SUPPORTING AND ENGAGING ISOLATED LANGUAGE LEARNERS IN OPEN AND DISTANCE LEARNING (ODL) CLASSES: A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN A MALAYSIAN AND AN INDONESIAN UNIVERSITY UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

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Abstract: Covid-19 has suddenly shifted physical classrooms to fully online. Not only educators, but also students are forced to resort to fully Open and Distance Learning (ODL) classes overnight. With lack of preparation, there are multitude of problems faced by both. Initially, the students welcomed the ability of studying at the comfort of their homes; later however, many have complained on difficulties faced in coping with ODL classes. At the same time, in changing the modes, a one-size-fits-all approach is often employed by the lecturers. In other words, internal content is converted into a form that they believe suitable for an external delivery. However, there is a significant problem with this approach, especially with students who feel isolated and disengaged from the physical classrooms. When compared to their counterparts who are more self-regulated learners, these students often face some barriers that they may not experience in face-to-face or blended learning environment to fully participate in their coursework. The online environment also poses challenges for many academic staff who need to master technological competency and proficiency within a limited time period. This paper provides one lecturer's findings and perspectives facilitating students learning online. Primary data collected from a self-administered online survey questionnaire are analysed descriptively in a general survey of trends, involving 162 survey respondents among degree students from UiTM Kelantan and an Indonesian university. It also includes students' responses and critical commentaries on some of the challenges faced by the students and the implications of more ODL classes in future.

Keywords: Open and distance learning, isolated disengaged learners, isolated engaged learners

1. Introduction

Earlier last year in 2020, not many of us really imagined that we would be in the situation we are facing today. As many governments around the world have enforced lockdowns or restricted movement orders due to Covid-19 pandemic, people stayed at home to prevent the virus from spreading (Anderson et al., 2020). Students are not sparred either. Their access to education has been impeded and they are forced to resort to online learning (Syed A. Raza et al., 2020). Zwain (2019) believes that information technology has made it possible to continue the learning process during the lockdown. While this may be acceptable among those who have access to facilities and internet, many students are denied of such privileges due to a digital gap. In Malaysia, the digital gap between urban and rural areas in Malaysia is at 70:30 (Karim, 2020).

Although online learning and its implementation especially in tertiary education have been widely researched, discussed and debated for more than two decades, we are hit with this unexpected situation when Covid-19 hits countries worldwide. Covid-19 has hastened the implementation of online distance learning not only at the universities, but also in schools worldwide (Kapasia et al., 2020; Van Wart et al., 2019). Unexpectedly, educators, teachers and lecturers are forced to sit in front of their devices to conduct classes as they would in physical classrooms. Most are unhappy by the constraints, such as connection problems, pedagogy and evaluation methods, whilst students are bored with the materials and some face problems with internet connections. The pandemic has affected students in different ways, depending not only on their level and course of study, but also on the extent to which they need to achieve in their programs (Daniel, 2020).

Those who have been involved in Distance Learning would have already understood the medium required; however, they still have to grasp the evaluation methods. Many are not prepared to shift from

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their standard educational model to complete distance learning and remote classes in a within a short period of time. You and Kang (2014) observed that online courses are conducive to students who prefer self-regulated learning as they tend to use various "cognitive and metacognitive strategies to accomplish their learning goal." These learners often utilize time management, review materials regularly, seek help from lecturers or peers, meet deadlines, and have metacognition skills to reflect upon their own learning.

However, the main concern would be isolated learners. Park (2008) found that 22% of distance learning students had "the risk of feeling isolated" as a challenge, reflecting findings that personal interaction is important for student learning (IpsosMORI, 2007). Psychological isolation may result from the physical and temporal isolation experienced by learning at a distance (Zeidner & Stoeger, 2019; Prinz, 2019; Lake, 1999; Wegner et al., 1999; Barrett & Lally, 2000; Hartley et al., 2001; Rovai, 2001; Dickey, 2004 ; Lorenzetti, 2005; Stodel et al., 2006). Isolation is defined in terms of time (concurrent study); space (geographic dispersal); social (awareness of others), intellectual/experience (academic ability and life experiences); profession (subject related expertise); ICT knowledge; sensory (ability to see/feel/hear peers); cultural; and subject (if anyone else is studying the same topic (Croft et al., 2010; Au et al., 2018).

