Student Choices and Perceptions of Online-Only Courses during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract[1]

Online learning is a growing phenomenon in higher education (Chem, Home, Florell, & Thomas, 2002; Reagan, Evmenova, & Baker, 2014). This study explored the COVID-19 pandemic's influence upon undergraduate university students' decisions to take courses in a traditional in-person format or an online-only format, an issue that has impacted education around the globe (Besser, Gordon, & Zeigler-Hill, 2020). Understanding this issue is a growing convern during the COVID-19 pandemic and understanding it has implications for future K-12 and higher-eduacation online enrollment projections for the future. The study utilized a survey with multiple-choice questions and the opportunity for participants to select "other" and write their own answers. The survey also included open-ended questions soliciting participant beliefs on the advantage and disadvantes of online-only learning formats. The results of this study indicate that students take online-only classes for many reasons, including the need for a more flexible schedule, the ability to work at their own pace, the physical distance from the university, and, in 2020, concerns about health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Keywords: *COVID, online learning, distance learning, COVID-19, pandemic, online education*

1. Introduction

Online learning is changing the face of education, especially in universities and colleges around the world (Chem et al., 2002; Regan, Evmenova, & Baker, 2014). The COVID-19 pandemic has made this mode of learning even more important, bringing it to the forefront as many K-12 and higher education institutions offer more online and distance-learning courses than ever before.

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Is there a difference between online and distance learning? Although there do exist many commonalities, there is a difference in location and student-student and student-instructor interaction. Online is anything using online materials and is often a blended learning technique used with other in-class teaching strategies. Online learning, for instance, can be used as a supplementary tool for in-person classes. As such, it is supplemental in nature. Distance learning is when students work entirely online while the instructor, never meeting them face to face, assigns and assesses work digitally and all communications are facilitated over the internet. The entire mode of instructional delivery and teacher-student interactions is online [Stauffer, 2020]. Online learning can include activities such as in an in-person course, hybrid courses, and online-only distance learning. As such, distance learning is a specific type of online learning. This study seeks to understand the factors in university students' decisions to pursue distance (online-only) modes of instruction, perceived advantages and disadvantages of this mode of instruction for foreign language courses at a basic level, and whether the global COVID-19 pandemic has played a significant role in prompting students who would normally choose in-person courses to opt for distance learning.

2. Review of Literature

Online learning plays a significant role in institutions of higher education Chem et al., 2002). Online learning is a growing phenomenon, with more than 6 million students participating in distance learning courses. This is especially true in higher education, where distance learning comprises a growing percentage of total higher-education enrollment numbers   (Regan et al., 2014. As many as 1/3 of all college students took online courses in 2014, and that number continues to grow (Yu, 2020).

Online learning can include many of the same types of assignments found in in-person classes: tests, quizzes, presentations, online interviews, and online group

projects. However, it also includes online-only assignments, such as blogging, live chat, wikis, audio assignments, webcam collaboration, pre-recorded videos, and podcasts (Bowman, 2010; Demosethenous, Panaoura, & Eteokkleous, 2020).

There are many pros and cons to online learning, both for educators and for students enrolled in the classes. For instance, online-only courses require more reading and writing, less talking and listening. Social difference is a 2nd aspect; students are isolated, alone with a computer, rather than in an in-person setting with a teacher and other students (Bowman, 2010). According to Patel (2014), distance learning requires more creativity and innovation compared to more traditional models of communication. There exists a large body of various media types to enhance online learning. This can present challenges for many students. Skills students need for online learning to be successful include technological competence, communication skills, and time management skills (Martin, Stamper, Flowers, 2020). Students must also have the ability to analyze multiple sources of educational information, create and understand multimedia texts and other multimedia platforms, follow the ethics required for a distance-learning course, and independently follow deadlines (Yu, 2020). Collaborative teamwork skills are likewise an important requirement for success in online-only courses (Demosethenous et al., 2020). In one study, collaboration with online peers was deemed challenging by students but helped alleviate feelings of social isolation (Yu, 2020). Yu also found that students need more real-time interactions with both their instructors and their classmates. Teachers should want instruction to include a variety of multimedia platforms. Many students reported a lack of experience with online collaborative assignments (Demosethenous et al., 2020). These challenges faced by students in online classes can impede learning and discourage students from continuing with distance education.

