

**MANDATORY ATTENDANCE POLICY AND STUDENTS' PERFORMANCE:
A CASE STUDY OF AN ONLINE ENGLISH CLASSROOM**

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Abstract

Students' attendance is easy to be tracked and monitored in the face-to-face classroom. The relationship between mandatory attendance policy and students' academic achievement in online classrooms is less known. The rise of online learning during the COVID-19 calls for a re-examination of the mandatory attendance policy on students' academic performance. This aim of this paper is to investigate the relationship of attendance on academic performance for a group of students in an online English course. The data was gathered from 32 students enrolled at higher learning institution in Oman. The investigation included document analysis of the students' attendance record and their grades. It also sought the perspectives of the students on their competency in the English language. The findings revealed that the students' attendance in a synchronous virtual classroom did not influence their academic performance. The findings also uncovered that for an English language course, the students perceived their participation in asynchronous activities more significant than their attendance. The study is significant as it suggests a re-examination of the mandatory attendance policy. The study also suggests that policy that pertains directly to the online environment is necessary to prepare the students for independent and life-long learning.

Keywords: *Attendance, English, ESL, Oman, Online education*

Introduction

Previous investigations recorded that consistent class attendance is an important factor in the academic achievement of undergraduate students (Hamamci & Hamamci, 2017; Shovon & Haque, 2012; Marburger, 2001). The majority of higher learning institutions in Oman imposes compulsory attendance policy for the undergraduate programs. Oman Accreditation Council (OAC) utilizes a credit point system for the undergraduate programs in the Sultanate in which "120 credit points have been selected as the number to be used for the equivalent of one year's full-time academic work" (OAC, 2004, p. 3). A 3-credit course meets between 35 to 42 contact hours in a 14-week program. The 14-week program is equivalent to one semester of the academic calendar. An undergraduate student is

expected to be in the physical classroom between 2.5 hours to 3 hours a week for a 3-credit course and the majority of students take 12 credits each semester. In online education, a student who enrolled with 12 credits for one semester would be spending between 10 to 12 hours a week in the virtual classrooms for lectures and tutorials. In addition to the virtual classrooms for lectures and tutorials, the student spends additional time online doing assignments, participating in forums, discussing with their peers, self-learning and doing assessments.

The spread of the COVID-19 calls for countries worldwide to move towards digital and distance learning (Murphy, 2020). On March 24th, UNESCO announced that the pandemic affected 1.37 billion students and 60.2 million teachers in 138 countries (UNESCO, 2020). As part of the pandemic precautions of minimizing transmission of the virus, Oman Supreme Committee on COVID-19 announced the suspension of classes for schools and educational institutions for a month starting March 15th, 2020 (“Oman suspends schools, universities from Sunday”, 2020). Responding to the instructions of the Supreme Committee, the majority of higher learning institutions in Oman rapidly transitioned from the traditional face-to-face classroom to online learning systems. The need for distance education and online learning as the result of COVID-19 requires a re-examination of the compulsory attendance policy on students enrolled in undergraduate programs in the Sultanate of Oman. This is because the definition of absenteeism in the face-to-face classroom does not easily interpret to online learning.

In addition to that, the majority of the higher learning institutions in Oman have moved toward Outcome-Based Education (OBE). In an OBE approach, the students must demonstrate mastery of specific skills. The students’ performance in the course is measured based on their competency. The students’ progress is evaluated in various ways through criteria that are predetermined for the course rather than an “arbitrary number of minutes spent sitting in a classroom” (Archambault, Kennedy & Bender, 2013, p.5)

Objectives of the Study

The paper investigates the relationship between classroom attendance and academic performance of a group of students in an online English proficiency classroom in the Sultanate of Oman. The data were gathered to address the objectives of the study, namely:

- 1) to investigate the relationship between online classroom attendance and the academic performance of the participants of the study, specifically:
 - a. to measure the relationship between the participants’ online classroom attendance and their overall grade
 - b. to evaluate the relationship between online classroom attendance and the continuous assessment grades of the participants, in particular, the four skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking
- 2) to seek the perspectives of the participants of the study on the compulsory attendance policy on their academic performance in the online classroom.

