This study involved 10 European undergraduate students enrolled in the online International Market Analysis (IMA) course offered through the International Business (IB) undergraduate program of CETYS Universidad. Using the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) theoretical approach and a qualitative research design, it asked how the students felt about their online educational experience. The results suggest that the students appreciated the freedom and flexibility that the online course provided. However, the lack of the physical presence of the teacher, and the challenges associated with working independently, made the learning experience less than optimal.

Keywords: SoTL, online, foreign students, online perspective, Mexico

INTRODUCTION

Institutions of Higher Education (IHE) in Mexico are now serving domestic and international students through online platforms. In 2016, more than 31,000 students from developed countries participated in student exchange programs in the country (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2019). CETYS Universidad, a three-campus system located in the northwestern cities of Mexicali, Tijuana, and Ensenada and having about 4,000 undergraduate students, welcomed 10 European students who enrolled in business courses from the International Business (IB) undergraduate program during the fall of 2018. These were full-time students who enrolled in the International Market Analysis (IMA) online class as part of their course load while in Mexico, and they are the focus of this research.

Similar to a traditional face-to-face course, online instruction works well when conducted appropriately. Smith (2001) was one of the first to argue that international business students could be served by online instruction, but the successful deployment of online courses rested in a large part on the ability of teachers to adopt a problem-based instruction model. At this time, there is insufficient research with international, online learners in Mexico to make an adequate assessment of the performance of IHE in online instruction (Gemmell et al., 2015). Therefore, it is very important to document the experience of the 10 foreign students through this research. To achieve the two goals of teaching and researching simultaneously, the study was grounded on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) theoretical framework. Under SoTL, teachers engage their students so they are active participants in their research, and this helps the teachers document their teaching strategies (i.e., course contents, pedagogy, resources) and examine their impact on learning.

This study contributes to the body of research on internationalization in higher education by examining the experience of a group of foreign, undergraduate students enrolled in the IMA online course. The novelty of this qualitative study rests on the analysis of the narratives from foreign students in Mexico, which is a scarcely studied group. Hopefully, the insights highlighted here will yield a better understanding of foreign students’ experiences with regard to online learning in Mexico and help inform faculty members and academic program administrators who are responsible for
online course design on expectations of teacher involvement with online learners. Thus, this study is a continuation of the work conducted by Drew (2014), whose work in an Australian university raised awareness of the need to offer foreign students online and hybrid courses in international business that are comparable, in terms of learning outcomes achievement, to traditional face-to-face courses designed to serve local students.

The general research question that guided this study was articulated as follows: How do foreign students enrolled in one international business program in Mexico feel about their IMA online course? The specific questions were drafted like this: (1) What did the foreign students get from their online course in Mexico? and (2) Was taking the online course a better option for them than taking the course face-to-face? By addressing these questions, IHEs in Mexico may be in a better position to serve foreign students in online contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This brief review of the literature was conducted to better understand what is currently known about foreign students in Mexico. Beyond addressing what is known about educational practices with foreign students, the focus will be on online instruction. This fits within the general discussion about online learners across countries (Gemmell et al., 2015). In Mexico, while research on the subject is scarce, a few studies have started to fill the gaps in the literature. These researches will be noted in this section.

Research on foreign students in Mexico has centered on face-to-face, student exchange programs. For example, Camargo and Quintanilla (2018) surveyed 163 foreign students in three universities in Monterrey, Nuevo León. The authors noted that most of them were European and several were from Latin American countries. The study concluded that foreign students were attracted to Mexico mainly because of existing student exchange agreements between their home institutions and the universities in Monterrey, but also because they found the country to be an interesting cultural and entertainment destination.

In another study, Cantwell, Luca, and Lee (2009) examined the dispositions of European, North American, and Latin American students participating in exchange programs in Mexico. The authors noted that European students were mostly attracted to the cultural and international aspects associated with Mexico, while students from Latin America focused more on the reputations of the Mexican universities. Gemmell et al. (2015) commended the efforts made by researchers who studied the experiences of foreign students, but they noted that there continues to be a gap in the literature regarding online learning experiences of international students.

Amaya, Martinez Ramos, and Castillo González (2017) argued that online learning is a viable option for IHEs that seek to make their programs available to students who lack the means to attend college courses in the traditional sense. The logic behind this claim is that online learning places less of a burden on students who encounter geographic and time restrictions. This implies that international learners can capitalize on online courses by being empowered to participate in group activities like discussion boards and wiki development despite geographic constraints (Gemmell et al., 2015).