Students are not the only ones facing challenges in distance-learning courses; educators also report unique challenges in creating and delivering instruction. Instructors may struggle with the creation and implementation of distance-learning courses, where student-educator communication is achieved solely through the use

of a computer. Regan et al. (2014) found that instructors find it more difficult to connect personally with students in distance learning courses than in traditional in-person classes. Meaningful group and peer interactions are another challenge faced by instructors in distance learning courses. Instructors must facilitate these interactions in multiple ways: between instructors and individual students, among student groups, and between students and the curriculum. Finally, some instructors report feeling underprepared to navigate the growing body of technologies utilized in online learning environments. Another challenge instructors must overcome is the potential for online negativity on the part of students who feel safer leaving derogatory comments online than they might in an in-person class. Discussion boards can decrease or disrupt the feeling of online community when negative or toxic comments are introduced, including cyberbullying, trolling, or insulting others' point of view. This is especially risky when posts are anonymous or otherwise detached from the students' in-person behavior and identity (Chem et al, 2002).

These challenges are certainly not to say that distance learning is not without its benefits. Pros for students include 24/7 accessibility to learning tools, the use of multiple modes of online communication, the ability to learn anywhere, and less test-taking anxiety during online assessments than in-class tests or quizzes (Yu, 2020). Collaborative learning during distance courses has also been found to improve students' active learning in online classes (Demosethenous et al., 2020). E-learners also valued having a flexible schedule to complete schoolwork, one where they can work at their own pace and according to their own scheduling needs (Stafford Global, 2020; Stauffer, 2020; Yu, 2020).

The solution to meeting these challenges is a focus on best teaching practices and sound pedagogy rather than simply transferring in-person activities to an online class. According to many authors, the focus should be on pedagogy rather than the technology used. Courses should include multiple pedagogical design frameworks in addition to complementary technology. One article claimed, "Online pedagogy is fundamentally about the adoption of learning and teaching principles in an online

learning design to ensure effective learning practice" (Patel, 2014, p.1). The courses must be user friendly for students to be effective (Patel, 2014). Discussion boards are a common online tool not available in traditional in-person-only courses (Chem et al., 2002). Online learning teachers should incorporate different learning strategies for differing learning styles among students. For instance, while an online course might easily engage visual and aural learners, how can it account for kinesthetic learners (Yu, 2020)? In the end, technology should complement and enhance the pedagogy used in in-person learning. Best-practice pedagogy and meticulous planning are crucial to successful online courses (Reagan et al, 2014).

Student needs are also paramount to the success of online courses. The literature indicates that Millennials, those born between 1981 and 1996, preferred fully online courses, while Generation Z, or those students born between 1997 and 2012, preferred hybrid courses. No differences in course delivery were found between men and women. A majority, 93%, of Generation Z had taken a distance learning (fully online) course at least once, while 97% of Millennials had. However, in this study done by Yu, this result was not statistically significant, indicating that neither students' generation nor their gender significantly impacted their preference for online or hybrid courses (Yu, 2020). Furthermore, flexible schedules, the ability to work at their own pace, and a variety of engaging content made a course successful for students (Demosethenous et al., 2020; Martin et al, 2020). This indicates that, despite challenges to be overcome, instructors and students can enjoy successful and meaningful online-learning experiences.

1.1 Online Learning during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The emergence of the global COVID-19 pandemic has impacted online education in novel ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted students' and teachers' lives in many areas, and this includes school and learning. It has caused a shift toward online learning versus more traditional modes of in-person learning. A study of students from India and South Korea determined that, among examples of

interaction in an e-classroom, personal student levels of motivation, instructor knowledge of e-learning techniques and pedagogy, and the structure of the e-course were all major influences in student satisfaction with their online learning experience during the COVID-19 pandemic (Baber, 2020).

The change to online distance learning has been a major challenge for many students. School goals may become less important as health and safety factors for themselves and their friends and family take precedence. COVID-19 has made life more stressful for students. Safety is paramount and may trump educational concerns. Students must deal with new feelings of stress, anxiety, social isolation and loneliness that are not normally issues in a traditional school environment. Uncertainty about an unresolved situation is also a factor. In online learning, a blended learning environment is often preferred due to access to traditional in-class learning opportunities and the chance to ask the teacher questions and receive personalized answers in real time, but this may not be possible when schools and institutions of higher education make an abrupt switch to distance-only learning (Besser et al.. 2020). This leaves a gap in the literature as researchers hurry to understand if and how the global pandemic is changing the demographics of online-only learners (Julien & Doowkay, 2020). Accordingly, this study seeks to understand whether COVID-19 is a significant factor in students' choices to choose distance learning and to identify other factors that influence students' decisions to take classes remotely rather than in hybrid or in-person modes, as well as their perceived benefits and challenges in choosing a distance-learning model over hybrid or traditional courses.