Studies on Classroom Attendance

The majority of higher learning institutions in Oman imposes compulsory attendance policy for the undergraduate programs. The policy stems from the belief that attendance is an important factor that

determines the academic performance of a student. Several courses may link attendance to the overall grades of the students. Stanca (2010) found that attendance has an effect on students' learning in a microeconomics class. The study also found that regular attendance for lecture and tutorial have a similar effect on the academic performance of the students. Marburger (2006) discovered that students' absenteeism affects their examination performance. The study found that students were likely to give an incorrect answer to final examination questions for the classroom sessions that they had missed. Marburger (2006) also discovered that by imposing a mandatory attendance policy, the students do better on the multiple-choice examination scores, with improved grades of 2%. Crede, Roch, and Kieszczynka's (2010) research across various students' disciplines revealed that classroom attendance is an important determinant for academic grades at the college. Raychauduri, Manojit, Seswata, and Gopal (2010) research on students' academic performance included factors such as gender, academic skills, and attendance. The study concluded that attendance is a statistically relevant factor that affects students' grades.

On the other hand, many higher learning institutions in Italy and Germany for instance, do not impose mandatory lecture attendance policy on the students. This contention is supported by several studies such as the work of Park and Kerr (1990) on economics students. The study found students' attendance did not determine grades. The study concluded that students' cognitive competence is the most vital factor that determines the students' academic performance. In a similar vein, Berenson, Carter, and Norwood (1992) found no correlation between classroom attendance and academic performance.

In the face-to-face school settings (primary and secondary education), "regular school attendance has been established as a key factor in student achievement in school settings ... associated with better performance on standardized test scores" (Archambault, Kennedy & Bender, 2013, p.2). Musser (2011) observed that truancy in school indicates that the student may be at risk. The study suggests that monitoring of attendance is important to increase the students' achievement in school. Finn's (1993) Participation-Identification Model is viewed students' engagement and involvement in the school, reflected in their set of behaviors and habits, impacted their academic achievement. Finn (1989) proposed four categories of students' participation in the primary grades as illustrated in the chart below.

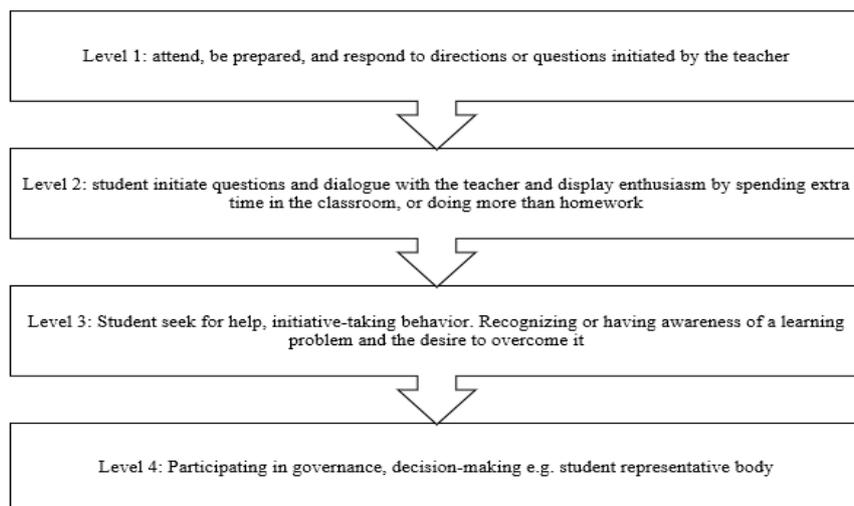


Figure 1. Finn (1989) Taxonomy of School Participation

According to Finn (1993) attendance in the regular, face-to-face classroom represents participatory behavior. Non-attendance, according to Finn (1993), prevents participation in-class activities and correlates to disruptive behavior. One of the findings of the study uncovered that the students who were at risk (chronic lack of attendance) were successful in school subjects. The study suggested that the opportunity to learn may indicate the differences in academic achievement.

In the context of English proficiency classrooms, Hamamci and Hamamci (2017) found that students' absenteeism affects English proficiency test scores. Condelli, Wrigley and Yoon (2002) discovered that in an adult ESL literacy program, classroom attendance aided the participants' reading comprehension and oral English skills. Hamamci and Hamamci (2007) stressed that studies on classroom attendance are predominantly content-based subjects (e.g. economics). There is a gap in the literature that observes the relationship between classroom attendance and skills-based subjects (e.g. languages). In addition to that, the effects of attending an online classroom on academic performance are also less known. Archambault, Kennedy, and Bender (2013) argued that monitoring students' attendance online to assure that the "students are attending lessons, progressing in their learning, and benefitting from instruction" (p.2) is challenging.

