024) found that university students in Switzerland valued the flexibility of online learning but also desired the personal engagement that physical classrooms provide, particularly when subjects are perceived as difficult. For English literature, this means integrating digital tools and resources with traditional methods to enhance both accessibility and interaction.

Zhu et al. (2013) indicate that when students maintain a positive attitude towards online classes, it can foster an effective atmosphere for teaching and learning. Alkodimi and Al-Ahdal (2022) found that most of their Saudi college EFL teachers showed satisfaction with virtual literature study, suggesting the significant contribution of literature in enhancing specific aspects of the English language for EFL learners. The study also found that teachers' satisfaction may be linked to thorough preparation and the effective use of various technological tools to enhance students' learning experience. Aituganova et al. (2023) confirmed that university students in Kazakhstan who were taught online developed more positive attitudes due to the flexible and



independent learning environment compared to traditional teaching. Additionally, Islam (2021) states interactive discussions and precise use of multimedia tools can enhance the teaching and learning of literature. These studies collectively demonstrate that a positive attitude toward online learning, especially in literature, can significantly improve student engagement, satisfaction, and language development.

Overall, while online learning offers many advantages for studying literature, it also presents challenges that need to be addressed to ensure a rich and engaging educational experience. By leveraging the strengths of online and physical learning and mitigating the limitations, educators can create effective and inclusive literature courses delivered through hybrid models that meet the needs of diverse learners.

METHODOLOGY

Methodologically, the study adopts the quantitative approach that involves the collection and analysis of numerical data (Chua, 2012). The instrument used to collect data from the respondents is a questionnaire as it is deemed to be the most suitable. Patten (2016) argues that questionnaires help researchers gather responses that are easy to tabulate, score, and allow for data analysis in a shorter period. The questionnaire was adapted from a study done by Chuanpit Sriwichai (2020).

There are six sections in the questionnaire, which are Demographic Information, Classroom Learning, Online Learning, Online Interaction and Technology, Learning Flexibility and Management, Learning Flexibility, and Open-ended Questions. The first section records the respondents' details such as gender, ethnic group, educational background and programme of study. There are seven items in Classroom Learning, six items in Online Learning, eight in Online Interaction and Technology, six in Learning Flexibility and Management, and five in Learning Flexibility. The open-ended section contains two questions: one asking respondents to describe their experience of learning literature in the course, and another asking them to suggest changes they would like to see based on their literature learning experiences at UiTM.

The questionnaire was distributed to 150 ESL learners enrolled in a literature course offered at the University. The response rate is 49.33% with 74 learners responding to the questionnaire, which was distributed via Google form. The questionnaire was distributed at the end of the semester after the learners had completed the course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Out of 74 respondents, 78% of them are female whereas there are only 22% male respondents. The course enrolment records that there are 127 female and only 23 male students. Hence, the unequal distribution of the respondents' gender is expected, coupled by the fact that English language related programmes in the University are mostly attended by female students.



Table 1 shows the main scores of students' preferences for learning English literature in post-pandemic higher education. As evident, learning flexibility and management ranked the highest in their preference. This is followed by face-to-face learning of literature, which ranked second with a mean score of 4.18, while online learning of literature ranked the lowest with a mean score of 2.59.

Table 1. Mean Scores of Learning Preferences

| Item | Mean |
|---|------|
| CL1-CL7 Face-to-Face Learning of Literature | 4.18 |
| OL1-OL6 Online Learning of Literature | 2.59 |
| OI1-OI8 Online Interaction and Technology | 3.41 |
| LFM1-LFM6 Learning Flexibility and Management | 4.21 |
| LF1-LF5 Learning Flexibility | 3.93 |
| Average Mean | 3.66 |

Table 2 shows the respondents' views on face-to-face learning of literature based on six items. 93.2% of the respondents agreed that face-to-face literature classroom activities help prepare them to learn on their own pace. Only 6.8% were unsure while none of them believed otherwise. 94.6% of the respondents agreed with the statement that face-to-face literature classroom activities help them to generate ideas to do course assignment. Only 5.4% were unsure. The third item received a stronger agreement from the respondents, which constitutes 98.6%. Only 1.4% were not sure about having "a chance to get support or feedback from the instructor and peers immediately." When asked about whether they learn literature better through teacher-directed classroom-based activities, 91.9% agreed that it is so. However, the percentage of those who were unsure is a bit higher, at 8.1%.

The fifth item, "I learn literature better when I collaborate with others in face-to-face classroom", sees a more distributed response. 87.8% agreed with the statement, 10.8% were uncertain while 1.4% disagreed. Most of the respondents, at 89.2%, believed that face-to-face literature classroom learning is more effective than literature online learning. Interestingly, 1.4% did not think so while 9.5% were undecided. The last item asked whether the respondents are bored when learning literature in this course in face-to-face classroom. Surprisingly, 12.2% believed it is so while 74.3% responded otherwise. 13.5% remained uncertain. These findings corroborate what Feubli et al. (2024) found that despite appreciating the flexibility of online learning, students also sought the personal interaction that physical classrooms facilitate, especially for challenging subjects like literature.