3. Methodology

This study was designed to explore the factors that lead undergraduate university students enrolled in a beginning-level foreign language course to choose distance-learning courses, the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this mode of

instruction, and whether COVID-19 was a significant factor for students in their decision-making process.

3.1 Research Questions and Hypotheses

For the purpose of this study, the following research questions and accompanying hypotheses were used:

Research Question 1: What factors lead undergraduate student participants to choose distance learning over hybrid or traditional courses?

Research Question 2: What advantages and disadvantages do participants perceive in taking a beginning-level foreign language course in an online-only format?

Research Question 3: Did the global COVID-19 pandemic have a significant effect on students' choice to enroll in a distance-learning model of foreign language instruction rather than a hybrid or traditional course?

- ♦ RQ3-H0: The global COVID-19 pandemic had no significant effect on students' choice to enroll in a distance-learning course.
- ♦ RQ3-H1: The global COVID-19 pandemic had a significant effect on students' choice to enroll in a distance-learning course.

3.2 Participants

Participants were undergraduate students taking a 100-level beginning foreign language course at a four-year university. They were either enrolled in Spanish 101 or French 101. All students were participating in a distance-learning, online-only course. There were 71 participants, 23% male and 77% female. Of these participants, 13% were enrolled in French 101 and 87% were enrolled in Spanish 101.

3.3 Instruments and Procedures

Students were asked to complete a short 7-question survey with multiple choice questions to ascertain gender, course in which they were enrolled, reasons for choosing a distance-learning online course format over other university options, and opinions about the efficacy of said course format over other options offered by the university. They were also given space to choose "Other" and enter their own answer, if desired. Finally, participants were asked to write a short response describing the challenges and advantages of taking a beginning-level foreign language course in an online-only format.

For research questions 1 and 2, answers were tabulated numerically and converted into percentages for ease of analysis. For hypothesis RQ3-0 and -1, Pearson's Chi-squared ($\chi^{2)}$) test was used to analyze the difference between expected and observed values in the effect of COVID-19 as a factor in choosing online-only modes of instruction with a $p < .05$ degree of significance.
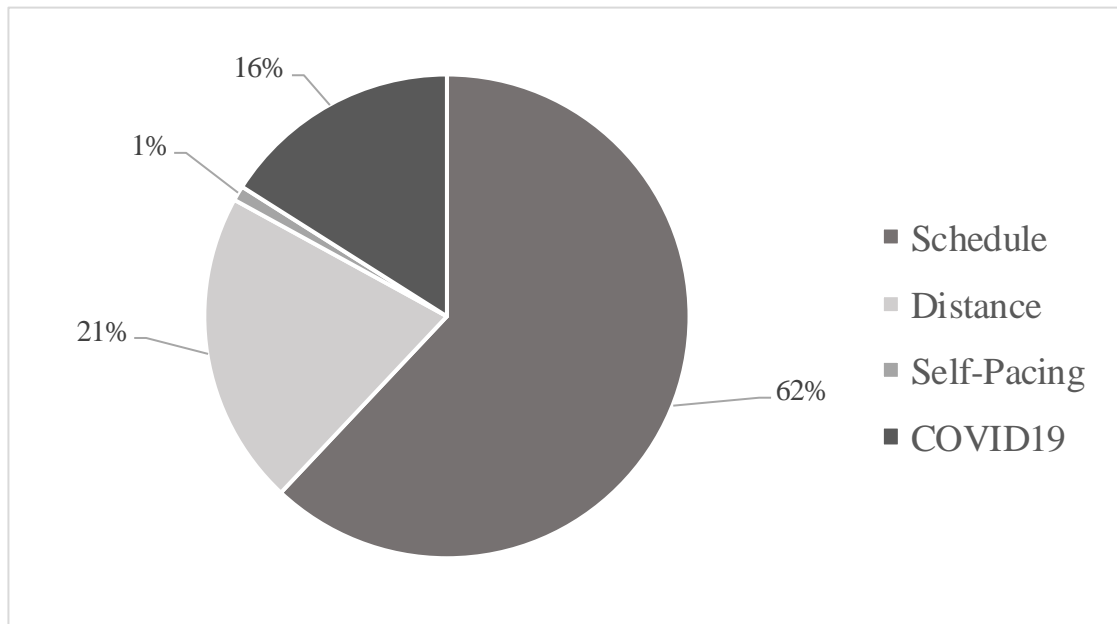
4. Results

4.1 Results According to Research Questions

4.1.1 Research Question 1: What factors lead undergraduate student participants to choose distance learning over hybrid or traditional courses?