Online Education in Oman

The Covid-19 pandemic has forced schools and universities to shut down, and inevitably disrupts the traditional forms of face-to-face learning. The present situation gives rise to online learning. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, the majority of the higher learning institutions had incorporated blended learning and virtual classrooms to complement the existing face-to-face classrooms (Al-Ani, 2013). The students in the higher education institutions in Oman are experienced in using electronic databases and e-learning platforms, as well as engaging with their peers online.

Al-Musawi (2010) explained that the increased number of students in the Sultanate of Oman educational institutions calls for re-examination on the ways education can be accessed. The opportunities offered by e-learning and digital multimedia technologies may help students in Oman to access learning resources instead of "making people travel to education ... [in a] population [that] is spread thinly over a wide geographic area" (Al-Musawi & Akinyemi, 2002, p.2). Al-Musawi (2010) wrote that the majority of instructors perceived the incorporation of technologies into the classroom positively. Al-Musawi and Abelraheem (2004) uncovered that web-assisted instruction is as effective as the face-to-face classroom in the educational setting of Oman. Naqvi's (2005) research suggested that students who had experienced e-learning had a better understanding of the course.

Consistent with Oman Vision 2040, the education sector of Oman introduced the Omani branch of the Arab Open University that fully operates as a distance learning center in 2007. Akinyemi (2003) and Hall (2009) addressed the challenges of web-based learning in the context of Arab culture and religion. The authors concluded that e-learning would be most effective if it reconciles with the cultural and religious values of the local people. Al-Musawi and Abelraheem (2004) added that e-learning standards are essential before it is widely used in Oman.

English Language in Oman

In the Sultanate of Oman, English is recognized as the only official foreign language (Al-Issa, 2005), and it is widely used in the government, business, education, legislation, media, and as a tool to serve

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the development of the nation (Al-Issa, 2005). The ability to communicate in English is perceived highly in the social hierarchy of Oman (Al-Issa, 2005).

Previous investigations on the students' proficiency in English in Oman reported that the examination-oriented schooling system, standardized assessment instruments, and conventional teaching practices that dominated the educational framework in Oman are among the factors that limit students' learning (Al-Ani, 2017). The traditional methods of education, such as memorization of notes (Al-Mahrooqi, 2012) and limiting learning resources to textbooks only, are inadequate in meeting the requirement of tertiary education and the demands of the workplace (Al-Mahrooqi & Denman, 2018). The Ministry of Education of Oman introduced the Basic Education System (BES) in 1998/199, education reform to overcome the English language deficit among the students (Al-Issa, 2005, Naseer, 2019). Oman National Strategy for Education 2040 was established with the aim to prepare the students with the growing challenges of using English to be effective global citizens in the 21st century, and the development of the Sultanate (The Education Council, 2018).

Methodology

The paper aimed to investigate the relationship between online classroom attendance and students' academic performance and to seek the perspectives of the students on the effects of mandatory attendance policy on their academic performance. The issues that were addressed in this paper build a case for an approach for quantitative and qualitative inquiries.

Sample of the Study

The study took place at a higher education institution in the Sultanate of Oman. It involved 32 undergraduate students enrolled in an English Proficiency course during the Covid-19. Lectures and tutorials for the course were delivered online. The students' attendance for lectures and tutorials for the virtual classrooms was recorded on the University's Student Attendance Management System. The mandatory attendance policy stated that students are required to attend 75% of the virtual classrooms. Students who did not meet the requirement of the policy were not allowed to sit for their Final Examinations. The students' Final Examination grades make up 40% of the total assessment, while their Continuous Assessment grades make up 60% of the total assessment.

