

Danica M. Jerotijević Tišma
University of Kragujevac
Faculty of Philology and Arts
Department of English Language and Literature

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ARE EFL LEARNERS' ATTITUDES TO ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT RELATED TO THE ACTUAL TEST PERFORMANCE?

Abstract: The history of teaching has frequently underscored the significance of classroom environment on the outcomes of learning. With the introduction of mandatory distance learning in university settings during the pandemic, the issue of online learning efficiency became more resonant than ever in educators' minds. The current study aimed at analyzing the connection between Serbian English-major students' attitudes towards online learning environment and their actual performance on a knowledge test. A total of 52 students took part in the specifically designed questionnaire and the examination following an online course in *English Phonetics*. The results pointed to a strong positive and statistically significant correlation between students' attitudes and scores on the knowledge test. This led to a conclusion that a learning environment might strongly affect not only students' motivation and engagement, but the very outcomes of learning as well. The findings have important pedagogical implications, especially when it comes to English language teaching, considering the fact that relatively simple alterations to the existing learning environments could yield positive results in terms of knowledge acquisition and retention.

Keywords: learning environment, online learning, test performance, attitudes, ELT.

1. INTRODUCTION

The interest in studying the influence of the learning environment is primarily driven by the assumption that, if the environment is organized, flexible and open enough to combine different approaches and methods, as well as numerous interactive activities, learning will be more effective and long-term. In some approaches, such as *Suggestopedia* (Lozanov 1978), the organization of the learning environment is considered essential for successfully overcoming the obstacles that the language learning process entails.

It seems there is a prevailing notion among a certain number of educators and the general public that it was the COVID-19 pandemic that transferred the traditional classroom to an online one (Moser et al. 2021; Jerotijević Tišma 2023). Nevertheless, a survey in the US showed that in 2017 about a third of students had attended an online course in higher education settings (Ortagus 2017). With wireless connectivity almost constantly accessible, learning, including academic studies, is literally at hand anywhere and anytime (Alphonse et al. 2019). It goes without saying that the pandemic and its aftermath have only accelerated the use of technological devices in everyday learning, making learning more enhanced by the general convenience, availability and feasibility of mobile phones and other portable devices. Within a relatively short time span, teachers were forced to transfer their lessons to an online environment, and more often than not they were overwhelmed with the number of technical options and tools (Dhawan 2020). There was an increasing and accelerated need for the reconsideration of existing pedagogies, yet the results frequently reported by the teachers were students' lack of engagement, inadequate focus or insufficient motivation (Sabarinath, Quek 2020). However, it was suggested that investigation of students' attitudes and perceptions on the learning environment could occasionally provide a more reliable insight into the connection between the environment and academic achievement than sole impressions of teachers (Tootoonchi 2016).

Having the previously stated importance of learning environment in mind, the present study concentrates on the relationship between English-major university students' perceptions of the online learning environment during a *Phonetics* course and their actual exam performance.

2. CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND ITS EFFECT ON LEARNING

Classroom environment represents all the personal, educational and psychological aspects of teaching, and it cannot be separately regarded from teacher and student roles (Dabbah, Kitsantas 2012). An EFL classroom environment represents a formal or informal setting which benefits English language learning using both material and non-material resources involving student–teacher and student–student interactions shaped by personal traits and differences (Sağlam, Sali 2013). Along with the aforementioned psychological dimension, classroom environment also incorporates physical elements important for successful classroom management, such as lecture halls, teaching aids and equipment etc. (Entwistle et al. 2003). An efficient teacher creates an environment in which students are responsible for their behavior simultaneously taking their feelings, perceptions and experience into consideration. Classroom

environment is thus an important tool for a teacher (Dean 2000: 84) and when well-organized and supportive, it can result in high levels of motivation and an effective learning process (Мрча 2007: 22). Hence, teacher plays a key role in monitoring performance, enhancing interpersonal relationships and raising the level of productivity and engagement. According to Hicks (2012), learning is impossible without an effective classroom. Classroom environment can either be structured around a positive climate, where the teacher is supportive, encouraging, and uses humor to promote effectiveness, or negative climate, where the teacher keeps warning students on how necessary it is for them to improve and reduce misbehavior, reprimanding or even threatening students for making a mistake.