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to look at problems faced mainly by learners who feel isolated from Online learning experience. The aim is to examine the students' learning experience of the existing online education courses that utilize the Internet as the primary source of instructional delivery. Although the literature regarding isolated learners has been discussed, the study focuses on students who have no choice but undergo ODL classes due to the pandemic. The findings of this study may contribute to the literature of online education in terms of isolated learners and how educators can design their syllabuses and instructions to suit all students.

3. Research Questions

The research questions addressed are:

a) How can the student online learning be improved by reducing the potential for isolation?
b) What factors contribute to isolation?
c) What are the differences between isolated self-regulated and isolated disengaged learners in terms of understanding and performance?
d) What measures can be put in place to overcome it?

It is very important for educators to understand that students can easily feel "isolated" in ODL classes and thus, they should seek remedies to reduce the isolation faced by these students and reduce the gap between self-regulated and isolated students.

4. Literature Review

4.1 Open and distance learning (ODL)

Open and Distance Learning (ODL) is a general term for the use of telecommunication to provide or enhance learning. The United States Distance Learning Association has its own formal definition of "distance learning" as "the acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance." The pandemic has somehow demanded students and educators to follow the new norms, which is to accept the implementation of Open Distance Learning (ODL). Universities worldwide have introduced ODL replacing the traditional method or face-to-face teaching (Daniel, 2020; Van Wart et al., 2019).

Distance learning is also described as students completing their enrolled courses virtually without attending physical classes (Allam et al., 2020). ODL also means students are physically distant from their instructors who will use digital technology in delivering the course content (Broadbent, & Poon, 2015; Wilde & Hsu, 2019). Distance learning occurs when students and instructor do not meet physically and the learning process is conducted via technologies (Van Wart et al., 2019; Conrad, 2006;

Roffe, 2002). Online learning skills will be attained through online education technologies and applications (Christopher, & Weng, 2020). It requires the learners to determine their learning objectives, search for information of what to learn, apply self-directed learning skills and possess high motivation (Wan Hassan et al., 2020).

Paulsen (2002) summed up the characteristics of online education as the separation of teachers and learners (which distinguishes it from face-to-face education), the influence of an educational organization (which distinguishes it from self-study and private tutoring), the use of a computer network to present or distribute some educational content, the provision of two-way communication via a computer network so that students may benefit from communication with each other, teachers, and staff. The choice of the delivery method will depend on the nature of the content and the available technologies (Rapanta et al., 2020). Lecturers prepare the materials for the lectures in various digital forms and upload the materials on the preferred online platform (Azlan et al., 2020; Oyediran et al., 2020).

4.2 Factors for success in open and distance learning (ODL)

4.2.1 Self-regulation and motivation

Kirtman (2009) found responses from online learners in which they "were so overwhelmingly positive that the issue of students satisfaction cannot be ignored." Studies have shown that intrinsic motivational factors as components for a successful online course and experience for the learner. Self-regulation and motivation are described as two critical factors in determining success in online courses (Matuga, 2009; Prinz, 2019). Self-regulation is defined as the "ability of students to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own behaviour, cognition and learning strategies". In addition, students should be intrinsically or extrinsically motivated to use self-regulatory strategies effectively in order to succeed in online courses (Matuga, 2009). As self-regulation is a key component to success in online courses, students who are not self-regulated learners tend to demonstrate academic procrastination, increased disorganization, and use less cognitive and metacognitive strategies to accomplish their learning goals (You & Kang, 2014). Prinz (2019) acknowledged self-regulation as a multi-dimensional and process-oriented research construct coming from educational psychology.

Self-regulatory processes focus on how students put their best effort to accomplish academic tasks (Zeidner & Stoeger, 2019). In this sense, effort regulation plays an important role in a learning strategy that involves self-managing motivation or persistence (Theus & Muldner, 2019), thus related to conscientiousness and academic self-efficacy (Quesada-Pallarès et al., 2019).