Data Collection Procedures

The research population consisted of a group of students at a higher learning institution in Oman enrolled in an English proficiency classroom. The students' attendance was recorded based on their presence in their virtual classrooms for fifteen weeks. The students' grades were divided into two categories. The first category is the Continuous Assessment. The grades for the Continuous Assessment consisted of assignments, quizzes, and presentations that represented the four skills namely: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing. The students' continuous assessment was recorded and maintained throughout the semester. The second category is the Final Examination. The students' grade for the Final Examination was recorded in the final week of the semester. The methods of gathering data for this research involved first, seeking consent from the students in the classroom. The second step of the investigation required document analysis of the students' attendance record, the record of continuous assessment grades, and final examination grades. The findings were analyzed with IBM SPSS V26 software. The next step of the investigation was to seek the perspectives of the

students on the effects of mandatory attendance policy on their English proficiency skills. This was carried out through focus-group discussion held online. The application that was used for the focus-group discussion was Zoom. All of the students in the classroom were invited to participate in the discussion. 11 out of 32 students participated in the focus group discussion and chose to provide their feedback through written-responses (chats). The students were given the opportunity to use a pseudonym to protect their identity. The students were informed that their feedback for the research was not linked to their grades and they were not identified in the publication of the research paper. The findings from the focus group discussion were recorded and where necessary, they were grammatically adjusted. The students' responses were viewed closely to identify a suitable frame for analysis. The broad domains derived from the respondents' focus-group discussion were coded in categories.

Findings and Discussion

The analysis for the findings of the study was gathered from a group of students at a higher learning institution in Oman. The findings for the study are divided into two parts, namely: a) Document Analysis and, b) Focus-Group Discussion.

Document Analysis

The variable attendance was operationalized by the number of virtual classes attended by the students enrolled in the course from week one to week fifteen. The investigation involved one online English proficiency course. The particular course comprised 32 students. The students' attendance was measured by the overall percentage of attendance (mean = 1.9687, SD = .82244). Table 1 provides a summary of the percentage of attendance for the particular course.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Students' Attendance

General Information			Descriptive Statistics				
Course	Credit Hours	No. of weeks	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
English proficiency course	3	15	32	1.00	3.00	1.9687	.82244

The findings of the study were framed by the following hypotheses:

Null Hypothesis (Ho):

There is no association between the students' attendance and their academic performance.

Alternative Hypothesis (H1):

There is an association between the students' attendance and their academic performance.

Academic performance was operationalized by the grade the students' received based on their Continuous Assessments marks and Final Examination marks. The Continuous Assessment marks carried 60% of the total assessment, while the Final Examination marks carried 40% of the total

mandatory attendance policy and students' performance: a case study of an online english classroom assessment. The Continuous Assessment for the course consisted of assignments, quizzes, and presentations that represented the four skills namely: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing.

The relationship between the students' record of attendance and their academic performance was investigated using the ANOVA correlation coefficient. Table 2 explains the relationship between Attendance and Overall Grade. The Pearson value is at .067. This signifies a weak relationship between the two variables: attendance and the students' overall grade. The sig. (2-tailed) result shows that there is no statistical correlation between the two variables. When the attendance variable is manipulated, the result was consistent with no significance to the students' overall grade.

Table 2. Correlations between Attendance and Overall Grade

		attendance	Overall Grade
attendance	Pearson Correlation	1	.067
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.717
	N	32	32
Overall Grade	Pearson Correlation	.067	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.717	
	N	32	32

Table 3 represents the findings from ANOVA. The record of the students' attendance was divided into the following categories:

- Group 1: 93% and above overall attendance percentage
- Group 2: 86-92% of overall attendance percentage
- Group 3: 79-85% of overall attendance percentage
- Group 4: 78% and less of overall attendance percentage

The result from the ANOVA test shows the significance value is at $p = .926$, which is more than .05. The finding suggests that the effect of attendance according to the groups and the overall grade is not statistically significant.

Table 3. ANOVA Result

attendance					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.902	7	.272	.342	.926
Within Groups	19.067	24	.794		

Total	20.969	31		
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The Pearson correlation test was performed to identify the relationship between students' attendance and their Reading and Writing results. Table 4 represents the outcome of the particular test. The correlation between Reading and the students' attendance was weak and negative. The data indicates the correlation is statistically insignificant, $r = -.247$, $p = .173$. On the other hand, the correlation between Writing and the students' attendance was positive but weak. The correlation was statistically insignificant, $r = .212$, $p = .245$.

