Students' Perceptions of their Online Communication with their Instructor, in an Undergraduate Communication Skill Classroom

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Abstract

Covid-19 pandemic has drastically changed higher education teaching and learning. In Malaysia, physical university classes were substituted with fully online classes, overnight. Being new at online teaching, many educators struggled with communicating with their students, online. This study explores the impact of an instructor's online communication strategies on her students' perceptions of learning, the subject conveyor, and the subject. The study was conducted in a fully online Communication Skills subject for second-year undergraduates and action research approach was used. Data shows that many students benefitted from communication strategies adopted but mixed result is reported on some aspects of communication particularly on clarity of instructions. When teaching online, extra attention must be paid to communicating with learners so messages do not get misinterpreted and effective strategies are put in place for exchange of written messages so that the message is not misconstrued. Finally, implication on strategies for improved online communication for future classes is provided.

Keywords: action research; clarity; Covid-19; e-learning; interaction

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed university teaching and learning. In times of Covid-19, online learning has become a necessity and in fact the only option available. According to Ally (2008), online learning refers to "the use of the Internet to access learning materials; to interact with the content, instructors and other learners and to obtain support during the learning process, in order to acquire knowledge, to construct personal meaning, and to grow from the learning experience" (Ally, 2008). University instructors utilise various online platforms, i.e., Microsoft Teams, Blackboard eLearn, and Zoom, just to name a few, and incorporate web 2.0 tools, i.e., Padlet, Miro, Kahoot, MS Forms and Quizziz to engage their students online, provide support to their students, and most importantly to ensure that students learn their subject content.

The initial stages saw a lot of struggles from teachers and students as well; teachers' struggle was to switch to a fully online mode of teaching and students were seen struggling to adapt to learning in a fully online environment (Crawford et al., 2020). Despite these reported struggles, there are benefits of online learning:

1. It has been accepted as a mode for improving pedagogy, bringing flexibility in students' access to learning and also making education easily accessible to a large range of audiences (Taplin, Kerr, & Brown, 2013; Graham, 2006; Zhang, Zhao, Zhou, & Nunamaker, 2004; Petrides, 2002; Schrum, 2002).

2. Pedagogically, electronic education has the ability to shift the focus from a passive teacher-centred approach to active student-centred learning approach. As suggested by Mellow (2005), synchronous and asynchronous communication remain to be the most promising benefits of online learning. It provides opportunities for instructor-controlled sessions and more flexible independent learning which supports the development of self-regulation and reflection (Cheung and Hew, 2011).

3. Online learning enhances and increases student engagement (Dzuiban, Hartman, Cavanagh, & Moskal, 2011) and when this is compared to *f2f* instruction, it shows an increase in student satisfaction and performance (Bernard et al., 2009; Means, Toyama, Murphy, & Baki, 2013).

4. Online learning has been seen as effective in the improvement of student achievement, increasing their motivation and self-confidence along with enhancing their communicative skills with peers and lecturers as discussed in various studies (Ozgur, 2015; Miltiadou & Savenye, 2003; Wang & Newlin, 2012).

For online learning to work, online teaching and learning must be well-equipped with a carefully designed classroom which offers student engagement with course content, faculty and peers (Tanis, 2020). Another crucial point to be considered is interaction and communication between the instructor and students. A study done by Ali Sher (2009) confirms the importance of student-instructor interaction which reiterates the assertions of online educators that interaction remains to be one of the most vital aspects of learning outcomes (Collison, Elbaum, Havind & Tinker, 2000; Pallof and Pratt, 2001; Salmon, 2001). This supports the findings of research that promoted interaction in instruction as a prominent feature for learners' satisfaction and learning (Arbaugh, 2000b; Chou & Liu, 2005; Sun & Zhan, 2006; Trentin, 2000).

1.1. The Importance of Instructor- Student Communication

Many studies contend that lack of face-to-face physical interaction is a great disadvantage of online education (Kirby, 1999; Kruger, 2000; Arbaugh, 2000a; Berge, 1999; Saunders and Weible, 1999) and this physical separation creates communication barriers (Sorenson and Baylen, 1999). Hence, there is a strong need to ensure that online communication between participants, particularly with the instructor is effective and supportive. Moore (1989) defines learner-instructor interaction as a form of interaction which takes place between learners and either an instructor or a team of subject-experts who have prepared the subject materials and here the instructor stimulates and regularly maintains the learners' interest by motivating them to learn, assesses their progress and also offers support and encourages them.