Bose (2014) argued that more effective online experiences for international students can be implemented by addressing questions regarding the level of teacher involvement in online classes in multicultural contexts and tackling technological and communication issues that may affect the learning process. For their part, Daly, White, Zisk, and Cavazos (2012) focused on examining the development of critical thinking skills in online learners. Additionally, Holbeck and Hartman (2018) addressed the problem of having online courses managed through transactional communication processes between instructors and learners, and they recommended integrating new technology to make the learning process more social. These studies suggest that there is real concern about the quality of online learning in general and for international students as well.

Barberà, Gómez-Rey, and Fernández-Navarro (2016) conducted a study with a sample of 322 online instructors from four different countries (China, the United States, Spain, and Mexico) to determine the effect of learner, institutional, and outcome factors on learning. The authors concluded that faculty members place greater importance on content and guidance aspects than the technological characteristics of their courses. They also noted that students tend to be autonomous
as they move through the material because of their relatively high levels of self-efficacy when it comes to online learning.

However, Guest and Hong Duyen (2016) argued that faculty and administrators should not assume that online learners have the same needs across cultures. On this matter, Gómez-Rey, Barbera, and Fernández-Navarro (2016) used their multi-country data and framed it in terms of Hofstede’s six cultural dimensions (individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, pragmatic vs. normative, and indulgence vs. restraint). The authors aimed to identify the key variables that affect learning in online, cross-cultural contexts and concluded that learner autonomy and learner satisfaction were the most influential variables in online learning at the start and completion of the course.

However, Ladyshewsky (2013) argued that online learners expect their instructors to be available throughout the class so they can make sure everyone understands the course content and instructions, and they should promote discussion as well. Moreover, Kara and Can (2019) noted in their research that graduate students expect their instructors to be encouraging, proficient in communication and technical skills, and knowledgeable in their field. In another study, Kumar and Kelly (2006) examined the effects of social and cultural aspects of online learning with a group of Mexican students and a group of Mexican small business owners. They concluded that online teachers should find ways to make online instruction more of a social process in which students create meaning together, and they also noted that this process should be moderated by cultural characteristics.

The research reviewed so far suggests that online learners value autonomy and do not mind transactional teacher-student relationships at the beginning of their interactions. However, student satisfaction with online instruction seems to be influenced by mediated communication and sociability. The need for a social as well as transactional approach to education may vary across cultures, so teachers working with international students can find themselves in situations where they have to be mindful of the needs of their particular group of students rather than rely on one standardized approach.

**CONTEXT OF THE STUDY**

**Theoretical Approach**

The main theoretical model that guided this study was Ernest Boyer’s SoTL. Paulsen and Feldman (2006) examined some of the most influential contributions developed under SoTL, and they noted that Boyer’s claim that research and teaching were two integrated parts of scholarly work carried out by mindful faculty was still relevant. Horspool and Lange (2012) conducted a study with online students under SoTL. They closely monitored their students in a Principles of Macroeconomics class to identify problems with task performance and understanding. They also encouraged feedback and looked for ways to address issues that interfered with learning. When the authors published their experience, they noted that the main problems facing their online learners were limited peer-to-peer communication and a lack of motivation to work on projects.

Similarly, in this study, giving out assignments, providing feedback, and clarifying questions helped develop a deeper understanding of the situation in which the foreign students were learning in the IMA course. This created a situation where the teacher was constantly adapting the course, and being aware of the needs of the students served the educational and research purposes of the course. As with other online courses, the syllabus for the IMA course was developed based on predetermined learning outcomes. In this regard, the study was influenced by some of the basic assumptions of Structural Learning Theory (SLT). SLT has been associated with the use of technology as a means to facilitate instruction (Kretchmar, 2018), and recent research suggested that online learning should be examined through the lens of SLT (Andres et al., 2017).

Online instruction can be effective when teachers set clear expectations, provide easy access to materials, share sample projects, and implement a variety of teaching strategies online (Marks, 2016). SLT was developed by Joseph Scandura under the premise that it is up to the teacher or tutor to determine what the students should know and then examine what each student actually knows (Scandura, 2018). This is consistent with the problem-based approach to student learning articulated by Smith (2001) and Daly et al. (2012).

