

Physical Learning as the Preferred Learning Style among IIUM Malay Undergraduates¹

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Abstract: This study discusses physical learning as the preferred learning style from the perspective of Malay undergraduate students studying at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM), based on their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study employed a qualitative research approach and implemented face-to-face semi-structured interviews for data collection. Open-ended questions were utilised to enable the participants to freely discuss their experiences. Using the purposive sampling technique, ten (10) IIUM undergraduates were selected, 6 females and 4 males, and all the participants were Malay students from Malaysia. The results of the study showed that the students prefer physical learning (face-to-face) more than online, as it allows for better focus and concentration, as well as effective communication. The study investigates the preferred learning mode among IIUM undergraduates. As they have experienced both physical and online learning, they choose their preferred method for a better learning experience. According to the results, students were more prone to physical learning than online learning; hence it is beneficial to assist and follow students' preferences

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to boost their enthusiasm and determination in learning. Additionally, the findings will allow the university to look deeper into students' preferences and develop a well-established teaching and learning method that fulfills the requirements and is in line with the aim of the Ministry of Education to produce qualified individuals for society and the nation.

Keywords: Concentration, Focus, Communication, Online learning, COVID-19, IIUM Undergraduates

Background of the Study

There is a global consensus that educated individuals obtain knowledge and develop the skills they need for the job market to escape poverty (United Nations, n.d.; Giovetti, 2022). Countries have their vision and mission regarding education to transform individuals for the betterment of society. For example, the ministries of education in India and the United States aim to provide easy access to quality education that benefits the individual, community, and the whole nation (Ministry of Education India, 2021; U.S Department of Education, 2018). Brazil, a developing country, has the initiative to boost enrollment in higher education by joining federal programs like the Open University of Brazil (UAB), enhancing the standard of higher education, and promoting distance learning alongside traditional classroom instruction (Heredia et al., 2019). In the case of Malaysia, the Ministry of Education seeks to provide a quality education that can uplift potential individuals for the nation (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2019). According to Grapragasem et al. (2014), Malaysia's educational system aims to create knowledgeable and skilled individuals capable of improving the country's economic standing and transforming it into a high-income country.

Before the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, physical learning was the most applied learning mode. In a typical physical learning setting, also known as face-to-face learning, students and instructors are physically present in the same learning environment (Darkwa & Antwi, 2021), and students concentrate and interact with each other. According to Tran (2016), the physical learning environment is synchronous. Students are present in class for learning purposes, and instructors teach, provide instructions for completing assignments, and consult

students who require additional assistance. Such physical interaction during learning is important for students to receive immediate feedback on the learning process (Kemp & Grieve, 2014; Tran, 2016). Instructors also observe students' responses to the course and provide appropriate learning techniques (Tran, 2016). Paul and Jefferson (2019) found that obtaining a degree through physical learning is more demanding in finding a job than online because the skills required for both are different, and skills received during physical learning appear to fulfil the requirement of any organisation.

After the global spread of the pandemic, educational institutions turned to online learning to ensure the continuity of teaching and learning in a safe environment. The Malaysian government, for instance, imposed a nationwide lockdown, resulting in the shutdown of all sectors, including the educational sector (Ramli et al., 2020).

Online learning is granting learners access to learning experiences through the utilisation of technology (Moore et al., 2010). It uses online platforms, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Microsoft Teams (Mustapha et al., 2021). These platforms became increasingly utilised globally for education purposes. However, the success of online education relies on specific resources, including high-speed internet, high-quality technological devices, and an appropriate learning environment (Bringula et al., 2021). Without having any of these elements, students encountered difficulties affecting the quality of their education. For example, Chung et al. (2020), Ismail et al. (2020), and Mustapha et al. (2021) stated that poor internet connection was the greatest challenge among students during online learning, which caused a delay in learning, especially in rural areas. Farooq et al. (2021) also found that students in rural areas were negatively affected during online learning because of poor Internet coverage. Family financial strains prevented students from purchasing internet data or other necessary study materials (Amir et al., 2020).

Moreover, online learning harmed students' communication with each other (Nassr et al., 2020; Wildman et al., 2021) and their interaction with learning material (Subedi et al., 2020). Some students came from families with limited financial capabilities; therefore, their parents could not afford to provide them with new or high-quality devices. In some households, siblings were required to share a single device (Zainol et

al., 2021). Studying in a distracting environment was another challenge. Students' understanding and concentration were affected by noise from family members and surroundings at home (Cabual & Cabual, 2022).

