Prolonged Online Learning: An Exploratory Mixed-Methods Study on EFL Learners' Needs and Need Satisfaction

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Abstract—In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, English programs were switched to online regardless of learners' wishes in several regions. In such a challenging circumstance, learners' needs should be specially attended to. Situated within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, the current study explores the fundamental needs of *relatedness, competence*, and *autonomy* of EFL (English as a foreign language) learners and the satisfaction of those needs in fully online learning. The study draws upon qualitative data collected from focus groups (seven students), and quantitative data collected from a survey (183 students). Findings indicate strong teacher support in fields other than autonomy and relatedness. Also, students were highly satisfied with both their technological and academic competence but were neither happy with the in-classroom communication nor provided space for autonomy. Based on the findings, implications to enhance learners' need satisfaction in prolonged post-pandemic online learning are discussed.

Keywords—COVID-19, EFL learners' needs, need satisfaction, fully online learning

1 Introduction

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, online learning, if included in English education, normally served as an additional component to assist face-to-face instruction. The outbreak of COVID-19 has not only caused upheavals in the life of millions of people worldwide but also changed the way we are learning and teaching English. Face-to-face classes were canceled in several regions. They were partially or completely replaced by online classes if not postponed awaiting further notice. In such a scenario, online learning might have become the main, or possibly the only channel of English teaching in several contexts.

In a normal situation, online learning is found comparable, if not superior, to face-to-face classes regarding learning outcomes and satisfaction (see [17] for a review) on the one hand. On the other hand, online learners are noted to possibly perceive situated factors differently, and so do they behave [22]. In the face of the prolonged online

learning amid COVID-19, scholars and educators would agree that learners' perceptive and affective changes would be even more significant, and so are their needs.

Learners are found to be challenged both mentally and psychologically when learning online for a long time amid COVID-19 (see, for example, [12]; [14], among others). To face those issues, learners have reported high demands for technical, academic, and psychological support [12]. In such a scenario, actions to address online learners' needs are considered a priority for not only teachers but also educational institutions [16].

In language education, though there is an increasing research interest in online language learning, learners' needs are rarely taken into account [1]. In some rare cases when this topic is investigated, it is often examined in blended learning. The mishap of the COVID-19 pandemic and its recurrent outbreaks have been an alarm that online learning may not be a one-time educational solution. Generally, a positive attitude of learners toward online learning amid the pandemic has been reported; however, learners' course participation [18] and learning motivation [25] are somehow negatively affected. Again, learners' needs and need satisfaction in prolonged online learning amid the pandemic, which may contribute greatly to the reduction of learning motivation and persistence, which are also critical to assist learners in the current and future education crisis remains under-researched. This study is aimed to obtain knowledge from an explorative point of view, which hopefully unearths learners' three basic needs [9] and the satisfaction of those needs in fully online learning focusing on the following two research points:

1. How were learners' basic needs responded to in their fully online English course?
2. To what extent did learners feel satisfied with their fully online English course?

2 Literature review

2.1 Learners' basic needs

In Self-Determination Theory, [9] posit that the three most fundamental needs of learners include *autonomy, competence*, and *relatedness*. They also assert that the fulfillment of those needs mediates learning motivation.

Autonomy Autonomy involves learners' free will to control their learning process. Given the flexible nature of online learning regarding both time and place, learners are required to be more autonomous; however, they may inherently enjoy more freedom. In literature, autonomy is associated with higher course satisfaction [5].

Competence Competence involves the need of being effective in interacting with and controlling the surrounding environment. The feeling of competence is associated with positive attitudes toward online learning, elevated motivation, and better learning outcomes while the feeling of incompetence that remains unsupported and unaddressed may result in frustration, anxiety, and distress for learners [21].

Relatedness Relatedness refers to the sense of being connected and belonging, which is fulfilled through learners' constant interaction with peers and teachers. In the online learning environment, though learners are expected to be autonomous and independent, the desire for being included and connected remains strong [8].

