ONLINE LEARNING READINESS LEVEL OF FIRST AND SECOND YEAR STUDENTS AT FACULTY OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHER EDUCATION, VNU UNIVERSITY OF LANGUAGES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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Abstract: Recent advances in Information and Technology Communication (ICT) have prompted significant changes in the domain of education, particularly in the rise of online learning. In early 2018, VNU University of Languages and International Studies (VNU-ULIS) started implementing several web-based courses on a Learning Management System (LMS), in an attempt to encourage the development of online learning at the university. The aim of this study was to investigate the level of readiness for online learning of potential learners of LMS so that both course instructors and course participants would be able to identify difficulties that they might encounter in the novel virtual teaching and learning environment. The data collection process was divided into two phases: closed-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews afterwards. The main instrument was Online Learning Readiness Scale developed by Hung Chou, Chen and Own (2010).The final results indicated that university students from both academic years get relatively high levels of online readiness, yet the second year student participants had a slightly higher level of readiness than the first year participants. Therefore, the implementation of LMS was probably more suitable for sophomore ones.

Keywords: online learning, online courses, online learning readiness level

1. Introduction

Currently, there is a growing inclination towards distance education while traditional teaching methods are not able to meet the burgeoning demands for education (Schachar & Neumann, 2003). Despite the widespread popularity of online education programs, they have received mixed reviews from both faculty members and students. Further elucidation of advantages and disadvantages of online learning will be presented in the later part of the research.

Several previous studies have emphasized the importance of measuring students' readiness in online learning prior to student taking an online course (McVay, 2001), as well as the significant impacts of individuals' readiness on their academic achievements within online learning environment (Bernard, Brauer, Abrami & Surke, 2004). As LMS is newly adapted at VNU-ULIS, it is crucial to gauge students' online learning readiness level (OLRL) to

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better understand how to achieve fruitful online learning and teaching experiences (Yu & Richardson, 2015).

The execution of an e-learning readiness instrument is highly desirable for not only web-based course designers but also course participants to identify feasible difficulties that they might encounter in the virtual teaching and learning environment. By undertaking this task, online course instructors are likely to help the distance learners develop their competencies or improve their readiness skills to avoid problematic situations involving non-content related learning challenges that could hinder their success in online learning (Zawacki-Richter, 2004).

This study focuses on identifying students' readiness for online learning at the Faculty of English Language Teacher Education (FELTE), VNU-ULIS through these two following research questions:

- *What is online learning readiness level of the first year students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS?*
- *What is online learning readiness level of the second year students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS?*

2. Literature Review

2.1. Distance Education

Definition

Recently, online learning has gradually become a popular form of teaching and learning for various academic fields at different grades around the world. Yet, there appears to be no clear consensus on one definite term for this mode of teaching and learning. The variations include distance education, online classes, online learning and e-learning. As a matter of fact, these terms might have been utilized interchangeably (Doe, Castillo & Musyoka, 2017).

Holomberg (1986) claimed that distance education was a term used to describe organized learning that was not directly monitored by teachers at a specified time and place; it required special techniques of course design, instructional techniques, communication tools and finally special administrative management. Likewise, Perraton (1988) emphasized the flexibility of online learning as this educational process constituted teaching and learning activities conducted by independent individuals, without obligatory physical meetings between teachers and students. Keegan (1988) proposed a more comprehensive definition of online learning by extending the concept suggested by Holomberg (1986) and even specifying the differences of e-learning in comparison with other types of education, namely the separation of teachers and learners, which distinguished distance education from face-to-face education; the integration of an educational organization, which distinguished it from self-study and private tutoring; the application of digital media to distribute teaching contents and finally, the presence of two-way computer-mediated communication with other teachers and students.

The History of Distance Education

Since online learning is closely related to technology, technological innovations have changed the face of distance education and revolutionized the concepts of teaching and learning. According to Taylor (2001), distance education practices and theories have evolved through five generations. The first generation of distance education was *Correspondence Mode*, which was based on print technology. Correspondence courses utilized written/ printed texts and postal services to deliver information manually in the form of books, newspapers, etc. Interaction between educational partners was limited since it occurs merely through letters or written/ printed documents and with the help of the postal system, which was

undoubtedly time-consuming and not very interactive (Moore, 1994).

Following Correspondence Model was *Multi-media Model*, which was based on print, audio and video technologies. Unlike the first generation, the second generation was broadcast. This generation was characterized by the application of diverse technological transitional devices such as satellite, cable television, radio, live presentations and records. Nonetheless, this generation still possessed a limitation on establishing an interactive communication between students and instructors (Bowles, 2004).

In the third generation of distance education – *Telelearning Model*, telecommunication technologies were applied to provide learners with synchronous communication. To be more exact, ICT was adopted as a tool to distribute information and facilitate communication between learners and teachers as well as between learners and learners. However, it was observed that the universities offering distance education do not make enough use of technology in terms of educational application (McLellan, 1999).

The fourth generation of distance education was the *Flexible Learning Model*, which was based on online delivery via the Internet. During this era, the widespread voice/video conference system not only enabled distant interaction between students – teachers and students – students but also promoted collaborative group work across borders (Perraton, 1988). Although many universities were just beginning to implement the fourth generation of distance education initiatives, the fifth generation was already emerging based on the further development of modern technology.

The fifth generation of distance education, *Intelligent Flexible Learning Model*, was bound to be an indispensable derivation of the fourth generation, which aimed to capitalize on the features of the Internet and the Web. This generation facilitated teaching and learning activities with an automated response system together with campus portal access to institutional processes and resources.

Factors of Successful Online Learning

Several studies have pointed out various advantages of distance education, including flexibility (Chizmar & Walbert, 1999), convenience (Poole, 2000) and informative communication (Vonderwell, 2003). First, Petrides (2002) stated that according to the participants, collaborative groups could be arranged more easily in a virtual learning and teaching environment than in traditional face-to-face settings. Next, there existed an overwhelming consensus in different online learning literature on the convenience of web-based courses. Poole's (2000) study of student participation in web-based courses (i.e., going online) when they felt convenient, normally at home and at the weekend. The study of Murphy and Collins (1997) found similar results. Participants indicated they would perform learning activities when it was available and most productive to them. Furthermore, participants in Petrides' (2002) interviews indicated that they had their tendency to consider more carefully about the subject areas when expressing personal viewpoints in written communications since online postings would not only be public but also be permanently displayed. In Vonderwell's study (2003), the author interviewed 22 students concerning their perceptions of individuals' online communication experiences. Most participants agreed that thoughtful and responsible comments were likely to be fostered by asynchronous communication.