Many studies have stressed upon the importance of prompt communication and feedback by the faculty and how it compensates the distance associated with online learning (Moore, 1997). Timely feedback from the instructor motivates students and promotes course satisfaction as suggested by Dahalan *et al.,* 2013. There are various other aspects of communication and interaction in online learning. Ausburn (2004) reported course announcements and reminders from the instructors as the most crucial features of an online course along with information about the course syllabi, schedules, marking guidelines, and information and instructions for assignments. Grant and Thornton (2007) suggest providing clear guidelines and expectations for students. Since learners explore course materials in a non-linear fashion, explicit instructions are vital so that learners may utilise all the learning materials efficiently (Callahan *et al.,* 2013).

Studies have documented the effects of interaction with the instructor in online learning. The study by Swan et al. (2000) revealed that interaction with course instructors and active discussion were the reasons for success in online learning. Interaction has been highlighted as a key component for success in online settings (Picciano, 2002). Similarly, Jiang & Ting (1998) note that the amount of emphasis given to instruction significantly impacted students'

perception of online learning. It has been found that students value the opportunities to communicate with their instructors and peers in an online setting (McCall, 2002). The study done by Hay et al., (2014) reported that online learning in fact may actually allow for higher levels of interaction as opposed to large lecture classes found typically in business schools, and level of student interaction remains to be a good predictor of learning outcomes.

The interaction carried out by the instructor remains to be a key component in online learning and the instructor plays two key roles here; one is to provide direct interaction with the course instructor and this is of value to both teachers and students (Soo & Bonk, 1998); and the other role is to set the tone for interaction among students in online settings (Wise et al., 2004). This is echoed in a study conducted by Kim, Liu and Bonk, (2005), who found that students asked for more interaction with instructors and frequent and prompt feedback from their instructors. They indicated that delay in feedback which was because of no real-time communication with their lecturer posed as a challenge in online learning. It was also noted that they missed interacting with their peers due to the absence of face-to-face contacts and differences in time-zones.

2. The Study

It is clear that student-instructor interaction and communication is one of the most critical factors in enhancing learner satisfaction in online learning. Adopting an action research approach, the purpose of this study is to explore students' perspectives of their online communication with their instructor, and to identify strengths and gaps in current online communication strategies employed, for further improvement.

The aspects of online communication that were investigated were:

- Students' preference for either asynchronous or synchronous session for communication of assessment-related information
- Students-instructor communication during live session (voice, clarity of explanation, addressing students' concerns)
- Clarity of instructors' explanation and instructions in the pre-recorded videos (for asynchronous learning)
- The following research questions guided the study:
- What were students' preference for communication of assessment-related information?
- What were students' general perceptions of their online communication with the instructor?
- What were the strengths and gaps in current online communication strategies adopted?

3. Context and Participants

The study was carried out at Sunway University located in Malaysia. The study was conducted in two Communication Skills classrooms (ENG 2013 & ENG 2024) and 45 students out of 113 from School of Hospitality and Sunway University Business School participated in the study. Communication Skills is a compulsory subject in the second year for all undergraduate students at Sunway University. The classes were conducted fully online and live sessions were held twice a week. Assignment briefings, information regarding assignment requirements and submissions, and concepts and theories for communication skills were delivered mostly asynchronously using pre-recorded educational videos.

4. Data Collection

Data was collected before the end of the April 2020 semester. Data collection tool, in the form of a survey questionnaire created on Google Forms, comprised of both closed and open-ended questions.

The sections in the survey comprised of these sections:

- Five closed-ended questions with Likert scale (1-5 corresponding from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') on preference for synchronous or asynchronous session
- Ten closed-ended questions on students' perception of online communication, particularly on clarity of instructions and feedback
- Five open-ended questions sought suggestions for improvement on various aspects of teaching and learning, i.e., quality of pre-recorded videos, live sessions, consultation, and general quality of online teaching.

Below are some of the communication strategies that I have adopted in my Communication Skills classes.