2.2 Learners' need satisfaction in online learning

Fully online learning – a unique form of online learning There are three popular concepts of *online learning, distance learning*, and *blended learning* that are sometimes used interchangeably. *Distance learning* refers to the learning provided in the face of geographical and/or temporal teacher-learner separation, with instructional materials being delivered in both printed and electrical forms [20]. *Online learning*, as widely agreed in education, is access to learning via some form of technology. *Blended learning* is formed when online learning is combined with some amount of face-to-face instruction.

Most educational research into online learning focuses on blended learning rather than on fully online learning while the latter has its unique characteristics; the failure to acknowledge the distinctions between those learning modes means ignoring the existence of an extra set of challenges facing learners in fully online learning [28].

Need satisfaction in online learning In online education, learner satisfaction has been closely associated with increased learning motivation [9], higher course satisfaction, better engagement, performance, and learning outcomes [15]. Learner satisfaction is also critical to online course completion [7]. There are several factors that influence online learners' general satisfaction. For example, learners are more satisfied with their online courses if they have appropriate interaction with peers [3] and their teachers [8]. Technological tools, course features, or teacher behaviors that facilitate online learners' communication are also found to elevate learner satisfaction [8]. Besides, online platforms, programs, or technological tools which are perceived as easy to use also enhance their general satisfaction [3]. Learners' perception of their self-efficacy in computers and the internet and the usefulness of tasks is another contributing factor to learners' satisfaction [2]. The list is by no means exhausted; however, it is salient that the factors contributing to learners' overall satisfaction all address some extent of their basic needs, such as relatedness (through the facilitation of learners' communication with others), competence (through the enhancement of learners' capacity to control aspects of their learning environment), and autonomy (the provision of choices upon learners' interests and personality types). In a study particularly focusing on need satisfaction, [30] compare the effects of need satisfaction and need dissatisfaction and find that these two affective statuses have distinctive impacts on not only online learners' learning outcomes but also their learning motivation. Interestingly, the satisfaction of one basic need in online learning is found to enhance the satisfaction of others [15].

While understanding and satisfying online learners' needs are critical, it is challenging to do so. Online learners are often reported to face more negative emotional issues than in the traditional setting such as frustration, [4] isolation, and unrelatedness due to the lack of communication and interaction [28][29]. These feelings could be even more intense when online learning is prolonged. Research findings of online learning amid COVID-19 have indicated multiple issues for learners regarding both their mental and physical well-being including anxiety and stress [14], demotivation [14], fear, and exhaustion [12]. Facing those problems, learners have overtly claimed their demands for pedagogical, technical, and emotional support [12]. Clearly, the understanding of online learners' needs and how to satisfy those are of critical importance; however, these topics remained under-researched in education when the vast majority of educational research only focuses on learners' general satisfaction.

2.3 Learners' needs and need satisfaction in online language learning

In language education research, attention to fully online language learning increased significantly during the COVID-19 pandemic with the forced switch of language classes to online on a large scale. Online language learners are found to be especially challenged in staying motivated and self-directed [25][28] while online language teachers find it hard to maintain learners' class participation, engagement, and communication [29]. Consequently, [8], while investigating the practice of teaching and learning Dutch as a second language online, suggests online language courses be designed with a need-oriented approach. Despite that call, little is known about what online language learners need and how those needs might have been addressed. [6] are among the few scholars looking at learners' needs in fully online language classrooms and found a positive correlation between the satisfaction of basic needs, especially that of competence, and course satisfaction. Nevertheless, this study mainly draws upon quantitative data, which may hinder the explorative power of the research.

3 Methodology

3.1 Context and participants

This study is part of a bigger project which focused on fully online English learning at a big university in Hanoi amid COVID-19. Participants were students who were taking an English Preparation course (EPC) at that university, which aimed to help students achieve sufficient English proficiency (equal to 5.5 IELTS) to study their majors in English. The course included six levels; each level was taught within eight weeks using a textbook in a textbook set by Pearson Longman. Each student needed to complete some, or all of these levels depending on their English placement test results at the entrance. When schools were closed for the second time in Hanoi in May 2021 to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, EPC classes were fully switched to online using Google Meet. Notably, this was a hi-tech university and well before COVID-19, the daily use of an internet-connected laptop was compulsory for students for both learning and administrative purposes.

