EFL Students' Challenges of Online Courses at Van Lang University during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Pham Manh Tri[1*], Luu Thi Tu Uyen[1], Mai Thi Hoang Uyen[1],

Thai Thuy Thuy Trang[1], Ngo Thi Cam Thuy[1]

[1]Faculty of Foreign Languages, Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam
*Corresponding author's email: tripham.230901@gmail.com
* https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4942-7534
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ABSTRACT

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In recent years, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly influenced most activities around the world, especially EFL education. Due to the pandemic, all schools and colleges must turn traditional education into online education through online learning platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and so forth. The research aims to investigate the concentration challenges that EFL students at Van Lang University are encountering while they are studying online. The paper used quantitative and qualitative methods by conducting questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews with 100 second-year, third-year, and four-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Van Lang University (VLU). Based on the data collection, the results of this research have demonstrated that most EFL students faced some common distractions like external noises, unstable internet connections, the harmful effects of too much screen time, and so on. After the investigation, this study suggests that lecturers at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Van Lang University look for numerous positive solutions to solve EFL students' trouble in order to enhance the quality of online courses.

1. Introduction

Over thousands of years, people have constantly been trying to learn and cultivate knowledge. And technology was born to meet educational needs that were insufficient. Any important event that occurs is the reason for any turning point in the field of invitation (Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020). At the same time, because of the influence of the pandemic, schools and colleges have been trying out the implementation of EFL online classes. It has helped online learning applications thrive, including the application of online classes. The only way in this serious situation is to

switch to online learning because of the COVID-19 epidemic (Mahyoob, 2020). E-learning is determined as classes conveying through the web to other places other than face-to-face classrooms where the teachers can teach in a virtual meeting and students can speak and interact with lecturers or other students (Farrah & al-Bakry, 2020). In the present time, online learning platforms play a very important role in education. Nevertheless, numerous teachers in schools and colleges do not use this education regime and do not know what is related to e-learning (Mahyoob, 2020). It is because of the newness in this teaching method that both teachers and students have many difficulties in communicating and absorbing knowledge.

A study conducted by Ahmad (2016) found the difficulties of foreign language students when learning online. In listening sessions, the ICT equipment used by teachers to train pupils who are indifferent and remote locations is frequently inefficient. When administering listening tests, teachers are also unable to provide the best possible supervision to their pupils. Students have difficulty mimicking their instructor's manner of speaking in speaking courses with distance or online learning, and the teacher cannot adequately train the students to talk in these circumstances. Moreover, according to Wahab and Iskandar (2020), they concluded that learners do not have smartphones, laptops, or computers. Lack of internet quota also becomes a problem for students. Providing an internet quota requires a high cost. This difficulty is felt by students and parents from middle-class economies and below. They do not have enough budget to use the Internet. Students often have trouble accessing the Internet due to the places they live. Nashruddin et al. (2020) indicated that some students live in distant rural regions where the Internet is not available. Their cellular network is usually unstable because of the geographical location, which is far from the signal coverage. This is often also an issue that happens in a lot of students who take online learning, so the implementation is less effective.
The research aims to explore EFL students' concentration difficulties in online courses by synthesizing and analyzing current evidence carried out through questionnaire surveys and semi-structured interviews with 100 second-year, third-year, and four-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of Van Lang University (VLU). According to the information, EFL teachers can grasp what EFL undergraduates are experiencing and seek long-term solutions to tackle those problems in online courses during the COVID-19 outbreak.

The difficulties in accessing online learning have progressively been adapted to the teaching syllabus since both learners and teachers have had the wonderful chance of understanding and interacting with educational, technological devices such as smartphone learning, computer-based acquiring knowledge, and web-based learning (Pellegrini et al., 2020; Byun & Slavin, 2020). The emphasis of this study was on the challenges faced by EFL students, practically, EFL students in Van Lang University during the present worldwide pandemic, as well as the facilities and solutions that may be provided to address issues when taking online courses.

2. Literature review

2.1. Online courses

During the COVID-19 pandemic, turning face-to-face courses into online courses is one of the best solutions so that education will not be put off. Picciano and Seaman (2009) concluded that online learning is believed to be a type of distance education on the grounds that evaluations and instructions occur in digital classrooms with internet connections. Additionally, according to Gonzalez and Louis (2018), online learning is conducted from a distance with the assistance of electronic inventions, for example, smartphones, computers, laptops, etc. Some investigators described online learning as access to academic experiences by means of modern technologies (Benson, 2002; Conrad, 2002; Carliner, 2004). Furthermore, Benson (2002) and Conrad (2002) reported that online learning could be seen as a more recent version of distance learning that provides students with better access to educational chances. Online courses have played a vital role in education around the world (Singh & Thurman, 2019).

Tabiri et al. (2022) believed that learning and teaching online is the best option during the COVID-19 pandemic. Smedley (2010) agreed that online education ought to be applied in schools thanks to its flexibility, convenience, and personalized learning opportunities. As far as Tran (2021) was concerned, learners tend to access resources like videos, PowerPoint lecture slides, and so forth in order to learn many times at a lot of places, including at home, at a café, or even on the road. With online methods, teachers can meet learners who do not have the ability to attend classrooms because of time constraints and distance (Srichanyachon, 2014).

2.2. Challenges of online courses

Notwithstanding online courses' advantages, they may bring students various limitations. Numerous authors argued that there remain many factors that have impacts on learners' online learning experiences, including learning style (Eom et al., 2006), students' learning process (Paechter et al., 2010), self-regulated learning (Tichavsky et al., 2015), self-efficacy (Alhamami, 2019), lecturers, interaction, technologies, learning ability (Luu, 2022), and learners' quality (Selim, 2007; Baylor & Ritchie, 2002; Volery & Lord, 2000).

Sarvestani et al. (2019) investigated the difficulties experienced by Iranians taking online courses at the Virtual School of Shiraz University of Medical Sciences with qualitative methods and phenomenological analyses. The findings identified educational, organizational, ethical, technology, supporting, evaluation, management, and communication challenges as general categories. Most research on online education addressed the same difficulties in each area, such as negative impressions of e-learning, slow connections, lack of engagement with instructors, and inefficiency of instructional information. Based on the findings of this research, organizational challenges include the lack of diversity in online courses and a lack of online teaching expertise among the teaching staff. Ethical challenges include a lack of a proper culture for using this discipline, as well as a negative view of online education. Technical obstacles include inadequate internet connection and a loss of physical space. Managerial problems are related to ineffective instructional materials. Communication problems consist of a loss of

connection with professors and students and a lack of interaction.

