The Effectiveness of Asynchronous Activities in Degree English Courses: A case study in the Faculty of Engineering, Design, and Information Technology

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Abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated providing additional teaching and learning support for students in virtual learning environments (VLEs). A new type of support was designed to provide learning activities on VLEs that students can complete asynchronously online outside of teaching hours. Two degree-level English language courses in the Faculty of Engineering, Design, and Information Technology (EDICT) at Bahrain Polytechnic, namely EL6001 English for EDICT 3 and EL6002 English for EDICT 4, included asynchronous activities as part of students' weekly learning experiences during semester one of the academic year 2022–2023. Asynchronous activities included a range of discussion posts, listening quizzes, speaking recordings, writing essays and reports, responding to forums, and interactive H5P activities. This paper will assess the efficacy of weekly asynchronous activities in improving students' learning experiences. It will also investigate the appropriateness and need for continuous improvement and make recommendations for future research and better implementation. The results of the study have shown Bahraini students' positive perspective learning asynchronously with a number of preferences related to attendance and grades which have not been found in similar research studies.

Keywords: Higher Education, Language Learning, Self-Directed Learning, Online Learning, Asynchronous Learning, Synchronous Learning,Bahrain Polytechnic,Degree English Courses

1. INTRODUCTION

During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and learners around the world were forced to rapidly shift to a remote teaching and learning approach. Bahrain Polytechnic deployed its blended learning plan from the start of the pandemic to ensure students received their education regardless of the situation. Part of Bahrain Polytechnic's plan was to

have asynchronous activities as part of students' learning experiences in their enrolled courses.

The terms "synchronous" and "asynchronous" learning have become universal in describing online learning, although they similarly exist in in-person learning environments. Synchronous learning refers to instructors and students gathering at the same time and place (virtual or physical) and interacting in "real-time." Asynchronous learning refers to students accessing materials at their own pace and interacting with each other over longer periods.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

While optimal course designs vary with learning goals and content to be covered, most online courses will benefit from incorporating both asynchronous and

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synchronous activities**.** Synchronous instruction is well-suited to creating immediate social engagement and faster exchanges of information, helping to build a sense of community and clarify misconceptions (Dawson, 2006; Giesbers et al., 2014; Hrastinski et al., 2010). However, it requires scheduling shared times for students and instructors, often across different time zones and is prone to technical challenges and accessibility limitations related to the strength of Wi-Fi. In contrast, asynchronous instruction is temporally more flexible. This both allows more time for students to explore and engage with material (Davidson-Shivers et al., 2001) and allows access to a wider range of students (Stanford Graduate School of Education, n.d.).

Couey (2022) stated that "asynchronous learning" is a term used to describe forms of education, instruction, and online learning that do not occur in the same place or at the same time. Asynchronous learning includes watching pre-recorded video lessons, viewing video demonstrations, reading and writing assignments at a student's own pace, quizzing students on required readings, posting online class discussions via discussion boards, etc. It was also indicated that asynchronous online learning has numerous benefits, such as the ability to learn at your own pace and on your own time and is cost-effective for learning institutions. Yet challenges arise with asynchronous learning, such as content being less immersive and less camaraderie between students, which can lead to students putting off assignments (Couey, 2022).

Similarly, Fabriz, Mendzheritskaya, and Stehele (2021) acknowledged two basic settings in online learning: asynchronous and synchronous. Both differ in terms of the time and place of teaching and learning activities. Asynchronous settings are temporally and geographically independent and are defined as more individually based and self-paced, as well as less instructor-dependent. They, however, also bear challenges, including (1) providing immediate feedback, (2) transmitting verbal and non-verbal communication cues, (3) providing a sense of personalization, and (4) simulating a natural language; whereas for the degree of medium naturalness, face-to-face communication is considered to be the most natural form of communication. This results in synchronous learning environments being less natural and less "rich" than face-to-face learning environments. The authors, therefore, claim that this leads to higher cognitive load, greater communication ambiguity, and lower activation. And albeit asynchronous teaching can enable students to work at their own pace and independently of time and place (Fabriz, Mendzheritskaya, & Stehele, 2021).