Survey participants include 183 EPC students, who were mainly male (68.8%), aged between 18 and 21, and from the intermediate, advanced, and higher advanced English levels. The students were from different majors of study: information technology (60.8%), Business Administration (20%), Graphic Design (4%), and foreign languages (3.2%). Seven surveyed students volunteered to participate in focus groups; details of those participants are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Focus-group participants' background information

Name	Nang	Lang	Nhung	Dung	Yen	Hai	Quang
Age	18	19	21	19	19	18	19
English level	Ad	Ad	Ad	Inter	Inter	Inter	Inter
Focus group	FG1	FG1	FG1	FG2	FG2	FG2	FG2
Major	CS	CS	GD	JS	BA	BA	CS

Notes: Ad (Advanced); Inter (Intermediate); CS (Computer Science); GD (Graphics Design); JS (Japanese Study); BA (Business Administration).

3.2 Research design

This study follows the explanatory mixed-method design, drawing upon a sub-set of survey and focus-group data of a bigger project; however, it is principally qualitative research with survey data mainly serving to guide the follow-up in-depth focus-group discussions.

Survey The survey was based on that developed by [27], which includes 40 items that specifically explore needs and need satisfaction in a physical education (PE) course. Given the different context of the current research and also the minor role of questionnaires in this study,15 of the 40 original items were adapted to explore English learners' needs and need satisfaction in fully online learning in this study. The stem *"English teacher"* was inserted in the place of "PE teacher" in the original items. Also, the phrase *"in this online course"* is added where necessary. The survey questions were designed with 5-point Likert scales to explore three main research foci including student demography, need support, and need satisfaction.

Focus group interviews Focus groups were designed in a semi-structured format based on 13 guided questions. With this design, the author could flexibly go with participants' stories and ask spontaneous questions to capture more insight.

3.3 Data collection and ethics considerations

Participant selection was under the principle of *convenience sampling*. An invitation and a link to the Google Form survey were sent via email to almost 400 students who were currently taking EPC at the university. The email also included details about the purposes of the study, an explanation of the student's right to participate or not, and the confidentiality of participants' information. The survey was open for a week in late May 2021 with 183 responses returned.

Both the invitation email and the survey included information for participants who might want to join the focus groups. Seven volunteers were assigned to Focus group 1 (FG1) and Focus group 2 (FG2) based on their English levels. The focus groups were audio-recorded with students' written consent and generated almost two hours of recording data. Vietnamese was used for both the survey and interviews to facilitate learners' understanding and responding to the questions.

3.4 Data analysis

Survey data The survey data were automatically analyzed by Google Forms and then put into predetermined themes.

Interview data Focus groups were recorded and fully transcribed. The author read the transcription several times and found a total of 21 motifs which formed four macro themes. The themes were then brought back in comparison with survey data to reveal similarities and supplementation.

4 Findings

4.1 Need support

A thorough examination of the survey and focus-group data revealed two major themes: 1) The perceived strong and effective teacher support in *competence* and 2) The limited efficacy of *relatedness* and *autonomy* support in fully online classes.

Strong and effective competence support As shown in Table 2, teachers' competence support was perceived as strong in both fostering learners' self-confidence (75%, item 8) and their actual progress (90%, item 9), and only 1.6 % of the participants indicated otherwise. Teacher support was also revealed to significantly contribute to learners' progress (as agreed by 90%, item 9).

Table 2. Competence support

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(No of Responses (%))				
8. The English teacher makes us feel like we are doing good in this online course.	53 (29)	84 (45.9)	43 (23.5)	2 (1.1)	1 (0.5)
9. The English teacher helps us improve in this online course.	77 (42.1)	89 (48.6)	17 (9.3)	0	0

Notes: SA (Strongly Agree); A (Agree); U (unsure); DA (Disagree); SD (Strongly Disagree).