However, this particular type of teaching and learning was perceived to possess certain drawbacks. To begin with,

Hara and Kling's (1999; Petrides, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003) qualitative case study of a Web-based distance education course at a U.S. university reported online learning students' frustration due to a lack of immediacy in getting responses back from the instructor. Delayed response appeared to be an inevitable feature of asynchronous communication since both course instructors and course participants varied online schedules. Another problematic issue relating to distance education was the level of expertise. Specifically, students indicated a considerable amount of skepticism about their peers' knowledge. This phenomenon would influence the quality of online discussions negatively as students could be dubious about their friends' feedback, resulting in low effectiveness of peer review activities. Last but not least, feelings of isolation could affect the success of distance education as well. Wood (2002) and Vonderwell (2003) reported that online learners appeared to experience the lack of connection with course instructors as well as other learners. It is not only because they are new to the online learning environment but also because they are not familiar with online learning communities, which are virtual classes filled with virtual friends (Cho, Shen & Laffey, 2010). Consequently, their social presence (the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication felt actively connected one to another – Swan & Shih, 2005) was relatively low.

2.2. Dimensions of OLRL

To optimize the advantages of distance education, Bowles (2004), Wang and Beasley (2002) emphasized the importance of identifying learner's e-readiness. Similarly, Dada (2006) found that readiness was an integral factor that was often highlighted and measured in research on online learning, e-learning or distance learning. To better understand how to achieve effective online learning, it is necessary to know what dimensions of online learning readiness college students should possess. As a matter of fact, there are simultaneously various research projects focusing on developing the most comprehensive and effective student readiness instrument, which is expected to be generalizable across contexts.

Dimensions of OLRL in Previous Research

A foundational study on readiness for online learning in academic settings was proposed by Warner, Christine and Choy (1998). They examined the readiness of 542 students from Australian vocational education and training sector for participation in web-based learning environments. The authors defined OLRL in terms of three aspects: (1) students' preferences for flexible delivery as opposed to face-to-face classroom instruction; (2) students' confidence in using electronic communication technologies for learning, particularly, competence and confidence in the use of Internet and computer-mediated communication; and (3) student's ability to engage in autonomous learning.

Based on the research of Warner et al. (1998), Mattice and Dixon developed a survey on online learning readiness in 1999, consisting of three dimensions: students' readiness (learners' self-direction, orientation to time, preferences for feedbacks and their previous experience with distance education), students' access to ICT and lastly students' interest in future virtual learning courses. Thereafter, McVay (2001) established a 13-item instrument for measuring readiness for online learning. The instrument focused on students' behavior and attitudes towards online learning, specifically, online learners' background knowledge about distance education, access to technology and personal motivation to pursue online learning. The McVay's

instrument had been considered as an important and useful online readiness assessment tool and has exerted a great influence on subsequent readiness studies (Bernard, 2004). Later, Smith, Murphy and Mahoney (2003) conducted a study with college-age students to examine the reliability and validity of the McVay's instrument. Their study on the instrument resulted in a two-factor structure: self-management of learning and comfort with e-learning.

A review of this study, however, revealed that these scales and measures of assessing learners' readiness do not succinctly cover other dimensions that are critical to online learning, including technical skills and learner control (Stansfield, McLellan & Connolly, 2004). Likewise, other researchers emphasized that technical skills involving computers and the Internet were related to learners' performance in web-based learning environments (Peng, Tsai & Wu, 2006). Similarly, learners' perceptions towards the Internet could shape the learners' attitudes and online behaviors (Tsai & Lin, 2004). In terms of learner control, since online learning environments were not highly teacher-centered, students were supposed to take a more active role in their learning. Specifically, students had to take responsibility for managing their own learning, involving making decisions about learning pace, depth, and coverage of the content, type of media accessed, and time spent on studying, etc.

Another typical feature of web-based courses was computer-mediated communication tools, categorized into two types: asynchronous tools (threaded discussions and email) as well as synchronous ones (live chat, instant messages, etc.). Online courses generally lacked regular face-to-face meetings; therefore, it was important for students to be able to communicate comfortably and confidently with teachers and classmates through computer-mediated correspondence or discussions (Salaberry, 2000). In addition, distance learners appeared to have a lower sense of belonging than students in face-to-face formats (Ma & Yuen, 2010). Tinto (1998) emphasized the positive effect of student-faculty interactions and student-student interactions on students' senses of belonging. Thus, the dimension of online communication should also be added to the readiness instrument.

Dimensions of OLRL in This Study

The concept of five distinctive dimensions in the OLRL instrument (Hung et al., 2010), which was utilized in the data collection procedure of this research, would be clarified as follows.

Computer/ Internet Self-Efficacy

The idea of self-efficacy stems from the social cognitive theory, which offers a conceptual framework for elucidating how self-efficacy beliefs regulate human functioning through cognitive, motivational, affective, and decisional processes (Bandura, 1977). Bandura (1986) defined self-efficacy as:

> People's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. It is concerned not only with the skills one has but also with judgments of what one can do with whatever skills one possesses (p. 391).

The term self-efficacy was generally extended to other domains, including the use of computers. Compeau and Higgins (1995) defined computer self-efficacy as "a judgment of one's capability to use a computer" (p. 192). The researchers also affirmed that computer self-efficacy did not merely represent basic technical skills, such

as running the computer, but it would refer to an individual's perception of his or her ability to use computers to accomplish a task such as using software to calculate, demonstrate and analyze data. Computer self-efficacy (CSE) was identified to have a significant effect on computer-use outcomes, emotional reactions to computers, and actual computer use (Compeau & Higgins, 1995).