Aboagye et al. (2020) explored the challenges of students in tertiary institutions, including internet connectivity, using compatible smartphones, laptops and participating in group-work. The results showed that challenges could be categorized into eight groups: social issues, faculty issues, outreach issues, learning dynamics, learning issues, general issues, learner intentions, and demographics. They revealed that the most critical challenge could be accessibility issues, followed by social, academic, and generic problems. Specifically, students were not prepared for a fully online experience, and they found it difficult to access course materials. Hijazi and AlNatour (2021) stated that the online learning challenges negatively impacted students studying English-101 and English-99 in an EFL context during the COVID-19 pandemic. An electronic survey with multiple analytical methods was sent to 1,200 selected students studying English-101 and English-99 courses at Yarmouk University in Jordan to collect data. The analysis of the questionnaire data demonstrated that the challenges encountered by the students are teaching methods, social aspects, infrastructures, computer skills, coordination, motivation & willingness, and assessment methods.

2.2.1. Physical and mental challenges

Muslimin and Harintama (2020) acknowledged that students feel nervous about online learning. Istifci (2016) confirmed that students found it boring during online courses since they could easily search for the answers to the assignments. During remote learning, students feel dizzy due to staring at screens of cell phones or laptops for too long (Ariyanti, 2020). According to Octaberlina and Muslimin (2020), one of the most significant hurdles to online learning generally seems to be the physical barrier. Students spend much time working at computers, as opposed to reading a printed page. This constitutes an outwardly visual activity for them. Smaller text and pixelated images are commonly used on digitally displayed pages, so they must strain their eyes to read. The study recommended that teachers should offer their pupils a break while enrolling in an E-Learning activity to overcome physical obstacles. In addition, many students have headaches every time they attend classes (Ariyanti, 2020). Talal Alodwan (2021) asserted that online learning causes social isolation among students.

Motivation is one of the most important elements influencing L2 learners' success and effectiveness in the language acquisition process. Meşe and Sevilen (2021) investigated students' perspectives of motivation in relation to online education. Factors that make students feel unmotivated when learning online include dissatisfaction with course content and materials, lack of self-discipline to participate in the course, lack of communication between teachers and students, and lack of private space to monitor the course.

Yuzulia (2021) discovered the challenges and problems faced by students during the implementation of online learning. Students prefer traditional learning to online learning due to some difficulties in implementing e-learning. The students complained about the techniques used by the teachers. They are asked to participate in Zoom meetings every day, which makes them feel uninterested. Furthermore, learners have some health issues such as eye strain and

headaches. Teachers ought to provide interesting methods and techniques in online teaching to boost student motivation and performance during this pandemic situation.

2.2.2. Language learning challenges

Sai et al. (2013) and Altunay (2019) claimed that some learners found it awkward to enhance their command of English via distance education. Similarly, Ja'ashan (2020) reported that the students did not improve their language skills like speaking skills with the implementation of blended learning. Moreover, Phan et al. (2022) reported that students studying online could not practice speaking English sufficiently because there are limited interactions among the students (p. 252). Mahyoob (2020) claimed that learners could not effectively interact with teachers in virtual English skills classes regarding language communication. In contrast, Khabbaz and Najjar (2015) investigated that combining foreign language learning with modern technologies may give rise to many difficulties which hinder students' independent learning.

Moreover, Sai et al. (2013) explored the challenges of online courses learners took. The research was carried out at the University Sains Malaysia's School of Distance Education with 512 participants. The participants faced challenges in taking online courses regarding language skills. The results showed that most learners had difficulties in the areas of speaking, vocabulary, and grammar when they were learning English through online education. The study recommended that lecturers need to pay attention to learners while teaching and learning online. Al-Shamsi et al. (2020) discovered the impacts of mobile learning on improving learners' listening skills. Most participants faced some problems associated with the suitability of listening material, the nature of mobile apps, cell phone screen sizes, and poor connections. Students had difficulties listening to audio materials and answering questions simultaneously, so they sometimes forgot what they listened to and could not grasp the meaning of the recordings.

2.2.3. Technology challenges

Studying online effectively requires learners to have a good technical knowledge base and a stable connection. Conversely, most students cannot have perfect online learning experiences due to technical problems, poor digital skills, etc. Kuama and Intharaksa (2016) specified that learners face technological and individual difficulties. For those taking online courses for a long time, unstable internet connections might be a primary reason that irritates them because they cannot grasp their knowledge of the lessons or follow what lecturers are teaching (Ariyanti, 2020, Muslimin & Harintama, 2020; Hijazi & AlNatour, 2021; Nguyen & Duong, 2021; Yuzulia, 2021). Moreover, Altunay (2019) pointed out that EFL students encountered some high-tech tools' absence and technical problems even though they were satisfied with online education thanks to its flexibility. Nugroho (2020) demonstrated that most students lacked technological knowledge, so turning the entire process of learning into online classrooms is not successful. Other studies' results also admitted that learners encountered technology problems (Islam et al., 2015; Atmojo & Nugroho, 2020; Jhon et al., 2020; Alodwan, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, some underprivileged students living in remote areas are less likely to

access the Internet (Ariyanti, 2020; Adnan & Anwar, 2020).

In 2011, Tanveer conducted a study to focus on students' and instructors' perspectives on the use of e-learning pedagogical tools in language classrooms and the problems they confront and some solutions to improve the practical use of e-learning tools in classroom-based language education at Majan College. Common hurdles include technological illiteracy, certain students' severely restricted educational backgrounds, insufficient time and internet materials, a lack of confidence in using digital equipment, an inexperienced instructor. Lecturers and learners must be provided with support regarding training, equipment, and time resources.

Mahyoob (2020) conducted a study to focus on the challenges of e-learning, learners' interaction with information technology tools in e-learning, and learners' satisfaction with online learning at the University of Taibah, Saudi Arabia. The research showed that learners have difficulty accessing the Blackboard platform. About 30% of learners missed classes and other tasks while using the Blackboard. Technical issues are also a huge obstacle as some learners have difficulty connecting to the Internet, accessing classes, and downloading course materials. The level of satisfaction of EFL learners with online learning is low; less than 50% are satisfied with e-learning, while 14% of learners are not satisfied with e-learning and 43% of learners are not entirely in favour of long-term online education.