The same appreciation for both teachers' technical and academic support was evident in focus groups. As for the former, one representative student, Yen, whose major was Business Administration, reported that her teacher spent part of the first slot briefly reviewing the use of Google Meet. Though already receiving guidance from the Academic Department before the block, Yen said the section helped her "more confident". Nang, who majored in Computer Science (CS), said that "my teachers told us we are experts in technology and using Google Meet would be a piece of cake". With a different observation, Lang, another CS student, said his teacher did not show any explicit encouragement, which he perceived as a way to acknowledge students' high technological competence because "he [his teacher] has no reason to do so …I mean… we use computers every day".

Regarding academic competence, interview data strongly resonate with survey data highlighting the role of teachers in students' knowledge acquisition and skill development. Students mentioned several strategies teachers used to assist their learning. Nang said his teacher often "answers all questions" and "explains things very clearly". Yen reported that her teacher "provides detailed feedback" so she could fix her errors and progress. Hai observed that his teacher "often organizes fun games in Kahoot which helps us learn more effectively". Quang said, "my teacher lets us play fun games and she often asks if she should adjust her teaching to make our learning easier".

Limited autonomy and relatedness support Regarding autonomy support, findings show that learners were cared for, listened to, and supported but they were hardly emotionally understood or provided with choices/options.

Table 3. Autonomy support

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(No of Responses (%))				
1. Our English teachers make sure we clearly understand the goal of the lesson and what we need to do in this online course.	68 (37.2)	84 (45.9)	31 (16.9)	0	0
2. We can be open with our English teachers in the online course.	73 (39.9)	95 (51.9)	15 (8.2)	0	0
3. Our English teacher encourages us to ask questions in this online class.	88 (48.1)	82 (44.8)	12 (6.6)	1 (0.5)	0
4. Our English teacher answers our questions fully and carefully in this online course.	101 (54.9)	76 (41.8)	6 (3.3)	0	0
5. We don't feel very good about the way the English teacher talks to us.	34 (18.6)	27 (14.8)	38 (20.8)	64 (35)	20 (10.9)
6. We feel able to share our feelings with the English teacher during this online course.	51 (27.9)	58 (31.7)	61 (33.3)	10 (5.5)	3 (1.6)
7. We feel that the English teacher provides us with choices and options.	32 (17.4)	24 (13)	72 (39.1)	34 (18.5)	22 (12)

Notes: SA (Strongly Agree); A (Agree); U (unsure); DA (Disagree); SD (Strongly Disagree).

Both data sources highlight teachers' significant efforts in making online classes a supportive environment for autonomous learning. As seen in Table 3, almost 83% of surveyed participants indicated that their teachers often made learning goals clear (item 1), were open to students (92%, item 2), and encouraged questions (93%, item 3), which were often fully and carefully answered (item 4, 96%). In focus groups, these aspects of support were confirmed by all participants. Nang said, "though communication with our teacher is not as good as in normal classes, our teacher is friendly and explains everything clearly". Lang further commented that "asking questions is a part of our lessons. My teachers often ask us to question if anything is unclear". Receiving similar encouragement, Nhung reported not being reluctant to seek teachers' support when necessary and considered asking questions as compensation for limited teacher-student interaction in her online classes:

> *We can't interact with teachers in the way we did in face-to-face classes, so making questions is a way to keep us connected and let our teachers know where and when we need help.*

However, concerning affection, students did not seem to be emotionally supported to become effective autonomous learners. While more than half of the participants indicated they could share their feelings with teachers (item 6), the other half were either unsure (33.3%) or disagreed with that point (7.1%). Also, though largely perceiving teachers as open and friendly, one-third of the students did not seem happy about the way teachers communicated (item 5). Focus-group data further highlighted the weakening emotional connection between teachers and students with several

essential affordances of emotional exchanges seemingly impeded due to the lack of physical presence. For example, teachers' observation of students' physical and emotional states, such as sadness and tiredness, was no longer possible to provide instant encouragement (Yen). Also, teacher-student communication was "limited just within academic content" (Hai).