The construct of the terminology Internet self-efficacy (ISE) was analogous. Eastin and LaRose (2000) pointed out that ISE did not reflect solely the act of performing some Internet-related tasks, such as uploading or downloading files; instead, ISE involved one's belief in his or her own competency to apply more sophisticated technological skills in the Internet, namely troubleshooting problems occurring online. A study conducted by Tsai and Lin (2004) showed that the level of ISE was directly proportional to the result of student's academic performance in web-based courses. Students with high Internet self-efficacy seemed to learn better than students with low Internet self-efficacy.

To sum up, the joint of those two aforementioned self-efficacy aspects, is also known as learner's computer/ Internet self-efficacy, alludes to individual's ability of "successfully performing different sets of skills required to establish, continue and utilize efficiently the Internet on the basis of sufficient computer skills" (Peng et al., 2006, p. 84). Computer/ Internet self-efficacy has been identified as an important factor that affects learner's motivation, interests and performance in Internet-based learning environments, since learner's perceptions of the Internet may shape his or her attitudes and online behaviors.

Self-Directed Learning

Knowles (1975) defined self-directed learning as a "basic human competence – the ability to learn on one's own" (p. 17). In the context of online learning, this terminology would refer to a linear procedure in which individuals actively decide their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify feasible human as well as material resources for learning, select and apply suitable learning strategies, and finally evaluate learning outcomes.

There are currently two distinctive perspectives exploring the domain of self-directed learning. The first one is personal attribute, which refers to learners' motivation (intrinsic and extrinsic) for and the competency of taking responsibility for their learning on the basis of their prior knowledge and prior experience (Garrison, 1997). In the context of online learning, personal attributes involve three components: resource use, strategy use and motivation. First, resource use refers to students' ability to successfully utilize available human resources (instructors and peers) and information resources (given instructional materials and the Internet). In distance education, Internet offers permanent access to instructors' and peers' comments throughout the whole course (Petrides, 2002); but it also has delayed feedbacks and the lack of in-depth discussions from the participants, leading to the need of learners' adequate self-directed skills equipment for better e-learning experience. Second, the novel LMS may require unique communication strategy, especially from those inexperienced learners, as the lack of facial expressions and body language in written communication could lead to misinterpretation (Petrides, 2002). Finally, research indicates that motivation to learn in a virtual environment appears to be tough due to distraction and procrastination (Elvers, Polzella & Graetz, 2003). The absence of strict requirements for physical presence makes it easier for students to procrastinate in online classes than in conventional face-to-face classrooms

(Elvers et al., 2003). In this sense, increasing students' motivation is vital to mitigate detrimental effects of distraction or procrastination on learners. Consequently, from the perspective of personal attributes, self-direction seems to be an essential competency that students should have for the success of online learning.

The second perspective is process, which is known as individuals' autonomy in learning process, involving planning, monitoring and evaluating (Moore, 1972). For planning, the flexibility of distance education (Chizmar & Walbert, 1999) means that online learners are free to create individualized learning pace as long as it suits their learning styles and convenience. In terms of autonomous monitoring, the lack of physical presence challenges students to decide whether they understand the subject correctly (Shapley, 2000) to look for assistance from course instructors, peers or Internet resources. With regards to evaluating, in Petrides' study (2002), the research group showed a high level of uncertainty when it came to evaluating participants' own knowledge as well as peers' knowledge. Indeed, online learning is closely associated with self-directed learning from both perspectives.

Self-directed learning is a key factor in distance education (Lin & Hsieh, 2001), as a web-based learning environment appears to be less challenging for students being able to establish customized learning strategies and learning pace than for those who are dependent on fixed schedules in traditional learning environments. In summary, it is integral for distance educators to actively help potential learners determine whether they are prepared to take an online course or program through identifying their self-directed learning level at the pre-course stage.

Learner Control (in an Online Context)

According to Shyuand Brow (1992), learner control is the degree to which a learner can manage his or her own learning experience and process. With online learning, learners are allowed to choose the amount of content, the sequence, and the pace of learning with maximum freedom (Hannafin, 1984; Reeves, 1993). This is also the main difference between traditional learning environments and web-based environments.

The Component Display Theory of Merrill (1983) has indicated that learner control is an important aspect of effective learning and that the level of learner control may maximize student performance. With self-control, individuals would have a chance of making instructional decisions that match their learning styles together with experiencing the results of those decisions afterwards.

Regarding students' varied characteristics, the way in which each individual would prefer to access and to interact with computer-based learning material varies from individual to individual. In fact, there seems to be no particular teaching method that would perfectly satisfy all learners' needs. Learners may have their own preference, viewing the instructional material in a sequence that best meets their needs (Jonassen, 1986). In a study conducted with a sample of 81 Taiwanese undergraduates, Wang and Beasley (2002) found that students' task performance is affected significantly by learner control in an online learning context. Better web-based learning performance possibly counts on better management of the learning procedure. Thus, the dimension of learner control becomes an important part of students' OLRL (Hew & Cheung, 2008).

Motivation for Learning (in an Online Context)

Over decades, researchers have investigated the impacts of motivation on distance education since motivation theories administered in traditional face-to-face classrooms and other settings might not be applicable in the modern innovated learning environment. It is suggested that Self-determination theory (SDT: a quality of human functioning that involves the experience of choice to commence an action – Ryan & Deci, 1985) is probably a suitable framework to examine the role of motivation in online learning. Determinants of motivation identified in the self-determination theory are autonomy, relatedness and competency relatively, which correspond to some characteristics of learning such as flexibility (Chizmar & Walbert, 1999), computer-mediated communication and social interaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).

According to Ryan and Deci (1985), motivation, both intrinsic and extrinsic, is strictly related to learners' attitudes and learning behaviors in educational research and practice. First, motivation directs behavior towards particular goals. Numerous research studies have proved the direct connection between learners' motivational levels and their academic achievement (Fyans & Maehr, 1987; Walberg, 1984). Besides, due to the fact that motivation determines the specific goals towards which students strive for, it affects their instructional decisions when they enroll in any educational activities. Understanding an individual's motivation for learning is essential to improving the planning, producing, and implementing of educational resources (Federico, 2000). Finally, it determines the positive or negative attitude that a student may have throughout the learning process. Saadé, He and Kira (2007) agreed with the crucial role of motivation in the success or failure of online learning. To sustain motivation, students must become active learners who have strong desires for learning (Knowles, 1975).