On a more specific language-based scale, Nagodavithana and Premarathne (2022) found that students learning English at a higher education institute in Sri Lanka preferred a blended mode of education (synchronous and asynchronous) to overcome the challenges of online learning. It was also found that flexible learning hours, a stress-free learning environment, and the use of various visuals and videos have maintained students' interest and engagement and contributed to effective learning. Ninety-eight percent of students in the study agreed that they improved their level of proficiency in the English language, and they revealed that asynchronous online learning increased their motivation to learn the language. Additionally, asynchronous online education has promoted student-centered learning and made students more independent and eager learners.

Likewise, De Wever et al. (2006) stated that online asynchronous learning groups became a major focus in education since collaboration could foster learning. The collaborating process included both individual negotiation and knowledge construction, which acknowledged the importance of interaction in collaborative learning. Similarly, Costley (2021) argued that the shared skills and knowledge of a group are beneficial in processing information when many learners encounter learning problems. To help understand how and why group work might benefit learners, the cognitive underpinnings of how collaboration interacts with learning should be considered. From this perspective, group work is effective for several reasons, including overcoming the limitations learners have in processing certain pieces of information, increasing individual performance, and increasing students' feelings of emotional support while learning, which may help overcome some issues of information processing. In this same regard, Costley (2021) debates two opposing claims. One is that highly motivated students who contribute substantially to group work are likely to gain the most from learner-to-learner interaction. In other words, learners who have a high level of motivation are likely to participate in group work and make greater contributions to planning and leading a group in comparison to those with lower levels of motivation. The second claim is that group work offers a type of scaffolding for learners who may lack motivation or contribute less to their groups. Costley (2021) concludes that in online learning environments, students benefit when they are part of learning groups in order to support their studies. One of the reasons is that many large online courses lack student-to-student interaction, and these learning groups give students the opportunity to share what they know and what they have learned. Costley (2021) highlighted the importance of these groups by revealing the cognitive benefits students would get from studying together. Furthermore, this study showed that those learners who contributed little would also benefit from group work.

Seli et al. (2016) argued that a relationship between motivation and retention rates exists in educational contexts. Motivation is a key determinant of academic achievement, with highly motivated students typically outperforming their less motivated counterparts. The authors found that the influence of motivation on retention was mediated by both intentional and unintentional types of mind wandering and suggested possible methods of intervention that may be useful in improving student retention in educational settings. Similarly, Kelmendi and Nawar (2016) confirmed that there is a relationship between motivation and student retention, with extrinsic motivation having a higher impact. Motivation, as defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary, is "the enthusiasm for doing something." Hence, intrinsic motivation is doing something for personal and internal reasons; extrinsic motivation is the alternative to intrinsic motivation and being moved to do an activity for a separate goal or consequence. Kelmendi and Nawar (2016) concluded that student retention is affected by extrinsic motivation in the form of financial gains or others.

3. METHODOLOGY

A. Action Research

Geoffrey E. Mills states, "Action research has the potential to be a powerful agent of educational change" (Luo, 2008). This is because conducting action research involves a full cycle of problem identification, thinking of ways to tackle problems, making changes, evaluating the changes, making modifications if needed, and then disseminating the findings for future improvements (i.e., a full cycle of planning, change implementation, and review). This can help in developing teachers' and administrators' professional attitudes to embrace action, progress, and reform rather than stability and mediocrity (Luo, 2008). Action research is defined as "learning by doing"; a group of people identifies a problem, does something to resolve it, sees how successful their efforts were, and, if not satisfied, tries again (Ho, 2021). Thus, action research is an attempt to reflect on educational contexts, pose questions, think, and then act to introduce improvements. This way of thinking through "learning by doing," or so-called "experimental learning," is active as opposed to passive (ibid.). Learning by doing will provide deeper learning, where it is acceptable to make mistakes as long as you learn from them as you go.