The study found that 62% of participants chose this method of foreign language instruction due to the flexibility of schedule, whether it was for work or family. It also found that 21% of participants chose the method due to physical distance from the university, citing impracticalities of commuting long distances. Finally, 16% indicated they chose a distance-learning course due to safety and social distancing concerns related to COVID-19. These results can be found in Figure 1.
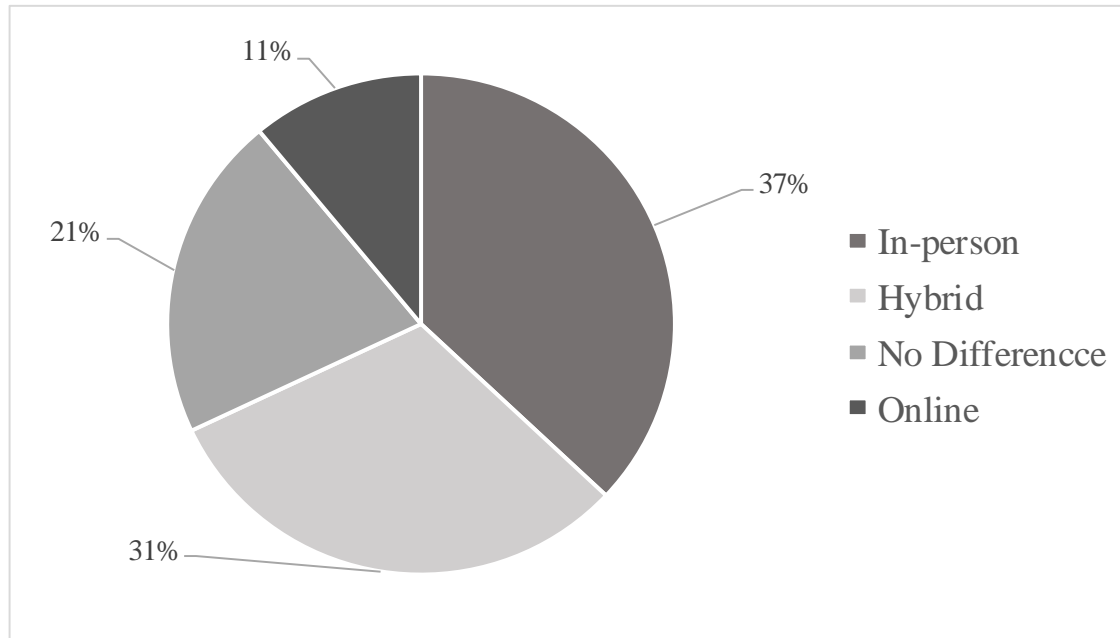
Figure 1: Self-Reported Reasons for Choice of an Online-Only Course

4.1.2 Research Question 2: What do participants believe is the best method of foreign language learning, and what advantages and disadvantages do participants perceive in taking a beginning-level foreign language course in an online-only format?

Survey results indicated 37% of students believe an in-person course to be the best option for beginning language learners, while 31% favored a hybrid course combining both online and in-person components. Twenty-one percent (21%) indicated no preference in taking an in-person, online, or hybrid course, and only 11% believed an online-only course was best. These results are seen in Figure 2.

Participants noted the following advantages of taking an online course:
- the ability to learn from an instructor fluent in the language
- the ability to learn at their own pace
- a preference for learning by themselves rather than in groups
- the ability to ask the teacher questions and receive answers quickly
- flexibility in completing assignments and assessments,

Figure 2: Partipants Perceptions of the Best Way to Learn a Foreign Language

- more thorough explanations of content when questions are asked
- the opportunity to interact with others and practice the language orally and hear words pronounced aurally
- a necessity for distance-learning courses to be more structured and organized.
- The perceived disadvantages of this mode of instruction included:
- difficulty learning without real-time peer and instructor support
- less thorough explanations of content via technology as compared to in-person scenarios when questions are asked
- a lack of opportunity to interact with others and practice the language orally and hear words pronounced aurally with greater ease
- a focus on grammar and writing over speaking and listening.