The research on the importance of classroom environment for successful learning is abundant, the majority of which confirmed the beneficial effects of a positive classroom environment (Hansen, Childs 1998). For example, Wong and Fraser (1996) investigated science laboratory classes and perceptions of the classroom environment, underlining a connection between laboratory classroom environments and students' attitudes. Students from the science-independent group regarded their classroom environments more positively than the other two groups (humanities and science-oriented). Goh and Fraser (1996) focused on interpersonal behaviour of the teacher and the students, finding that girls invariably considered teachers' interpersonal behavior more favourably than boys. Khoo and Fraser (1997) investigated the environment of adult computer education and underscored the contribution of the psycho-social perspectives of the classroom to the teaching and learning process. The school can also benefit from positive classroom climate in terms of professional advancements and higher academic attainments of the students (Heck 2000).

3. DISTANCE EDUCATION AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Keeping in mind that the virtual component of everyday teaching is almost indispensable, the focus of research is shifting towards investigating learners' behaviour in an online environment. Teaching resources, methods and the learning environment together make online learning successful (Howard et al. 2020). The introduction of smart learning environments has further enhanced the process by introducing artificial intelligence, personalized suggestions and automatic assessment. It is all designed to increase students' satisfaction and meet their needs, yet somehow it seems there is something important missing (Moser et al. 2021).

Although the learning environment has been recognized as an important part of the complex learning process, there is an evident scarcity of research dealing with the environment other than traditional, physical classrooms (Beckers et al.

2016). The reason is obvious, because investigating the ways in which physical environment of a student's home or place where they are at during an online class benefits or restricts the learning process is an incredibly demanding task. One of few studies conducted by Alphonse et al. (2019) investigated the students' views on physical properties of the learning environment during a distance learning course under the lens of Equivalency Theory. The greatest challenges faced by students were lack of appropriate equipment, inability to balance family responsibilities together with learning and deficiency of a suitable workspace. An interesting study by Wang et al. (2017) studied the usefulness of the mobile devices for learning in a museum setting, finding that the aforementioned devices increased student collaboration.

The vast possibilities of online learning made room for multi-media and interactive learning materials, supporting them with spontaneity and informality (Ching, Hsu 2013). Nevertheless, this presupposed informality is what causes potential challenges, since students are so easily distracted. By using both synchronous and asynchronous features students can rely on greater flexibility, collaboration and ownership in the learning process (Choy, Quek 2016; Ortagus 2017). Simultaneously, physical interaction is restricted, making it difficult for some teachers to establish effective feedback strategies and personalization of learning, which in turn leads to students' feeling less comfortable and confident. The issue becomes even more complicated if the lack of pleasure resulting from the inappropriate learning environment results in poor academic achievement (Harper 2018). The practice has indicated that students need to be constantly engaged in activities online to maintain the level of attention and motivation, yet this may sometimes be demanding for teachers due to occasional technical issues (Roddy et al. 2017) and the challenge of maintaining and stimulating discussions.

4. METHODOLOGY

Aims and Research Questions. The overall aim of the study was to investigate the potential correlation between Serbian English-major students' attitudes towards the online learning environment and the actual test performance. More specific goals included the evaluation of attitudes and analysis of the relationship between the test performance and individual subscales of the attitudes questionnaire to obtain a more detailed account on the aforementioned relationship.

In line with the proposed goals, the study was based upon the following research questions:

- What were Serbian English-major students' attitudes towards online learning environment during an *English Phonetics* course?
- Are the attitudes related to the actual test performance?

Participants. The sample was comprised of 52 first-year English-major students at the Faculty of Philology and Arts, University of Kragujevac, who attended the online *English Phonetics* course during the 2020/2021 academic year, due to the restrictions caused by COVID-19 pandemic at the time. The average age of participants was 19.69, 15 male and 35 female. The students signed the consent form prior to the investigation agreeing to voluntarily take part in the examination. They all successfully passed the entrance exam designed matching the B2 CEFR level of proficiency. Furthermore, the particular sample was selected because of the specific nature of the *English Phonetics* course in question being taught online for the first time. Among other things, the course includes practising IPA transcription and practical sound production, which was demanding to perform via online learning platforms due to the occasional incompatibility of software to Unicode symbols.

