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Decision-Making between Online and Frontal EFL Courses

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ABSTRACT

This research provides an understanding of how Western Galilee College (WGC) students decided which course delivery format to take i.e., online self-access learning vs. face-to-face (F2F) for a mandatory academic English course. The current study investigated the compatibility or incompatibility of the online course initiatives to the students' decision-making behaviours. For the study, interviews as well as a questionnaire before the final department-wide exam were utilized. Moreover, information concerning learning outcomes (final course grades) for all students registered in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) courses was received from the WGC IT department. In general, the study found that WGC students emphasized the technical aspects (price, convenience, flexibility) instead of the essential aspects of the course (personalization, quality of learning, success in the course) in choosing a virtual course over a F2F format. Additionally, in the selection process, these students did not consider the uniqueness of an English course (as a language course) and its relative lack of suitability in the virtual format. Moreover, the students did not rely on professional consultation to weigh the suitability of the online course for them. Finally, students' grades at the end of the English course were remarkably lower in the online course than in the traditional courses. Based on the evidence presented, it can be concluded that language classes are not always suitable for an online delivery platform. The results of this research will have ramifications as to how to tailor future English courses to the students' learning needs.

1. Introduction and Background

The study explores students' perceptions of their decision-making process regarding taking an online reading comprehension English course at the Western Galilee College (WGC) a small undergraduate college in the northwest of Israel. The students who attend the college come from a large variety of ethnic backgrounds: Jewish (including Ethiopian and Russian), Christian, Muslim, Druze, Bedouin, Circassian. WGC is a rural college, so that its overall function is to make tertiary education available to people who would not have the opportunity to study otherwise. Social science courses comprise the majority of disciplines offered as well as Business Management and Economics, among others.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or also known as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses are an integral part of the academic curriculum in Israel. Each student must meet certain academic English proficiency criteria in order to receive a BA degree. There are three basic levels of EFL taught at the WGC as well as at other colleges and universities in Israel: Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced. Students are originally placed in a level according to their grade on the neutral nationwide psychometric exam offered by the National Institute for Testing and Evaluation (NITE) in Israel (like the USA's SAT exam). After that each student progresses through the necessary EFL levels by passing the department-wide exam until they successfully pass the final Advanced 2 level and receive the exemption. The primary purpose

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of the EFL program is to equip college students with sufficient knowledge of the English language, teach skill sets, and learning strategies so they can successfully cope with academic texts in English.

This research provides an understanding of how WGC students decided which course delivery format to take i.e., online self-access learning vs. F2F. The study aims to investigate the compatibility or incompatibility of online language courses to the students' decision-making behaviours. Moreover, this study sheds light on and has practical implications on how students enrol in academic courses as well as how academic institutions offer counselling to students for those courses. The results of this research will have ramifications as to how to tailor future English courses to the students' learning needs and behaviours as well as how to prepare students for other online courses.

The current research will give insight into three areas. We explored into a specific Israeli context of a small, rural, ethnically diverse college, and generally into the decision-making process of Israeli students taking EFL courses. Second, we delved into how these students registered for an online language course for the first time with little or no preparation in EFL courses online. Third, we investigated the level and amount of advisement WGC students received before making the decision which course delivery format they would choose as well as what considerations and motivations were considered before enrollment. Our research question was "How do college students make the decision as to whether to take an online English course or the face-to-face course?"

According to the existing literature, we predicted that WGC students would choose the online course because of cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and convenience (e.g. Platt, Amber, & Yu, 2014), and not because they thought the online option would be better for them. This is especially true since EFL courses in Israel are at an extra charge, so we assumed that WGC students chose the online course to save time and money. We also expected that suitability of the delivery format of the online course was not contemplated as a factor in the decision-making process of the students (Jaggars, 2013). Third, we assumed that WGC students would also not consider that different skills would need to be utilized in the online course since they had not previously experienced an EFL course online (Rabbani, 2015; Nilson, 2013). Fourth, we expected that the level of advisement would play a minimal role in their decision-making process. Finally, we expected many of these students to fail the department-wide exam.

2. The WGC Study

As stated in the Introduction, this study set out to explore students' perceptions of their decision-making process regarding a virtual reading comprehension English course at the Western Galilee College (WGC) in Israel. We investigated how the students' made the decision (i.e., online self-access learning vs. face-to-face learning). Our research question was "How do college students make the decision as to whether to take the online academic English course or the face-to-face course?"