5. My Communication Strategies

5.1. Communication during live sessions

The main platform used during the entire semester for both ENG 2013 and ENG 2024 was MS Teams for both synchronous and asynchronous teaching and learning. Before the beginning of the semester, I uploaded my weekly plans for the first seven weeks in the semester. While teaching online, I knew I had to be virtually present throughout the weeks-before and after and needless to say, it was quite time-consuming and overwhelming. These weekly plans indicated whether we were to meet live online or they had to watch a pre-recorded video, and I made it a point to indicate in my plan that students should "like" or

"react" to the post using emoticons so I knew they had read the post. When we met for live sessions, a meeting was scheduled beforehand and posted on MS Teams.

The live sessions usually began with an informal small talk where I encouraged the students to turn on their cameras, but somehow not many of them turned their cameras on. Once almost all the students had joined the meeting, I would review the content covered until then and open the floor to any question students may have regarding assignment or anything else. Students mostly used the chat box to ask questions and I answered live on audio and not through the chat box. The meetings feature on MS Teams saves the entire chat even after the meeting is over, so everyone could look at those questions but to listen to my answers they would have to watch the recording of the meeting. Once a live lecture or tutorial was complete, I would save the live session recording and upload it to *Stream* and it was available for viewing in the *Tabs*. Students who missed the live session or who just wanted to refer to what was covered in the live session could access this tab and quickly gather the related information.

It is important to add here that a number of times I would ask the students if they knew where to look for materials, or where they had to submit an assignment just to make sure that everyone was aware. If I wanted to get a quick feedback, I used the *Quick Poll* option provided by *MS Forms*. If anyone replied saying that they were unaware, or if I saw in the *MS* Forms summary that there were some students who were unaware, then I would share screen and walk them through the steps and process. During live sessions, students interacted by either unmuting their audio or communicating in the chat box. Then there is the chat feature of MS Teams where students can privately message me. Interestingly, sometimes students would privately message me using that chat feature. It could be that they did not want their questions to be seen by all or it could be that those questions were not related to that day's live session. I always managed to reply those questions when I had a few minutes where students had some activity to do during live sessions such as answering a quiz or playing a *Kahoot* game etc. or even after the session was over. These students appreciated the effort and thanked me in the chat.

Some activities during the live sessions were group-work, some pair-work and some even individual. These activities were designed using one of the many available online tools such as *Kahoot, Quizziz, MS Forms, Padlet or Assignments on* MS Teams. Once I had briefed the students about the activities they were given a time-limit and then they had to complete their work. Games like *Kahoot* and *Quizziz* show me the number of participants in the game and sometimes I had a full attendance but sometimes not all joined the game. During the live *Meetings*, lessons were delivered synchronously where I shared my PPT slides and taught the lesson for that day. After concepts were taught, sharing of links to quizzes on *MS Forms* was done through the meeting chat as well. Students received immediate feedback once they had

done all the closed-ended questions because *MS* Forms allows that and for the open-ended questions in the quizzes, I could tackle the most worrying areas and give feedback or explanation to students there and then. Whether the formative quiz was given synchronously, it was quite easy to give feedback after a formative quiz was completed because *MS Forms* creates a nice colourful visual summary of all the responses and students get clear and immediate feedback and clarification on difficult concepts from me.

5.2. Communication during consultations

I was teaching on MS Teams which is a well-integrated system under *Microsoft Office 365* that offered quizzes via *MS Forms*, collaborative work under *Class Notebook* and storage under *One Drive*. I really did not feel the need to use any other LMS as MS Teams was a one-stop centre for all my teaching needs. I created and posted coursework assignments under *Assignments* on MS Teams. This is another useful feature of using MS Teams as assignments can be created, released and monitored by me using MS Teams. Students had to upload their assignments from *One Drive* or their device and turn-in their assignments before the due date as the platform does not accept submissions after the due date is over if I set it that way. As for me, I could view who had submitted their assignments and who had not and eventually grade their work on MS Teams itself. *Class Notebook* was a great place to collaborate with students.