Instruments, Procedure and Data Analysis. The primary instrument for attitudes collection was a questionnaire designed by Gray and Di Loreto (2016) for which a written publication permission was obtained from the authors. The survey was deemed suitable since it was specifically created to refer to online learning environments. It contained 34 6-point Likert scale statements divided into six subscales: *Course Structure/Organization* (1–5), *Learner Interaction* (6–12), *Student Engagement* (13–17), *Instructor's Presence* (18–22), *Student Satisfaction* (23–28) and *Perceived Learning* (29–34). Statements 2, 3, 7, 17, 19, 24, 31 had reverse coding. Test performance was measured using a knowledge test in *English Phonetics* with a total of 40 points. The exam structure goes as follows: Task 1 was phonemic transcription (transcribing ten words phonemically using the IPA symbols); Task 2 was phonemic dictation (transcribing 4 words the instructor pronounces without seeing them beforehand); Task 3 was transcription reading (reading a 50-word passage given in IPA and rewriting it in regular spelling); Task 4 was related to sound classification (multiple choice questions about sound descriptions in particular words); Task 5 was articulation description (a detailed description of articulation for the two given sounds); and Task 6 had two theoretical questions on the topics covered during the course.

Both survey completion and testing was done in January 2021. The testing was performed in person, while the survey was completed anonymously online.

Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were conducted using SPSS, version 20.0.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the survey containing students' attitudes to the online learning environment are presented in Table 1¹.

Table 1. Questionnaire Results: Attitudes to Online Learning Environment

Statement	Answers (%)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
<i>Course Structure/Organization</i>						
1. Student learning outcomes were aligned to the learning activities.	/	9.6	17.3	19.2	23.1	30.8
2. Course navigation was illogical.	26.9	35.8	11.5	5.8	/	/
3. The layout of the course was disorganized.	48.1	38.5	9.6	3.8	/	/
4. Instructions about student participation were clearly presented.	/	/	7.7	17.3	40.4	34.6
5. The purpose of the course was clearly presented.	/	/	/	23.1	42.3	34.6
<i>Learner Interaction</i>						
6. I frequently interacted with other students in the course.	9.6	17.3	25.0	13.5	21.2	13.5
7. There were no opportunities for active learning in this course.	19.2	50.0	9.6	21.2	/	/
8. The learning activities promoted interaction with others.	5.8	/	25.0	11.5	21.2	36.5
9. I had the opportunity to introduce myself to others in the class.	15.4	11.5	13.5	11.5	23.1	25.0
10. I communicated often with other students within the course.	28.8	30.8	11.5	5.8	13.5	9.6
11. I regularly communicated with the instructor of the course.	23.1	13.5	5.8	17.3	21.2	19.2
12. I received ongoing feedback from my classmates.	36.5	26.9	15.4	11.5	9.6	/
<i>Student Engagement</i>						
13. I frequently interacted with my instructor of this course.	21.2	19.2	/	19.2	13.5	26.9
14. I discussed what I learned in the course outside of class.	28.8	21.2	19.2	15.4	11.5	3.8
15. I completed my readings as assigned during the course.	13.5	9.6	17.3	28.8	17.3	13.5
16. I participated in synchronous and/or asynchronous chat sessions during the course.	34.6	34.6	17.3	13.5	/	/
17. I was not actively engaged in the activities required in the course.	13.5	15.4	13.5	19.2	25.0	13.5
<i>Instructor's Presence</i>						
18. The instructor's feedback on assignments was clearly stated.	9.6	7.7	15.4	26.9	21.2	19.2
19. The instructor's feedback on assignments was not constructive.	23.1	26.9	19.2	13.5	7.7	9.6
20. The instructor provided timely feedback about my progress in the course.	13.5	13.5	30.8	17.3	13.5	11.5

¹ For the sake of economy, the Likert scale is marked with numbers in Table 1 in the following way: 1 – *strongly disagree*, 2 – *mostly disagree*, 3 – *somewhat agree*, 4 – *moderately agree*, 5 – *mostly agree*, 6 – *strongly agree*, as suggested in Gray, DiLoreto 2016.