4.2.2 Communication and interaction

The success of an online course also depends on interaction and communication, where both factors are coined with students' satisfaction and motivation (Freeman & Urbaczewski, 2015). According to Lehmann (2004), "communication is what separates true online learning from Web-based tutorials." Interaction occurs in three pivotal areas: interaction between the learner-instructor, the learner-other learners, and the learner-the content (which is the most common) (Savenye, 2005). Thus, online instructors should create a learning environment that increases the interaction between the learner-instructor and the learner-other learners through both synchronous and asynchronous interactions. According to Van Wart (2020), "good" online classes not only create a comfortable atmosphere for the learners, but also provide strong learner-to-learner interactions. It means the instructor's communication is clear, focused, and encouraging, at the same time the feedback is customized and timely.

Instructors should create a learning environment that encourages students to work collaboratively and cooperatively with other students and/or the instructor in live debates, reflective journal entries, peer reviews, discussion boards, and video or audio teleconferencing (Savenye, 2005).

4.2.3 Isolated learners

ODL learners do not meet their instructors, lecturers and classmates regularly making them feel isolated and disconnected which can affect learning. At the same time, instructors and support staff are unable to identify students who are at risk of feeling isolated (Park et al., 2011; Au et al., 2018). Learners may experience issues that can be personal such as anxiety associated with using technology, being out of one's comfort zone that is no longer in physical classrooms, perception of inequity in assessment particularly in "group" assignments, and the perceived inability or difficulty in peer interaction particularly in presentations (Little-Wiles & Naimi, 2011; Rucker & Downey, 2016; Zeidner & Stoeger, 2019). The sense of isolation increases the risk of failure. Thus, it is important that they are connected with their learning community to give them a sense of identity and learning (Koole, 2014). At the same time, it is crucial to help learners develop a shared sense of belonging, purpose, and norms (Koole, 2014; Lapadat, 2007).

Online learners may experience participation barriers which are evident in collaborative learning tasks such as group work, group presentations and group assessments (Gillet-Swan, 2017; Davidson, 2015; Graham & Misanchuk, 2004; Jaques & Salmon, 2007). They may also experience isolation due to personal issues such as anxiety using the technology (internet connection problem, mastery of technology), being out of the comfort zone of physical classrooms, their perception of inequality in assessments especially group assignments, and their inability or difficulty they might face in peer interactions especially when doing presentations. At the same time, learners' isolation is further compounded by the instructors themselves who may be struggling to use some of the online platforms (Little-Wiles & Naimi, 2011; Rucker & Downey, 2016; Schmidt et al., 2016; Thorsteinsson, 2013).

5. Methodology

An online survey via Google Form was conducted among 162 undergraduate students randomly selected from Universitas Pertahanan Nasional Veteran Jakarta (UPNVJ), Indonesia and Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan Branch (UiTMCK). The survey questions seek to identify:

- students' learning preferences
- their engagement in the classroom
- the factors that contribute to isolation
- the isolated self-regulated and isolated disengaged learners
- how can the students online learning be improved by reducing the potential for isolation
- measures that can be taken to overcome the problem (self and lecturers).

It also includes students' responses and critical commentaries on some of the challenges faced by the students and the implications of more ODL classes in future.

6. Findings

6.1 Demographic background

Table 1 shows the distribution of the respondents from UiTMCK and UPNVJ. Most UiTMCK students were 20 years old and above and majority were already in semester 2 at 55.3%, semester 3 at 29.4%, semester 1 and 5 at 9.4% and 5.9% respectively. Comparatively, most UPNVJ students were under 20 (95.9%) and were in their 1st semester at the university, also at 95.9%. Findings also indicate that UiTMCK students experienced ODL classes for at least 2 semesters (93%), as compared to 95.9% of UPNVJ students who were experiencing it for the first time (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic profile of respondents

Construct	Description	UiTMCK Percent	UPNVJ Percent
Age	Below 20	1.2	95.9
	Above 20	98.9	4.1
Semester	Semester 1	9.4	98.3
	Semester 2	55.3	-
	Semester 3	29.4	1.7
	Semester 4	-	-
	Semester 5	5.9	-
	Final semester	-	-
No of semesters taking ODL classes	1 semester or less	-	95.9
	2 semesters	93	4.1
	3 semesters	4.7	-
	More than 3 semesters	2.3	-

6.2 Learning preference

Figures 1.0 and 2.0 show that both university students chose blended learning classes (UiTMCK, 48.8%; UPNVJ, 52.1%) as the most preferred learning method, followed by face-to-face physical classrooms (UiTMCK, 43%; UPNVJ, 37%).