4.1.3 Research Question 3: Did the global COVID-19 pandemic have a significant effect on students' choice to enroll in a distance-learning model of foreign language instruction rather than a hybrid or traditional course?

The results compared the expected number of responses indicating that COVID-19 was the reason for choosing an online-only course as opposed to the observed rates indicating that COVID-19 was the reason (Table 1). These results compared the number of students who had chosen online-only the semester before as compared to the Fall 2020 semester. The result was $\chi^2(1, 71) = 14.4648, p < 0.000143$. Thus, the null hypothesis was accordingly rejected, and the alternative hypothesis was accepted with a value of $p \leq .001$ level of significance. When compared with semesters in which COVID-19 was not a factor, the number of students choosing online-only instruction due to COVID-19 was statistically significant at $p \leq .05$.

Table 1. Pearson's χ^2 Statistical Results of COVID-19 vs. Other Reasons for Choice of Taking an Online-Only Course

	COVID-19	**Other**
Expected COVID-19	16 (8.5) [6.62]	84 (91.5) [0.61]
Expected Other	1 (8.5) [6.62]	99 (91.5) [0.61]
Marginal Column Totals	17	183

5. Discussion

5.1 Results

The results of this study indicate that students take online-only classes for many reasons, including a need for a flexible schedule, ability to work at their own pace, physical distance from the university, and, in 2020, concerns about health and safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. Although 16%, a statistically significant number, did choose distance learning due to COVID-19, this was not the majority

concern of the students in this study: a higher number reported they chose this format of class due to scheduling (62%) or distance (21%) issues. This study also found that only 11% of participants believed it was the best way to take a beginning foreign language course, which often includes lots of speaking and listening in a more traditional course. This indicates that students are sacrificing what they perceive as quality in lieu of scheduling, distance, pacing, and safety issues.

Finally, the study showed that, while not the main factor in deciding whether to take a distance-learning course, COVID-19 was a significant factor in some students' decision to forego courses with a face-to-face component in favor of a distance-learning course.

5.2 Limitations

The limitations of the study include the narrow scope of classes surveyed and the location of the university. Future studies would benefit from a broader pool of participants to give a more accurate sampling of university populations as well as a survey of courses beyond beginning foreign language courses. For instance, are students more or less likely to choose distance-learning options for other courses, whether general education or major specific? If so, why? Are those differences statistically significant?

Finally, use of masks and impact of COVID-19 has varied widely across the United States. It is possible that students in other parts of the country or world might have different priorities when it comes to their safety regarding COVID-19, and as such might make different choices when electing distance, hybrid, or traditional courses. A survey of different parts of the United States and the global community would help understand the general distance-learning trends on a larger scale.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Study

Based on the limitations of this study, further investigations that include a larger participant base drawn from a wider array of distance-learning courses at various levels and in various disciplines is warranted. Additionally, students from different geographical areas of the United States and world will help researchers better understand the trends noted in this study.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated some reasons why undergraduate university students in a beginning foreign language class chose to take a distance-learning course over a traditional in-person or hybrid course, especially whether the COVID-19 global pandemic had a significant impact on these students' choices to take an online-only course.

The results showed that students elect to take distance-learning options for a variety of reasons, including a more flexible schedule, the ability to work at their own pace, surmounting difficulties caused by distance from the university, and concerns about health and safety during the global COVID-19 crisis. Sixteen (16%) percent of respondents chose an online-only format due to COVID-19, but higher percentages of students indicated that they chose this format due to scheduling (62%) or distance (21%) issues. This study also found that in a course where all participants were enrolled in a distance-only course, only 11% of them indicated they believed this was the best way to take a beginning foreign language course.

Finally, a Pearson's χ^2 test revealed that a statistically significant proportion of students surveyed did choose an online-only format due to concerns about health and safety in the era of COVID-19, χ^2 (1, 71) = 14.4648, $p < 0.000143$. This

indicates a real and significant concern for health when making educational and scheduling decisions.

Distance learning is here to stay and should be expected to increase, especially as COVID-19 plays a factor in students' lives and decision-making processes (Baber, 2020; Patel, 2014). As universities strive to better understand this phenomenon, they should be prepared for increased numbers of distance-learning student enrollments. Further studies can help researchers understand current global trends and better prepare to serve students during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

7. Acknowledgements

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