Statement	Answers (%)					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. The instructor cared about my progress in this course.	/	17.3	19.2	34.6	15.4	13.5
22. I learned from the feedback that was provided during the course.	3.8	19.2	28.8	5.8	21.2	21.2
<i>Student Satisfaction</i>						
23. I am satisfied with my overall experience in this course.	23.1	25.0	28.8	13.5	/	9.6
24. I would not recommend this course to other students.	28.8	26.9	26.9	13.5	3.8	/
25. I am satisfied with the level of student interaction that occurred in the course.	13.5	17.3	28.8	23.1	9.6	7.7
26. I am satisfied with my learning in the course.	23.1	34.6	25.0	9.6	7.7	/
27. I am satisfied with the instructor of the course.	/	/	17.3	25.0	26.9	30.8
28. I am satisfied with the content of the course.	25.0	30.8	15.4	21.2	7.7	/
<i>Perceived Learning</i>						
29. I am pleased with what I learned in the course.	13.5	13.5	26.9	25.0	13.5	7.7
30. The learning tasks enhanced my understanding of the content.	5.8	9.6	21.2	17.3	30.8	15.4
31. I learned less in the course than I anticipated.	17.3	23.1	9.6	17.3	23.1	9.6
32. I learned skills that will help me in the future.	13.5	21.5	13.5	30.8	17.3	3.8
33. The learning activities promoted the achievement of student learning outcomes.	/	11.5	15.4	26.9	28.8	17.3
34. The course contributed to my professional development.	21.2	30.8	7.7	15.4	11.5	13.5

When it comes to the first subcategory of *Course Structure/Organization*, about 54% of students mostly or strongly agree that the learning outcomes were aligned to learning activities. Around 70% moderately to strongly disagree that the course navigation was illogical and more than 90% do so that the layout of the course was disorganized. The majority of students likewise agree (more than 90%) that the instructions about student participation and the purpose of the course were clearly presented.

More evident variation can be noted for the second subscale *Learner Interaction*, which is understandable since it was the first time they had ever met some of the colleagues in class while the online platform was fairly novel. About a half of the students reported to have frequently interacted with other students, whereas almost 70% disagreed that there were no opportunities for active learning even though the entire course was online. About 70% thought that the learning activities had promoted interaction and about 60% reported that they had had the opportunity to introduce themselves to others. The answers may be related to a particular interpretation of the very statement, since the students had the chance to say a few words about themselves at the beginning of the course. However, less than 30% said that they had often communicated with other students, yet the percentage is almost doubled for communication with the instructor. About 75% of the students reported to have received no feedback from their classmates during the course. The latter statement may be directly related to the peculiarities

of online interaction, which always seems impersonal despite the numerous opportunities it offers for intra-group communication.

Pertaining to *Student Engagement*, almost 60% reported to have frequently interacted with the instructor, while only about 30% discussed what they had learned outside the class. However, almost 60% allegedly completed their readings during the course, while the participation in synchronous and asynchronous chat sessions was fairly limited. These views point to the re-evaluation of the course organization and need for improvement, although we are now in the aftermath of COVID-19 pandemic and the teaching practice is returning to physical classrooms. About 60% reported to not have been actively engaged in the activities required in the course, which may be ascribed to the course requirements on the one hand, as well as to students' motivation for participating in online classes. Some of the more frequent excuses for not participating were technical difficulties (no camera or poor Internet connection), which is obviously not an argument one can resort to in a face-to-face interaction.

The participants mostly reacted positively to *Instructor's Presence*. Namely, about 65% agreed moderately to strongly that the feedback was clearly stated and that it was constructive. The majority likewise agreed that the feedback was timely and that the instructor cared about the students' progress in the course. The majority likewise claimed to have learned from the feedback provided during the course (more than 50%).

Based on the results of *Student Satisfaction* subscale, one could conclude that a large number of students was satisfied with the course. More than 70% were satisfied with the overall experience and more than a half of the students would gladly recommend the course to others. About 40% of the students were satisfied with student interaction, however, more than 50% were not satisfied with their own learning. A similar percentage was not satisfied with the content of the course, since it may have been unexpectedly demanding. Nevertheless, more than 70% were satisfied with the instructor.