2.1 Participants

The participants were students registered at the WGC at the Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced 1 levels of academic English proficiency courses. All students at the WGC, regardless of whether they were registered for the online course or the traditional F2F course, took the same exam at the end of each semester. We investigated three groups of students from three different semesters: Spring 2016, summer 2016, and fall 2016. Of the total 288 students registered for the online courses in all three semesters, only 100 responded to the questionnaire.

2.2. Instrument and Materials

For the study, we utilized a questionnaire as well as interviews before the final department-wide exam, i.e. while the semester was still in session, with 8 students who were enrolled in a

F2F course as well as another 16 students who were registered in the online course. After analyzing their responses, we understood what kind of information we needed to investigate in the questionnaire. The questionnaire, with 48 questions, was accessible on the WGC's Moodle platform and was anonymous. Information concerning learning outcomes (final course grades) for all students registered in EFL courses was received from the WGC Information Technology (IT) department. A T-test was run to analyze the statistical information gathered from the responses on the survey.

3. Results

In order to examine the hypotheses, a number of statistical analyses were performed on the basis of the responses from the students on the questionnaire. We began by analyzing the frequencies of Question 2 which asked "What were the considerations that led you to decide to take the English course in an online course? (Mark the three main considerations).

Table 1.

		All Respondents (n=100)
		%
Essential Aspects	2.3 The teacher in a frontal course is not good for me.	4.0%
	2.4 The teaching method in a frontal course does not suit me.	11.0%
	2.5 Learning in a frontal course does not advance me.	24.0%
	2.6 Learning in a frontal course bores me.	18%
	2.7 It's easier for me to attend an online course.	22.0%
	2.8 Less experience of frustration than in a frontal course.	18.0%
	2.9 The frontal course does not encourage me to learn.	7.0%
Technical Aspects	2.1 The online course saves me time.	87.0%
	2.2 The online course saves me money.	80.0%
	2.10 You can score higher than the regular course.	7.0%
	2.11 The online course does not have a class grade.	13.0%

As can be seen in the table 1, the list of essential aspects has been given a very low percentage of selection as key considerations for choosing the virtual course. The highest consideration was "learning does not advance me" (only 24.0%), followed by "it is easier for me to study in an online course" (22.0%) as well as there being considerations that received only a small to negligible percentage. On the other hand, two of the technical considerations gained a very high percentage of votes – "saving me time" (87.0%) and "saving me money" (80.0%).

Another analysis is of the frequencies for Question 3, which examines the effect of the cost of the course. The question was formulated as follows: "If the cost (price) of the frontal course and the online course were the same, what would your decision be about the type of course to take?"

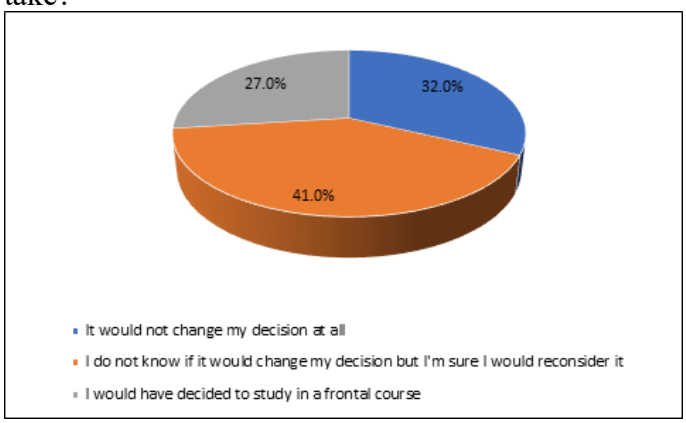

Figure 1.

Figure 1 shows that 41% of the respondents would reconsider their decision to take an online course only because of the cost, another 27% said they would change their decision and choose a frontal course. Only 32% claimed that they would not change their decision and would still choose to take a virtual course.

