

ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF ONLINE HOMEWORK SOFTWARE: THE CASE OF “LIFE” IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

Technology has dramatically changed the way we teach and learn a language and created new trends in English language teaching such as Blended Learning and Computer-Assisted Language Learning. It has become so popular that recently-published textbook series, including Life begin to have their workbooks uploaded in online platforms. However, there have been only a few studies on how online workbooks benefit teachers and students and what issues they may cause in specific context. The paper aims at filling in this gap by investigating the online homework of Life series. Through an interview with teachers and a survey with students at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University, the research reveals both benefits and drawbacks of Life’s online homework software. Results of the study have provided suggestions for administrators to improve online homework systems and for teachers to take better advantages of the online assignments for students.

Key words: English language teaching; Life; online homework software; School of Foreign Languages; benefits; drawbacks.

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NHỮNG LỢI ÍCH VÀ HẠN CHẾ CỦA PHẦN MỀM BÀI TẬP VỀ NHÀ TRỰC TUYẾN THEO BỘ GIÁO TRÌNH LIFE TẠI VIỆT NAM

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TÓM TẮT

Công nghệ đã và đang thay đổi mạnh mẽ cách thức dạy và học ngôn ngữ; nhờ đó những xu thế học tập mới trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh đã được ra đời, ví dụ Blended Learning (Học tập kết hợp) và Computer-Assisted Language Learning (Học ngôn ngữ được máy tính hỗ trợ)... Phương pháp này ngày càng trở nên phổ biến, dẫn đến hàng loạt cuốn sách được xuất bản gần đây, trong đó có bộ giáo trình Life đã xây dựng hệ thống bài tập của họ trên nền trực tuyến. Tuy nhiên, hiện nay chưa có nhiều nghiên cứu về những thuận lợi và hạn chế của hệ thống bài tập này đối với giáo viên và sinh viên trong bối cảnh cụ thể. Bài báo được viết với mục đích bổ sung thêm một cách đánh giá đối với hệ thống giao bài trực tuyến của bộ giáo trình Life. Thông qua công cụ phỏng vấn giáo viên và phiếu điều tra dành cho sinh viên tại Khoa Ngoại ngữ - Đại học Thái Nguyên, nghiên cứu đã chỉ ra những lợi ích và cả những hạn chế của phần mềm giao bài trực tuyến theo giáo trình Life. Kết quả nghiên cứu đã cung cấp cho nhà quản lý những đề xuất để cải tiến hệ thống giao bài trực tuyến cũng như cách thức giúp giáo viên tận dụng tốt hơn những mặt lợi ích của hệ thống giao bài cho sinh viên.

Từ khóa: Giảng dạy tiếng Anh; Life; phần mềm bài tập về nhà trực tuyến; Khoa Ngoại ngữ; lợi ích; hạn chế.

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1. Introduction

Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) has become a new trend in English Language Teaching (ELT) in the 21st century. Its advantages and disadvantages have been addressed by multiple scholars. However, there is a lack of empirical studies on teachers and students' responses to online homework systems. Therefore, this paper aims at providing more assessment on Life online workbook and how it works in the context of School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University.

The first advantage addressed by many scholars is that CALL raises students' interest and motivation. Online workbook can provide student with ways to learn English through computer games, animated graphics, and problem-solving techniques which can make drills more interesting [1]. Ushida [2] found that the second language (L2) students' participation in language courses with a strong online component resulted in positive attitudes toward successful language acquisition.

Another advantage provided by CALL is students' improvement in autonomy and empowerment. Learner control over learning promotes critical thinking and student motivation and achievement because greater control allows learners to choose the sequence of what they learn [3], to negotiate meaning via the computer [4] and to suit their personal learning style [5].

In addition to allotting learners more control over the learning process, computer-assisted language learning instruction offers them immediate feedback and multiple attempts. Felix [6] reported that two-thirds of the students taking a face-to-face and technology L2 course felt that having multiple attempts promoted language learning, and, in another study [7], she found that some students liked instant feedback so much that they spent many unanticipated hours in front of the computer in pursuit of the perfect score.

Moreover, Salaberry [8] indicated that computers and its attached language learning programs could provide second language learners more independence from classrooms and the option to work on their learning material at any time of the day.

Not only students but also teachers obtain benefits from CALL. Today, with the high development of computer technology, computers can easily capture, analyze, and present data on second language students' performances during the learning process. When teachers attempt to assess students' learning progress, they can get the essential information from a well-designed computer language learning programs and then offer feedback tailored to students' learning needs [9].

Although advantages of online learning (also CALL in the context) cannot be denied, the approach also brings educators and students several significant challenges.