This action research project aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How are asynchronous teaching and learning experiences characterized by students in their English Courses?

2. How can asynchronous activities be employed effectively?

3. Should asynchronous activities be linked with grades and/or attendance?

B. Context

During the pandemic, this action research was conducted in two revamped English courses, namely, English for EDICT 3 [EL6001] and English for EDICT 4 [EL6002], to suit the online learning requirements and better facilitate the teaching and learning of these courses. The courses were turned into fully user-friendly online courses in which teaching and learning materials were digitised. The same team of six course tutors, two course coordinators, and an English programme manager in the Faculty of EDICT who developed the two courses created asynchronous activities that were embedded in weekly lessons for each of the 15-teaching-week courses (e.g., English for EDICT 3 [EL6001] and English for EDICT 4 [EL6002]). These courses are core degree courses available to students enrolled in the Faculty of Engineering, Design, and Information Technology (EDICT) at Bahrain Polytechnic. The two courses have recently been adapted by the School of Business and the School of Logistics and Maritime. The asynchronous activities in the two courses (e.g. EL6001 and EL6002) included the same weekly module outcomes targeted as per the courses' aims and objectives. The activities varied in their type and ranged from listening activities, forum/discussion posts, writing sentences, essays, and reports, as well as recording speaking input. The activities were designed using H5P tools as well as all the different Moodle tools (e.g. quizzes, forums, assignments, HotPots, Questionnaires, Workshops, etc.) based on their suitability to the activity designed. Figure 2 below shows a sample of the activities included in one week within the course. All the activities in each lesson including the Asynchronous activities are checked through the weekly submission checklist at the end of each week- see Figure 3 below. Students can track their own progress through the same checklist.

Figure 2 Moodle Tools Used in Weekly Asynchronous Activities

Figure 3 Weekly Submission Checklist

The completion times and dates of the asynchronous activities were set weekly and were also added to the automatic weekly checklist in Moodle for students to monitor their submissions. In order to stress the importance of scaffolding and practising the learning objectives aimed at in the asynchronous activities, a change was introduced in the course descriptors of the two courses. The amendments were introduced to allocate one learning hour per week dedicated to the completion of the formative asynchronous activities (See Figure 2 above). To ensure students practise these skills; the addition of this hour necessitated registering students' attendance upon submitting their weekly asynchronous activity.

Figure 1 Learning Hours in English 4 for EDICT

4. PARTICIPANTS AND CONTEXT

This research project was conducted at Bahrain Polytechnic, Faculty of Foundation, for two EDICT English courses, namely, English for EDICT 3 and English for EDICT 4. The participants in the research were a total of 53 students. All participants agreed to take the questionnaire after reading the ethical statement in the provided materials. The researcher was aware that interaction with a human sample would usually have some ethical implications. It was important to establish trust with the research participants. This was achieved by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for all participants, carefully explaining the research process and how the data were presented and providing as much information on the research project and its aims and objectives without influencing responses.

5. DATA COLLECTION

The data was collected from a questionnaire, which was made up of 23 questions. Questions were spread around two categories: 20 ranking questions from 1 to 20

including multiple choice; whereas, Questions 22, and 23 were open-ended questions – See Table 1 and Table 2 in Appendix A. This was run using Google forms which gives the calculations when extracted in an excel sheet.

6. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions on how asynchronous teaching and learning experiences are characterised by students in their English courses and how asynchronous activities can be employed effectively in English courses, students have first linked their progress to the availability of feedback on their asynchronous submissions. Students' justifications for objecting to having grades against asynchronous activities include the absence of constructive feedback in these activities, which did not allow for proper knowledge building in the case of errors. However, only 26.4% of the participants believed that the asynchronous activities should be marked by the teachers (see Table 3, for the exact descriptive statistics).