Online Communication Self-Efficacy

The absence of regular face-to-face meetings between teachers and students means that online communication is the sole information transmission channel for students to stay contactable with other course participants as well as with the course instructors. McVay (2000) emphasized the importance of providing online students with opportunities for interactions. Communication with other course participants is likely to help online students evade the loneliness and social isolation of virtual classes. In addition, asking questions or joining online discussions with the help of certain computer-mediated communication tools such as forum, Q&A sessions, comment sessions, etc., is a beneficial way for students to not only attain more comprehensive information about the subjects but also to seek constructive advices for unexpected problems occurring online.

In fact, social presence (the degree to which a person is perceived to be a real person in an online community) is suggested to be an effective predictor of students' satisfaction in online classes (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). This finding implies that designing web-based courses should involve designing techniques that enhance social presence.

The overall goal for creating social presence in any learning environment, regardless of teaching delivery methods: face-to-face or online, seems to be equal to creating a high level of comfort, in which learners would feel comfortable communicating with the instructor and other peers. It allows individuals to participate in virtual learning activities more eagerly (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999), and to share their personal opinions

as well as emotions more easily (Gunawardena et al., 2001). Similarly, Roper (2007) suggested that successful students should make the most of online discussions, which may provide opportunities for richer discourse and thoughtful questions as a technique to stimulate both fellow students and instructors' engagement.

From aforementioned studies, Hung et al. (2010) pointed out that learner's communication self-efficacy in online learning is an essential dimension for overcoming the limitations of online communication to help students enhance their online learning achievements.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This study was designed on the basis of mixed methods research, which combined both quantitative and qualitative data to attain a more elaborated understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2017). To be more specific, the study adopted a sequential explanatory design, which included survey together with interviews afterwards in order to ensure the reliability and validity of the eventual results.

Survey was chosen to be the initial stage of the data collection method thanks to its flexibility in eliciting quantitative data (Mackey & Gass, 2005), generalizability (Chambliss & Schutt, 2015) and effectiveness in terms of effort and cost for researchers (Dörnyei, 2007). Besides, additional semi-structured interviews were conducted to triangulate data in order to alleviate superficiality of the questionnaire responses. The semi-structured format was chosen as its guiding questions and prompts would help the researcher gain deeper insights into the conclusions generated by the quantitative data (Dörnyei, 2007). Moreover, the removal of pre-fixed responses appeared to provide room for unfolding new phenomenon(s), which might not have been recognized in the survey. Consequently, a more comprehensive and profound description of the research topic was likely to be achieved after a two-phase data collection process.

3.2. Sampling

The first (QH2018) and second year (QH2017) students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS from both majors (English Linguistics and English Language Teacher Education) and from both programs (Standard Program and Fast-track Program) were selected to be the research participants because of three main reasons. First, according to the list of thirty pilot courses on LMS, there were initially courses for FELTE students at the first year as well as at the second year, so it was vital to conduct research on both freshman and sophomore students. Second, although there were two distinctive majors for students at FELTE, all pilot courses for them on LMS focused on English competency in general, with no difference between the two majors. Therefore, students from both majors should be included in the research group to guarantee the representativeness of the final results. Third, mainstream as well as fast-track students were selected since the LMS was designed for students from both programs. Omitting students from any teaching programs would impinge on the representativeness of the eventual results.

With the confidence level of 90% and the confidence interval of 5%, the following table showed the detailed sample size calculated by the Creative Service Systems (a sample size calculation online service).

Program	Sampling	
	Total population	Sample size
First year	529	180
Second year	550	183

Since the average number of students per class is 26 students/class, regarding the aforementioned sample size, the desired number of classes that participated in the first data collection process was 7 classes/ academic year.

After that, 8 female students (4 first year students and 4 second year students) from the research group were asked to participate in the semi-structured interviews. Interviewees were chosen from the list of students who participated in the previous close-ended questionnaire, based on their convenience and willingness.

3.3. Data Collection

Data Collection Instrument

The main instrument was the Online Readiness Level Scale questionnaire developed by Hung et al. (2010). The complete questionnaire includes 18 statements in total. They are categorized into five dimensions of OLRL, namely self-directed learning, motivation for learning, computer/ Internet self-efficacy, learner control and online communication self-efficacy. All of the statements are close-ended, attitudinal ones. The adopted scaling technique is 5-point Likert scale, in which the respondents were asked to make evaluative judgments about the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with a list of provided statements by choosing one of the responses ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

Data Collection Procedure

Prior to the administration of the questionnaire, the researcher contacted lecturers who were teaching at VNU-ULIS via email to ask for permission. When the approval was made, the researcher came to each selected class and administrated the questionnaire after having briefly introduced the background as well as the significance of the study to avoid unwanted misunderstanding among participants. The questionnaire was delivered directly to the research participants by the researcher during class time at VNU-ULIS to ensure the positive response rate. Despite face-to-face administration, the data collection process still prioritized voluntary participation.

Following the questionnaire, there were additional semi-structured interviews to explain quantitative data. The researcher contacted the interviewees via e-mail initially to ask for permission. During the interviews, the interviewees were enquired for further explanations for their choices in the questionnaire. Despite predefined questions, the responses at this data collection stage were not noted to be restricted to those particular themes. Interviewees were free to express their opinions about other issues related to the research topic as well. To ensure the consistency between the interviewees' responses in the close-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interview, the researcher provided the participants with their former answers and gave them time to scan through their individual survey before officially commencing the interview. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to guarantee the accuracy of the responses. Interview transcripts were also sent to the interviewees to proofread deliberately before data analysis to eliminate unwanted misinterpretation or subjectivity.