A similar study was carried out by Gulnaz et al. (2020). They investigated the effects of blended learning on the educational process as experienced by instructors and students using the Cambridge Learning Management System. The survey was conducted on 200 EFL students and 8 teachers. The EFL students filled out a questionnaire, and 8 teachers took part in a structured interview. They noticed that students were experiencing technical problems. To resolve the challenges, the university needed to hire professional instructors who could spend maximum time answering the students' queries and fixing the technical issues immediately. Ja'ashan (2020) found that the time required for exams and assignments was insufficient, and the digital platform resulted in problems accessing course content. Some students struggled with their home internet access and were dissatisfied with the software at home. Most students who had basic computer literacy skills could not utilize E-learning, so they should be equipped with E-learning skills through training courses so as to make successful use of E-learning.

Allo's research article (2020) looked into learners' perceptions of online learning in the middle of the COVID-19 epidemic. The learners of UKI Toraja's English study program are the focus of this study. The researcher interviewed the learners over the phone using the WhatsApp application. According to the findings, learners' perceptions of online learning are good and helpful. Students hoped that instructors would incorporate popular programs into the online learning system, such as free Messenger apps. They thought that it would be beneficial for lecturers to create learning groups on Messenger so that their friends who do not have access to the Internet might get knowledge. They also stated that individual activities helped them maintain the necessary physical distance due to the epidemic and that they needed group tasks to assist friends who did not yet have an internet connection. Also, they wished explanations had been provided before materials and homework were given. For this reason, they suggested

that Voice Note might be utilized successfully while delivering instructions. However, it was claimed that lecturers' online learning material and directions were difficult to use. The researcher also recommended that teachers need to observe their students' conditions with regard to financial ability, availability of Internet access, and choices of online learning applications that are effective and efficient to the implementation of online learning systems.

In 2020, Octaberlina and Muslimin concentrated on online courses and difficulties that students are facing and their solutions for overcoming them. Students experienced diverse challenges while learning online: unfamiliarity with e-learning and bad internet connection. Therefore, there is a gap between positive results and the obstacles faced by students who are very substantial in carrying out online learning. The major aspects function as obstacles to e-learning. The concept of E-Learning as a learning method was recognized as the most important component. This aspect includes general concerns about the validity and feasibility of E-Learning and the loss of "personal contact" in comparison to more traditional forms of learning and development. The second element is directly related to the use of technology and the Internet. This element takes into account both the pupils' technological proficiency and the speed accessible to them on the Internet. The combination of all of these unique characteristics might make it difficult to focus on studying in such an E-Learning platform. To overcome a loss of personal contact in E-Learning, the instructor must consider the overall academic objectives, as well as students' learning styles. Additionally, to address the shortage of networks and internet connections, the instructors should convert video content to audio and utilize texts.

2.3. Research gap

After examining the previous papers, most of the authors above highlighted that online courses had countless weaknesses that should be improved in the future despite giving EFL students many virtues. These studies have been well organized with awesome results; however, most were not looked into through qualitative and quantitative methods to have wider views. This is because EFL students' challenges need investigating by questionnaires and online or offline interviews to understand their perspectives of online learning fully. For this reason, our research plans to discover and clarify the challenges of online learning EFL students at VLU are experiencing via the two methods, including qualitative and quantitative methods. To accomplish superior online experiences as well as online courses' quality enhancement, it is suggested that those disadvantages are bound to be removed as fast as possible. All in all, in line with our paper's evidence, EFL educators at VLU can have obvious insights into EFL students' current problems of online courses in order to assist EFL students in coping with these problems.

2.4. Research Questions

1. What are the challenges of online courses that EFL students have to overcome?

2. What are the solutions to improve EFL students' academic performance?

3. Methods

3.1. Pedagogical Setting & Participants

Van Lang University, established in 1995, is considered one of the first private universities with great success in education. Based on Decision No.109/QĐ/VL-HĐT 18th, August 2020 of Chairman of the Van Lang University's Council about Educational Philosophy, the educational institution's philosophy of education includes a holistic, lifelong, ethical, and impactful learning experience. At the beginning of 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic first spread to Vietnam, which made VLU decide to change traditional courses to e-learning ones. According to Thuy (2021), the researcher confirmed that VLU offered adequate training and guides to assist both lecturers and learners in adapting to new online methods during the entire process of learning and teaching. Nevertheless, when online courses were applied to educate students at VLU, there were many challenges leading to negative effects on their academic achievement.

The research's participants are 100 second-year to four-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU. The paper was carried out during the first semester of the academic year 2021-2022 when the participants were taking online courses due to the outbreak of COVID-19. Because the investigators found it tough to research with all students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU, using a Simple Random Sampling (SRS) method is a suitable solution for gathering information, evaluating specific numbers, and determining the study sample. All 100 EFL students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU participated in the surveys. It was believed that the study would grasp co-existing challenges of online education based on the learners' opinions and experiences.

3.2. Design of the Study

The current research concentrated on investigating the challenges of the entire online learning process encountered by EFL students at VLU. The study integrated quantitative and qualitative methods to collect the data related to the research problem. The mixed-methods were gathered by questionnaires online. The researchers designed the questionnaires because it might be simple to analyze the information. Additionally, the researchers asked participants to provide their personal information like name, gender, age, and major before carrying out the interviews and surveys. The data from participants were only used to support the research. Those who took part in the study were willing to show their perspectives voluntarily. The paper's purpose was to understand EFL students' problems about online courses that they learned through their opinions. The mixed methods were used to answer the research questions.

3.2.1. The quantitative method

The researchers chose online questionnaires designed by Google Forms to analyze data. The surveys consisted of multiple-choice questions with the five-point Likert scale from "totally disagree" to "totally agree" (1 = totally disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = totally agree). The aim of the paper was to conduct the surveys with 100 second-year to four-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU. The online questionnaire list was

designed and posted to Facebook groups of the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU. Participants were given about five to ten minutes to fill out the survey. It took about two weeks to gather sufficient answers for the paper. About the benefits of this method, Wright (2005) found that utilizing questionnaire surveys saves investigators' efforts and time thanks to supplying automated data collection. Instead of asking participants to fill in traditional surveys like paper-and-pencil questionnaires, they could submit data through the Internet. The researcher concluded that online surveys allowed research group members to share information and results when participants submitted the data to the researchers. Moreover, the questionnaire list was divided into many parts with regard to types of challenges of online education: technology challenges, physical and mental challenges, and learning environment challenges.

