JELTAL

The Evaluation of an Online English Course for Tourism Workers in Ninh Binh from Learners' Perspective

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ARTICLE INFORMATION	ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a study designed to measure the evaluation of learners on an online English course. A survey questionnaire was distributed to 20-course attendees, who are tourism workers in Ninh Binh province. The results of the survey reveal learners' positive attitudes towards (1) the course content, (2) the course approach, (3) the course materials, (4) the course management, and (5) the perceived course outcomes. Besides, semi-structured interviews were carried out to pinpoint the difficulties learners encountered throughout the course. Based on the preliminary analyses of this questionnaire form, suggestions for a more efficient application of this online course are proposed.

1. Introduction

Flexible options in education have become more available recently thanks to technological advancement and innovation, especially in the industry 4.0 era. E-learning is considered a viable solution for effective life-long education for sustainable development in a population of learners who are simultaneously full-time employees (Nguyen et al., 2020). E-learning has shown a great prospect for application by virtue of its aforementioned flexibility and convenience regardless of time and place. It has become a powerful form, especially in the occurrence of coronavirus pandemics across the whole world.

As a labor-intensive service industry, tourism's growth depends much on the availability of good-quality personnel to deliver, operate and manage the service (Amoah & Baum, 1997). E-learning has fulfilled the need for an alternative approach to satisfy the constant requirement of training and retraining the industry's staff. E-learning environment has been proved to cater to a wide range and academic and employability skills that reflect the complexity of the tourism and hospitality industry (Abdon & Ninominya, 2007).

To our best of understanding, so far there has not been much research on tourism E-learning programs to support the training of human tourism resources. The study addresses the evaluation of an online English course specially designed for tourism workers in Ninh Binh province from the learners' perspective.

The aim of the study can be clarified as follows:

1) To measure the evaluation of learners in the course (in terms of course content, course, course approach, the course materials, course management, and perceived course outcomes)
2) To investigate the difficulty learners encountered during the course

2. Literature Review

2.1. E-learning

E-learning has been long believed to be a subset of the larger worlds of both "information technology" and "education and training" (Sun Microsystems Association, 2007). It addresses learning activity, which is proceeded via electronic technology (Servage, 2005). According to Condie (2007), E-learning is a systematic utilization of networked multimedia computer technologies

to empower learners, improve learning, connect learners to people and resources supportive of their needs, integrate learning with performance, and familiarize the individual with the organizational goal.

2.2. E-learning in tourism education

E-learning has become an important part of the worldwide education agenda in general, and in the tourism industry in particular. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, online learning and teaching in the fields of hospitality, leisure, sport, and tourism were in their introductory phase (Lominé, 2002). Eraqui et al. (2011) summarize a number of researchers' ideas about the utilization of new technologies to facilitate the process of learning and the flow of information in many hospitality and tourism institutions. Sigala (2020) supposes that E-learning is to familiarize learners and not only make them more competent in knowledge but also develop their information literacy and knowledge management skills.

Penfold (2008) comments that educators in hospitality and tourism education should be encouraged to use methods that stimulate the development of personal and intellectual skills and develop students' critical thinking capabilities. In-service education programming at all levels in the services sector has been in great demand for years Hsu (2020). Eraqi et al. (2011) insist that more involvement of the hospitality learners in their own learning should be encouraged and student-centered teaching and learning approaches should be increased.

This study discusses the learners' satisfaction in an online English course for tourism workers in Ninh Binh province. The course is designed for full-time in-service staff.

2.3. Learners' evaluation of online course

Course satisfaction is attitudes and feelings regarding the experience and outcomes in a course. There are a number of criteria learners base on to evaluate the course that they take online. Sun et al. (2008) review factors that are critical to the activities of and affecting learners' satisfaction with E-learning. The six main components are learners, instructor, course, technology, design, and environment. Qteishat (2013) also considers contributing elements to students' attitudes towards E-learning in higher education. Their model suggests the following factors: (1) Perceived usefulness; (2) Perceived ease of use; (3) Technical Support and (4) Previous experience.

Mohammadi (2015) proposes different attributes to explore user satisfaction when using an E-learning system, including education quality, service quality, technical system quality, information and content quality, perceived ease of use, and perceived usefulness.

This study exploits the aforementioned discussions to build up a framework of five criteria for learners to assess the success of their online English course participation, including (1) the course content, (2) the course approach, (3) the course materials, (4) the course management, and (5) the perceived course outcomes.