3.4. Data Analysis

The main adopted data analysis method was descriptive statistical analysis. Specifically, the data collected from the close-ended questionnaire responses was transferred into SPSS software for interpretation. Firstly, the frequency distribution of the variables ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) was identified. After that, the central tendency (mean and mode) as well as dispersion (standard deviation) of eighteen items was calculated. Descriptive statistics

of eighteen separated variables were merged and divided into five broader variables. The output was the overall OLRL of students from both academic years, which was divided into five dimensions: computer/ Internet self-efficacy (CIS), self-directed learning (SDL), learner control (LC), motivation for learning (MFL) and online communication self-efficacy (OCS).

After calculating and interpreting data from the close-ended questionnaire responses, researchers focused mainly on problematic issues that emerged in the results of the survey to dig deeper in the semi-structured interviews with former respondents. However, participants were still able to express their opinions about other topics related to the context of this study if wanted.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. Findings From the Close-Ended Questionnaire Responses

The number of participants was 363 in total. The response rate was approximately 78% (285 respondents: 132 first year responses and 153 second year responses). The response rate was considerably affected by a significant number of absent students in each class.

Research question 1: What is online learning readiness level of the first year students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS?

Table 4.1

Results of First Year Students' OLRL

Dimension	Mean	SD
CIS	3.54	.89
SDL	3.39	.82
LC	2.98	.90
MFL	3.66	.84
OCS	3.39	.99

(CIS: Computer/ Internet self-efficacy; SDL: Self-directed learning; LC: Learner control; MFL: Motivation for learning; OCS: Online communication self-efficacy)

At first glance, apart from LC, students' mean scores in other four dimensions (CIS, SDL, MFL and OCS) were all higher than the average mean of 3.00, ranging from 3.39 to 3.54 on a 5-point Likert scale. VNU-ULIS students participating in this study had the highest readiness level in the dimension of motivation for learning, followed by computer/Internet self-efficacy, self-directed learning and finally online communication self- efficacy.

The lowest readiness level was in the dimension of learner control. Gaps among five dimensions were not significant, leading to a tentative assertion that freshman students seemed to be confident in their readiness for online learning.

The standard deviation (around 1.00) indicated that individual scores were not really clustered close to the mean. In fact, respondents shared varied opinions about their readiness for online learning in all five subscales. The majority (around 42%) possessed a neutral attitude (the responses were in between 3 and 4) towards all items in the survey. Approximately 30 percent of freshman students seemed to be confident in their CIS, SDL, MFL and OCS. The readiness level of LC was totally low since 51 percent of responses was negative (below 2). Generally, it was tentatively asserted that a certain number of freshman students seemed to be confident in their readiness for online learning.

From the results presented in Table 4.1, it was clearly seen that the mean score of LC (2.98) was slightly lower than that of other dimensions. On this account, it was essential to take a closer look at the central tendency of separated variables within the category LC to figure out the problematic statement(s) with the low level of positive responses, which was presented in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Descriptive Statistics of Separated Items in OLRL (QH2018)

Descriptive statistics	CIS1	CIS2	CIS3	SDL1	SDL2	SDL3	SDL4	SDL5	LC1
Mean	3.39	3.24	3.98	3.26	3.83	2.70	3.33	3.80	3.24
Mode	4	3	4	3	4	3	4	4	3
SD	.90	.92	.86	.84	.80	.85	.81	.83	.82
Descriptive statistics	**LC2**	**LC3**	**MFL1**	**MFL2**	**MFL3**	**MFL4**	**OCS1**	**OCS2**	**OCS3**
Mean	2.30	3.42	3.70	3.50	3.77	3.72	3.60	3.35	3.22
Mode	2	3	4	4	4	4	4	3	3
SD	1.02	.82	.83	.88	.84	.85	.92	.99	1.0

The most common mode of eighteen variables was 4 (*agree*) with 10 times. *Neither disagree nor agree* (3) ranked second with 7 times. LC2 (*I am not distracted by other online activities when learning online)* was the sole item having 2 (*disagree*) as the number of mode and 2.30, which was below the average mean of 3.00, as the number of mean. This finding probably indicated that distraction from non-learning activities had significant impacts on online learners' readiness in a virtual learning environment. Likewise, a study conducted by Winter, Cotton, Gavin and Choy (2010) highlighted the difficulty of managing the combination of learning and non-learning activities when participating in web-based courses as perceived by online students.

Besides, LC2, SDL3 *(I manage time well)* was another item with the mean score below 3.00. Time-management skill seemed to be a problematic issue of students, regardless of teaching modes, traditional or virtual context.

The variable with the highest mean score was CIS3 *(I feel confident in using the Internet to find or gather information for online learning),* which showed that first year students appear to be self-assured in their computer/ network skills, which were requisite for online learning.

Research question 2: What is online learning readiness level of second year students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS?

Table 4.3

Results of Second Year Students' OLRL

Dimension	Mean	SD
CIS	3.59	.99
SDL	3.62	.86
LC	3.22	.92
MFL	3.80	.87
OCS	3.51	1.03

(CIS: Computer/ Internet self-efficacy; SDL: Self-directed learning; LC: Learner control; MFL: Motivation for learning; OCS: Online communication self-efficacy)

It was shown that all students' average scores of different variables ranged from 3.22 to 3.80 on a 5-point Likert scale, indicating that they generally exhibited above medium levels of readiness toward online learning (above 3.00). Similar to their counterparts, the second year students at VNU-ULIS possessed a positive viewpoint towards their readiness level for web-based courses. In addition, the dimensions with the highest and lowest mean score of sophomore students were analogous to that of freshman

students, as motivation for learning ranks first and learner control was at the bottom of the list. The second, third and fourth dimension were online communication self-efficacy, computer/ Internet self-efficacy and self-directed learning respectively.

The dispersions of OLRL of the second year students were slightly higher than that of the first year students, which means that the value of individual responses scattered more considerably around the mean. The neutral responses (around 40%) repeatedly accounted for the greatest amount of responses. Approximately 32 percent of sophomore students showed positive responses to the level of CIS, SDL, MFL and OCS. The readiness level of LC was slightly higher since only less than half of the participants (41%) expressed negative responses towards this particular dimension. Indeed, it could be concluded that the second year students seemed to be more confident in their OLRL level than the first year students, yet the percentage of participants with high level of readiness for online learning was still limited.