3.2.2. The qualitative method

The researchers selected 15 EFL students randomly and asked them to express their ideas and perspectives about online courses that they had learned via 4 interview questions. As a result of the pandemic, online interviews were conducted rather than in-person ones. The investigators invited the participants to join meetings on Microsoft Teams or Zoom applications to make semi-structured interviews successful. Each Zoom or Microsoft Teams interview lasted at least ten minutes and was video-recorded. Furthermore, the researchers carried out interviews, including two parts. The first one consisted of name, gender, age, and major. Second, online interviews contained some questions associated with the challenges of learning English skills via online education. When it comes to the advantage of this method, Fox (2009) reported that exploiting semi-structured interviews was effective for researchers to collect data regarding perspectives, attitudes, and personal feelings because interviewees can express their opinions exactly about what they experienced.

3.3. Data collection & analysis

With the quantitative method, the questions were made to collect data in terms of EFL learners' challenges of online learning and their opinions about e-learning courses. The participants were asked to choose one of the options (1 = totally disagree; 2 = disagree; 3 = neutral; 4 = agree; 5 = totally agree) upon filling in the questionnaire list. Each part of the questionnaire list focused on sorts of challenges of online courses such as technology challenges, physical and mental challenges, and learning environment challenges. After participants had filled in the surveys, the researchers evaluated those results. Each kind of challenge was demonstrated through specific numbers and percentages (%). In order to make the process of estimation in statistics simple, the study applied a software called Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Based on the results, the study could estimate common challenges during EFL students' online learning process to help EFL teachers understand what their students faced. In addition, the researchers chose 15 EFL students randomly and gave them an interview question list including 4 questions. The interview questions focused on the participants' challenges and comments about online courses, particularly the challenges of learning English skills during the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants were encouraged to express their feelings in their own words with detailed explanations and supporting ideas. They were allowed to use Vietnamese so long

as they had difficulties in expressing their opinions in the English language. The investigators could translate Vietnamese answers into English ones if necessary. The researchers made the data peer-reviewed to ensure that the study had logical information. In other words, unreliable and incomplete answers were ignored. After finishing the surveys, the researchers designed tables to demonstrate the results. Additionally, all interview answers were shown and analyzed in this study.

4. Results/Findings and discussion

The results of this research were data from using the two methods, which are quantitative and qualitative. Collecting and analyzing the data played a pivotal role in answering the two questions of the paper. The researchers used statistics and percentages (%) to describe the options from "totally disagree" to "totally agree" (1 = totally disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = totally agree) for quantitative data. Furthermore, the research showed participants' answers regarding their opinions about online courses and discovered the common challenges of learning English skills online for qualitative data.

4.1. Quantitative analysis

Table 1. Technology challenges

Questionnaires	1	2	3	4	5
You have poor computer skills.	18%	11%	40%	26%	5%
You find it difficult to use applications such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, etc.	16%	16%	47%	11%	10%
The poor network connection is one of the common problems that make you face a lot of difficulties in learning online.	6%	10%	12%	42%	30%
You have to be trained to enhance your computer skills.	7%	9%	12%	42%	30%
You have sufficient equipment such as smartphones, laptops, or computers to study online.	31%	46%	12%	3%	8%

Table 1 shows the percentages of the participant's answers to the items regarding technology challenges. Five items in this table indicated that students have problems with technology on a regular basis. All of these five mean ratings had significant impacts on joining the online courses of students at Van Lang University. Items 1 and Item 4 reported that students had trouble using the required computer skills. Of the respondents, just 31% of students thought that they had poor computer skills (as shown by the sample's responses on item 1), but 72% wanted to be trained to enhance their computer skills (as shown by the sample's responses on item 4). This meant that the students desired to improve their computer skills. Participants did not have too many difficulties in using the applications such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Google Classroom, and so on. The answers to item 5 in the equipment showed that 77% of the students

disagreed that they had sufficient equipment such as smartphones, laptops, or computers. Item 3 demonstrated that the students faced a lot of difficulties in learning online because of poor network connection (72%).

Table 2. Learning environment challenges

Questionnaires	1	2	3	4	5
Noise pollution prevents you from focusing on the lesson; that is, you do not have a quiet space to concentrate on your learning.	3%	7%	20%	32%	38%
Working in online groups is hard since the interaction between students is limited.	7%	9%	19%	24%	41%
When learning online, you cannot avoid using social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, etc.	6%	11%	23%	30%	30%
You cannot develop social skills because of the independent learning environment.	5%	3%	15%	42%	35%

Students had different attitudes towards the challenges of their learning environment, as shown in Table 2 above. Items 1 and Item 2 reported that students had difficulty with the e-learning environment. 70% of the students agreed that noise pollution could prevent them from focusing on the lesson. Only 16% of e-learning students disagreed that online learning affected their teamwork, while 65% of students claimed that e-learning had negative influences on relationships between students because of the lack of interaction and discussion. Until now, students had not been trained to have essential skills for online learning. For this reason, when they transferred to this form of learning, they found it very difficult to adapt. Item 3 showed that 60% of students agreed that the comfortable home school environment made them easily distracted from learning by using social media like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and so forth. The university played a key role in developing social skills for young adults, but the results had shown that 77% of students agreed that online learning also lacked the time needed for students to develop appropriate social skills (as shown by the sample's responses on item 4).

Table 3. Physical and mental challenges

Questionnaires	1	2	3	4	5
Online learning causes a lack of learning motivation because it is too complicated to follow.	2%	14%	11%	63%	10%
Online learning is too boring to continue your learning.	9%	52%	23%	11%	5%
You feel isolated during online courses because of the independent learning environment.	7%	3%	8%	4%	78%
You feel exhausted due to sitting in front of computers too long.	3%	10%	12%	71%	4%
Online learning has negative effects on your physical health such as obesity, eye strain, and so on.	4%	9%	13%	68%	6%

As can be seen, Table 3 showed the results as regards physical and mental challenges of 100 second-year to four-year students at the Faculty of Foreign Languages of VLU. When studying through e-learning, most people (73%) agreed that they had a lack of learning motivation. Many students (52%) confirmed that online learning was not boring, and they felt that it was joyful and satisfactory. With regard to the question about whether you felt isolated during online

courses, the majority of the answers (78%) confirmed that feeling isolated might happen to all, especially when learning was challenging. Numerous individuals (71%) also agreed that learning through e-learning might be exhausting due to sitting in front of computers for many hours. 68% of the respondents agreed that online learning also had negative effects on their physical health like eye strain or obesity, and their bodies did not receive the necessary energy.