If there was a group assignment and I wanted them to get into groups of three to four students, then I could create a page under *Class Notebook* and then post a message with a table attached. Students could just go to the table and put in their names under their preferred groups and also their topics for the assignment. This kind of collaboration worked for pair-work and group-work. Students were advised to form a group chat with their group members and I asked them to add me into their group chat as well so consultation could be done there. During group consultations I used to video call them at their scheduled time slot. It was made clear before the consultation that all group members should be present and they must have a rough draft or outline for their assignment work. During the consultation, they would share their screen and show me their outline and then I would give them my feedback. I assigned 20 minutes slots for each group which mostly was enough but there were a few times when the consultation exceeded the 20 minutes time-limit. There was a large number of students in the SOH group, and all had to be assigned a consultation slot, so I had to limit the group consultations for 20 minutes each. Having said that, students had been advised to set extra consultation slots if they felt they needed more time with me. I feel the consultations were successful and students clarified all their doubts and concerns during that consultation. There were times when students had completely missed out an area or they had done it absolutely incorrectly. Then I used to ask questions that guided them to think about what they had

missed or done wrongly. It helped them figure out their mistake and I found out that sometimes I could offer them some feedback on something they had not even thought about or planned. At times, I sent them additional videos or supplemented with case studies or scenarios which would help them understand their content more clearly.

It is important to note that online consultations not were just for group or pair work assignments but also if individual students had some doubts or they wanted to get feedback for assignments or course content. They would fix an appointment with me via email since I had advised them to fix appointments only via email and then I would confirm the day and timing of the appointment via email as well. When I met these students for individual consultations, I used the video call feature in MS Teams chat and students would turn on their camera and they did not feel apprehensive about that. A number of students utilised this facility and I was happy to see that they practised good habits in setting appointments and showing up for their scheduled consultations. However, there were always some who did not avail this facility and it surprised me to learn that they did not feel that getting feedback about their assignments or clarifying doubts over course content was important to them.

5.3. Communication during pre-recorded videos

Luckily, I was one of the very few who was trained in producing educational videos using various web tools such as Panopto and Screencast-omatic even before March 2020 when lockdown was first announced in Malaysia. I had recorded my educational videos for assignment briefing and also for teaching course content. If the weekly plan consisted of asynchronously delivered lessons, then these videos were assigned within the weekly plan that was posted on MS Teams. Since these videos were posted on Panopto, it was easier for me to track how many students had actually watched the videos, engaged with the content and also attempted the embedded quizzes within the videos. This helped me to mark attendance for those asynchronously delivered lectures or tutorials. Students exhibited their responsibility by engaging with the videos and those who did not, I would remind them using the chat feature on MS Teams, so they were aware that their participation is being monitored.

These videos were recorded using the previously mentioned tools where video, audio and the slides were used. If the pre-recorded videos were for assignment briefing, then clear guidelines about assignment requirements were given where the crucial information was on the slides but if something needed more explanation then I explained during those videos. I supported my videos with previous examples from students and other examples as well. Pre-recorded videos about course content on the theory part included a good introduction to the communication skills topics and content and the slides were organized and labelled appropriately. If these videos were supplemented with a formative quiz given asynchronously, it was quite easy to give feedback after a formative quiz was completed

because *MS Forms* can be set in a way where students get immediate feedback and explanation for correct answers. If there happened to be any open-ended questions where there was no immediate feedback and I had to mark the students' work, then I used to take a few repeated errors and prepare a pre-recorded error-correction video which explained why those answers were incorrect. This helped me give feedback to the entire class even when I was not meeting them live and they could always go back to these error correction videos when they were in the revision stages of the semester before their final assessment.

After I covered each topic, if Padlet was used for tutorial activities, then again, I would use pre-recorded videos for giving feedback to students based on those activities. Padlet allows real-time submission and feedback and it makes it convenient for distant or remote teaching and learning where *f2f* meetings are not possible. I used to give feedback to the students using pre-recorded error-correction videos, audio feedback feature or just by correcting their work on their original posts. This is a practice I which I continue doing for my ongoing classes and users do not need to log in only from PCs or laptops but also on mobile phones, so it is convenient and easily accessible with the anytime anywhere availability of Padlet as long as they are have an Internet connection.