To attain a more profound understanding of each item, Table 4.4 demonstrates the descriptive statistics, including mean, mode and standard deviation of all 18 items in the close-ended questionnaire.

Table 4.4

Descriptive Statistics of Separated Items in OLRL (QH2017)

Descriptive statistics	**CIS1**	**CIS2**	**CIS3**	**SDL1**	**SDL2**	**SDL3**	**SDL4**	**SDL5**	**LC1**
Mean	3.35	3.29	4.14	3.65	3.91	2.98	3.56	3.97	3.56
Mode	4	4	5	4	4	3	4	4	4
SD	1.04	1.00	.95	.80	.86	.94	.82	.89	.80
Descriptive statistics	**LC2**	**LC3**	**MFL1**	**MFL2**	**MFL3**	**MFL4**	**OCS1**	**OCS2**	**OCS3**
Mean	2.57	3.53	3.79	3.64	3.95	3.84	3.62	3.48	3.43
Mode	3	4	4	4	4	5	4	4	4
SD	1.09	.88	.87	.98	.78	.84	.97	1.00	1.13

There were certain similarities in the results of mean scores and mode numbers between two groups of research participants. To begin with, the predominant mode was 4 (*agree*), appearing 14 times. *Neither disagree nor agree* or 3 was the second most frequent mode number. Moreover, the two items with the low mean score were LC2 (*I am not distracted by other online activities when learning online (instant messages, Internet surfing)* and SDL3 *(I manage time well)*. Their mean scores were both below 3.00, which are 2.57 and 2.98 relatively. Finally, the mean score of CIS3 *(I feel confident in using the Internet to find or gather information for online learning)* was on top of the list, which was fairly 1.5 times greater than the lowest mean score of LC2.

Unlike descriptive statistics of freshman students, there was no trace of mode number 2 (disagree). Instead, mode number 5 (strongly agree) appeared twice in variable CIS3 *(I feel confident in using the Internet to find or gather information for online learning)* and MFL4 *(I like to share my ideas with others).* In addition, the fluctuated dispersion (from 0.80 to 1.12) of eighteen variables indicated that the scores were spread out from the mean. Consequently, there was likely to exist

individual differences among participants' responses, which could be solved by teachers' special guidance or training relative to online learning (Tsai & Tsai, 2003).

Despite the analogies in terms of central tendency, dispersion as well as ranking among eighteen variables in particular and five dimensions in general of VNU-ULIS students' OLRL, there still existed certain differences between readiness level of freshman students and that of sophomore students. The table below (Table 4.5) showed the summary of OLRL of students from QH208 and QH2017.

Table 4.5

Comparison of the First Year Students' OLRL and the Second Year Students' OLRL

Dimension	Mean (First year/ Second year)	SD (First year/ Second year)
CIS	3.54	.89
	3.59	.99
SDL	3.39	.82
	3.62	.86
LC	2.98	.90
	3.22	.92
MFL	3.66	.84
	3.80	.87
OCS	3.39	.99
	3.51	1.03

(CIS: Computer/ Internet self-efficacy; SDL: Self-directed learning; LC: Learner control; MFL: Motivation for learning; OCS: Online communication self-efficacy)

By and large, the mean scores of the second year students were roughly higher than that of the second year students in all five dimensions of OLRL. However, to decide whether or not these differences could serve the confirmatory purpose of a correlation between students' academic level and their readiness level for online learning, independent samples t-tests were conducted.

Independent samples t-tests of these five subtopics were below ($p < 0.05$). In other words, there appeared to be inadequate evidence to conclude that grade level seemed to make significant differences in students' readiness for online courses within the context of this study. The gaps of mean scores and dispersion in all five dimensions of OLRL between the first and second year students were not remarkable since they frequently overlapped the qualitative data of each other. The result of a negative correlation between students' academic level and their readiness level for online learning was different from the result of other related studies about the feasible connection of those two aforementioned categories (Hung et al., 2010; Wojciechowski & Palmer, 2005). The semi-structured interviews conducted afterwards were expected to provide explanations(s) for this phenomenon.

4.2. Findings From the Semi-Structured Interviews

All participants in the interviews had an analogous number of online courses that they had participated in before (3), specifically *Informatics 2, Introduction to Vietnamese Culture, Introduction to Vietnamese Culture and Introduction to Vietnamese Linguistics.*

Overall, qualitative data showed a more crystal-clear positive attitude of the participants (regardless of their academic year) towards distance education than quantitative data, especially towards the dimension of CIS, MFL, SDL and OCS. They seemed to be quite confident in their computer/ Internet skills as well as online communication skills thanks to personal acquaintance with those skills. Throughout approximately one academic semester at VNU-ULIS, first and second year students

were required to accomplish particular assignments integrating those two aforementioned competences. Despite individuals' prior skills in e-learning, participants consistently put emphasis on the absolute importance of clear and adequate instructional materials from the virtual learning environment to help them save time from non-content related learning challenges and to maximize the quality of teaching input together with output.

From the results of the survey, four issues concerning the OLRL that seemed to require further investigation were: a high number of neither disagree nor agree responses (1), a low level of some variables, particularly LC2 (2) and SDL3 (3) and the gaps of OLRL between the two academic years (4).

First and foremost, all interviewees seemed to have the same reasons when responding neutrally for any items in the questionnaire. They chose *neither disagree nor agree* because they were unfamiliar with online courses conducted completely in English. They stated that although they had enrolled in some online courses before, namely *Introduction to Informatics 2, Introduction to Vietnamese Culture, Introduction to Vietnamese Linguistics*, these courses were totally Vietnamese so that the language barrier on web-based courses on LMS could be a noticeable issue that they did not feel very comfortable with. Besides, the new format of LMS (with the lack of predetermined meetings) made students feel afraid of vague requirements for assignments (if any) of web-based courses. Once again, interviewees persisted on comprehensive instructional materials, especially a course orientation beforehand, in which the lecturers could briefly explain the course objectives, course rules, compulsory assignments and marking rubrics, etc. to avoid unnecessary misunderstanding *("A meeting at the beginning of the course is enough.")*