Question 7 of the Questionnaire is the most direct question about considerations for deciding which type of course to take. This question asks the respondent explicitly what s/he thought when s/he decided to study in a virtual course. Based on the respondent's replies, two indices were constructed: positive statements (statements 2, 3), that is, statements that express essential judgments about the quality of the course and learning and negative statements (4, 5, 6, 7), that is, statements that express considerations unrelated to the quality of the course and the learning. The scale of answers ranged from very incorrect (-2) to very true (2). Between these two measures we performed a t-test for paired sample analysis. The results of this analysis are as follows:

Table 2.

Negative Aspects (n=100)		Positive Aspects (n=100)		
M	S.D	M	S.D	t
.36	.97	-.04	.97	-3.20 **

* $P < .05$. ** $P < .01$. *** $P < .001$

The findings of the analysis in the table clearly show that the negative aspects receive a much higher degree of willingness than the positive aspects, which receive a negative score.

Another aspect of deciding about the type of course is consulting with various professionals at the college. In Question 6 of the questionnaire, the participants were asked about the influence of the advisors with whom they consulted (lecturers, study consultants, department coordinators, etc.) in their decision to study in the online course. The following table lists the frequencies of this question:

Table 3.

	All Respondents (n=100) %
Definitely not	37.1%
Very little	5.7%
Small extent	7.1%
Moderately	27.1%
Very much	18.6%
Definitely a lot	4.3%

As the table shows, close to 40% (37.1%) of the students who consulted with various advisors said that they were not influenced by the counselors. In addition, if we add to this group the students who said that they were affected very little (5.7%) as well as those who were affected to a small extent (7.1%), then we have 50% of the students who said that they were not significantly influenced by the advisors. On the other hand, only 23% of the students report that the counselors significantly influenced their decision.

Another issue that emphasizes the problematics in deciding about participating in an online course instead of a frontal course is the subject of grades. Considering this assumption, we received from the college administration the data of all the students who studied English at different levels (Beginners, Intermediate, and Advanced) during the 3 semesters when the frontal and virtual courses were taught parallel. Based on this data, we calculated each student's

last grade in the English course and made a comparison using a t-test for paired sample analysis. The results of this analysis are as follows:

Table 4.

	Frontal			Virtual			
	n	M	S.D	n	M	S.D	t
Beginners	174	61.0	17.3	29	57.8	16.6	-.92
Intermediate	486	60.8	18.4	81	50.9	19.6	-4.24 ***
Advanced	2286	64.9	17.6	132	61.0	18.2	-2.50 *

* $P < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

The findings presented in the table indicate overwhelmingly that the grades of students in the frontal course are better than those in the corresponding virtual course. In other words, the probability of a student passing the course in English when taking the Online Initiative is lower than in a F2F course. At the "Intermediate" and "Advanced' levels this difference is even significant.

4. Discussion

The research conducted at the WGC elucidates problems with EFL or EAP instruction in general, and academic language acquisition, in particular. We had five expectations at the onset of this survey and all of them were confirmed via the interviews, the questionnaire, and the final grades of academic performance on the department-wide exam at all three levels.

In general, we found that WGC students emphasized the technical aspects (price, convenience, flexibility) instead of the essential aspects of the course (personalization, quality of learning, success in the course) in choosing a virtual course over a F2F format. Additionally, in the selection process, these students did not consider the uniqueness of an English course (as a language course) and its relative lack of suitability in the virtual format.

Our first prediction was that WGC students would choose the online course because of cost-effectiveness, flexibility, and convenience (e.g. Platt et. al., 2014), and not because they thought the online option would be a better learning experience for them. From the responses to Question 2 of our survey "What were the considerations that led you to decide to study English in an online course?" these factors were the reason a large majority of WGC students chose the virtual delivery format instead of the traditional frontal course with 87% indicating that it would save them time (2.1) and 80% indicating it would save them money (2.2). From Table 1 it can be clearly seen that WGC students chose the online format due to technical reasons and not integral ones. 22% of the students indicated that they thought it would be easier to study in the online delivery format (2.7), i.e. convenience.

In addition, Figure 1 also shows the results that connect to the importance of cost in students' choice of delivery formats. When asked in Question 3 "If the cost of the frontal course and online course were the same, would you change your decision as to what course to take", from the distribution of the responses for this question as shown in the pie graph (Figure 1), it can be concluded that the financial consideration of the low cost of the virtual course, was a decisive factor on a large percentage of the students who chose to take a virtual course. Considering this, it can certainly be concluded that according to our research hypotheses, the technical aspects were more central than the essential aspects which should have been paramount in their choice.