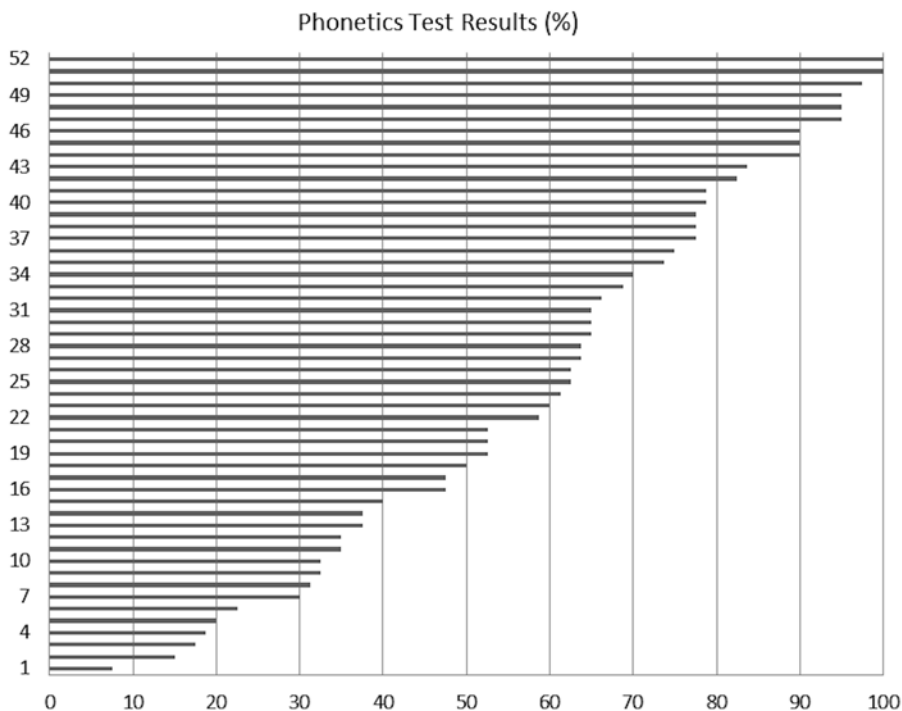
Finally, the last subscale was related to *Perceived Learning*. About a half of the students were pleased with what they had learned, and about 60% agreed that the learning tasks enhanced the understanding of the content. Almost a half of students claimed to have learned less than they expected, and about a half saw the importance of the new skills for the future. Nonetheless, about 70% felt that the learning activities promoted the achievement of the learning outcomes, which seems slightly discrepant to the previous opinions. Disappointingly, a solid half of students did not agree that the course contributed to their professional development.

As unison the majority of answers may seem at first glance, it goes without saying that the online learning environment had the prevailing influence in the domain of interaction and knowledge retention. Some of the statements were similar, and even though the survey may appear repetitive, it was more than useful

for checking the reliability of students' answers. Overall, it may be concluded that English-major students showed positive attitudes towards the online learning environment when it comes to course organization and instructor presence, yet less so when it comes to learner interaction and perceived learning.

The results of the actual knowledge testing are presented in Figure 1. The percentage of progress was given for each student individually.

Figure 1. Students' Test Performance



Judging by the results, 65.38% of students scored more than 50% on the knowledge test, with 11.5% performing outstandingly with more than 90% of the test done correctly. About 13.46% of students achieved less than 30%, which could be counted as poor performance. Having the previous teaching experience in mind and the results attained by students in the past (the author of the present paper was the instructor of the course in question), we dare say that the performance was similar, even though there are numerous factors that need to be taken into consideration.