The IMA students started the semester in a predesigned course, but after the initial weeks, the
teacher started adjusting to the context and brought a third theory into the mix. Role Theory (RT) serves to address questions about the expectations individuals might have that affect their overall perception of others (Carpenter & Lertpratchya, 2016). By looking at the learning context through the lens of RT, the teacher was able to identify what the students needed to take full advantage of their course, and as a researcher, the teacher was able to identify patterns in student expectations that would later make it easier to draft appropriate questions for the students that could lead to applicable data for the study.

For example, after the first couple of weeks in the class, it was clear that the students were more comfortable with assignments that involved reading, summarizing, and reporting, than with tasks that required them to examine quantitative data through computation. In response, the teacher provided helpful tips and examples to facilitate such processes and created practice exercises. The teacher also played the role of motivator when students expressed frustration with some of the assignments and even created an extra-credit opportunity to motivate students to keep practicing. The goal was to have the students achieve the same learning outcomes they would be required to master if the course was face-to-face, even if the grading criteria was slightly different.

Instructional Design of the IMA Course

CETYS Universidad offers a growing number of courses taught in English designed for Mexican students who want to improve their communication skills and foreign students from non-Spanish speaking countries. The 10 European students in the study were enrolled in face-to-face courses in the Ensenada campus; however, one of the courses they needed to complete in order to satisfy the requirements of their home institutions was the IMA course, which was offered online. The general objective guiding the contents of the IMA course was that students should be able to examine economic, political, social, technological, and environmental indicators from foreign countries that may serve in the export market selection process for small and medium size businesses. To achieve this objective, students read Khanna, Palepu, and Sinha’s (2005) five context framework to examine the appropriateness of specific product, labor, or capital markets based on previously selected business cases.

The five context framework helps students identify the key indicators they can use to determine the viability of a specific market (Khanna & Palepu, 2010). Once students identified which indicators to focus on, they accessed a variety of data published by the World Bank (WB), the OECD, the CIA World Factbook, GlobalEdge, as well as academic journals and MarketLine and International Business Monitor (IBM) reports to conduct their examination. Examining the data usually included the use of descriptive and inferential statistics computed with the use of MS Excel and the statistical package for the social sciences (SPSS). The students in the class were advised, but not required, to have completed at least one introductory course on statistics. A description of the objectives, learning outcomes, materials, and flow of activities throughout the semester is depicted in Table 1.

The instructor responsible for teaching the class was not present in the Ensenada campus but worked out of the Tijuana campus, which is located a little over 100 kilometers north. Students in this online course were provided learning materials through the virtual classroom on Blackboard, which used links to the digital library where students could access bibliographical materials, discussion forums and exercises, online exams used to test students’ data analysis skills, online tutorials on conducting statistical analysis using MS Excel and SPSS, a questions and answers (Q&A) section where students posted questions that the teacher and other students could read and address (i.e., Where is the reading on GMGA? Where can we find the t-test application in SPSS?), and an announcement section with explanations, examples related to the assignments, guidelines and suggestions, and other supporting materials.

A new announcement was posted every Monday, which students read to identify their assignments for the week and where to access the resources they needed to complete their tasks. Except for the midterm paper and the final research project, all assignments were to be carried out in teams. Google searches were encouraged when students found unfamiliar words that needed to be defined. This was a practical way of solving a recurring problem for students who spoke English as a second language, which was the case with all
the students in the group, and who were unable to recognize specific words from time to time. Although the teacher was in another city, the students took other classes together on campus, and they were encouraged to work face-to-face in the library or at other locations of their choosing.

The IMA course was designed using a problem-based approach in a manner consistent with the pedagogical design suggested by Smith (2011) and Daly et al. (2012), so the students were expected to think for themselves. It was anticipated that they would feel comfortable being independent from their teacher, considering they were willing to live away from home for six months. Moreover, consistent with the recommendations provided by Xu, Meyer, and Morgan (2008), the choice of software packages and tutorials was made taking into consideration the needs and expertise of average business students enrolled in data analysis driven courses.

Direct communication between the instructor and the students (as a group or individually) took place mainly by email, the Q&A section on Blackboard, and to some extent by telephone. All communications were in English. Without exception, all email messages sent by the students to the instructor were replied to within 24 hours. The deadline to submit most assignments was by the end of day (11:59 p.m.) on Sundays, which meant that students usually had one week to complete their tasks.