Table 2. Face-to-Face Learning of Literature

| Item | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| CL1 Face-to-face literature classroom activities help prepare me to learn on my own pace. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 6.8 | 36.5 | 56.8 |
| CL2 Face-to-face literature classroom activities help me to generate ideas to do course assignment. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 5.4 | 40.5 | 54.1 |
| CL3 In face-to-face literature classroom, I have a chance to get | 0.0 | 0.0 | 1.4 | 23.0 | 75.7 |

| | | | | | | |
|-----|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| OL3 | I like learning literature online because it enables me to access instructional content easier. | 10.8 | 9.5 | 17.6 | 36.5 | 25.7 |
| OL4 | I would like learning time in the classroom of this literature course to be reduced. | 27.0 | 32.4 | 20.3 | 12.2 | 8.1 |
| OL5 | I would like to have online class for this literature course rather than in the classroom. | 27.0 | 35.1 | 20.3 | 10.8 | 6.8 |
| OL6 | I am bored when learning literature online. | 17.6 | 10.8 | 28.4 | 20.3 | 23.0 |

When examining the opinions of respondents regarding in-person and online literature learning, it becomes evident that they express a stronger preference for face-to-face instruction. This preference stems from the belief that in-person activities aid in self-paced learning and facilitate the generation of ideas for coursework. While the level of agreement is not as pronounced as with face-to-face instruction, the respondents still find online learning intriguing and convenient, appreciating its ease of access to instructional materials. This finding is in line with Singh et al. (2021) who propose that hybrid approaches can combine the flexibility of online learning with the advantages of face-to-face interaction.

Table 4. Online Interaction and Technology

| Item | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| OIT1 I feel isolated when I learn literature online. | 2.7 | 25.7 | 21.6 | 31.1 | 18.9 |
| OIT2 I would like to interact with my instructor when I learn literature online. | 1.4 | 4.1 | 8.1 | 51.4 | 35.1 |
| OIT3 I would like to interact with my classmates when I learn literature online. | 1.4 | 5.4 | 6.8 | 47.3 | 39.2 |
| OIT4 When I learn literature online, I can communicate with teacher or classmates online easily. | 9.5 | 27.0 | 29.7 | 21.6 | 12.2 |
| OIT5 I can collaborate well with my team in doing assignments of this literature course. | 2.7 | 2.7 | 10.8 | 47.3 | 36.5 |
| OIT6 I think online learning platform (Google Meet, UFUTURE, etc.) used in literature teaching and learning of this course is easy to use. | 2.7 | 6.8 | 12.2 | 51.4 | 27.0 |
| OIT7 I believe online learning platform (Google Meet, UFUTURE, etc.) used in teaching and learning of this course is useful for my literature | 0.0 | 10.8 | 20.3 | 41.9 | 27.0 |

| | | | | | | |
|--|-----|-----|------|------|------|--|
| learning. | | | | | | |
| OIT8 I think this online learning platform should be used in teaching and learning other literature courses. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 27.0 | 33.8 | 24.3 | |

Table 4 presents the respondents' perspectives regarding online interaction and technology, as indicated by the eight items. 50.0% of the respondents felt isolated when I learn literature online whereas 28.4% did not think so. Quite a number (21.6%) remained unsure. When asked whether they would like to interact with the instructor when learning literature online, most of them (86.5%) agreed while only 5.4% did not feel the need to do so. Similarly, the percentage remains high (at 86.5%) when it comes to interacting with their classmate. The respondents were divided when asked about communicating online easily with teacher or classmates. 33.8% agreed, 36.5% disagreed while 9.5% were uncertain. 83.8% of the respondents believed that they could collaborate well with their team in doing assignments.

Most of the respondents (78.4%) viewed that the learning platform in the course is easy to use. Because of this positive experience, 68.9% of them felt that the learning platform is useful for their literature learning. So, more than half of them (56.8%) believed that online learning platform should be used in teaching and learning other literature courses. Given the students' positive view of the platform used by the University, it seems that the challenges such as technical issues and the need for adequate support and infrastructure as acknowledged by Singh et al. (2023) are currently being addressed by the institution to maximise the effectiveness of online learning.

Table 5. Learning Flexibility and Management

| Item | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|---|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| LFM1 I would like to access the teaching materials and the literature lessons without limits of time and place. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.7 | 24.3 | 73.0 |
| LFM2 I would like to decide where and when I want to study the literature lessons. | 5.4 | 4.1 | 33.8 | 35.1 | 21.6 |
| LFM3 I like to study literature lessons of this course at my own pace. | 1.4 | 2.7 | 23.0 | 47.3 | 25.7 |
| LFM4 Learning literature in both face-to-face classroom and online learning mode motivate me to be more self-disciplined and responsible for my learning of literature. | 0.0 | 2.7 | 6.8 | 37.8 | 52.7 |
| LFM5 I can organize my time efficiently in learning literature. | 0.0 | 1.4 | 10.8 | 58.1 | 29.7 |
| LFM6 When I have problems in learning, I can find the ways to solve them (e.g. asking for | 0.0 | 0.0 | 6.8 | 37.8 | 55.4 |

assistance from others, or finding information from the Internet).