To answer the proposed research question related to the interconnectedness of attitudes to the online learning environment and the actual test results, a Spearman correlation non-parametric testing was performed. Test performance

was compared to each subscale separately to obtain more reliable results. All subscales showed strong positive correlation between the test performance and the attitudes to the online learning environment. This means that those students who had more positive attitudes towards the online learning environment, scored higher on the performance test, and vice versa. The results are positive and statistically significant for every subscale ($p < 0.05$), which can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. Correlation Analysis Results

<i>Test Performance</i>	<i>Course Structure/Organization</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.641, p = 0.001$
	<i>Learner Interaction</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.577, p = 0.005$
	<i>Student Engagement</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.992, p = 0.001$
	<i>Instructor's Presence</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.996, p = 0.002$
	<i>Student Satisfaction</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.637, p = 0.001$
	<i>Perceived Learning</i>
	$rs(50) = 0.588, p = 0.005$

The positive correlation indicates an important impact learning environment may have on the outcomes of learning, which was proved by previous findings as well (e.g. Dean 2000; Мрѡа 2007). The prevailing positive attitudes to the learning environment potentially affected the outcomes of learning, while the latter may have been further enhanced with more positive attitudes on perceived learning and learner interaction in an online setting.

6. CONCLUSION

Having in mind the challenges COVID-19 restrictions brought upon institutions and educational process itself, the present paper had the goal to return to the issue of online learning environment and its potential effects on learning. The aftermath of the pandemic doubtlessly introduced novel queries and it seems prerequisite for future educational endeavors to take diverse perspectives into consideration. Thus the prevalent aim of the current paper was to determine whether there was a relationship between English-major student's attitudes towards online learning environment and the results of a knowledge test.

The results demonstrated a statistically significant, strong positive correlation between the aforementioned variables. The more positive the attitudes, the higher the score on the test, and vice versa. The obtained findings underscored the importance of learning environment for learning outcomes and

underlined relevant pedagogical implications. Namely, by introducing changes in the learning environment EFL teachers could directly observe the fluctuations in learners' performance. Furthermore, the preservation of certain aspects of distance learning could bring novelty and motivation boost in an everyday classroom. The fact that the participants in the present research underscored the challenges in the domain of interaction and perceived learning additionally emphasizes the need for constant monitoring of students' preferences and aspirations.

The limitations of the study lie in the particular content of the testing instrument, since more reliable results could be obtained by introducing topics pertaining to *General English*. Related to the latter is of course the proficiency level of participants. Younger learners could likewise be included in future studies. Future research may also include other instructors with different teaching styles, potentially resulting in opposing findings. Moreover, the design of the survey instrument could be modified in the sense that statements could be altered to be more closely connected to a particular course. In general, the way of gathering information about the learning environment used in the current paper may prove useful for instructors to re-examine certain aspects of curriculum design and possibly enhance eventual exam performance.

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Даница М. Јеротијевић Тишма

Универзитет у Крагујевцу

Филолошко-уметнички факултет

Катедра за англистику

ПОСТОЈИ ЛИ ВЕЗА ИЗМЕЂУ СТАВОВА СТУДЕНАТА ЕНГЛЕСКОГ КАО СТРАНОГ ЈЕЗИКА ПРЕМА ОНЛАЈН НАСТАВНОМ ОКРУЖЕЊУ И ПОСТИГНУТИХ РЕЗУЛТАТА НА ТЕСТУ ЗНАЊА?

Резиме: Значај наставног окружења за исходе учења често је потцртаван кроз историју образовања. Са увођењем обавезног учења на даљину на терцијарном нивоу образовања током пандемије, питање ефикасности учења на даљину постало је једно од важнијих како у настави уопште, тако и за наставу страних језика. Наш рад има за циљ да анализира однос између ставова српских студената енглеског језика према онлајн наставном окружењу и њиховог реалног постигнућа на тесту знања. Укупно 52 студента учествовало је у посебно дизајнираном упитнику и испиту након онлајн-курса *Фонетика енглеског језика*. Резултати су указали на снажну позитивну и статистички значајну корелацију између ставова ученика и резултата на тесту знања. Такво стање ствари довело нас је до закључка да окружење може одредити не само мотивацију и ангажовање ученика, већ и саме резултате учења. Дати налази имају значајне педагошке импликације, посебно када је у питању на-

става енглеског језика, с обзиром на чињеницу да би релативно једноставне измене постојећег окружења за учење могле дати позитивне резултате у погледу усвајања и дугорочне ретенције знања.

Кључне речи: наставно окружење, онлајн-учење, учинак на тесту, ставови, настава енглеског као страног језика.