Second, Table 2 shows what we expected about the suitability of the delivery format of the virtual course. We expected that suitability was not taken into consideration as a factor in the decision-making process of the students (Jaggars, 2013, Nilson, 2013). Question 7 stated "Here are a few sentences related to online course registration, are they right for you? When I signed up for the course I thought ...." 7.1 asked "The course is different from a frontal course" where

an overwhelming 70% (43% "very correct" and 27% "correct") responded that online courses are different, which negates our expectation of whether students actually thought about the suitability of this kind of course. However, 22% responded "neutral", which connects to the lack of deep thought about whether a language course is suitable as an online course. In addition, to Question 7.5 which asked, "The main thing is to pass the course with a minimum investment," 54% of the students responded (31% "very correct" and 23% "correct") that they agreed with this statement as well as another 27% who answered "neutral". Moreover, to Question 7.7 which asked, "The online course is less good, but it does not matter since the main thing is to pass," 52% (20% "very correct" and 32% "correct") agreed and another 21% answered "neutral" indicating that suitability was not an issue. Thus, they knew that the virtual course was different (7.1), that it would not prepare them well for the exam (7.2), and that it is less good them for them (7.7). Still, they choose to take the online course – and as statistics show they had lower scores. This suggests that suitability or investment of effort was not a factor in the decision-making process.

A further indication that connects to suitability are the responses from other questions in the survey. In addition, Question 7.4 queried "I should invest less in the online course than in the frontal course." 32% of the students responded that this statement was "very correct", another 24% answered "correct", and thus an overwhelming 56% of the students thought that it would be easier, without considering the structure of the online course or even its demands. A further 22% answered "neutral," meaning that they did not really contemplate about what was required. Thus, the results from Question 7 of the positive and negative aspects show (Table 2), that the negative aspects (7.4, 7.5, 7.6, and 7.7) are much stronger in the decision-making process than the positive aspects (7.2, 7.3). This difference is significant, again pointing to the fact that WGC students made their decisions on technical considerations, and not positive considerations.

Table 2 can also be used to justify our third expectation which was that WGC students would also not take into account that different skills would need to be utilized in the online course (Rabbani, 2015; Nilson, 2013) since they had not previously experienced an EFL course online. Question 7.3 asked "The online course gives more learning tools than a regular course." 48% responded "neutral" to this question, while 29% responded that this statement was either "wrong" or "very wrong" for them and another 22% thought this statement was "correct" or "very correct" for them. It is possible to interpret the 48% answer as the fact that most WGC students did not consider that they might need a different "tool box" or set of skills as well as different strategies for the online course. Question 7.2 queried "That the online course will prepare us better for the exam" meaning more skills and strategies would be taught. 59% of the students responded "neutral" to this question supporting our expectation that students had not thought about the skills needed for the online course because they did not have any previous experience with an online EFL course. In addition, another 18% (6% correct, 12% very correct) thought that the online course would be better for them also without investigating what skills and strategies would be needed. After more than 20 years of teaching at the WGC, we have found that many of our students find F2F EFL courses difficult, so they do the minimum and hope to pass while not really gaining any skills and strategies taught in the classroom. While we cannot know which students actually answered the survey, and the survey is only a sample, we think that this sample is representative of WGC students in general.

A number of questions in the survey dealt with the level and amount of advisement the students received before making the final decision about which course delivery format they would choose, and Table 3 shows some of these results. The results to Question 6 may give us an indication about the process of making a substantive decision, since there is no doubt that the counseling factors that the college provides to the students are directed to choose a course that is effective for them in terms of the quality of learning. Thus, a lot of impact indicates a proper

decision-making process and a lack of influence or little influence indicates a decision that stems from considerations that are not essential. To Question 6 (Table 3) "To what extent did the recommendation or opposition of the parties you consulted influence your decision?", 37.1% responded that they were not influenced at all by the advice received as well as another 7.1% responding that they were minimally influenced, with an additional 5.7% who were very minimally influenced. Thus, close to 50% of the respondents were not significantly influenced by the advisors. The statistics are low which means that the students did not rely on professional consultation to weigh the suitability of the online course for them.