Table 3 Items Addressing Research Question 1

Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The asynchronous activities enhanced my learning.	20 responses (37.7%)	18 responses (34%)	15 responses (28.3%)
The asynchronous activities should be marked by the teachers.	14 responses (26.4%)	30 responses (56.6%)	9 responses (17%)
The asynchronous activities were related to the class lessons.	47 responses (88.7%)	3 responses (5.65%)	3 responses (5.65%)

A great deal of blended and online learning research has shown how asynchronous teaching and learning can promote knowledge construction, problem solving, and critical thinking (Mandernach et al., 2007). However, with the absence of proper feedback, constructive learning will be challenging, as suggested by the findings, which also align with those of Fabriz, Mendzheritskay and Stehle (2021) and Saputri, Khan and Kafi (2020) found that students learning in synchronous settings got more feedback compared to those in asynchronous settings. Prince, Felder and Brent (2020) added that for "the course to be effective, the knowledge and skills to be learned by the students (the content), the feedback provided to the students on their progress towards achieving that learning (the assessment), and the methods used to transmit the knowledge and provide

practice in the skills (the pedagogy) should align closely with one another" (p.2). Similar to the findings of the case study were Riwayatiningsih and Sulistyani's (2020) findings. In their case study investigating the effectiveness of asynchronous learning with Indonesian participants, Riwayatiningsih and Sulistyani (2020) found that asynchronous learning fits with the current situation of technology dominating daily life activities. Besides, their participants found asynchronous activities and content proved to be interesting and easily accessible in a distance learning situation in which the participants preferred the blended modes of asynchronous platforms for their academic performance. The participants stated that the online blended asynchronous course offered them the chance to be prominently involved in an adaptable learning environment where they were forced to be active. They found that asynchronous communications allowed them to plan and reflect responses for the designed discussion topics.

Another question sought students' perceptions of whether the asynchronous activities should be group work instead of the current status of individual work. The results in Table 4 showed that more than half of the students (56.5%) rejected the idea, as they felt that the activities were simple and would be better done individually, especially since students might not be able to get together outside of class time. Some students stated that working in groups to complete the activities would add unnecessary stress and that some students would be dependent, while the whole point of these activities was to sharpen some skills. On the other hand, a few of the 11.3% who were with the group work in these activities believed that having other people would facilitate better learning in the cases of misunderstanding concepts due to lack of knowledge, and they also stated that dividing the work would reduce the work pressure (see Table 4, for the exact descriptive statistics).

Table 4 Items Addressing Research Question 2

Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The asynchronous activities should be group activities.	14 responses (11.3%)	16 responses (32.1%)	23 responses (56.6%)
The asynchronous activities are time-consuming.	20 responses (37.7%)	22 responses (41.5%)	11 responses (20.8%)

Unlike the findings of Rapanta et al. (2020), most of the participants in this study preferred completing the asynchronous activities individually rather than collaboratively for stress-related reasons, namely,

avoiding stress from being dependent on and aiming to learn the skills on their own. Rapanta et al. (2020) claimed that collaborative formats such as group work had a higher potential for learning, content-oriented interaction in online learning which was not found in the findings of this action research study. Similarly, Fabriz, Mendzheritskay and Stehle (2021) revealed that asynchronous teaching and learning environments are more content-oriented. They added that asynchronous methods that utilise discussions in online forums demand more attention and more comprehensive planning to support interaction between students.

The third research question addresses whether asynchronous activities should be linked with grades and/or attendance, to which half of the students objected to having their completion of the asynchronous activities connected to their attendance, with only 17% accepting the condition and another 32.1% being neutral (see Table 5). Some of the reasons the agreeing students gave were related to feeling more committed to doing a task and being more focused, while the participants who disagreed justified their choice with the fact that forgetting to do the asynchronous activities affected their attendance percentage negatively as they would be marked absent when an activity was not completed within the timeframe given. Another reason was that students felt overwhelmed with the multiple submissions that coincided with other courses. Added to that, a participant stated that technical issues in the virtual learning environment caused delays in completing the activities.