When students wanted to show their unfinished work to the instructor to receive feedback before submitting, they had to do so before Friday afternoon, otherwise they risked not getting feedback in time for them to make corrections. The instructor received very few requests from students to review their work before the Sunday deadline, and there was never an instance where a student asked for feedback 24 hours before the Sunday deadline and did not receive a response. The course ran for 16 weeks, and in the end, all 10 students passed the course. Their individual scores ranged from 74% to 100%.

**METHOD**

This study was developed through the application of qualitative data-gathering and analysis procedures. Creswell (2014) noted that qualitative studies are characterized by carefully informing readers about the criteria under which participants

---

**Table 1. Flow of Participants through the International Market Analysis Online Course**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Learning Outcomes:</th>
<th>Market selection paper using the Five Context Framework</th>
<th>Statistical analysis report using official data from international organizations</th>
<th>Case report with analysis and recommendations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tools and Materials</td>
<td>Khanna and Palepu's (2010) Five Context Framework, Online (open) data sources and tutorials, Electronic Library and Databases (i.e., EBSCO Host), Blackboard applications.</td>
<td>MS Excel, SPSS, APA Manual and Online Tutorials, Blackboard applications.</td>
<td>Electronic Library and Databases (i.e., EBSCO Host), Blackboard applications.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 1–4</td>
<td>Read and discuss the Five Context Framework.</td>
<td>Review of descriptive and inferential statistics (t-Tests, ANOVA, Linear Regression).</td>
<td>Read and discuss Industry Reports.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 5–8</td>
<td>Access and interpret statistical data from official sources (i.e., WB, CIA World Factbook).</td>
<td>Use MS Excel and SPSS to organize and analyze product, labor, and capital market data.</td>
<td>Discuss peer-reviewed papers on market analysis and international business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 9–12</td>
<td>Find one market opportunity through the &quot;desk&quot; research.</td>
<td>Compare market data to determine appropriate fit between partner countries.</td>
<td>Document main findings and report to class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Week 13–16</td>
<td>Proofread and submit Market Selection paper.</td>
<td>Integrate results into the Market Selection paper.</td>
<td>Find market reports and studies that used similar statistical analyses to confirm own examination.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were chosen, the data collection procedures, the role of the researcher and the setting, the coding approaches, and the analysis strategies. He argued that explaining how conclusions were reached should yield greater insights into the experiences of the participants and allow researchers to address complex phenomena. Moreover, qualitative case studies are often used in the social sciences for their flexibility of approach and consistency with the standards held by academics and practitioners who wish to understand certain phenomena (Hyett et al., 2014).

Saldaña (2011) noted that qualitative research designs usually developed based on a particular theory selected by the researcher. In this case three theoretical models (SoTL, SLT, and RT) guided the course design, application, and overall research process. One important note to make at this time is that the terms teacher and researcher will be used interchangeably from this moment on. The same applies to the terms students and participants. Under SoTL, those involved with the learning process are also the ones developing the research, which explains the duality of the roles.

Research Design

Given that the results from this study should serve online teachers and program administrators from CETYS Universidad and other educators working with foreign students, the case study research approach seemed appropriate. The question of student feelings toward their online course required the flexibility and perspective-taking that case study approaches allow in their designs (Creswell, 2014). The focus was on the one event (the IMA course experience) and not the broad experiences of the foreign students across the different aspects of their time in Mexico (i.e., other courses, tourism, and so on). According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), when the focus of the research is in one particular case (i.e., IMA course with foreign students), the case study approach is usually used.

Careful attention was paid to the signals students were sending in response to their online experience that could have been influenced by cultural background, previous experience with online learning, or vocational aspects. With this in mind, the data-gathering approach was flexible and nonjudgmental. Students were assured that participating in the study would not affect their grade and were given ample time to respond to the questions initially shared by the researcher. Since the class took place online, the initial questions and follow-ups took place online via email. This gave the participants time to reflect on their responses without being placed on the spot while answering the questions. The initial questions sent out to the students were drafted to examine aspects related to time management, reading and writing skills, autonomy, teacher and institutional support, and overall satisfaction with the course. The participants were encouraged to use the questions as prompts and tell their story as it related to the IMA course. The interview protocol included these initial/prompt questions:

1. How did you become involved with online learning?
2. Do you see yourself as an independent learner? Why?
3. Are you happy learning on your own terms? Why?
4. What are some of your best learning experiences? Can you describe them?
5. Do you often use informal learning tools (i.e., commercial websites) as part of your learning strategy? If so, how?
6. How would you rate your learning skills (reading, writing, information literacy, time management)?
7. How do you feel about your online experience in Mexico?