Cook [10] stated that online working could stop students from participating face-to-face small groups and that online learning may damage their interpersonal relationships and communication skills.

Compared with a written course material, building an online programme is very expensive – ranging from thousands to hundred thousands of dollars. Moreover, ongoing faculty time commitments and online discussion groups may need much time [11]. Besides, expensive hardwares and softwares also become the big obligations for schools and parents [12]. Furthermore, online learning makes students more dependent on technology. A minor problem can disturb or even stop them from participating in the course [10] as well as increasing cognitive loads [13]; hence, it can impede students' satisfaction and learning. In addition, both teachers and students find difficulties in dealing with technical issues that the

approach may cause. Therefore, the benefits of computer technology for those students who are not familiar with computer are inexistent [14].

Alur [15] showed that many web based learning courses had an inferior instructional design. The software of computer assisted language learning programs was still imperfect. Current computer technology mainly deals with reading, listening, and writing skills. Even though some speaking programs have been developed recently, their functions are still limited.

Additionally, computers cannot handle unexpected situations. Second language learners' learning situations are various and ever changing. Due to the limitations of computer's artificial intelligence, computer technology is unable to deal with learners' unexpected learning problems and response to learners' question immediately as teachers do.

From the above references, it is notable that most studies were carried out in the environment of learning English as a second language. Therefore, some more researches about learning English as a foreign language, especially in online platforms should also be conducted. The following parts, including methodology, findings and discussion will reveal both benefits and drawbacks of learning with Life online workbook system at the School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University.

2. Methodology

The study applied the mixed method research with a combination of a semi-structured interview and a survey in order to collect data because of the following reasons. First, the number of teachers participated in the study was relatively small; thus, interview would be able to provide an in-depth insight of what they think are advantages and disadvantages of Life online assigning system. Second, the number of students was, on the other hand,

relatively large; thus, a survey was a more reasonable choice in terms of time, effort and finance. Finally, it was necessary to build a reliable questionnaire for students based on results of the interview because such questionnaires specifically for online homework were not available.

2.1. Participants

Participants of the study were 7 teachers and 257 students from the School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University (SFL-TNU), which is a regional university in Northern Vietnam. Five out of seven teachers have from five to ten years experience and hold a Master degree; two of them have less than five years experience and hold a Bachelor degree. Six of the teachers are female; one is male. Six teachers are from 25 – 35 years old; one is below 25 years old.

Students participated in the study are 257 first year and second year students majoring in English language and English language teaching in SFL-TNU. The majority of them come from rural areas. They have used the online homework system of Life for at least one semester. They range from 19 to 22 years old. Ninety five percent (244 out of 257) students are female and five percent (13 out of 257) are male. The majority of them (78.2%) have both computer and internet access in where they were living; so they did their homework at home on their computer.

2.2. Data collection procedure

Data were collected in sequential procedure. Teachers were asked questions on advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework software for themselves and for their students. Their answers were noted and then coded. Data from teachers on advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework for teachers were used to answer the research questions. As the study focused on advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework system, responses related to its

content were removed. Data from teachers on advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework for students were used to design a questionnaire for students.

The questionnaire included three parts with a total of eight close-ended and two open-ended questions. The first part was used to collect students' information. In the second part, students were asked to check on advantages of Life online homework software that they agreed with. In the third part, they were asked to check on disadvantages they agreed with and answered two open-ended questions on their additional opinions and suggestions. These items were taken and paraphrased from teachers' answers in the interview to meet the principles of questionnaire construction in [16]. Questions were written in Vietnamese with English translation in brackets. The survey was then delivered directly to students or sent through the internet using Google Forms.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework software from teacher's viewpoints

As can be seen in table 1, five out of seven teachers in the study identified the possibility to follow and check students' progress thoroughly and the ability to save time. For the former, teacher 1 explained that she could "extract students' assignment statistics in great details that enable teachers to judge students' progress precisely." These details involved students' scores, the time they spent doing each tasks, etc. Teacher 4 said these reports could help him "have proper intervention" with his students learning process. For the latter, teachers elaborated that the online homework system saved their time preparing homework for students and grading them. "The homework is available. Teachers only have to add the homework according to the unit of lessons," Teacher 3 answered.