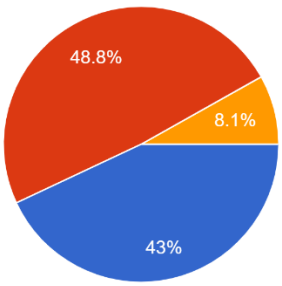

Figure 1: UiTMCK Students Learning Preference

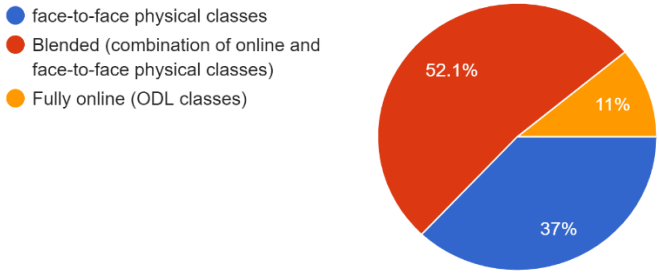

Figure 2: UPNVJ Students Learning Preference

Findings also show that students from UiTMCK and UPNVJ did not prefer fully ODL classes; at 8.1% and 11% respectively. Bachelor of Science (Hons) Mathematics (CS 249) and Bachelor of Information Science (Hons) Information Systems Management (IM 245) respondents indicated that they preferred Blended Learning classes (combination of online and face-to-face physical classes) as their subject requirements would necessitate them to opt for physical meets coupled with online classes.

An open-ended question asked students why they did not favour ODL classes. The following are illustrative examples of students' feedback from both universities reflecting this question:

- I prefer face to face physical classes to practice our speaking skills
- I often feel distracted and don't get the "atmosphere" so sometimes I cannot focus
- Distance education lacks proximity with teachers and has its own set of unique challenges. Some students may find it difficult to learn a subject and take more time to understand.
- It's really tiring for us (student and lecturers I guess) and for now I just feel like do not have any interest in studies anymore.
- I hope there is no more ODL because the longer I study online, the less enthusiastic I become.
- ODL good for theoretical subjects, but for coding subject it's very difficult to understand because it's technical.
- Difficult to do work especially group assignment
- It is sometimes tiring to me, physically and mentally because sometimes I have a miscommunication with my friends due to only chatting and unable to explain thoroughly like face to face classes. I need to learn on how to explain in detail and give clear answer to my friend when we discuss about assignments.

- I really have difficulties with online learning because I enjoy the face-to-face learning in class, I can ask the lecturer directly.
- Exhausted.
- It is not fun because I can't interact with lecturers and friends.
- Boring; tiring; no direct interaction; hard to concentrate.
- There's too much distraction when I learn through ODL at home, and it's harder to understand.
- ODL makes me more independent and feel more responsible! But most fun, can save my money. But overall, I am more comfortable studying face-to-face as usual at the university. I want to feel the vibes as a degree student. In addition, ODL at home also sometimes I have problems with the family. Please, I want to study as usual at university.

6.3 Engagement during online classes (participation during ODL class discussions)

Findings show that there was more active engagement among UiTMCK students compared to UPNVJ students, as shown by Table 2. About 10.3% and 46% (a total of 56.3%) of UiTMCK students participated very actively and participate actively during ODL class discussions as compared to a total of 35.2% of UNVJ students who participated very actively and actively. Another 37.6% of UiTMCK students were somewhat participative as compared to 50% of UPNVJ students. On the other hand, students who rarely participated is shown only at 5.7% by UiTMCK students against 10.8% indicated by their Indonesian peers. Meanwhile, 4.1% of UPNVJ students were not participative at all whilst none was recorded among UiTMCK students. The instructor's personal experience also indicated that UiTMCK students were more actively engaged in ODL class discussions compared to their Indonesian counterparts.