The responses were collected over two weeks. Some students engaged in email messages while others drafted MS Word file attachments. While some participants provided concise responses, most of the responses were in essay form, often adding information that was not originally solicited but relevant. In some cases, participants added questions they would have wanted to answer but were not included in the initial interview protocol. All the data the participants provided were included in the analysis. Throughout the data collection phase, it was made clear to the participants that they could revise their responses, and even withdraw from the study, if they felt the need.

Participants

Ten European, undergraduate students participated in the study which means that the entire
cohort was involved in the study. As noted in Table 2, the participants came from four countries and all were in their 20s, studied business-related fields, and were working on their undergraduate degrees, with the exception of one Engineering graduate who was working on her Master’s of Business degree. The range of experience with online courses went from zero to 30 previous courses. All of the foreign students in the IMA course were invited to participate in the study via email and not one declined. Participation was voluntary and not tied to any course requirement. Upon accepting, the participants understood that their names were to be kept confidential (pseudonyms are used here), and that their data were going to be used to complete a research study for publication. Once the students confirmed their participation via email, they received the interview protocol.

Analysis Procedure

Once the participants provided their insights into their learning experience in a manner consistent with the purpose of the study, the data were organized into a single MS Excel spreadsheet. This allowed for the simple description of demographic information, academic program, and previous experience with online courses for each participant. At that point, the MS Excel document was exported to QDA Miner software, a known qualitative data analysis software used to simplify the process of coding through colors and illustrating results. Consistent with the approach recommended by Creswell (2014) and Saldaña (2011), each paragraph of the data was read to identify categories and themes as they emerged, and reliability was provided through triangulation. This means that codes were assigned only after three data points agreed on one particular insight. Consistent with qualitative research practices, the researcher was a key part of the process (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), so it was the researcher’s interpretation of the data, with the help of the software, that lead to the selection of the emergent categories and themes.

RESULTS

After the analysis phase was completed, two categories and several corresponding themes emerged that adequately addressed the general purpose of this study. These categories and themes are noted in Table 3 and will be explained while providing supporting evidence using direct participant data. The categories and themes emerged from participant responses to the set of questions in the interview protocol as whole, as well as impromptu comments and observations. The two categories that resulted from the analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Home country</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic program</th>
<th>Online experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lola</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Tourism Management</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ingrid</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Tourism</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Engineering and Master’s in Business</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabriel</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Business Marketing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Business</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Isak</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olivia</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Management: Healthcare and Nonprofit</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leon</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Global Sales and Marketing</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Management</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caroline</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>The Netherlands</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Tourism management</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by the author.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conflicting feelings about online learning.</td>
<td>Freedom, flexibility, trust, ineffective learning, hybrid or blended class.</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability demands of the role of online teachers.</td>
<td>Feedback, availability, trust, time.</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Developed by the author.
were (1) conflicting feelings about online learning, and (2) the need for online teachers to be available for problem solving and course discussion.

**Category 1: Conflicting feelings about online learning.** It was interesting to see how students appeared to struggle with reconciling some of the pros and cons of their online education. Contradictions about the value of online learning among students were expected, but it was surprising to see how students identified conflicting arguments from within. For example, Gabriel stated:

*I feel that there is a lot of potential in online learning because they [instructors] are providing the mindset of working remotely in the future, and that they aren’t tied to the office cubicle from 8 to 5. For a certain type of people, it’s a really good way of learning, but on the other hand some students are not getting too much out of it* (Gabriel, personal communication, December 2018).

As this direct statement suggests, Gabriel recognized the value of learning to work independently, but he is quick to point out that the approach is ineffective, at least in some cases. While Gabriel noted the value of learning to work remotely, Isak appreciated the notion that online instruction implies trust, but both participants agreed on the potential for ineffectiveness. One direct quote from Isak reads as follows:

*On the one hand it is good because it means that teachers have trust in their students, on the other hand not so good because some of the students will not learn anything and just do their assignments* (Isak, personal communication, December 2018).

The claims made by Gabriel and Isak suggests that they found value in the independence and teacher-student relationship implied in online learning, but they believed that others were not getting what they need from these types of courses. The attribution to others is apparent from the use of the phrases “some students” and “some of the students” in the direct quotes noted above. Leon, however, centered the response on himself, but he was consistent with the perceptions of his peers:

*I like the fact that you can do it at home and anytime you want but I guess I learn more with a teacher in a classroom. I am an independent learner, although I really like to get expert knowledge during classes from teachers* (Leon, personal communication, December 2018).