Suffering from headaches, migraines, and eyesight problems were common health problems during online learning (Subedi et al., 2020; Hashish et al., 2022). Sitting in front of the screen for a long time made students suffer from anxiety, sadness, stress, backache, and eye strain (Idris et al., 2021). Students who reported experiencing these drawbacks were reluctant to continue with online learning. Physical classes are preferred for more meaningful and effective learning experiences (Win and Wynn, 2015). This paper discusses the students' perspective that physical classes improve concentration and communication.

Physical Learning as the Preferred Learning Style

Virtual education was implemented during the critical time of the COVID-19 pandemic. It took place at home, which is a new learning environment with different circumstances. Even though the learning process was controlled by stakeholders in the education sector, the IIUM undergraduates viewed that the lack of focus and concentration and the declined communication between themselves and their instructors affected their learning experience and made them prefer physical learning. Figure 1 shows the two main themes discussed in the paper.

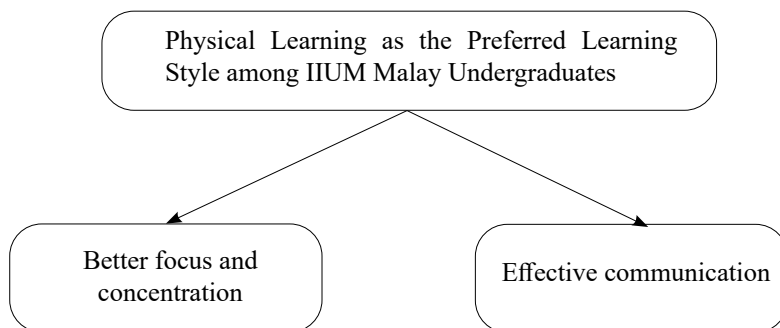


Figure 1 Research Themes

Concentration is the key to understanding learning material. However, concentration level varies according to the learning environment. (Keis et al., 2017) found that in-person learning stimulates students' attention, especially when learning difficult subjects. Physical learning is also known as a teacher-centered style, and students are more focused as the lecturer is their center of focus in receiving knowledge (Coman et al., 2020). There are fewer distractions in real classrooms than online (Kumari et al., 2021); consequently, students concentrate more and comprehend the course material more effectively (Tambunan et al., 2020). A study in Indonesia concluded that students had a better focus on understanding the course and applying what they had learned in class during physical learning (Amir et al., 2020). Due to face-to-face learning promoting focus and concentration, it is significant to implement effective teaching approaches to address the lack of focus when learning online (Fatonja et al., 2020).

Most of the participants in the present study expressed that they had higher concentration and focus during face-to-face learning. During the pandemic, the alternative learning environment was the household. Noise and household chores were common distractions causing a loss of concentration and motivation for online learning. For some students, it was embarrassing to open the microphone and talk to the lecturer to ask questions or interact with the other students because of the noise at their end.

For example, Min, a third-year student, could not cope with the distraction of online learning. She said,

I did not like learning online. I got distracted easily by a simple noise. In contrast, I have better concentration when I am in the classroom. The lecturer is in front of me, so I can interact and ask questions or further explanations.

Dam, another participant, also preferred going to physical classes to escape the distractions at home.

We had a baby at home. When the baby cried, I had to do something. My other siblings also needed my attention since my parents were busy. I did not have a good experience with online education because of the uncontrollable distractions

at home. For this reason, I prefer to have physical classes so I can be more focused.

Besides having better focus and concentration, students prefer physical classes for effective communication. Realising the distinction between the nature of communication during face-to-face and online education influences students' preferences and explains why they prefer physical learning (Miller, 2020). Physical learning provides a platform for direct communication and face-to-face interaction (Darkwa & Antwi, 2021). According to Kemp and Grieve (2014), a physical classroom setting creates social connectedness and a sense of community. Students in India did not favor online learning because the quality of instruction was inferior (Nambiar, 2020). A study showed that students preferred physical learning because it offered immediate engagement and feedback (Keis et al., 2017; Paul & Jefferson, 2019; Miller, 2020). Virtual learning lacks direct contact as students are geographically separated (Darkwa & Antwi, 2021). The lack of social communication prevented students from speaking with the course instructor; as a result, it did not generate the expected learning outcomes (Adnan and Anwar, 2020). A study showed that students preferred in-person education since they could communicate more freely in physical classes, especially in group discussions (Amir et al., 2020).

Effective communication is vital during the learning process, whether between learners or between learners and instructors. Good learning outcomes rely on communicating ideas, thoughts, knowledge, and information, regardless of whether the education is physical or virtual. All the participants in the present study expressed that communication in physical classrooms plays a significant role in improving their understanding of assignments and doing well in final exams. Khai, for example, physical classes helped him better understand the material assigned for final examinations because of the direct communication with his colleagues. In contrast, he pointed out that lack of immediate communication with the instructor during online learning had a negative effect on his Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). In this regard, he commented the following,

When we learn face-to-face, I study for the final exams with my colleagues, and I can discuss the points I do not understand. When I studied online, it was hard to understand

a course on my own as I faced the obstacle of having limited and indirect communication with either the instructors or colleagues. This really affected my CGPA.