3. Methods

3.1. Study context

The study is conducted in Ninh Binh, a small province to the south of Hanoi Capital, which possesses enormous potential for the tourism sector with numerous natural, historical and cultural heritages. Despite this favorable condition for development, Ninh Binh's tourism has been considered to be underdeveloped compared to its potential. It is on an account of several reasons, one of which is the human tourism resource. According to the report by Ninh Binh People's Committee, the labor force in this industry has been insufficient both in quantity and in quality. The province's tourism sector has been in burgeoning demand for training and improving English communication competence for its staff.

English proficiency of the local tourism staff has been received greater concern and investment from leaders and policymakers of Ninh Binh. A CLS online course for tourism workers is one out of the two anticipated outcomes of a two-year project ordered by the Ninh Binh Tourism Department and implemented by Hoa Lu University. The online course involved the participation of workers from many tourism enterprises in Ninh Binh. Learners of the course completed online lessons attended online web meetings and took part in offline on-site meetings. The knowledge of general English, English for presentations of the tourism destinations as well as English for occupational practices are provided throughout the course.

3.2. Participants

Learners of the course are full-time tourism workers performing different tasks at the boat station (2 participants), in the ticket office (2 participants), at the restaurants (6 participants), at the hotels (10 participants).

The study does not examine the influence of participants' gender, age, marital status, educational and professional experience on their evaluation of the online course. That is why information related to these aspects is not mentioned in the article.

3.3. Questionnaires

All evaluation criteria are measured by a 5-level Likert scale as follows.

☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1 – strongly disagree	**2** – disagree	**3** – partly agree	**4** – agree	**5** – strongly agree

The questionnaire form is designed in five main parts: (1) The evaluation of the course content; (2) The evaluation of the course approach; (3) The evaluation of the course materials; (4) The evaluation of the course management and (5) The perceived course outcomes.

Table 1: The questionnaire

Part 1: The evaluation of the course content	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
1.1	I can see the clear objectives of each unit.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.2	The content of each unit is suitable for me.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.3	The distribution between theory and practice is proper.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.4	The course content is relevant to what I am working on.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.5	The course content is accurate, logical, and focused.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
1.6	The course content is extensive and up-to-date.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part 2: The evaluation of the course approach	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
2.1	The instructions are clear.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.2	Learning activities are relevant to what I am working on.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.3	The learning activities are vivid and motivating.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.4	The course takes full use of assistive learning devices.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.5	The course duration is proper to achieve the course objectives and to deliver the course content.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
2.6	I can exchange information and knowledge easily and quickly with other learners.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part 3: The evaluation of the course materials	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
3.1	The course materials are compatible with the course content.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.2	The course materials are beautifully designed and motivating.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.3	The course materials are suitable for online learning.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.4	The course materials are extensive and relevant to real working situations.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.5	The website satisfies the learners' needs.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
3.6	The website is beautifully designed and user-friendly.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part 4: The evaluation of the course management	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
4.1	The course schedule is suitable.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.2	Online lessons create great flexibility.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
4.3	I can get useful support from the course instructors.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
Part 5: The perceived course outcomes	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	
5.1	I can improve my English proficiency.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.2	I can improve my working performance.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.3	I can enhance my critical thinking and self-study skills.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.4	I feel more confident when using English at work.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
5.5	I feel satisfied with the course quality.	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The questionnaire responses were analyzed via SPSS version 20 to figure out how learners assess their experience taking part in the course.

3.4. Semi-structured interviews

The study also exploits the strengths of semi-structured interviews to investigate learners' troubles regarding their participation during the course online. The main question is "*What are the difficulties you encountered when taking part in the course*?", while other questions related to the questionnaire would also be included (if the interviewees mentioned them).

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Learners' evaluation of the online English course

Learners' responses from the survey questionnaire were analyzed in SPSS software to infer their assessment of the course. In each table of analyses, **N** is the number of responses; **Minimum** and **Maximum** represent respectively the smallest and highest points that respondents gave for each question. **Mean** figures inform the average scores of the respondents' choices. Higher Mean scores reveal that learners agree with the statements to a larger extent. **Standard Deviation** demonstrates the dispersion of the dataset, in which the more the data spread out, the higher the standard deviation is.