All these well-labelled pre-recorded videos were saved under *Class Materials* on MS Teams. I posted all the Padlet and MS Forms links under correctly-labelled folders as well so students did not have to worry about looking elsewhere. Furthermore, I reminded students from time-to-time where all this information as stored, because it is quite possible that they forgot and sometimes students would ask me where these videos or links were stored. Nevertheless, there were times during a live session or out of class hours where some students would still be unsure and then they would ask me either via email, MS Teams chat or during live sessions. In all cases, I guided them by sharing my screen and showing them where to find all these materials.

In 2020, various platforms were used and communication felt easier as compared to physical classroom setting because students and instructor were constantly in contact. Interaction was in real time and feedback to students was given and always available for them regardless of which platform was used.

6. Findings

6.1. Students' Perception of Clarity of Instructions and Feedback

The participants were asked to state their experience about the availability of the instructor, clarity of instructions and feedback they received during the semester.

A majority of students (almost 80 percent) reported that their instructor was always available to address their concerns and provide support. In fact, 80 percent of the respondents stated that if not all, most of their questions were answered during live sessions itself and nobody seemed to disagree here but there were 20 percent students who wished to remain neutral on this. 80 percent of the students responded that even if the instructor did not manage to answer their questions during live sessions, their questions were attended to and answered in a fair amount of time after the live sessions were over. A large credit goes to the anytime anywhere feature of distance or online learning, and MS teams made it convenient for me to respond to my students. Almost 70 percent of the students responded that they really valued these question and answer opportunities during live sessions. However, there were five students who disagreed to this. It is hard to say why this was the case. It could be possibly due to the fact they were not present or participative for these live sessions.

A number of students (73.3 percent) seemed happy with the explanation they received during live sessions and they reiterated that it was extremely useful for their assignments. However, 26.6 percent of the respondents felt it was not the case and they did not think that the explanations helped them with their assignments. It is very hard to gauge why this was the case and I feel that it could be due to the same fact that either they were not participative or present or they did not ask the correct questions or even care to clarify their doubts. Almost 70 percent of the students felt that the instructor helped reduce their confusions about assessments and their instructions were clear but seven students disagreed to the same.

When we sought students' responses about clarity of instructions in the pre-recorded videos, almost 70 percent of the students reported that the instructions were sufficient for them to understand the requirements of the assignments but again a small number (8.9 percent) disagreed to that and 22.2 percent students remained neutral. This might be due to the fact the students had already read the assignment related information on eLearn and did not feel the need to watch the pre-recorded videos on assignment briefings.

6.2. Students' Perceptions of Synchronous and Asynchronous Communication on Assignment-related Information

Analysis of students' preference for synchronous (live sessions) and asynchronous (pre-recorded educational videos) sessions found that 82 percent of students preferred to receive instructions about their assignments from their own instructor during live sessions and 86.7 appreciated that their assignment was communicated through live sessions supplemented with pre-recorded educational videos, so that they could refer to them later. Interestingly, 77.1 percent of students preferred to just read about the assignments on eLearn which was quite surprising because this shows that these students preferred to rely on prepared materials on their assignment without interaction with the course instructor.

6.3. Students' Perceptions of their Online Communication with the Instructor during Live Sessions

There were 47 statements identified that were related to instructor's communication during live session. Out of this, 21 were positive comments, and 26 statements were negative which suggested areas for improvement. Students spoke positively about the instructor's good practices during live sessions.

> *"You spoke very clear had good transition words and showed respect for students. I was comfortable to attend your class."*

> *"Your teaching is very good and clear."*

> *"it is clear to know about my lecturer what she is teaching and understand the whole chapter."*

> *"overall is good. my lecturer gave us a clear instruction and advise on our work."*

> *"Personally, I do not think that there has to be anything improve. Over the whole semester I was always satisfied with the lectures and there was... information provided and explanations which has helped me to develop new skills and understand the topic better."*

The negative feedback on instructor's communication during live sessions were on various aspects. Students, highlighted that the instructor needs to be more friendly and have more patience during online sessions:

> *"Maybe smile more"*

> *"Please be more gentle and more friendly"*

> *"Be more patient with students because it is a new norm with online learning."*

Students also reported that they would have appreciated if the lecturer gave more examples and explained more so they could have a better understanding:

> *"Lecturer should take more time to explain further information or provide more examples in their lecture notes as sometimes it may be quite hard for students to grasp the meaning of certain information provided with just only one example."*

> *"Overall communication is okay. However, would have liked if she was more direct and provide more examples."*

Apart from this, students also highlighted issues with consistency of instructions received about assessment:

> *"The briefing and instructions about assignment should be more consistent."*

"I felt like sometimes the lecturer did not really explain about some instructions for assignment."