Table 2: Engagement during ODL classes

Construct	UiTMCK Percent	UPNVJ Percent
Participate very actively	10.3	6.8
Participate actively	46	28.4
Somewhat participative	37.9	50
Rarely participative	5.7	10.8
Not participative at all	-	4.1

When interviewed, the students who felt isolated and not actively engaged in ODL classrooms responded:

- I'm lost during the lecture; cannot concentrate
- I have an anxiety to unmute the microphone whenever I want to speak
- Most of the time I fall asleep during online learning and I will be the clueless one in the classes.
- ODL classes makes me desperate as I cannot follow the lectures.
- I find it difficult to understand the lectures
- I'm a slow learner, I take time to understand things
- I don't participate but I understand the lectures and read notes provided by the lecturers.
- I don't participate because it is hard for me to understand every subject.
- I'm always lost in ODL classes; so, when the lecturers ask questions, I don't know how to answer.

These students, who could be categorized as isolated disengaged learners, also indicated poorer results compared to other students as they found themselves isolated from the classes, their lecturers and even the subject matter.

6.4 How the students improve their understanding/academic performance

Table 3 reveals that most students from both universities employed self-learning to improve their understanding of the subject matter, at 46% and 44.6% respectively. When interviewed further, some

of these students indicated that they studied on their own by referring to other sources of information and would immediately do the tasks assigned by their lecturers. They might not normally ask questions in class or partake in the discussions, but they would do the quizzes or tasks assigned the soonest possible. These students can be categorized as isolated, however, self-regulated learners. These students also showed good performance in tasks and assessments. The following illustrates feedback from these students:

- I may not be participative in ODL classes, but I mostly do self-learning.
- Group work is not good as I have problems communicating with friends online.
- I prefer to work alone; group work is a problem.
- I do more reading outside classes.
- I use search engines to learn more about the subject matter.

Table 3: How the students improve their understanding/academic performance

Construct	UiTMCK Percent	UPNVJ Percent
Self-learning	46	44.6
Always consult my lecturers	19.5	10.8
Group projects/group work	33.3	44.6
Others	1.1	-

Students from both UiTMCK (33.3%) and UPNVJ (44.6%) also believed that group projects or group work helped them to improve their understanding and grades. About 19.5% of UiTMCK students, unlike only 10.8% of UPNVJ students, would consult their lecturers to improve their understanding of the subject matter.

A student from UPNVJ who did not perform in her mid-semester test said that group projects had helped her to improve her scores. She also said that she "had a difficulty in understanding lectures, has problem when studying alone, thus when doing group work, her partner would assist her; this will help to improve her grade." The following illustrates feedback from students:

- I read the notes provided and ask my lecturers if I don't understand the subject matter.
- Group work is not good as I have problems communicating with friends online.
- Group projects help me get better grade.
- My lecturer always responds to my WhatsApp messages and helps me check my drafts.
- I always ask my lecturer outside of class hour.
- My lecturer helps me a lot; my friends too.
- Project work helps me get connected with my friends; also helps my grade.

6.5 How the lecturers can help

Based on the responses, as can be seen from Table 4, most respondents wanted the lecturers to provide notes to help them understand the subject matter better; 36.8% (UiTMCK), 40.5% (UPNVJ). They also responded that the lecturers could help them by providing motivation and emotional support, which is shown by 25.3% from UiTMCK and 18.9% from UPNVJ. In addition, 16.1% of UiTMCK students and 18.9% UPNVJ students suggested that lecturers should have more interactions with them in and outside of ODL classes. While more UPNVJ students (14.9%) thought that the lecturers could enhance their understanding by giving them more short quizzes, only 9.2% of UiTMCK students opined that quizzes could benefit them. UiTMCK students also considered that immediate feedback from the lecturers would also help boost their understanding, as compared to only 5.4% of UPNVJ students. The following illustrates feedback from students:

- She's (my lecturer) very patient, because I'm slow to understand and focus in ODL classes
- (The lecturer) should provide current learning material that can be read well
- The lecturer provides notes on each course. The lecturer also gives us support and motivation and some kind of entertainment during the classes, so we don't get bored easily
- Notes and textbooks help
- Short quizzes and discussion questions at the end of the lessons help me understand better
- My lecturer checks my drafts and return them back very fast

- I always interact with my lecturer after classes if I don't understand anything
- My lecturer always motivates us; we help motivate each other too.