The third research question explores the attachment of asynchronous activities to grades or attendance for more independent self-paced performance. Results show that considerable groups of students believed that neither their attendance nor their grades should be affected or linked to the completion of the asynchronous activities as in the action research (see Table 5).

Table 5 Items Addressing Research Question 3

Items	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
The asynchronous activities should be counted in my grades for the course.	14 responses (26.4%)	16 responses (30.2%)	23 responses (43.4%)
The asynchronous activities should be attached to my attendance.	9 responses (17%)	17 responses (32.1%)	27 responses (50.9%)

Unlike the findings of this research, Fabriz, Mendzheritskay and Stehle (2021) and Van der Keylen et al. (2020) argued that asynchronous teaching can enable students to work self-paced and independently of time and place. No research was found investigating the positive correlation between asynchronous learning and students' grades and/or course retention.

7. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusions

This paper explored Bahraini students' perspectives practising and completing asynchronous activities that are part of their teaching and learning materials. The responses were interesting showing a few similarities and somewhat differences from findings of other research findings in different contexts. Like many research projects as Mendzheritskay and Stehle (2021) and Saputri, Khan and Kafi (2020), the findings of this research showed that teaching and learning can enhance knowledge construction, problem solving, and critical thinking provided that constructive feedback is offered. In addition, the majority of the participants in this study favored individual asynchronous activities over group activities to reduce stress and enhance personal skills unlike what Fernandez, Ramesh and Manivannan (2022) found in their case study   . The participants in this paper preferred not to have their attendance or grades attached to any asynchronous activity completion which has not been found in current research investigating the same.

The main limitation of this paper is that it is based on a survey that deals with student satisfaction levels of weekly asynchronous activities in English for EDICT 3 (EL6001) and English for EDICT 4 (EL6002) during semester one of the academic year 2022–2023. Another limitation is the type of activities used for asynchronous learning and their suitability, taking into consideration the nature of student collaboration, and sharing of information using online tools. Also, the amount of feedback expected, and the amount of marking are areas to investigate further when running asynchronous activities.

B. Recommendations

Future research should utilize more varied constructs to create more focused and reliable measurements of the number of asynchronous activities learners are doing. Also, further investigation into the specific behaviors and reactions to asynchronous learning. The paper recommends that a successful language course can be offered to students online in an asynchronous mode if (1) the course material is well-designed to develop all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing; (2) it makes use of new technologies in virtual

learning environments; and (3) it is easy to understand by both students and teachers. Course materials should be supported by visual illustrations and videos which can create interest in the students and motivate them to learn the language. The findings of the paper can provide insights for educators and instructional designers when planning to offer online language courses within the blended mode of delivery. This research has value because it gives us a deeper understanding of the dynamics of learner-to-learner interaction as well as how those asynchronous activities impact learning.

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9. APPENDIX

Table 1 Questionnaire Ranking Questions

Ranking Questions
1-Which English course are you enrolled in?
2- I enjoy doing the asynchronous activities in the course.
3- How effective in terms of learning have the asynchronous activities been for you?
4- How helpful were tutors in mentoring the asynchronous activities?
5- The asynchronous activities were related to the class lessons.
6- The asynchronous activities enhanced my learning.
7- The asynchronous activities should be counted in my grades for the course.
10-The asynchronous activities should be attached to my attendance. 11- If you choose "Agree" for Question 10, please state why. 12- If you choose "Disagree" for Question 10, please state why.
13-The asynchronous activities should be group activities. 14- If you choose "Agree" for Question 13, please state why. 15- If you choose "Disagree" for Question 13, please state why.
16-The asynchronous activities should be marked by the teachers. 17- If you choose "Agree" for Question 16, please state why. 18- If you choose "Disagree" for Question 16, please state why.
19-The asynchronous activities are time-consuming. 20- If you choose "Agree" for Question 19, please state why 21- If you choose "Disagree" for Question 19, please state why.

Table 2 Open-Ended Questions

Open-Ended Questions
22-How much time have you spent completing one asynchronous activity?
23-How many asynchronous activities have you completed?