Another thing was the voice and delivery in the synchronous sessions where students felt the instructor needed to improve on volume, and speed of delivery:

"Sometimes voice was little small."

"The flow while teaching can be slow…"

This was further aggravated by issues with connectivity:

"Keep repeat the important information, because some of students have poor wifi."

"Sometimes the lecturers voice will muffle due to bad internet connection."

One aspect of live session that students suggested for improvement was instructor-student, and student-student interactions during live sessions:

"Let students to have small activities session to speak with each other with the communication skill that they just learnt."

"Live session should have more interaction with students."

"Question-and-Answer session could be longer"

"I would suggest for my lecturer to have more of interaction activities included in the teaching such as Q&A through google form but with limited time, so that students would be alert and from here, we can check their understanding."

6.4. Students' Perceptions of the Quality of Instructor's Communication during Consultations

Thirty-seven statements were identified to be related to instructor's communication with students during consultations. Out of these, 22 statements were positive, highlighting various positive aspects of instructor's communication with students during consultation, with 7 statements being negative.

Some of the positive aspects of instructor's communication during consultation were:

6.4.1. Quality of feedback/ communication

"The feedback my team got was useful to improve our work later."

"Very well received. The lecturer was able to provide solutions to my uncertainties about the assignment requirements, understanding of topic etc."

"Online consultations were done in a short time but very efficient. Lecturer addressed all the issues and provided better understanding for student. She even helped my team with sending some relevant videos for final group project."

"Online consultation has been very helpful… Consultations focused on the personal/ group problems… I have received information and feedback on how to improve my work, how to solve the problems and how to conduct the assignment well. I am very glad that we were able to set the consultation hours anytime as it really helps me with my assignments.

6.4.2. Clarity of instructions

"consultations made it even more clear for the paths of our assignments"

"Overall is good. my lecturer gave us a clear instruction and advise on our work."

"This session is very useful for a student. This session helps student to have better understanding on the assignment."

Students also reported feeling comfortable during the consultation with their instructor:

"Very comfortable, lecturer was friendly and helpful."

"I enjoyed every minute of online consultations you had with my lecturer."

Students valued such online consultations or feedback sessions and the time they had with the instructor. Students commented that they could meet the instructor out of class time and this made it better than *f2f* consultations where sometimes some students could not be present at the same time. Two students actually mentioned that their online consultation experience was better than their *f2f* consultations.

Internet connectivity posed some problems during consultations as well. One student commented that because of connection problem their session was interrupted. It is interesting to note that not all students requested for feedback through online consultation.

Apart from the positive comments, students also highlighted the following:

Uneasiness over communication channel to use for consultation:

"I don't feel comfortable when we use email or MS Teams, but if online call then it is good enough."

Feeling rushed during group consultation

"Overall was okay. When having individual consultations, the lecturer took time to understand the situation. However, if it was a group she seemed rushed. Like she had other important things to do."

Feeling of awkwardness during consultations

"It feels awkward…"

6.5. Students' Perceptions of the Quality of Instructor's Communication in Pre-recorded Videos

Thirty-four statements were identified that relate to the pre-recorded videos. Out of these, 11 statements were positive whereby 23 others were negative but out of the 23 statements, 14 were related to communication. Students highlighted coherence between parts and the "*high quality of effect and sound*" as the positive aspects of the pre-recorded videos.

Many students, however, requested for clearer examples, and more in-depth explanations in the pre-recorded videos:

"Lecturer could have given more examples in the pre-recorded video for all the theories given instead of reviewing or mentioning the theories. Thus, it will be easier for student to relate to the theories."

"More examples and clearer explanations."

Students also commented on the quality of the audio or instructor's voice in the pre-recorded videos:

"Sometimes voice was little small"

"The volume of videos is not consistent since sometimes it goes high and low."