Table 4: How lecturers can help the students improve their understanding/academic performance

Construct	UiTMCK Percent	UPNVJ Percent
Provide notes	36.8	40.5
Provide motivation and emotional support	25.3	18.9
Have more interaction in and outside the class	16.1	18.9
Provide immediate feedback	11.5	5.4
Give more short quizzes to improve understanding	9.2	14.9
Others	1.1	1.4

7. Discussion

The primary objective of this research was to establish the understanding of students' preferences with regard to Open Distance Learning and identify ways to support and engage isolated learners through the learning process. The comparative survey was conducted among 88 undergraduate students from Universiti Teknologi MARA Kelantan Branch (UiTMCK), Malaysia and 74 from Universitas Pertahanan Nasional Veteran Jakarta (UPNVJ), Indonesia.

Unlike several previous findings, the findings of this study show that most students from both universities do not favour the implementation of ODL. Blended learning is the most preferred online learning system. Many students cite disengagement or isolation from the classes, lecturers and peers as the main factors why they prefer blended learning or face-to-face physical classrooms as compared to ODL classes. This finding shows no matter how advanced the technology is, readiness for ODL implementation still needs to be considered in improving the online learning process. Besides, the finding also identified several 2 types of isolated learners:

a) Isolated self-regulated learners
b) Isolated disengaged learners

Isolated self-regulated learners are learners who are not actively engaged in ODL classes; however, they are self-regulated and motivated learners. These students prefer to be silent in classes and prefer to work alone. However, as they possess the drive and motivation, these students will achieve their learning goals even in ODL classes. This is consistent with findings by Zeidner and Stoeger (2019); Theus and Muldner (2019); Quesada-Pallarès et al. (2019), Matunga (2009); You and Kang (2014) that self-regulation and motivation are two critical factors in determining success in online courses.

On the other hand, ODL learners lacking self-regulation drive will eventually feel isolated and disengaged; thus, will likely demonstrate academic procrastination, increased disorganization, often feeling stressed and exhausted, not able to manage time and used less cognitive and metacognitive strategies in their learning (Zeidner & Stoeger, 2019). Thus, it is important to assist them to get connected their learning community to give them a sense of identity and learning. The instructors need to be more creative and innovative in employing various methods to engage especially these isolated learners during ODL classes. The feedback received also indicates that students want their instructors to be supportive of the students during the learning process as they may face problems such as internet connection problem, family obligations or interference and other personal problems. Time management skills also need to be introduced to the students to reduce procrastination and students' inability to manage time (Au et al., 2018).

Instructors also have to take into consideration their teaching styles, such as behaviour management, student feedback and assessment, general communication skills such as responding to students' messages, giving immediate feedback to assignments/tests and developing professional relationships (Gillet-Swan, 2017; Au et al., 2018; Rapanta et al., 2020). Instructors can design and implement advanced tasks that engage students from the very beginning, since students' employment of motivational and self-regulated strategies warrants a high probability of course completion and academic success (Quesada-Pallarès et al., 2019; Vanslambrouck et al., 2018). Instructor training in handling online classes is also regarded as one of the crucial success factors in ODL implementation (Brinkley-Etzkorn, 2018). University administrators should also play a role in providing appropriate

assistance and counselling service not only to the students but also to the instructors. Carefully designed syllabus that suits the ODL needs will benefit both the students and instructors the implementation of ODL classes.

This research revealed some indications in engaging isolated learners in ODL classes. Though it has some limitations, further studies are needed to extend the limits of knowledge on ODL implementations.

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