4.2. Qualitative analysis

Table 4. Challenges of online writing courses

Students	*Interview question 1: Did you have any challenges in online writing courses? Why and why not?*
Student 1 (Hanh)	*"In my opinion, online writing courses might not be challenging because lecturers gave coursebooks and references that were good enough for me to improve my writing skills."*
Student 2 (Mai)	*"Yes, I did. Because some teachers' online methods are too complicated to absorb. Writing is one of the hard subjects, so students need devoted lecturers to help them advance this skill."*
Student 3 (Anh)	*"In my Writing 5 course, I faced many challenges regarding looking for correct references to support my ideas when I was writing an academic essay due to my lecturer's ineffective teaching method."*
Student 4 (Dat)	*"I had some trouble with the lessons that were too sophisticated, and the teachers didn't have any effort in guiding us to understand the lessons."*
Student 5 (Chi)	*"The lack of interaction between teachers and students is the most significant barrier to learning online through Microsoft Teams for a difficult subject like Writing 5. Because communication is limited, it is difficult to absorb new knowledge."*
Student 6 (Tu)	*"I think that learning writing with online courses is not challenging because this skill requires interaction between learners and instructors. In other words, students only need to have feedback from their teachers about their essays and self-correct their mistakes."*
Student 7 (Quynh)	*"Coherence was my barrier in writing, every word seemed to be fit but made no sense. I spent more than 12 weeks recognizing what was irrelevant. There should be teachers to correct students appropriately."*
Student 8 (Tien)	*"During the pandemic, I had done my Writing 5 and had some challenges. The first challenge associated with the devices for learning is that my family is poor in the countryside, so my parents cannot buy a laptop or good mobile phone for my study immediately. The second one about the coursebook is that files sent by the teacher were very hard to see while I was studying. As a result, I could not study without printed books."*
Student 9 (Van)	*"I'm currently studying online Writing 5 and generally I think my online writing course is fine. But there are also some disadvantages. I don't have many opportunities or enough time to practice writing in online classes. I can't receive any feedback about my writing from my teacher. For example, in my previous offline classroom, teachers would pick random writings from the students and check errors in those writings in front of the class. All students can look at and realize errors in writing. As a result, they can avoid those errors in the future. In contrast, in the online course, the teacher is less likely to do that. Instead, I find that the teacher often does a one-way talking teaching style over the course while students listen passively. Usually, I don't know if my writings are right or wrong and how many grades my essays are. There's not much time for checking and giving feedback in online courses. In addition, in offline classes, teachers*

	usually give students homework to do after class. So in the next class, teachers will give back the exercise which they have already commented on and graded on. Teachers wrote their detailed comments about the errors and pointed out what needs to be improved on the exercise. From that, I can fix my errors quickly. However, teachers in online courses give the exercise back to students quite late and without any comment on the essay. The exercise hasn't been sent back to students soon during the course but is being sent back on the last few days of it. Besides, I also have difficulty when I do the online exam since I often lack time. So when I submit the test, I often have the computer lagging and it makes me submit it late. But my teacher supported me on that."
Student 10 (Thang)	*"I think that it is not challenging for the writing section due to my quite good typing skills. However, the data collecting process took me a ton of time to analyze the assignment which I'm not good at (this section is more on the reading side)."*
Student 11 (Duy)	*"Yes, I did. When studying online, the subject had too many small details that I missed because I was careless and didn't pay attention to the online classes."*
Student 12 (Bao)	*"I did have problems with my online writing course, mainly because of how the teachers from the last two semesters conveyed the lessons. Since we study online, the interaction between teachers and students isn't as good as offline. It's either the internet connection is weak or just the teacher rushing the lessons, so students can barely learn anything."*
Student 13 (My)	*"I did not have any challenges. I think online learning has the same quality as offline learning."*
Student 14 (Trinh)	*"In Writing 5, I had a hard time finding sources because the teacher asked for reputable sources. There are recent topics such as health or COVID-19 but there seems to be no research paper for me to refer to."*
Student 15 (Nhu)	*"I did not have any challenges because I usually watched recordings after class to understand obviously about the new lesson."*

In Table 4, most students agreed that writing is a difficult subject, so learners need devoted lecturers to help them enhance this skill. When learning Writing, some students had some trouble with the lessons that were too sophisticated, and the teachers didn't have any effort in guiding us to understand the lessons. Another issue that students confronted was relaying the teacher's lesson, teachers had to deliver lessons straightforwardly and understandably. Students faced many challenges regarding looking for correct references to support their ideas when writing an academic essay due to the lecturer's ineffective teaching method. The interaction between students and teachers when learning online was limited. And internet connection was also a cause of lack of communication. It is either the internet connection is weak or just the teacher rushing the lessons, so students can barely learn anything. Besides, some students were not satisfied with the teacher's response speed when learning online. They could not receive any feedback about writings from the teacher. For example, teachers did not have much time to check and give feedback in online courses, so students hardly noticed the mistakes they made.

Table 5: Challenges of online listening courses

Students	***Interview question 2: Did you have any challenges in online listening courses? Why and why not?***
Student 1	*"I think that taking online listening courses is so boring because lecturers only ask students to*