Additionally, students seemed provided with little control in the online classes. Only one-third of surveyed participants indicated that they had choices/options. In focus groups, some participants reported being able to choose sub-topics for presentations (Nang, Nhung-FG1) and groupwork partners (Nang, Nhung; Hai, Quang). All participants, however, resonated that it was rare that they could choose class activities or learning materials. Quang commented:

> *It is just not relevant talking about what materials or activities we wanted because we had textbooks. Sometimes my teacher adds some supplementary materials, but I think she has to consider them carefully. It is not the job of students.*

Regarding relatedness support, though the data were highly consistent in showing learners' perception of teachers' friendliness and supportiveness, teacher support seemed insufficient to facilitate learners' communication within online classes.

As shown in Table 4, almost all surveyed participants reported teachers' friendliness (96.7%, item 10), but only half of them confirmed teachers' encouragement of peer interaction (item 11). Focus-group data slightly differ from survey data with six of the seven participants claiming that teamwork was their usual classroom practice; only one student (Yen-FG2) stated that "we often work alone…we do exercises or search the internet to prepare for individual presentations". However, in further discussions, the other six students revealed that the actual practice and the efficacy of team activities largely fell short of expectations. Nang added that "sometimes, we have fun working together, but sometimes, you know, some members just don't join". Quang also mentioned this point, saying that "…it depends on who my teammates are. Sometimes, I work alone or do not work at all because no one works with me". Another student, Hai, added that his teammates found "millions of excuses for not doing their parts… like… poor internet connection, problems with their laptop and so on". He suggested teachers be "stricter" and "bonuses and punishment are necessary".

> *I think teamwork is not very effective because we often work separately and spend just a couple of minutes combining individuals' work before doing a presentation or sending our work to teachers. (Dung)*

Table 4. Relatedness support

Statements	SA	A	U	D	SD
	(No of Responses (%))				
10. The English teacher is very friendly to us in this online course.	97 (53)	80 (43.7)	6 (3.3)	0	0
11. The English teacher encourages us to work together in this online course.	30 (16.4)	60 (32.8)	42 (22.8)	36 (19.7)	15 (8.2)

Notes: SA (Strongly Agree); A (Agree); U (unsure); DA (Disagree); SD (Strongly Disagree).

4.2 Need satisfaction

Significant competence satisfaction Students were highly content with both their technological and academic competence; the satisfaction with the former, however, seems stronger. Almost 80% of survey participants and all focus-group interviewees indicated achieving technological competence either before or after learning online for a short while. A representative, Nang, said: "I feel alright with all technical things". For Quang, "learning online is easier because I just need a click…then everything is there". Yen and Hai said technical things became easier just after some lessons. Yen added, "I felt a bit nervous at first, but it turned out simple". As for academic competence, most survey participants (58%, item 14) and all interviewed students were satisfied with their course performance and academic progress in general. However, five interviewed students seemed quite dissatisfied with their English-speaking skill development. Only two students, Nang and Lang (FG1), were content with this aspect. Lang affirmed that "though it is more difficult to practice speaking English in online classes, you will find the way if you want". Nang added that he joined a discussion group to practice speaking English outside classes and found it "effective in improving my speaking skill".

Table 5. Need satisfaction

Statements	SA	A	U	DA	SD
	(No of Responses (%))				
Autonomy					
12. I can decide which activities or skills I want to practice in this online course.	43 (23.5)	70 (38.3)	60 (32.8)	7 (3.8)	3 (1.6)
13. I feel certain freedom of action in this online course.	45 (24.6)	104 (56.8)	31 (16.9)	3 (1.6)	0
Competence					
14. I am satisfied with my performance in this online course.	35 (19.1)	72 (39.3)	60 (32.8)	14 (7.7)	2 (1.1)
15. When I participated in this online course for a while, I feel pretty competent with online learning skills.	41 (22.4)	98 (53.6)	39 (21.3)	4 (2.2)	1 (0.5)
Relatedness					
16. With other students in the class, I feel supported.	46 (25.1)	71 (38.8)	48 (26.2)	14 (7.6)	4 (2.2)
17. With other students in the class, I feel listened to and understood.	35 (19.1)	67 (36.6)	66 (36.1)	11 (6)	4 (2.2)

Notes: SA (Strongly Agree); A (Agree); U (unsure); DA (Disagree); SD (Strongly Disagree).