Secondly, when being asked about the distraction of non-learning online activities (LC2), only one participant said that she found no significant differences between online or offline learning. Most interviewees (7 students) claimed that they "*sometimes [turned] on another window when there [was] no new information in the online lessons"* or *"when the teaching videos [were] so boring, […] because there [was] no interaction between the lecturers and me"* and *"because the lectures' facial expression [was] too serious."* From these responses, it could be seen that the course design, including course content and online interaction, was remarkably important to enhancing students' participation in online learning. A study conducted by Swan (2002) on 73 online courses offered at the State University of New York Learning Network also unveiled the correlation between clarity in course design and students' satisfaction. Course design had also been reiterated several times throughout the interviews of other items, such as LC1 *(I can direct my own learning progress)*, LC3 *(I repeated the online instructional materials on the basis of my needs)* and MFL2 *(I have motivation to learn).* Besides, interaction, in three forms: between students and teachers, between students and between students with content (Moore, 1989), had been identified as a critical factor in online learning. Since interaction did not belong directly to the dimension of learner control, it would be analyzed more thoroughly in the latter part of this research, with the focus on online communication self-efficacy.

In terms of SDL3, this item received contradictory opinions from interviewees. Three out of eight participants thought that they could manage time well with online learning as long as deadlines of the modules are not extremely intensive *("It would be alright if the university gives me enough time to finish every assignment").* The remaining participants were skeptical about their own

time-management skill since keeping a balance between studying and a hectic working schedule from part-time jobs appears to be quite tough. Besides, they also claimed that their procrastination might bring them trouble with deadlines. Despite (sometimes) low quality of the work, time pressure did help these students accomplish their assignments. In other words, the underlying problems integrated with a low mean score of SDL3 were not from the web-based courses themselves, but from the individual students. Fortunately, all participants were aware of the pernicious effects of poor time management skill and promised that they are trying to ameliorate the situation *("I am trying really hard. I don't think that it can be better soon but at least I am aware of the problem.")*

Concerning the gaps between the first year and second year students' level of readiness, the quantitative data just proved that there was an insufficient evidence to claim the statistical differences between these two research groups, yet it did not mean there were absolutely no differences. The qualitative data showed that it could probably be speculated that knowledge and skills that sophomore students have attained from some second-year English courses (i.e., *English 3A, English 3B, English 4A, English 4B* and *English 4C*) might have better prepared them for the e-learning. One student from QH2017 stated in the interview that *"I have already learnt how to find a reliable source of information [CIS3] in English 3B"*. Although students from QH2018 have a relatively high mean score in this item (CIS3 – *I feel confident in using the Internet to find or gather information for online learning*), all of them (4 students) seemed to be unable to thoroughly explain what the proper way to find and to evaluate a reliable source of information actually were. In fact, they appeared to overestimate their computer/ Internet skills (White, 2000). This inconsistency occurs in other items as well: CIS2 *(I feel confident in my knowledge and skills of how to manage software)* – first year students were uncertain about common software(s) applied for distance education, and LC3 *(I repeated the online instructional materials on the basis of my needs)* – the notion of instructional materials were unclear to freshmen. In short, the first year students were not familiar with fundamental concepts related to online learning, resulting in their misunderstanding of some items in the questionnaire (without their awareness). Therefore, an online course orientation before an official implementation of LMS for students at VNU-ULIS was highly recommended to help not online course learners but also course designers achieve a fruitful virtual learning experience.

Besides, the semi-structured interviews also revealed two other issues that were not evident from the quantitative data. First, despite relatively high mean scores from participants from both academic years (3.22 – QH2018 and 3.43 – QH2017), the item OCS3 *(I feel confident in posting questions in online discussions)* involved varied responses from the interviewees. Some of them claimed that written discussions, to a certain extent, were not as effective as spoken interactions since "*it took a long time for you to type"* or "*you could easily be judged by the others with your words."* These answers raised concern about the low quality of online discussions without direct observations from the lecturers. On the contrary, some thought that posting questions online was not so difficult unless students tried to do it frequently to attain a habit of critical thinkers. In fact, a comfortable online community would facilitate valued discussions in particular and effective online interaction in general (Swan, 2002).

Next, participants were worried about the delayed response time from the instructors due to asynchronous communications. On LMS, students were

expected to direct their own learning process themselves despite the physical arrangement of the learning materials. Thus, interviewees were dubious about the availability of lecturer(s) when they sought for special guidance; for example, when reviewing the existing instructional materials was insufficient. Although students could seek assistance from their peers as well, they felt rather dubious about the validity of these responses. For this reason, the course instructors were recommended to go online in accordance with predetermined schedules to provide students with timely feedback of the modules on which they are currently working. The combination of both written and spoken discussions was likely to bring out the most fruitful e-learning experiences for learners. In case making prefixed online appointments was impossible, there should be some voluntary or selected course assistants (senior students) to help inexperienced course participants when needed. In this way, students tend to absorb online information more effectively.

In brief, the qualitative data did indicate similar results with the quantitative data, with overall positive responses to OLRL of students from both academic years. Besides, the semi-structured interviews presented certain issues that were not identified from the close-ended questionnaire responses together with ways to tackle those difficulties, providing the researcher with deeper insights into the problematic issues.

5. Conclusion

5.1. Summary of the Findings

Combining both the quantitative and qualitative data, it could be concluded that students from both academic years had a relatively high level of online learning readiness. Results of the second year students were moderately higher than that of the first year students. Therefore, it might suggest that the second year students (QH2017) could possess greater readiness for enrollment in online courses and were likely to achieve a better academic performance than the first year students (QH2018). The results of this study pointed out that it seemed to be challenging for freshmen to make adjustments from their traditional face-to-face teaching mode at high school classrooms to the virtual university classrooms. Needless to say, the application of LMS would be more appropriate for the sophomore students than the freshman ones. Furthermore, the quantitative data revealed that two readiness dimensions needed special attention are learner control and online communication self-efficacy.

5.2. Implications

When dealing with students owning relatively low learner control, teachers can instruct them to control both the learning content and the learning process in a way that could meet individuals' learning need. To reduce the side-effects of non-learning activities, it is advisable for students to strictly follow their pre-set learning plans to ensure successful academic performance. From the perspective of course designers, they are suggested to create a stimulating learning community through varied motivating and interactive online activities to enhance learners' interests in the web-based courses (Swan, 2002).