Thus, one of the original hypotheses of the researchers was that WGC students would choose the virtual course because of flexibility and cost effectiveness, which has been proven correct. According to Levy, who was responsible for registration of all English classes at the time, there were two reasons that our students made the decision for the online course One was the money – 300 NIS or 3000 NIS which is a substantial amount for any person, even though the frontal course is on a much higher level - there is a lecturer - but then again if you have the option of 300 NIS as opposed to 3000 NIS, of course people are going to choose the cheaper option. The second is the class grade & the fact that they wouldn't have a teacher to speak to during the semester – which is the disadvantage of the online course (N. Levy, Personal Communication, and May 9, 2016).

Our fifth prediction was that many WGC students registered for the online course would fail the department-wide exam which can be seen in Table 4. Our starting point is that students are interested in at least passing the course, if not really knowing the material being studied. It follows from this point of view that students should at least examine the degree of their chances of passing the course in each of the diverse formats and at least take this into consideration during the decision-making process. The findings presented in Table 4 continue the general line of the present study, in that it appears that these students did not even consider in their decision-making process their future grades or their chances of passing the course. The statistical analysis for all levels and for all 3 semesters shows that students' grades at the end of the English course were remarkably lower in the virtual course than in the traditional courses. The results showed statistical significance in this area. Thus, not only were essential considerations for the quality of the course and learning not taken into account, but also even the simpler factor of grades was not considered. On the other hand, it seems that WGC students chose the online course purely according to technical considerations. Thus, those students who took the F2F course succeeded better than those who did not, which proves our original predictions. This also upholds the belief that language classes are not always suitable for an online delivery platform.

The findings presented in Table 4 indicate overwhelmingly that the grades of students in the frontal course are better than those in the corresponding virtual course. In other words, the probability of a student passing the online course in English is lower than in a F2F course. At the 'Intermediate" and "Advanced 1" levels, this difference is even significant. These findings continue the general line of the present study, that the participants in this study did not even consider in their decision-making process their future grades in the course or their chances of passing. Therefore, not only was their decision making based on technical considerations only, but that also their learning outcomes (grades and passing the course) were not taken into account at all.

All of the findings presented here show that the main hypothesis of the study has been confirmed and students chose to take their mandatory English course in the virtual format, mainly on the basis of considerations of convenience, money, and time and much less on the basis of significant considerations of the quality of the course and learning as well as not even considering their learning outcomes. Many researchers have discovered that self-regulation and motivation is a key component to success in virtual courses (Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013;

Serdyukov & Hill, 2013 cited in Broadbent, 2015; Paechter & Maier, 2010; Deimann & Bastiaens, 2010; Schulze & Scholz, 2018; Platt et al., 2014). Thus, in theory and reality WGC students who chose the on-line EFL course format did not take into consideration these two aspects that are essential for success in a virtual course.

Furthermore, much of recent literature on the suitability of online courses has revealed that language courses are not suitable for the online delivery platform (Schulze & Scholz, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014 p. 636, 642; Jaggars, 2013 p 16; Xu & Jaggars, 2010). Our research upholds these earlier studies since the results of WGC students' final grades who took the frontal course were significantly higher in all levels (> 0.5) than those students enrolled in the online course.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research set out to investigate three factors connected to the decision-making process of our students. The first area explored connected to the decision-making process of Israeli students taking EFL courses at a small, rural, ethnically diverse college. Second, we delved into how these students registered for the online EFL course for the first time with little or no preparation in EFL courses online. Finally, we investigated the level and amount of advisement WGC students received before making the decision which course delivery format they would choose as well as what considerations and motivations were taken into account before enrollment. The results of our research have proven that not only were our original three areas of investigation shown to be problematic for WGC students, but also that all five of our hypotheses were confirmed. While our survey focused solely on one small rural college, we expect that the results would be the same in a similar situation elsewhere. Future research at other colleges as well as the universities in Israel might strengthen our findings. Considering the research done in past years, blended or hybrid courses in addition to the traditional F2F EFL courses might be a better alternative for students to the totally online English language courses. One limitation of the WGC survey is that we did not focus on demographics (gender, age, ethnic background). Efforts were taken to increase survey participation; however, these efforts may have also impacted the amount of bias in the results, and the sample population may not reflect the true population.

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