4.1.1. The evaluation of the course content

There are six statements involved in the assessment of the course content. All the mean scores of the questions are higher than 3, which means in general the respondents agree with each idea. As the standard deviation of the statement "*The course content is relevant to what I am working on*" is smaller than 0.5, learners mostly agree and strongly agree that the contents of units are relevant to their real working scenarios. However, when it comes to the originality of the content, learners' answers are quite different. Although the Mean score is 4.45 (more than agree), there are still respondents who supposed that the course content is not extensive and up-to-date enough.

Table 2: The evaluation of the course content

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can see the clear objectives of each unit.	20	3	5	4.40	.663
The content of each unit is suitable for me.	20	2	5	4.00	.894
The distribution between theory and practice is proper.	20	2	5	4.15	.831
The course content is relevant to what I am working on.	20	4	5	4.35	.477
The course content is accurate, logical, and focused.	20	3	5	3.95	.589
The course content is extensive and up-to-date.	20	1	5	4.45	.548
Valid N (listwise)	20				

4.1.2. The evaluation of the course approach

The course approach involves clear instructions, relevant activities, vivid and motivating activities, proper course duration, the usefulness of the assistive learning devices, and the interaction among learners.

Table 3: The evaluation of the course approach

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The instructions are clear.	20	3	5	4.00	.548
Learning activities are relevant to what I am working on.	20	4	5	4.40	.497
The learning activities are vivid and motivating.	20	2	5	4.05	.921
The course takes full use of assistive learning devices.	20	3	5	4.20	.812
The course duration is proper to achieve the course objectives and to deliver the course content.	20	2	5	3.90	.831
I can exchange information and knowledge easily and quickly with other learners.	20	2	5	4.10	1.091
Valid N (listwise)	20				

Among these sub-criteria, the relevance of the learning activities during the course is highly appreciated by the learners. On the other hand, they wonder about the duration of the course. Actually, in the interviews, some learners said that the schedule of learning was too tight for them. They sometimes failed to complete the lessons on time.

4.1.3. The evaluation of the course materials

The course materials include videos, audio, pictures, and images, as well as the files from a book written by the course instructors. Learners can easily access these materials during the course. From the survey, it can be seen that learners have a high opinion of the course materials. They all agree that the course materials are compatible with the course content and are beautifully designed. These materials are suitable for online learning and help motivate learners a great deal. Moreover, they are relevant to the real working situations of the learners with resourceful features. With regard to the website, learners agree that the website is beautifully designed and user-friendly and it can satisfy their needs of learning.

Table 4: The evaluation of the course materials

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The course materials are compatible with the course content.	20	2	5	4.15	.910
The course materials are beautifully designed and motivating.	20	3	5	4.35	.853
The course materials are suitable for online learning.	20	3	5	4.60	.583
The course materials are extensive and relevant to real working situations.	20	3	5	4.50	.671
The website satisfies the learners' needs.	20	2	5	4.15	.792
The website is beautifully designed and user-friendly.	20	3	5	4.25	.698
Valid N (listwise)	20				

4.1.4. The evaluation of the course management

When delivering the course, the course instructors provided a schedule of releasing units and lessons. Every three days, new lessons were opened for learners. Although there was no limitation of the time when the lessons were due, the learners had to face the pressure of completing the previous lessons when the next was coming out. That may be the reason why many learners reported that the course schedule is not really suitable for their learning pace. Sometimes, they would fail to complete the lessons as scheduled and had to deal with the workload at the end of the course.

As for other criteria, learners are of the high opinion that the course going online creates a great deal of flexibility in terms of time and place to access and complete the lessons. Moreover, they can get constant and useful support from the course instructors.

Table 5: The evaluation of the course management

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
The course schedule is suitable.	20	2	5	2.90	.865
Online lessons create great flexibility.	20	4	5	4.80	.400
I can get useful support from the course instructors.	20	4	5	4.75	.433
Valid N (listwise)	20				

4.1.5. Learners' perceived course outcomes

Regarding the expected course outcomes, learners suppose that there would be improvement in their oral English communication skills with more accurate pronunciation (that they learned a lot from the model videos and sample practices), more sufficient vocabulary range, better presentation skills, richer knowledge of highly context-based English language suitable to their distinctive working requirements and more professional occupational skills. Especially, learners express that they get more confident when using English at work and that is how they become satisfied with the course quality.