Table 4. Relationship between Attendance and Reading & Writing

		Reading	Writing	Attendance
Reading	Pearson Correlation	1	-.292	-.247
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.104	.173
	N	32	32	32
Writing	Pearson Correlation	-.292	1	.212
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.104		.245
	N	32	32	32
attendance	Pearson Correlation	-.247	.212	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.173	.245	
	N	32	32	32

Similarly, the Person's r test was performed to investigate the relationship between Attendance and, Listening and Speaking. The findings indicate the correlation was statistically insignificant. The correlation between Attendance and Listening is $r = .166$, $n = .363$, $p = .32$, while the correlation between Attendance and Speaking is $r = .213$, $n = .242$, $p = .32$. The findings are illustrated in Table 5.

Table 5: Relationship between Attendance and Listening & Speaking

		Listening	Speaking	% attendance
Listening	Pearson Correlation	1	.712**	.166
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.363
	N	32	32	32

Speaking	Pearson Correlation	.712**	1	.213
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.242
	N	32	32	32
attendance	Pearson Correlation	.166	.213	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.363	.242	
	N	32	32	32

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings of the study suggest that the relationship between student's attendance and the overall grade is statistically insignificant. The correlation between the students' attendance and the academic performance for each skill: Listening, Speaking, Reading, and Writing is weak. Therefore, the findings reject the hypothesis of the study, while the null hypothesis is accepted.

Focus-group Discussion

“But why do we have to attend”?

The majority of the students who participated in the focus group discussion (9 out of 11) perceived attending lectures and tutorials regularly through the virtual classrooms did not facilitate their ability to be competent in the English language. One of the students explained that her motivation to attend the classes was primarily to meet the requirement of the attendance policy. She was not intrinsically motivated to attend the classes. Another student shared a similar sentiment and explained that her motivation to attend the classes was for her grades. One student explained that although attending the classes helped improve her grades, she felt that it did not help her to be proficient in English.

“Online learning must be flexible”.

Three out of 11 of the students revealed that they were adult students and they had to manage their time with their education, work, and family. The move towards distance and online learning favored them in managing their time, however, they felt that the mandatory attendance policy for the virtual classrooms needed to be re-examined.

“YouTube is more fun!”

The majority of the students' expressed their view about learning English as needing to do well for examinations, which, in turn, facilitates future higher learning opportunities and better-paid jobs. One student explained her ability to communicate in English allowed her to be socially known on the internet (a social media influencer), while another added the importance of learning English for traveling, entertainment, and socializing. Although the students valued formal learning of English for education and career, they preferred learning and engaging in English activities that were fun, such as watching English videos on YouTube instead of attending virtual classrooms.

“But I did all homework and assignments, that's enough”

One of the students discussed the importance of quality of participation in the classroom instead of the quantity of attendance in the virtual classrooms. The student commented that although he had missed several lectures and tutorials for the virtual classrooms because of his commitment to work, he had completed all assignments and homework. The student added that he spent extra hours revising the subject and watching the recorded lectures. The student further explained that unlike his classmates who had the time to attend lectures and tutorials, his time was restricted. However, he felt that he was more serious and focused on doing well for the subject when compared to his male peers.

Discussion

The data gathered for the investigation between the students' attendance and their academic performance revealed that there was no association between the two variables. This finding is inconsistent with the works of Hamamci & Hamamci (2017) and Condelli et al. (2002). The two studies found a positive relationship between the students' attendance and their academic performance for English proficiency courses. One of the factors that may contribute to the difference in the finding is the environment in which the study took place. The previous investigations studied the relationship between students' attendance and academic performance in conventional, face-to-face classrooms. The present study, on the other hand, measured the students' attendance and their academic performance in an online setting. Roblyer and Marshall (2014) uncovered several factors that determine successful outcomes for online education settings included the students' ability to carry out independent learning, motivation for learning, self-regulation, the students' experience with technology, good attitude towards the course, and self-confidence.

Although this paper did not investigate the different factors that may have led to the students' academic performance, it revealed that the mandatory attendance policy did not affect the students' academic performance or competency in the English language. The data implied that other factors, as uncovered by Roblyer and Marshall (2014), may have played a larger role in the students' academic achievement. This was reflected in the responses provided by the students in the focus-group discussion. One of the students' discussed the relevance of the mandatory attendance policy for virtual classrooms and contended that his participation in assignments and homework mattered more. The particular student also revealed that his self-motivation to learning is higher when compared to his peers. Following the previous discussion, this paper proposes a re-examination of the mandatory attendance policy by situating the importance of students' participation in the online course, such as in the case of an English Proficiency course. Finn's (1989) taxonomy participation serves as a reliable framework that may be used to identify the varying degree of the students' participation in the online course. The students' participation, proposed in this study, includes the following levels:

- Level 1: A student responds to the basic requirement of the online course, such as doing assignments, quizzes, and exams.
- Level 2: A student participates in classroom-related activities that are beyond the need for passing assessments. This may include participating in forums and discussions, initiating discussions with peers, asking questions to the course instructor, having awareness of learning problem, and seeking help, all of which the activities are visible online
- Level 3: Independent-learning time refers to the ability of a student to regulates own learning, demonstrating abilities to do well for the course and having good IT skills

Figure 2 represents the framework proposed by this study. The students' participation in the online course serves as the overarching paradigm for successful performance outcomes. The framework is augmented from Finn's (1993) Participatory-Identification Model to suit the learners' current needs (i.e. online settings).

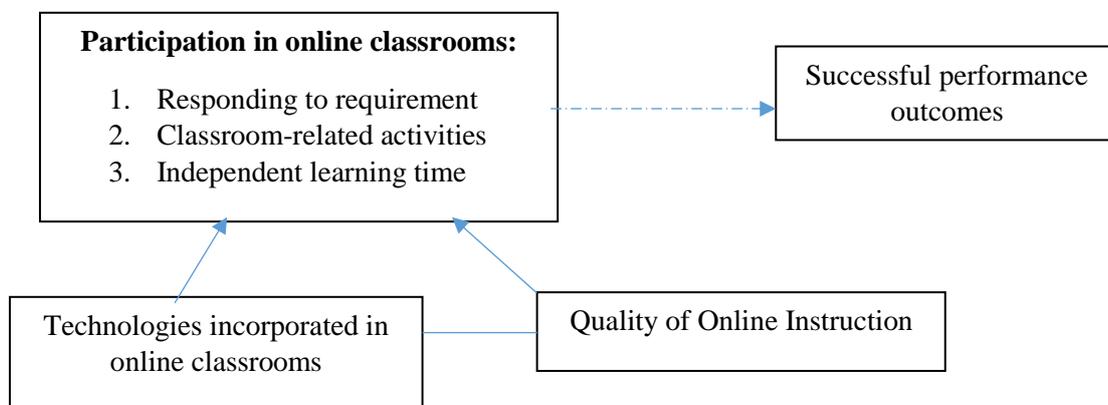


Figure 2: Participatory-Online Course Framework

Conclusion and Recommendation

Although the study focused on a small sample of undergraduate students, it has important implications for research and pedagogical practice for ESL online classrooms in Oman. First, the study revealed that mandatory attendance does not influence the academic performance of the participants of the study. An avenue for future research is to include a larger sample of study for students enrolled in English proficiency courses, particularly in the context of the Sultanate of Oman. Second, the study proposes a re-examination of the mandatory attendance policy for online courses offered by higher learning institutions in the Sultanate of Oman. According to Archambault, Kennedy & Bender (2013), many of the educational policies that are in place in the education settings originated from the late 19th century. Without an updated policy that pertains directly to the online environment, the students' experience with learning may be obsolete. Third, the study proposes placing the importance of students' participation in online courses instead of the students' attendance. The students' participation may vary in degrees of engagement with the classroom activities. By placing the importance of the students' participation, a higher education inevitably makes learning flexible for adult and working students who may be restricted with the classroom time. One of the ways a higher education institution may stay relevant in providing virtual learning is to take the best practices of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOC), such as FutureLearn. FutureLearn was established by the Open University in 2013 and jointly owned by the SEEK Group. FutureLearn offers a variety of courses provided by different organizations, mainly universities from different countries. A student enrolled in a course offered by FutureLearn is given an opportunity to receive a certificate based on the student's participation in a particular course. The findings of the study also implied that the role of an English-language course instructor is to develop a course content that requires active participation from the students. The activities may vary from synchronous to asynchronous. The majority of the students, as revealed in the study, preferred learning English in an entertaining way. This finding is reflected in the work of Dickie (2008) that found the majority of the students' experience with English were through popular culture texts, music, video-games, and online videos. Finally, by re-examining the mandatory

attendance policy to meet the needs of the students in present times and by placing the importance on the students' participation instead of their attendance, we are encouraging the students to be independent learners. We also help prepare them for life-long learning. These two aspects are important in Oman Vision 2040.

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