Autonomy satisfaction: Mixed findings Regarding the need for autonomy, learners' satisfaction was significant regarding the freedom to act in classes but limited in freedom to make choices. Table 5 shows that 81.4% of surveyed students reported being free (item 13); only three participants indicated the opposite. In focus groups, participants revealed some reasons for this perceived freedom. Nang, Nhung, Hai, and

Quang mentioned some control over class activities, including choosing their team partners, which was perceived as favorable as "it is more effective when working with someone you work well with" (Quang). Three students from FG1 (Nhung, Nang, and Lang) mentioned the longer time assigned for tasks in the online classes, which enabled them to personalize their learning pace, feel more relaxed, and diversify their learning content/activities to some extent:

> *When having more time, I feel more relaxed. I can learn slowly or fast as I want. If I have some time spared from assigned activities, I can do more exercises or read things I like (Nhung).*

Notably, larger space for freedom and less teacher control in online classes could be abused by some poorly-motivated students. Dung, for example, felt free because "when the microphone and video muted, I can sleep or do whatever I want. Teacher won't know" (laugh).

However, students had few chances to make choices and have options. Survey responses were divided with 50% showing that students could choose skills and classroom activities; the other half indicated either uncertainty or disagreement (item 12). Focus-group data were slightly different; no students reported that they could select learning content or learning activities. Though two interviewees (Nhung and Nang) said they could choose specific topics for teamwork projects within a provided general one, this freedom was not enough for Hai and Yen. Hai said:

> *No, we are often required to follow activities and topics in the textbook. That's fine, but sometimes book topics are boring, and I think if we could choose from a wide range of topics, it would be more fun.*

Limited relatedness satisfaction Relatedness was the need of students which was the least fulfilled. Teacher-student communication was generally perceived as "not as good" as in face-to-face classes (Nang). There were seemingly "invisible barriers impeding access to teachers" (Nhung), and teacher-student interaction were "not easy and spontaneous" (Hai). Several participants highlighted the absence of physical contact as the cause of emotional distress. Regarding peer interaction, most surveyed students confirmed that they felt supported (64%, item 16), listened to, and understood by their classmates (55%, item 17). That means a significant percentage of students (36% and 45% respectively) did not feel so. The views of focus-group participants in these matters were incongruent. A minor group (including Nang and Lang) said that they had a few problems with peer interaction within online classes because "it all depends on you. If you are active in the class, you can maintain the connection with teachers and friends as usual" (Nang). The majority, including Nhung, Yen, Hai, and Quang claimed to feel "fine" with peer support in learning, but they did not feel personally connected.

> *We do not communicate much except when discussing shared tasks. I am not sure if it is correct for others, but I feel uncomfortable. I cannot talk or build something personal with others in a Google Meet room. (Hai).*

Yen further noted:

> *We still cooperate to complete assigned tasks but it is hard to have close connections. You know, most of us were in different classes in the previous semester, and we could not know each other in this online class.*

As a result, Nhung reported being somewhat "lonely and disconnected" while Yen said, "I miss my friends. It has been months since I could see everyone in person". The last view was that of Dung, who described himself as "a self-efficient guy" and that he felt "more comfortable being alone", so "learning online is great".

5 Discussion

Research Question 1: How were learners' basic needs responded to in their fully online English course?