Emma expressed her opinion rather bluntly when she noted that the online course was not appropriate if the goal was for students to do some actual learning. Her statement reads as follows:

*It is good when a course just needs to be done fast and gotten over with. It is not ideal for actual learning, because it just feels like an extra liability that is mostly uninteresting. This course especially is a heavy one being about research. It includes a lot of information we are unfamiliar with such as statistics and measures. This is something we need a teacher to explain to us in his own, plain, regular person words. All these fancy words on google do not mean anything to us, and will certainly not stay in our heads a second after returning. Human interaction for courses this heavily loaded, so information is not a possibility, it’s a necessity. This is not a criticism to the teacher as a person at all, but the execution of this particular course* (Emma, personal communication, December 2018).

The argument made by Emma is logical in that it rests on the assumption that teachers should engage their students directly, not through communication technology, when the subject matter of the class is challenging. Not all the participants, however, were able to clearly articulate their position. The statement by Clare was noteworthy as she appeared to be negotiating with herself in terms of the value of online learning and the flexibility it implies. Although she noted online learning in general, since she did not have any prior experience with online course, it is assumed that she was referring to her experience in the IMA course:

*I don’t know what my opinion is right now about online learning. I really like the fact that you don’t have a fixed time schedule during the week where you have to be at school for a certain lecture. Furthermore, I believe that I take more away from the class than at face-to-face lectures, because I’m always required to repeat the learn
things in my own words. At school, you can pass a class without even paying attention. But most of the time, the online course is completely out of my mind and I remember it at the deadline date. So actually, you don’t do the assignments during the week, when you have some free time, but mostly you make time on the deadline date to upload the assignment in time (Clare, personal communication, December 2018).

The data provided by the participants support the claim that students appreciate having the freedom to manage their time as it relates to their schoolwork. However, the data also suggest, through their internal disagreement, that the students have difficulty managing their time when it comes to completing their assignments without the physical presence of a teacher. It is unclear how much freedom or flexibility in schedule is appropriate for them to achieve the objectives of the class while taking advantage of their learning experience. This leads them to question how they really feel about taking classes online. Perhaps the best way to reconcile the conflicting views on online learning in the IMA course came from Lola:

“I think that combining normal classes with online learning would be a great idea, but complete online learning would not be preferable. I think having the option of online learning (or only attending class when you have difficulties with the subject) would greatly improve the time management skills of students and is more realistic for work later. Telling me what I need to learn, followed by me doing exercises/assignments by myself at home, only coming to class when I need an explanation or have questions and then working on it at home would be a good way to study (Lola, personal communication, December 2018).

Lola had no prior online learning experience, but she makes the argument for hybrid or blended courses. In theory, students get the best of both worlds: the flexibility of online classes and the face-to-face interaction with teachers. This point will be revisited in the Discussion section.

Category 2: The need for online teachers to be available for problem solving and course discussion. Based on the data provided by the participants, it seems that what they expect, first and foremost, from their teacher is clarity and availability. In other words, participants stated that they wanted their teacher to communicate precisely what is required of them, and that the teacher should be available in case they needed further clarification as they develop their tasks. Lola noted:

“I like to know what I am supposed to hand in or deliver at the end, but I don’t need the supervision of a teacher while I am working on the assignment. I rather do it on my own. I only get nervous or distracted if the teacher is watching/supervising. I work best at home... The downside is that I sometimes have questions about the expectations of the finished product that prevent me from doing the homework right. In addition, it feels like I have to google explanations, which does not learn [sic] me anything, I need to listen to the teacher’s explanation and then work on it on my own (Lola, personal communication, December 2018).

One important point to make here is the psychological impact of having a teacher online versus face-to-face. Students typically wait for their class meetings to clear up most of their questions. They understand that their teacher will be available to them during class time, and to a limited extent via email, telephone, or some other type of electronic media. Although office hours were noted in the IMA syllabus, in which they could call the teacher via skype, telephone, or hangouts during the day, most students worked on their assignments at night during the hours before the deadline to submit, which was usually at end of day (11:59 p.m.).