(Hanh)	*turn on and listen to audio with some instructions. In offline courses, there are some activities making classrooms more interesting."*
Student 2 (Mai)	*"Yes, I did. Because I am not good at listening to English. I can understand dialogues if I have a transcript. In contrast, I listen without a transcript, which makes it difficult during listening."*
Student 3 (Anh)	*"Learning listening online is quite easy because I'm familiar with online methods"*
Student 4 (Dat)	*"I have some difficulty in understanding the lessons because sometimes the wifi connection is unstable and the voice gets a pause or a long silence without hearing anything."*
Student 5 (Chi)	*"Vocabulary is not enough to understand the listening tasks, in addition, the teacher also does not let students practice in order from easy to difficult which makes me cope with trouble in gauging how far my skills have progressed and what I can do to improve better."*
Student 6 (Tu)	*"Listening courses were boring. The unstable internet connection might have influences on practicing listening and taking online tests."*
Student 7 (Quynh)	*"It is up to everyone's strengths. To me, listening is the hardest skill to master, so online listening courses provide me with a more comfortable and advantageous zone than in traditional classes. It is also easy to search for what is unclearly heard."*
Student 8 (Tien)	*"I often missed some parts of lectures and the knowledge lecturers were teaching due to the unstable internet connection. Sometimes I couldn't finish my listening assignments early because my device's software was too old to turn on audio on modern applications."*
Student 9 (Van)	*"No. We study listening from audio whether in offline or online courses. So, there are no differences between online and offline methods. I have to spend most of my time listening to audio. Moreover, being at home seems to be a little better because I am not dependent on teachers. I can actively learn by listening more during class or sometimes I can listen to the part repeatedly several times if I find it hard to understand. In sum, I can actively learn without any limit from the teacher."*
Student 10 (Thang)	*"Yes, I did. It mostly depends on the lecturer whether they make a clear speech or not (accent can also contribute to the impact of the quality of the online course)."*
Student 11 (Duy)	*"No, I didn't. I don't have any difficulties when it comes to listening. I have good listening skills because I have watched a lot of foreigners' YouTube videos."*
Student 12 (Bao)	*"I didn't have any problem with my Listening course online. This is mainly because listening itself is a self-studying subject, students just need to practice it by listening to audio clips from the lessons and some instructions from teachers."*
Student 13 (My)	*"Learning this skill via online methods is so convenient because lecturers who teach online or offline only allow students to listen to audio from lessons and practice listening through assignments. And this skill doesn't require interaction between instructors and students so much."*
Student 14 (Trinh)	*"Yes, because I am a bad speaker, I find it difficult to understand English when there is unclear sound."*
Student 15 (Nhu)	*"No, I didn't. Learning listening online helps me listen more clearly than in class."*

According to Table 5, when it comes to online listening classes, Student 4 (Dat), Student 6 (Tu),

and Student 8 (Tien) complained that they faced unstable internet connections which made their online learning experiences more complicated. For example, Student 4 (Dat) and Student 8 (Tien) could not listen clearly to their lecturer's entire lessons or lectures, and Student 6 (Tu) encountered difficulties in taking exams or practicing listening skills. Student 14 (Trinh) described herself as a bad English learner, so practicing listening online was so hard when some sounds were unclear. Furthermore, Hanh said that learning listening online without any activities was boring because online classrooms were difficult for teachers to design activities. Student 5 (Chi) reported that her lecturer did not permit students to practice in order from easy to difficult, which made her deal with trouble in gauging how far her listening skills had progressed and what she could do to improve better. She thought that teachers should make their classes comfortable with easiest to hardest levels to assist students in improving listening skills when teaching listening online.

Table 6: Challenges of online reading courses

Students	*Interview question 3: Did you have any challenges in online reading courses? Why and why not?*
Student 1 (Hanh)	*"Reading skills may not be difficult to learn, so online or offline methods are suitable for me. During online or offline courses, the lecturer gives students vocabulary based on topics of coursebooks and trains them to have reading skills like skimming, scanning, and other tips. Students improve their reading skills through reading as much as possible, which means that they don't depend on their lecturer."*
Student 2 (Mai)	*"Yes, I did. Because Reading is limited by time, sometimes I feel worried about assignments or tests while doing them. For example, lecturers often give 5-8 minutes to finish a task, but it contains numerous new words. As a result, I cannot complete on time."*
Student 3 (Anh)	*"Learning this skill is tough if I don't remember a large number of academic words. In my opinion, studying hard helped me to get high scores despite studying online."*
Student 4 (Dat)	*"I can't focus well because the lessons drag on for too lòng without any motivation to push myself harder through the learning process."*
Student 5 (Chi)	*"Reading, in my opinion, is a subject that can be studied independently. I used to struggle with Reading because I lacked an effective method for dealing with it. So, in order to excel in this subject, I think we need to devote time to practicing a variety of reading tests at various levels. Online learning may not have any impact on my reading skills."*
Student 6 (Tu)	*"Topics in reading courses are quite dull to read. Moreover, there are too many words on my computer screen to read, leading to eyestrain."*
Student 7 (Quynh)	*"The barrier in online reading courses was that there was poor interaction with teachers when I encountered incomprehensible paragraphs. Because we lacked eye contact and body language, it took more time to understand than normal. It was time-consuming."*
Student 8 (Tien)	*"I didn't face many challenges because this skill is quite simple to learn independently. I only felt that I had to turn on many tabs on my computer to read files, which made me annoyed to follow what my lecturer was teaching."*
Student 9 (Van)	*"In online reading courses, I had to use ebooks instead of print textbooks for studying and I think it was a little bit uneasy to note or mark something when I read the text online. But in general, I*

	didn't have any difficulties because if I was in an offline class I would just read texts and spend time listening to teachers, exactly what I would do when I learn online. Sometimes, I think learning online is much more convenient because it not only delivers exactly the knowledge that can be learned offline but it also helps me to easily access the learning platform despite where I am. I can save my time and energy and don't need to spend hours going to school."
Student 10 (Thang)	*"This case is actually quite big, I'm not a good reader, in fact, when it comes to reading, even for online or offline classes, I perform extremely badly. The reason is that I always lose my concentration (laziness is the easier way to explain) and I would like to see the video with that information instead."*
Student 11 (Duy)	*"No, I didn't. The subject is kinda easy for me to comprehend."*
Student 12 (Bao)	*"Just like Listening courses, I personally don't have any problem with studying it online, so far I don't. Since it mainly depends on how well the students do the reading and research by themselves."*
Student 13 (My)	*"I can learn this skill autonomously, so I don't have any challenges."*
Student 14 (Trinh)	*"No. Because I use online materials, I can search for new vocabulary faster than in class to read."*
Student 15 (Nhu)	*"Yes, I had some problems when learning reading online. For example, I have several questions I could not do by myself, and I could not ask my lecturer because we did not have many times in online class."*

As shown in Table 6, the students had the perception of disagreeing in online reading courses. Student 2 (Mai) had problems with vocabulary; for instance, Mai complained that doing reading assignments and taking tests that contained numerous new words were challenging, but lecturers just gave 5-8 minutes to finish. In addition to the vocabulary, Student 7 (Quynh) and Student 15 (Nhu) encountered difficulties in interacting with lecturers. For example, they had several questions which they wanted to ask, but lecturers did not have much time in online classes like offline ones. Furthermore, Quynh reported that students and teachers lacked eye contact and body language, which made the lesson more difficult to understand than normal. The motivation was another barrier, and Student 4 (Dat) reported that he could not focus well because the lessons lasted so long. Remarkably, reading too many words as well as studying on computer screens for too long led to eyestrain, which was complained about by Student 6 (Tu). Additionally, Tu also felt bored because topics in reading courses were quite dull to read. Student 9 (Van) argued that it was difficult to note or mark something important because students had to use online materials.