Table 1. Advantages of Life online homework software from teachers' viewpoints

Advantages	Number of teachers (out of 7)
Can follow and check students' progress thoroughly	5
Save time for not having to prepare homework and grade students	5
Can customize assignment options and modify due dates for specific students	1
Contact course members easily	1
Can comment personally on student's result	1
Have user-friendly interface	2

In terms of disadvantages in table 2, the teachers showed concern about cheating capacity of Life online homework software since it provides a self-study mode from which students can copy the answers. This drawback may affect teachers' perception of students' ability, which may lead to inappropriate treatment for the class. It may also alter students' grade and result in unfair assessment for honest students in the course. Other challenges included the long time to fix students' problems, the necessity of internet access, and the lack of a function for peer-evaluation. Teachers also complained that it was confusing to choose suitable activities, and that the email sent through Life's system could not attach a file.

Table 2. Disadvantages of Life online homework software from teachers' viewpoints

Disadvantages	Number of teachers (out of 7)
Take time to fix student's problems on first weeks	2
Only create assignment when having internet access	2
Student's cheating	3
Confusion in selecting suitable activities	1
No section for peer-evaluation	2
Cannot attach file in emails sent to students through the system	1

3.2. Advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework software from students' viewpoints

It is shown in table 3 that the majority of students responded that benefits of Life online homework software included the possibility to see the answer immediately after completing a task, various tasks with visual aids, the ability to do the task again, flexible time, and convenience. This result supports the findings in [6] and [7] that students liked instant feedback and multiple attempts in language learning. They also liked the variety of tasks and visual aids, which may raise their interests and motivation [1], [2], [17]. Additionally, they can do homework at the time and place of their choice [8]. Slightly below 50% of students identified that the online homework system could help them create a self-study habit and cause less stress. Online learning can help them develop learning autonomy [18]. Approximately 36% of them said it could help them save time, and

about 27% agreed that it could help them improve their computer skills.

Table 4 shows prominent disadvantages that students have with Life online homework software. More than half of the students responded that not being able to do homework on their mobile phone was an issue with Life. About 45% of students said that they had technical issues and they lost internet access. Approximately 30% of students said that broken computer would be a problem, while a relatively small number (15%) of them said not having a computer and/or internet access is a problem.

About 35% of students complained that the system did not provide any function for interactions among students. This issue, however, may not severely influence students' interpersonal skills and relationships as Cook [10] pointed out. This is because the courses with Life were provided in blended learning mode and students can interact with each other on their face-to-face class time.

Table 3. Advantages of Life online homework software from students' viewpoints

Advantages	Number of students	Percentage (%)
See the answer immediately	185	72.0
Provide various tasks with pictures, illustration, videos, etc.	158	61.5
Can re-do the tasks	143	55.6
Have flexible time	141	55.0
Be convenient – I could do homework anywhere there is a computer with internet access	133	51.8
Create self-study habit	121	47.1
Cause less stress	121	47.1
Make it easy to follow and check completion progress	115	44.7
Save time	93	36.2
Improve computer skills	71	27.6
Others	0	0

Table 4. Disadvantages of Life online homework software from students' viewpoints

Disadvantages	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
I can't do homework on my mobile phone.	145	56.4
I have technical problems with my account, such as forgetting password.	119	46.3
I lose internet access.	114	44.4
I can't do speaking exercises with other students.	90	35.0
My computer breaks down.	75	29.2
I don't have a computer.	43	16.7
I don't have internet access.	40	15.6
Others	5	0.02

Generally Life series have a user-friendly online homework system which has greatly supported both teachers and students in teaching and learning. Its advantages outweigh the disadvantages; therefore, Life and its online homework system should continue to be developed for better versions in the future.

4. Conclusion

The study attempts to provide a preliminary description of advantages and disadvantages of Life online homework software from the teachers and students' points of view. From these, there are several suggestions as following.

For teachers who use textbooks with online homework, a number of actions may be recommended to minimize its disadvantages. First, a community should be created to support students with technical issues, such as a Facebook group. Additionally, teachers should take the online homework score into reconsideration if there is a big gap between their online grade and in-class test scores.

For ICT developers and administrators, it is recommended that they take into account the following functions for a more successful system in a future. First, there should be a mobile-friendly system or a Life application for smart phone. Second, more interactive functions such as a chat, call, video call, etc. should be added into the system to increase interactions between teachers and students, and among students. Finally, responses from teachers and students should be collected regularly in order to upgrade the system.

Beside insights into teachers and students' responses to online homework, the research may have the following limitations. First, it was carried out with a relatively small number of teachers and students in a regional university; therefore, its results apply for the case of Life online homework in the context of this university and cannot be generalized for other contexts. Second, the questionnaire

was developed based on teachers' perception of advantages and disadvantages for students and has not been pilot-tested. However, it may provide evidence to support current studies on CALL and provide a feedback from the point of view of practitioners and students who are using online learning homework system. It may also serve as a pilot study for further research on online homework and CALL in the future.

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