Learners' views on learning flexibility and management were also sought in the study (presented in Table 5). Almost all learners, at 97.3%, would like to access the teaching materials and the literature lessons without limits of time and place. However, only about half of them (56.8%) would like to decide where and when they want to study the literature lessons while 33.8% were unsure. The learners also reported that they like to study literature lessons of the course at their own pace (73%). Interestingly, 90.5% believed that learning literature in both face-to-face classroom and online learning mode motivate them to be more self-disciplined and responsible for their learning. Therefore, most of them, at 87.8%, had the confidence to efficiently manage their time in learning literature. Lastly, they were also confident that can find solutions to their learning problems by asking for assistance from others or finding information from the Internet.

Table 6. Learning Flexibility

| Item | Strongly Disagree | Disagree | Uncertain | Agree | Strongly Agree |
|--|-------------------|----------|-----------|-------|----------------|
| LF1 Learning literature in both face-to-face classroom and online learning mode encourage me to set up my own literature learning plans and goals. | 0.0 | 0.0 | 2.7 | 24.3 | 73.0 |
| LF2 I want to learn literature in blended learning environment which combines face-to-face and online learning rather than learning in face-to-face classroom only. | 5.4 | 4.1 | 33.8 | 35.1 | 21.6 |
| LF3 I want to learn literature in blended learning environment which combines face-to-face and online learning rather than learning online fully. | 1.4 | 2.7 | 23.0 | 47.3 | 25.7 |
| LF4 I am ready to face challenges in learning literature in blended learning environment (combining face-to-face classroom and online learning). | 0.0 | 2.7 | 6.8 | 37.8 | 52.7 |
| LF5 If I have an opportunity, I want to register in a literature course that adopt blended learning approach (combining face-to-face classroom and online learning). | 0.0 | 1.4 | 10.8 | 58.1 | 29.7 |



The respondents were asked about their preferences when learning literature (presented in Table 6). A huge number of the respondents (91.9%) admitted that learning literature in both face-to-face classroom and online learning mode encourage them to set up their own literature learning plans and goals. Not surprisingly, more than half (64.9%) preferred to learn literature in blended learning environment which combines face-to-face and online learning rather than learning in face-to-face classroom only. Similarly, 73.0% preferred a combination rather than learning online fully. The respondents remained positive as 78.4% believed that they ready to face challenges in learning literature in blended learning environment (combining face-to-face classroom and online learning). Therefore, 64.9% admitted that, given the opportunity, they will enrol in a literature course that adopts a blended learning approach. These findings confirm the suggestion of Dziuban et al. (2018) that blended learning (BL) can enhance student success, satisfaction, and a sense of community more effectively than traditional face-to-face courses.

The respondents were also asked to describe their experience of learning literature in the course and almost all comments were positive. Interestingly, 32.4% of them cited that their learning had been fun. Most of them attributed it to having face-to-face class, the opportunities to interact with each other in real time, the approach taken by the instructors, and helpful classmates. Apart from that, they appreciated the online resources that were made available through the online platform. Furthermore, the students valued the discussions that they had in class as they were exposed to different perspectives and received validation and immediate feedback from the instructors. Reflecting on their past experiences on learning literature purely online (due to the pandemic), the respondents found it “was not a good experience”, “draining” and “quite boring ... because there was almost no interaction between classmates”.

Based on their experiences of learning literature both online and face-to-face, it is hardly surprising that some respondents were keen to have a blended environment for learning literature. Other interesting suggestions include literature being brought into the real world, for example taking students to the theatre to experience it in real life, or allocate time for the students to act out the play to make them understand the play better, students producing their own portfolios, and having more interactive classroom activities.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In conclusion, the shift to online and hybrid learning models in higher education, particularly for English literature, has indicated the diverse preferences and needs of students in a post-pandemic context. While virtual learning offers significant advantages such as flexibility and access to digital resources, it also presents challenges, including reduced personal interaction and feelings of social isolation. Students have adapted to these changes, recognising the benefits of online formats but also expressing a clear desire for the deeper engagement and community fostered by traditional face-to-face instruction. The combination of digital tools with in-person experiences has emerged as a favoured approach, reflecting students' preference for a balanced learning environment that leverages the strengths of both modalities.

Literature educators can harness the opportunity to utilise educational technology resources and tools, particularly within blended learning settings, to enhance the learning experience for



themselves and their students. Through harnessing their creativity, drawing upon their experiences, and collaborating with colleagues, they can improve their teaching skills both in the online and physical classrooms, ultimately creating a more interactive and productive learning environment for their students. This implies a need for institutions to provide training and resources for educators so that they can acquire competencies in online teaching, including planning, implementing, and assessing student performance in hybrid models more effectively. Future studies could explore a larger, more diverse sample size and consider incorporating additional data collection methods, such as interviews or focus groups, to gain a deeper understanding of the trends identified through the questionnaire in this study.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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