It was not uncommon for students to send an email at 11:00 p.m. or later asking the teacher for feedback and clarification, which usually resulted on a response the next day during office hours. Implicitly, real time response (or lack thereof) was an issue for the participants. Lola suggested as much:

“I think it can be hard sometimes because you cannot go further with your work whenever you don’t get a response on your question immediately. I prefer learning under the supervision of a teacher (Lola, personal communication, December 2018).
It is understandable that online students want to take full advantage of the flexibility that this type of arrangement provides, which implies greater commitment on the part of faculty. Although subtly, Gabriel reflected this sentiment:

*I enjoy the freedom of schedule and the fact that I can work anywhere with my laptop. Sometimes topics require some assistance from the teacher so it’s important that he is easy to reach* (Gabriel, personal communication, December 2018).

The question of trust appeared in the context of speedy and effective feedback, which is reflected in one of the insights provided by Leon:

*I prefer learning under the supervision of a teacher I trust, as he can answer my questions and I can believe in his answers. Doing that online is also possible, but with a teacher you get the feedback faster and probably better targeted to your specific question* (Leon, personal communication, December 2018).

One of the takeaways from these data is that students feel they should be able to communicate with their teacher at the time their questions arise. Most participants in this study tended to wait until the final hours before the deadline to submit their work, which made it difficult to obtain the kind of feedback they needed in time. The issue seems to be inconsistent with expectations of face-to-face teacher availability, as students usually take advantage of class meetings to address their questions and tend not to expect feedback from their teachers after business hours. The bottom line is that the participants, upon reflection, reached the conclusion that they would have preferred to take the IMA course in a traditional, face-to-face situation, or perhaps as a blended/hybrid class.

**DISCUSSION**

The research questions that guided this study involved the experience of foreign students enrolled in an online course and their assessments of the support they received from their teacher. The results indicate that the participants value the freedom and flexibility associated with online courses, but they do not expect this type of experience to produce significant learning. They expect this type of course to be simple and straightforward in order to fulfill a corresponding requirement. This was apparent with the statement from Emma, “It is good when a course just needs to be done fast and gotten over with.” Moreover, it was clear that the participants wanted their teacher to be available to them at the time they were working on their assignments, and they expected prompt responses, which apparently they did not get in some cases. Since the teacher addressed each question within 24 hours, the implication is that feedback should be provided faster, perhaps in real time.

The European online learners who participated in the IMA course in Mexico had conflicting views about their IMA course. They expected their teacher to resolve their questions promptly and effectively and made claims that imply that this hardly takes place with this modality, even though no question was left unaddressed for more than 24 hours by the instructor. These findings are in line with previous studies. The key takeaway is that it is important for the success of online education that teachers be willing and able to guide their students and help them to become self-learners (Daly et al., 2012; Romero-Romero et al., 2014).

Others have made efforts to examine this type of learning experience. Bourdeaux and Schoenack (2016) interviewed 22 adult online learners to identify their expectations and make adequate recommendations for online academic program managers. They concluded that students expect their teachers to (1) be creative in the ways they design and implement their courses, (2) understand the busy lives of online learners and show flexibility, and (3) perform their duties, namely answering questions promptly and providing feedback. These findings are consistent with the two categories that emerged from the present study: (1) conflicting feelings about online learning and (2) the need for online teachers to be available for problem solving and course discussion.

The present study shows that the freedom and flexibility associated with online learning can be a double-edge sword. On the one hand, students want to make their own schedules; however, they also want to be able to rely on the presence of their teacher. On this matter, Seiver and Troja (2014) noted that autonomy was not a significant factor in online student satisfaction but that instructor availability and being able to choose from a relatively small variety of assignments to fulfill
the requirements of the course are directly linked to satisfaction. This suggests that students place greater importance on faculty involvement with the class than on freedom. For their part, Niendorf and Alberts (2017) noted that autonomy increases among business students as they spend more time in the host country. Perhaps what students need is strong teacher involvement at the beginning of the course that allows them to adapt to the new environment, and then let them gradually disengage to give them more freedom.

In terms of the issue of course selection, and the claims made about avoiding more challenging courses in online contexts, Radovilsky and Wishniewsky (2016) examined the online learning preferences of MBA students in Russia. They noted strong relationships between concept-based courses and satisfaction with online learning. In addition, the authors found that previous experience with online education is associated with greater likelihood of accepting online learning opportunities and satisfaction. What Radovilsky and Wishniewsky's study suggests is that online education is better suited for courses that are theory-oriented rather than courses with more practical focus like mathematics or statistics. The finding was intriguing because it raises the possibility that data-intensive courses like IMA may not be the best option for online instruction. As it turned out in this case, course content was more of a factor than student autonomy. Similar concerns were expressed by Xu et al. (2008).