During online learning, group-based projects continued to be implemented, but communication challenges affected the quality of the project output. The lack of immediate and face-to-face meetings was the most mentioned reason among the participants. When groupmates interact in person, they are more likely to develop good communication in delegating project tasks. In contrast, students lacked virtual communication skills; consequently, they could not express ideas, divide the tasks, or cooperate in finishing the project. Qurr, a fourth-year student, talked about her experience in this regard, saying,

When we have classroom classes, our groupmates meet on campus or in the library to discuss a project. We all communicate directly and clarify ambiguous points. After that, the discussion for minor points continues via WhatsApp. However, during the pandemic, we held discussions through Google Meet or Zoom Meeting. We faced the problem that not all groupmates could attend the virtual meeting because of technological or Internet connection problems. At the same time, some groupmates attended the meeting but without participating in the discussion. I can say that misunderstandings happened during that time.

Nat, a participant from the Department of Psychology, talked about her experience with physical and online learning in terms of group discussion.

Face-to-face discussions with my groupmates provide me with instant feedback on whether groupmates understand the assigned tasks. During online learning, I could not tell if everyone would do the work well. Some replied by saying 'okay', but in reality, they were not okay.

Discussion

The findings of the study revealed that IIUM undergraduates prefer physical learning. Concentration is a component of the learning process;

however, it is often lacking when it comes to online learning. Without physical presence and face-to-face communication with instructors and classmates, some students found it difficult to concentrate during lessons and were hesitant to interact. Moreover, there were potential interruptions at home that were beyond the student's control, like family noise and household chores. Students' privacy was also affected as family members were present at home most of the time during the lockdown because of the pandemic. These findings are consistent with Coman et al. (2020), who concluded that physical learning is teacher-centered. While lecturers serve as their primary point of attention, students become more attentive and focused on class. According to Win and Wynn (2015), in-person instruction provides more engaging and effective learning opportunities than online. Focus and concentration in classes improve students' grasp of the learning material and develop interpersonal skills.

It is worth mentioning that IIUM students' preference for physical learning can be explained in terms of their satisfaction with provided facilities. The learning environment (classrooms and lecture halls) of IIUM is comfortable, with air conditioning, good lighting, data show equipment, whiteboards, disks, and seats. Besides, the university has the vision of producing students with Islamic values who are able to lead their nations. Accordingly, it is common for IIUM students to speak highly of the valued character of their respected lecturers who offer knowledge and respect during class and consultation hours. All these learning privileges were lost during online education, and the students faced unexpected challenges.

Being in the same learning environment with other students has its own value, fostering a sense of community that is absent when studying online. In-person learning creates meaningful and effective social connections and relationships. This type is difficult to imitate in an online setting since most learners do not communicate with one another outside of the virtual classroom. Most of the participants had the point of view that physical learning makes social communication easier. These findings are consistent with the research of Amir et al. (2020) that easy communication makes students prone to physical learning. It is also consistent with Kemp and Grieve (2014) that students' preferences toward physical learning developed because of social connectedness and a sense of community.

To engage students in the learning process, IIUM educators design individual and group assignments to enhance students' understanding and skills. It is common to observe undergraduate students searching for supplementary learning materials and studying in groups. They meet in the main library, in the hostel, on campus, and in the cafeteria for lunch or dinner. Above all, they are recommended to contact instructors and visit their offices whenever they require learning support. During the virtual classes, the students experienced feelings of isolation and separation, which worsened when they existed in a different time zone. The absence of interaction and discussion between students demotivated them and reduced the quality of learning; consequently, they preferred physical learning.

Conclusion

The paper discussed why physical learning is a preferred learning mode from the point of view of ten Malay undergraduate students studying at IIUM. Generally, they were dissatisfied with learning experiences and outcomes. Similar to other universities, turning to online learning at IIUM happened in exceptional circumstances. There was a shift from an academic environment to home, where uncontrollable distractions and limited learning equipment. For IIUM Malay undergraduates, physical classes are preferred to provide better focus, concentration, and effective communication.

Limitations of the Study

The study involved several limitations. First, it presented a qualitative case study of Malay undergraduate students studying at the Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences. Therefore, future research is needed to explore the experiences of international students studying in different kulliyyah's to ensure the validity of the results. Second, the study presented the point of view of students, and it is necessary to investigate instructors' perspectives. Third, it is recommended to increase the sample of the study for making a generalisation.

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