Because of the issue with quality of voice, there were also requests for captions or subtitles so that "*students are able to understand what the lecturer is saying as sometimes the pronunciation of lecturer in a video maybe too fast and make it harder to understand*."

Apart from this, some students also commented that they were having difficulties to find the pre-recorded videos:

"But may be it would be better in terms of organising the videos in one padlet link instead and be uploaded as the weeks come so that we can find all the pre-rec videos in one place."

"Struggled to find the videos at first, but you explained where to find it during live session so it was okay."

7. Discussion

The findings from this study indicated that students exhibited some level of satisfaction for the quality of communication and interaction in the online Communication Skills subject. The study also found that despite various communication strategies in place, there were many areas that need to be further improved particularly on the clarity of explanation during live sessions and in pre-recorded videos, voice/ audio quality during live sessions and in pre-recorded videos, the need for more interactions during live sessions, and instructor's approachability during live sessions.

7.1. Synchronous and asynchronous sessions

Analysis of qualitative data found that an integration of synchronous and asynchronous was indeed beneficial for the majority of students, particularly when it comes to assignment-related information, which supported findings in studies by (Liu, Liu, Lee, & Magjuka, 2010; Osman, 2005; Clouse & Evan, 2003).

Even though some students seemed to prefer relying on assessment documents stored in their learning management system, it is important to highlight that the majority of students preferred to have a session on assessments during live session coupled with some pre-recorded videos on the assessments for further reference. Preparing multiple forms of assessment-related information and making them available on various platform is thus important.

7.2. Communication and Interaction

The current study found that students' perceived instructor's communication more positively during consultations than during live sessions. Apart from supporting previous research, (Swan et al., 2000; Picciano, 2002; Jiang & Ting, 1998; McCall, 2002; Hay et al., 2004), this study also identifies that, students perceived communication with the instructor more positively when it was personalised.   Students appreciated interaction with the instructor even out of class hours and this is a notable aspect of online learning where meeting the instructor for feedback or consultation is not restricted due to time or space.

The instructor received more negative feedback on her communication style during live session. This shows that when situation becomes more impersonal, instructor's teaching and social presence became less prominent which resulted in some students' feeling the distance between them and the instructor, hence some requests for her to be more friendly, gentler, and approachable during live sessions. Students were generally positive about her communication style during consultations. One possible implication of this finding is to ensure that her teaching and social presence are maintained during live sessions, and some

aspects of personal communication during consultations are replicated during live sessions. This is one way to enhance the instructor's presence during live sessions.

Many students reported that explanations and examples were not sufficient during live sessions and also in the pre-recorded videos. This highlights the needs to acquire continuous student feedback so that similar issues can be tackled earlier in the semester. Students need to also be encouraged to take responsibility of familiarising themselves with the course content (Brophy, 2002). This finding also indicates the importance of ensuring that there is adequate content for students to engage with particularly for asynchronous sessions. It might be noteworthy to train students in using necessary technologies, such as web cameras and microphones to communicate in order to have more successful synchronous online sessions (Balkin et al., 2005).

The study also highlighted that it is easy to misinterpret information when communication takes place online. The instructor felt that her chat messages may have come across as being unfriendly and made her sound impatient. Future communication strategy when chatting with students online is to ensure that the written messages come across as factual with emojis to soften the effect of the message. Another strategy to reduce instances of misinterpretation of text messages is to have discussions done on audio or video calls.

7.3. Better Communication on Where Things are

Despite various communication with students to explain where things are (i.e., where meeting links are, where the pre-recorded videos are stored) some students still have issues finding them. This serves as a reminder to brief students during the online orientation about accessing the LMS, online-course features, documents, activities, educational videos etc. It is also important to prepare a frequently asked questions (FAQs) sheet and a page of helpful resources, which students can refer to when they have any doubts as suggested by Schrumm et al. (2005).

Recommendation for Future Research

The present study was a small action research involving a small group of students in one university. Future studies should be conducted on a larger student population involving students in different courses or programmes. Furthermore, it is recommended that communication between the instructor and students to be explored from the educators' perspective as well to get a deeper theoretical understanding and also to define key implications for practice to improve communication skills subjects. It is also recommended that more specific communication elements (i.e., ambiguity of non-verbal codes among online participants) be explored further in studies.

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