Learners' sense of competence in this online course was found well supported both technologically and academically. Also, teachers were flexible in selecting strategies to support different groups of students, which ranged from providing timely assistance to those who needed it to implicitly/explicitly acknowledging/praising students' technology competence. As for academic competence, students reported having frequent chances to raise questions and get teachers' feedback and guidance. Importantly, some teachers, such as Quang's, even encouraged students to involve in the pedagogical discussion. This finding is significant as it is often that Vietnamese EFL learners' voices neither receive commensurate attention nor be seriously considered for pedagogical adaptation [24]. This finding, thus, marks a shift toward a more student-centered approach, which is critical for learner autonomy development in online learning [29]. Besides, it has been found that teacher support plays a significant role in not only the efficacy of online learning, and learners' willingness to participate in future online courses [13] but also their self-regulated learning [31]. In the current study, the findings also indicate significant teachers' efforts in the face of multiple limitations of fully online classes which were perceived by students as critical for both their stronger sense of competence and their actual competence enhancement. This support is especially in the form of diversifying classroom activities via the use of new teaching approaches such as gamification – an emerging but warmly-welcome method in English classrooms in Vietnam [23]. The switch to fully online learning not only brought about challenges but also opportunities for pedagogical innovation [16].

In terms of autonomy support, students' perception was mixed. They reported being provided with clear learning paths, chances to raise questions, and to receive timely guidance and feedback but hardly given opportunities to get involved in decision-making processes. Students' choices of learning materials and skills to practice in these online English classes appeared so irrelevant that some students, such as Quang, unquestionably refused their legitimacy and capacity to contribute to these aspects of pedagogy. This finding is consistent with typical classrooms in Asia where teachers are knowledge providers and students are passive knowledge receivers [10]. Additionally, textbooks often serve as curricula in those contexts; consequently, EFL

teachers may question their authority to allow students' choices which may cause classroom activities to depart from textbook content [24]. There seemed to be a conflict between teacher commitment to traditional pedagogy and the demand for learners' greater control in online classes.

Regarding relatedness support, teachers were friendly and supportive, but the effectiveness of their efforts to enhance the fulfillment of learners' needs of communication/interaction seems limited. Collaborative activities, the core of the online learning paradigm, were widely encouraged in online classes but often ended up with students working alone. In literature, online collaborative learning is often found problematic when the dominance of some members impedes the contribution and development of others [4]. In contrast, the current study showed that the failure of those activities can be caused by members' lack of commitment/responsibility to fulfill their task roles. This finding is consistent with some existing research, which shows that the imbalanced contribution to shared tasks could consequently lead to frustration and discouragement among online learners [28],[29]. The unattainability of cooperative activities in synchronous online classrooms, as indicated in this study and also in some previous ones (see, for example, [29],[28]), may have discouraged some teachers (as Yen's) from organizing teamwork and relying on individual practices instead. Furthermore, students were dissatisfied with teachers' emotional support though they mainly attributed this issue to the inherent limitations of technology and cyberspace as a communicational setting rather than to teachers' lack of devotion. On this matter, [26] also finds that technology and cyberspace can be communication barriers. However, there seemed a lack of effective strategies to deal with those barriers in the context of this study.

Research Question 2: To what extent did students feel satisfied with their online English course?

Though technical issues are often the most problematic aspect of online learning [5], students in this study seemed to adapt well to the new learning setting in terms of technology. Though the students' high capacity and confidence in technology could be partially attributed to their familiarity with the use of technology in learning at their hi-tech university, teachers' flexible choice of strategies to support the sense of competence in different groups was notable.

With regards to academic competence, [17] asserts that learning outcomes of learners in online learning could be equal, if not better, when compared to those in face-to-face learning. As seen from the views of students in the current study, both course performance and academic progress were generally satisfactory except for the development of English-speaking skills. Resonating with several other studies (see, for example, [28],[29]), this study shows that learners' unsatisfactory progress in speaking skills in English was caused by the lack of communication, insufficient teacher control, and, again, ineffective collaborative learning.

Regarding autonomy, it is claimed that online learning should follow a more personalized and student-centered approach and emphasize more on students' participation in pedagogical processes [19]. This study indicates that students had some favorable conditions provided in the online course, including more time allowance for tasks and less teachers' control. With that support, some students successfully personalized their learning pace, experienced more relaxation and less learning pressure, and diversified their learning content to some extent. However, data revealed little control students

had over what and how they learned. Seemingly, despite the benefits and the necessity of learner autonomy development in online classes, teachers either did not believe their students enough or were not ready yet to share with their students part of their decision-making responsibility.