Table 6: The perceived course outcomes

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
I can improve my English proficiency.	20	2	5	3.95	.740
I can improve my working performance.	20	3	5	4.05	.497
I can enhance my critical thinking and self-study skills.	20	2	5	4.00	.632
I feel more confident when using English at work.	20	2	5	3.95	.805
I feel satisfied with the course quality.	20	4	5	4.60	.490
Valid N (listwise)	20				

4.1.6. Learning difficulties

Afifi (2011) summarizes the barriers of participating in the online course from the learners' perspective as follows: (1) Lack of an IT infrastructure; (2) Reduced social and cultural interaction; (3) Lack of management encouragement and (4) Technical problems. Additionally, there is a list of expected disadvantages when applying E-learning in higher education.

Table 7: Potential disadvantages of applying E-learning in Egyptian tourism colleges

No.	Potential disadvantages of applying e-learning	%
1.	Lack of interaction inherent in e-learning	71.4
2.	Consuming time in preparation	64.3
3.	Affecting negatively on the courses' practical application	42.9
4.	Students' immaturity and lack of self-discipline	21.4
5.	Staff members are not prepared yet for e-learning requirements	21.4
6.	Facing technical problems	14.3

(Afifi, 2011)

The results of the interview report the similar troubles that learners encountered during the course. Despite some benefits of the online course such as increasing the professional knowledge, increasing the ability for access from anywhere/anytime, enabling students to learn at their own pace, or improving IT skills for learners, they met several major problems.

Firstly, they feel in lack of vivid interaction with peers and course instructors. Learners really longed for constant contact with others during the course to discuss their problems. They highly appreciated that course instructors gave instant feedback on their work and that the instructors chose the high-quality products/assignment among the learners to share and recognize in the class group. In their mind, thanks to these actions, they felt the course more lively and "real".

Another difficulty that learners confront during the online course is the technical problems. They reported the troubles uploading files of assignments on the website, or moving to the next lesson. To be specific, learners found difficulties in loading the course on mobiles, as the interface on the computer is more user-friendly. Because of some default settings on the website, learners had more questions at the beginning of the course than towards the end of the course when they got familiar with the web.

A major factor hindering the learners from gaining the best results in the course is related to their self-discipline and time management skills. Learners selected their own time to complete the lessons on the website, following the course schedule. Although the course instructors sent reminders to learners, it was the learners themselves who decided when to study. When they failed to follow the schedule, there would be a load of work waiting for them at a time. That is why time management skills, as well as self-discipline, are essential if learners want to obtain the course benefits to the fullest.

5. Conclusion
Measuring the learners' evaluation of the online English course for tourism workers in Ninh Binh is important to promote the course quality. This study identifies how learners assess the course in terms of five criteria, including the course content, the course approach, the course materials, the course management, and the perceived course outcomes.

In general, learners highly appreciate the course content, especially its relevance to their professional practice. The course approach is reported to be suitable and flexible; the course materials are beautifully designed and captivating. Learners all perceive the positive outcomes from the course with their better performance in the language and in the profession (both general and functional English). Regarding course management, learners opine that the course schedule is too tight and they need more time for each lesson. Moreover, more interaction between learners and course instructors is welcomed.

The difficulties learners face during the course online include the lack of face-to-face communication with other learners and course instructors, the technical problems in exploiting the website, and the high requirement for self-discipline and time management skills. If learners can develop the necessary skills, they can make full use of the online course to improve their communicative competence in English.

6. Recommendations for further application of the course
Quang et al. (2020) reflect on how the Covid-19 pandemic illustrates the need for proactive efforts to prepare readiness strategies and draw up initiatives for the long-term development of tourism in Vietnam. Among these policies, one of the human-resource-specific policies proposed by Quang et al. is to fund human resources training and help industry-related training institutions effectively move their operations online. The provision of re-training programs is a contributing factor to improving workers' skillsets and their labor productivity according to Vietnam Tourism Occupational Standards (MCST, 2020).

Online courses to improve English communication competence, designed specifically for tourism workers in Ninh Binh, can be one of the useful parts of the training and re-training programs in the tourism sector of the province. In order to bring the course to practice on a larger scale, learners need to satisfy a number of criteria and possess several skills to have a successful deployment of the online course, including self-motivation, IT skills, time management, and self-discipline. At the same time, the course

instructors also play a vital role in the effectiveness and success of this E-learning-based course. Accordingly, the instructors should have IT competency, practical style, attitude, and mindset (Eraqui et al., 2011)

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