Table 7: Challenges of online speaking courses

Students	*Interview question 4: Did you have any challenges in online speaking courses? Why and why not?*
Student 1 (Hanh)	*"Speaking is one of the most challenging skills to learn online for many reasons. First, students facing unstable internet connections cannot communicate with others. Second, students who*

	practice speaking or take online exams are more likely to use transcripts. These transcripts are created to cheat in exams in case they forget what they need to speak. The dishonest way cannot help those students to improve their speaking skills although they can get good scores. Third, when the teacher asks students to turn on their camera to practice speaking, some of them cannot do it because their devices are out of order, which causes inconvenience and influences the quality of their communication experience. I think turning on cameras to practice speaking with partners in online classes is boring. I love offline classes and their communication environment because I can meet my classmates and teacher and interact with them naturally."
Student 2 (Mai)	*"Yes, I did. I recognized that I really need to have face-to-face interaction with my partner."*
Student 3 (Anh)	*"My pronunciation and speaking skills are poor, so learning online caused many challenges. I want to improve this skill through offline courses."*
Student 4 (Dat)	*"I can't communicate with others, maybe because students' competitiveness with one another and voice lag in online learning can be a handful to understand."*
Student 5 (Chi)	*"I think the major challenge is interaction. It's difficult to have a conversation fully when I'm speaking without feeling, I mean without seeing my friends' emotions. That's kinda boring."*
Student 6 (Tu)	*"Yes, because I want to talk to people in person, not through online classes."*
Student 7 (Quynh)	*"No, after 2 online speaking courses, I gained proficient speaking skills. For the teacher's demand that all of us have to turn on the camera and microphone, we do not lack interaction but have more effective space to think carefully."*
Student 8 (Tien)	*"Online classes don't allow me to meet my classmates as well as my lecturer to discuss with them and practice speaking face-to-face. Speaking through my computer screen makes me feel safe and comfortable to speak if I make mistakes, but speaking in online courses may lead to unconfidence when I interact with others in person."*
Student 9 (Van)	*"I didn't have any difficulty in speaking in online courses. I still could acquire all the knowledge and had chances to practice speaking through answers and questions with teachers. Through online courses, I'm more confident to volunteer to speak."*
Student 10 (Thang)	*"No, I don't think I had any challenge with my speaking skills in online courses. It's just me speaking through my laptop instead of speaking in person."*
Student 11 (Duy)	*"Yes, I did. Sometimes I had a poor internet connection, so I couldn't actively communicate with others during speaking courses."*
Student 12 (Bao)	*"Yes, I did have difficulties in studying Speaking online. Due to the lack of face-to-face interactions between students and teachers, I didn't really have the chance to actually practice speaking English to each other. So when students make mistakes in pronunciation, gestures or body language, there's no one to fix them."*
Student 13 (My)	*"There are many challenges in speaking courses. Unlike offline courses, there is a lack of interaction between my classmates and teacher. When it comes to Speaking 4, the Faculty of Foreign Languages shouldn't apply e-learning to this subject for some reasons. This subject trains EFL students to have good presentation skills in English. When presenting online, the students can use transcripts to read instead of speaking what they remember. Therefore, the students cannot improve their speaking skills as well as presentation skills. And they cannot speak confidently in public in the future."*

| Student 14 (Trinh) | *"Well, I think the teacher will not be able to correct students' pronunciation through online methods."* |
| Student 15 (Nhu) | *"Of course. Because when I presented my presentation, I was extremely worried about the problems regarding unstable connection and device.``* |

Regarding Table 7, almost all students had many challenges in online speaking courses. Through the collected answers, most of the participants said the most difficult aspect of e-learning was the interaction between lecturers and classmates while studying online (Mai, Chi, Tien, Dat, Tu, Hanh, Bao, & My). Remarkably, the same number of students have technological difficulties as a result of unstable Internet connections (Hanh, Nhu, & Duy). In addition to the Internet connection, Student 1 (Hanh) and Student 15 (Nhu) also encountered problems related to laptop errors and system errors. Next, Student 3 (Anh) and Student 14 (Trinh) argued that it is difficult to speak English because of limited pronunciation and not being able to correct pronunciation through online methods. Furthermore, Student 12 (Bao) reported that the teacher in his Speaking 4 class could not see students' bodies, so it was difficult to recognize their mistakes regarding body language, gestures, and so on. The issues related to learning online were also widely commented on. According to Student 1 (Hanh) and Student 13 (My), instead of saying what students remembered, they might utilize transcripts to read to have great performances.

4.3. Discussion

The present study's results are the same as the literature regarding common challenges of online courses. According to Hijazi and AlNatour (2021), students had difficulties attending online classes due to unstable connections. Students had yet to be trained to have good computer skills, so they sometimes had problems with using educational applications such as Microsoft Teams or Zoom (p. 387). Furthermore, it was hard for students to explain problems to lecturers, which meant that there was limited interaction between learners and instructors (p. 388). In terms of online teaching methods, teachers failed to assess learners owing to their inappropriate methods. More and more students cheat when taking online exams (p. 390). In addition, there existed a limited personalized connection with lecturers, as well as limited discussions between learners regarding assignments, homework, or social communication (p. 390). The study of Nguyen and Duong (2021) also agreed with the points mentioned above; they reported that the common challenges are poor internet connections and learning equipment (p. 26). They also confirmed that interacting effectively with lecturers and classmates via online methods is another challenge (p. 26). When it comes to language learning challenges, Hijazi and AlNatour (2021) concluded that most learners could not improve their speaking and writing skills; the courses only concentrated on listening skills. One of the reasons that caused the challenges is because of the lack of lecturers' knowledge, time, or training on how to make online courses become interactive (p. 388).