Further supporting the existing literature, this study also reveals that relatedness was the most problematic area of needs satisfaction in this online course. The physical absence of teachers and classmates, the lack of non-verbal cues in communication [26], and frequent time lapses during interaction processes significantly reduced the sense of spontaneity while increasing the feeling of connection loss for online learners in this study. In that scenario, the general observation was that students commonly viewed communication with their teachers and classmates as unsatisfactory. It should also be noted that students in this study, to some extent, seemed to be holding expectations for communication in traditional classes when learning online. The inappropriate expectations might have contributed significantly to their sense of disconnection and a lower level of satisfaction with in-class communication. Importantly, some students with a flexible mindset and high autonomy, such as Lang and Nang, who could take advantage of online learning to create learning opportunities, still reported a high level of relatedness satisfaction.

6 Conclusions and implications

This study explores learner needs and need satisfaction in a prolonged online English course amid COVID-19. Generally, teachers were supportive and students were capable of adapting to the new learning setting as seen from the technological and academic progress. However, students were not trouble-free and needed further support, especially in autonomy and relatedness. The implications below are to better address the basic needs of learners in this learning course and can be useful for the improvement of learner need satisfaction in future prolonged online learning.

First, chances for students to make choices and have more control over their learning were generally enjoyed and appreciated, but teachers did not seem willing or well-prepared enough to transfer part of the decision-making responsibility. For changes to happen, educational administrators and curriculum designers should play their roles in encouraging teachers to do so and provide teachers with necessary guidance about when and how to involve students in the construction of online pedagogy. There should also be official spaces in the curriculum for students' contributions.

Second, though teachers' duty is to detect and facilitate learners' needs in the online environment [11], teachers in this study appeared to be challenged in keeping track of students' emotional changes and psychological issues. Therefore, it may be more useful if teachers spend more time and attention on communicating with students to improve their mental well-being, which would subsequently benefit learning satisfaction and learning motivation [25]. Furthermore, many students reported dissatisfaction with both the quantity and quality of communication/interaction with their teachers and peers in online classes. This dissatisfaction, as discussed earlier, could be attributed partially to students' inappropriate expectations for communication within synchronous online classrooms. Therefore, online learners may need guidance to understand

and accept the unique nature of synchronous online communication, which includes time lapses between exchanges, the absence of non-verbal communication cues, and a weaker sense of reality, among many other features. The construction of more realistic expectations could reduce learner frustration and enhance their satisfaction in terms of relatedness.

Finally, the frequently reported failure of team activities due to students' poor participation and imbalanced contribution alarms us about the challenges for teachers to keep synchronous communicative/cooperative activities under control. Some students suggested teachers be "stricter" with the use of "bonuses and punishment" (Hai); this suggestion could be a signal of students' need for more active involvement of teachers in controlling online collaborative learning. Therefore, teachers may need to set rules for each teamwork, which would serve as the criteria for giving bonuses and punishment. Also, teamwork assessment should be a shared responsibility of both teachers and team members. When being required to assess the participation, contribution, and performance of themselves and their peers, students would develop a stronger sense of responsibility for effective teamwork. Finally, students may need the training to develop some collaborative skills to work effectively in teams and take a better share in collaborative/communicative tasks in online classes.

7 Limitations

Despite its contribution, this study has some limitations. Firstly, this study was based at a high-tech university, and many participants in both the survey and focus groups majored in Computer Science. Accordingly, students' high satisfaction with technological competence may not be generalizable for EFL students in other contexts where students are not as well technologically-equipped. Secondly, research findings have indicated several areas in which teachers appeared challenged in dealing with constantly forged changes, including shifting classroom hierarchies, teacher-learner roles, and pedagogies [8]. However, teachers' perspectives were not explored within the scope of the current research. This aspect remains a promising topic for further research, which would gain valuable insight into teachers' obstacles in addressing the complicated issues of learners' needs and need satisfaction in the online learning environment.

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