Regarding online communication self-efficacy, social presence, which is defined as "the degree to which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected one to another" (Swan & Shih, 2005), is probably the key principle. For instance, to formulate a highly connected online community among online learners, teachers are supposed to have students get to know their lecturers or peers through prevalent online communication tools such as social networks, online

messages, etc. The fundamental target of formulating a positive perception of social presence is to provide a flexible environment for other participants, in which they would be able to explain themselves better (Tu, 2002). Besides, students are encouraged to wisely utilize LMS forum by participating extensively in the discussions and by freely expressing their thoughts. The problem of delayed feedback could be solved through establishing established guidelines for timely and constructive response from peers as well.

In terms of other three dimensions, the application of supplementary short-term online orientation courses before registration is supposed to equip potential learners with indispensable technical training about all five dimensions of OLRL and to mitigate future encounters with possible technical difficulties. Therefore, they would become more familiar with the functions of this novel learning system. In addition, Bowles (2004) suggested that teachers may provide students with sufficient information about course objectives, course content, course structure as well as testing and assessment schemes to help students establish their individual-tailored learning plans with adequate time for the class participation. Special guidance and supportive assistance from teachers also plays such an important role in curtailing high attrition rate of online learning (Tsai & Tsai, 2003).

In conclusion, LMS should be optimized for VNU-ULIS students by the support from not only teachers but also from the education institutions before, during and even after their enrollment in any web-based courses. Findings of this research are expected to exhibit a fruitful contribution to the implementation of the LMS in the near future.

5.3. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

This study was limited to the specific research group only, which was the first and second year students at FELTE, VNU-ULIS. Due to rigid time limit as well as inconvenience of accessing a larger population, this research could not identify the OLRL of students at VNU-ULIS with a larger confidence level (95%) and from a greater range of academic years (from first year to fourth year). For further research, it is recommended to conduct study on students' readiness with participants from varied academic years and from different faculties at VNU-ULIS or from multiple universities to overcome the statistical sampling bias.

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Appendix

(Questionnaire)

ONLINE LEARNING READINESS LEVEL

The domains of teaching and learning are experiencing great changes as higher-education institutions rapidly adopt the concepts and practices of e-learning. In early 2018, VNU-ULIS has embarked on a project of building web-based format for entire teaching and learning courses at the university, which are expected to be applied from the academic year 2018 - 2019.

But, are VNU-ULIS students ready for online learning?

The purpose of this study is to examine students' readiness for online learning so that not only online course designers but also potential online course participants would be able to identify feasible difficulties that they might encounter in the novel virtual learning environment.

Your participation is entirely voluntary. Please give your answer sincerely as only this will guarantee the success of the investigation. If there are any items you do not feel comfortable answering, please skip them. Thank you so much for your cooperation.

Name: _____

Class: _____

E-mail: _____

This questionnaire asks about your PERSONAL evaluation of different dimensions related to online learning. There are 18 statements in total.

Please tick ONE box to show how much you agree or disagree with each of these statements.

1 - Strongly disagree;
2 - Disagree;
3 - Neither disagree nor agree;
4 - Agree;
5 - Strongly agree.

No.	**Items (in an online context)**	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1	I feel confident in performing the basic functions of Microsoft Office programs (MS Word, MS Excel and MS PowerPoint).					
2	I feel confident in my knowledge and skills of how to manage software for online learning.					
3	I feel confident in using the Internet (Google, Yahoo) to find or gather information for online learning.					
4	I carry out my own study plan.					
5	I seek assistance when facing learning problems.					
6	I manage time well.					
7	I set up my learning goals.					

8	I have higher expectations for my learning performance.					
9	I can direct my own learning process.					
10	I am not distracted by other online activities when learning online (instant messages, Internet suffering).					
11	I repeated the online instructional materials on the basis of my needs.					
12	I am open to new ideas.					
13	I have motivation to learning.					
14	I improve from my mistakes.					
15	I like to share my ideas with others.					
16	I feel confident in using online tools (email discussion) to effectively communicate with others.					
17	I feel confident in expressing myself (emotions and humor) through the text.					
18	I feel confident in posting questions in online discussions.					

THE END

Once again, thank you so much for your contribution.

MỨC ĐỘ SẴN SÀNG CHO VIỆC HỌC TRỰC TUYẾN CỦA SINH VIÊN NĂM THỨ NHẤT VÀ NĂM THỨ HAI, KHOA SƯ PHẠM TIẾNG ANH, TRƯỜNG ĐẠI HỌC NGOẠI NGỮ, ĐHQGHN

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Tóm tắt: Những tiến bộ gần đây trong Công nghệ thông tin (CNTT) đã thúc đẩy những thay đổi đáng kể trong lĩnh vực giáo dục, đặc biệt là sự phát triển của việc học trực tuyến. Đầu năm 2018, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ (ĐHNN) đã bắt đầu triển khai việc xây dựng website môn học (Language Management System – LMS) nhằm mục đích khuyến khích phát triển việc học trực tuyến tại trường đại học. Nghiên cứu này tập trung xác định mức độ sẵn sàng cho việc học trực tuyến của những người học tiềm năng của hệ thống website môn học để những người hướng dẫn khóa học cùng với những người tham gia khóa học có thể xác định những khó khăn mà họ có thể gặp phải trong môi trường dạy và học trực tuyến. Quá trình thu thập dữ liệu được chia thành 2 giai đoạn: phiếu khảo sát và phỏng vấn trực tiếp. Kết quả cuối cùng chỉ ra rằng sinh viên ĐHNN ở cả hai năm học đều có mức độ sẵn sàng cho việc học trực tuyến tương đối cao; tuy nhiên, sinh viên năm thứ hai có mức độ sẵn sàng cao hơn so với sinh viên năm thứ nhất. Do đó, việc áp dụng hệ thống website môn học sẽ phù hợp với sinh viên năm thứ hai hơn.

Từ khóa: giáo dục từ xa, khóa học trực tuyến, mức độ sẵn sàng cho việc học trực tuyến