When it comes to the impacts of online courses on learners' academic performance, Erickson and Wattiaux (2021) said that turning traditional methods into online methods led to negative

beliefs about satisfaction and engagement in some learners. Moreover, Hidalgo-Camacho et al. (2021) claimed that online methods during the COVID-19 pandemic caused experience anxiety and other affective states for teachers and students. In order to improve EFL students' academic performance during their online learning process, EFL lecturers should make their online courses more active and attractive. For example, they can use Edpuzzle (https://edpuzzle.com) to observe their students' learning process. About Edpuzzle's benefits, Ramos (2015) found that learners can view lecturers' lessons and have embed assignments. Through Edpuzzle, learners must focus mainly on what teachers are instructing, which prevents students from using social media or ignoring lecture slides from teachers. Furthermore, Edpuzzle helps lecturers to control their online classes and lead to interesting classes. For EFL students who cannot improve their language skills via online education, EFL teachers had better pay more attention to students' problems. For instance, for writing courses, they can spend more time checking students' mistakes in academic essays through Google Docs. Google Docs is useful for teaching online because everyone can access one online destination where teachers highlight or give feedback for students, and students can see comments or feedback from teachers, even they can interact with their teachers at Google Docs. For speaking courses, teachers can ask learners to turn on their camera to practice speaking with everyone, as well as increase interaction between students and lecturers. Moreover, lecturers should create supportive environments where everyone gives feedback for students' speaking performance. For listening courses, lecturers should create more activities to make learners get motivated.

5. Conclusion

Based on the quantitative and qualitative results above, there were a large number of challenges of online courses when e-learning was applied to train EFL students at VLU. Some participants found that e-learning did not have many negative impacts on their learning experiences. However, most students participating in the research complained that online learning was actually ineffective and annoying. The current research confirmed that EFL students gave a lot of negative feedback and were not ready for the virtual environment.

5.1. Challenges of online courses in terms of physicality and mentality, technology, and learning environments

Students had difficulty in applying computer skills and wanted to be trained to improve the skills. Moreover, they encountered unstable internet connections, which caused inconvenience while following lessons, and most of them did not have enough devices to have good learning experiences. Online education was challenging to adapt due to external, social, and individual factors. First, students could not get on well with others when working in online groups. Second, using social media made learners pay less attention to their online learning process. Third, because of studying individually from home, students' social skills might not be enhanced. Finally, noises and sounds from students' houses stopped students from concentrating on learning. The online environment made them isolated from others, so they felt bored and lost

their learning motivation gradually. In addition, online education forces human beings to work and study from home through computer screens for a long time, which might lead to poor physical health, eye strain, or obesity.

5.2. Challenges of learning English skills via the Internet

Writing might be a skill that was challenging to learn online. Online teaching was hard for teachers to help their learners to fully understand the content of the lessons. To improve students' writing skills, lecturers must make a lot of effort to give feedback and correct their mistakes. However, participants in this study complained that their instructors rarely gave feedback and corrected their mistakes. Some people said that there was poor communication between lecturers and students for various reasons like unstable connections. Teachers only taught the content of the lesson without guiding students to understand the lessons. For example, in Writing 5 courses, students could not grasp methods that teachers taught to look for perfect references for their essays due to the fact that teaching online made both lectures and learners difficult to discuss together. Regarding listening skills, the major challenge was that activities in listening classes were limited, which could not motivate students to learn listening. Besides, another challenge was the unstable internet connections which made students pay no attention to lessons, face trouble in practising listening and taking online listening exams. Students faced difficulties in doing reading assignments and taking online exams with limited time because there were too many new words to read. It was challenging to note something important because students had to use online materials. Besides, reading too many words as well as studying on computer screens for too long led to eyestrain. Some students had trouble communicating with teachers in online classrooms. Furthermore, the lack of eye contact and body language was a challenge to help learners to understand the lessons fully. Most participants could not improve their speaking skills via online education for some reason. The first difficulty was the interaction between lecturers and classmates in speaking classes due to poor network connections. Some students faced technological problems such as laptop errors and system errors that prevented them from communicating with others. Additionally, some learners had poor speaking skills (bad pronunciation, body language, gestures, and so on) that were compulsory in speaking classes, but lecturers did not have the ability to correct their mistakes due to online methods fully. Using transcripts to read upon giving presentations was not a good idea because this was an unfair way and could not enhance students' speaking skills, as well as presentation skills. In conclusion, with quantitative and qualitative methods, the researchers explored numerous challenges about technology, physicality and mentality, learning environments, and learning the four language skills that most EFL students met when they were taking online courses.

5.3. Limitations

There remained some limitations of the present study. The COVID-19 pandemic made the research have limited participants, so the results could not prove that the challenges of the participants were similar to the whole population's ones. The researchers could not invite EFL freshmen to take part in the study because contacting them was hard. Some participants answering the interview questions had unclear answers, so those answers were neglected.

5.4. Suggestions

Research papers in the future should investigate the challenges of EFL freshmen because they were still trying to be accustomed to online methods in their first online learning experience at their university. Compared with second-year to four-year students, the researchers thought that first-year students would be more likely to face more challenges to investigate. According to the results of the study, EFL educators can be aware of some main challenges of students. The lecturers can ask their learners to provide comments on online courses to discover the challenges of online learning. After that, the lecturers look for suitable solutions for students' unforeseen situations. Receiving feedback from learners tends to improve the quality of online courses and assist instructors in changing their teaching methods in order that students with challenges can adapt to the online learning environment. It is true to say that the challenges of online education can be removed if the university gives students a hand with solving the problems, although some complex challenges may be hard to tackle in the present. EFL lecturers need to observe their students' entire online learning process.

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Biodata

Pham Manh Tri is an undergraduate of Van Lang University's Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, discusses the challenges of online learning, as well as its effects on EFL students' academic performance. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where he is currently conducting his research.

Luu Thi Tu Uyen is an undergraduate of Van Lang University's Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, discusses the challenges of online learning, as well as its effects on EFL students' academic performance. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where she is currently conducting her research.

Mai Thi Hoang Uyen is an undergraduate of Van Lang University's Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, discusses the challenges of online learning, as well as its effects on EFL students' academic performance. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where she is currently conducting her research.

Thai Thuy Thuy Trang is an undergraduate of Van Lang University's Faculty of Foreign Languages in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, discusses the challenges of online learning, as well as its effects on EFL students' academic performance. The Faculty of Foreign Languages at Van Lang University is where she is currently conducting her research.

Ms. Ngo Thi Cam Thuy, M.A. and doctoral candidate in TESOL, is a lecturer of Van Lang University, Ho Chi Minh City. She has had more than 25 years teaching English- majoring students. She presented her Research at GloCALL 2019, AALA 2019, CAMTESOL 2020, OPENTESOL 2020, VIETTESOL 2020 and Asia CALL 2021. Her main interests include Professional Development, Methodology, Learner Autonomy, Language Assessment and Emotion Regulation.