To reinforce the overall results from this study, it is worth noting the work conducted by Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006). These researchers surveyed a sample of 131 undergraduate students using the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to determine the personality of their online learners. The authors concluded that no one personality trait characterized the students in the sample, but open-ended questions embedded in the survey allowed the researchers to identify common needs like prompt teacher feedback, clear instructions, and flexibility. Moreover, these results support the use of SLT and RT in designing online courses. On this matter, Muñiz Solari (2009) noted that it was important to implement strategies designed to facilitate communication processes in online learning experiences, especially when working with students from different cultures whose primary language is different from the one used in class. SLT calls for online course facilitators to clearly articulate the learning outcomes of the course and establish straightforward guidelines.

In terms of the applicability of the results presented here, it is worth examining the work of Horspool and Lange (2012). Their research supports the claim that new information from educational experiences should yield adjustments to improve the learning experience of the students. One study on online learning and international collaboration found that students and faculty have different expectations from one another at the start of the course, but that cross-cultural collaboration takes place as student-student and student-faculty relationships start to evolve (Iuspa, 2018). This is consistent with the basic assumptions of RT, which online teachers can use to determine how their role as facilitators can evolve as the class progresses and student needs become apparent.

This supports the case for developing hybrid or blended courses. Cundell and Sheepy (2018) noted that blended courses work best when teachers provide challenging, thought-provoking activities that their students can address through interaction in both online and face-to-face situations. The assumption is that blended courses, due to their flexibility and teacher availability, represent the best option for online learners (Epure & Mihăeş, 2017). This certainly is significant for the planning of future IMA courses with foreign students.

Moreover, the IMA course could benefit from the application of additional technological learning tools like Flipgrid, Loom, and Remind, which makes the learning experience less transactional and more social (Holbeck & Hartman, 2018). In their narratives, students noted that having nonmediated interaction with the teacher was a necessity. Online instruction often negates this, but through the implementation of new educational technology, the process can become more social and compensate, at least in part, for the lack of face-to-face interaction.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The general question that motivated this study was the following: How do foreign students enrolled in one international business program in Mexico feel about their IMA online course? The question was addressed by examining what
students expected from one online course they completed in Mexico and what they got from it. Special attention was given to student expectations of the teacher responsible for facilitating the online course. The two categories that emerged as a result of this research were (1) students’ contradictory feelings about online learning and (2) availability as the main demand on online teachers. Two notable themes according to the participants emerged from the first category: freedom and flexibility to manage the schedule and difficulties in building a trusting relationship with the teacher.

With this in mind, the first conclusion of this study is that while students appreciate being given the freedom to complete their schoolwork in a way that best fits their schedule, they feel they miss out on having the full benefit of developing a teacher-student relationship that promotes effective learning. The themes that were most notable in the second category were limited feedback and availability on the part of the teacher, which created a challenge in terms of time management for the students. While the students had ample time to do their schoolwork, they found themselves working against the clock because they tended to put off their homework assignments until a few hours before the deadline to submit.

Moreover, the students felt the teacher did not address their questions fast enough for them to use the feedback to improve their work. Therefore, the second conclusion is that the students expected their teacher to be available to them at the specific time they were working on their homework assignments, which was often late at night on Sundays. Overall, the participants in the study expected their online experience to be flexible, their teacher to be available to answer questions promptly regardless of the day or time, and to learn through meaningful interaction. They did master most of the material, and their grades were hard earned, but the conclusion is that the physical presence of a teacher would have yielded better results.

There are three limitations in this study that may serve as areas of opportunity for future research. First, the research is exploratory, so the conclusions stated here can only inform researchers, faculty members, and administrators on the one experience described in the study. Future research may focus on documenting other cases, so that in combination, the literature on online learning and foreign students in Mexico can paint a clearer picture and help advance the work conducted under SoTL. Second, the IMA course has certain characteristics that seemed to make it specially challenging for online learning. These include the use of technical reports, data computation, and so on. It is likely that perceptions from students in other courses, perhaps in the humanities, will feel differently about their online experience. Third, the text-based, predetermined method of instruction seemed to limit interaction between teacher and students. This could have impacted the results, but future studies may use courses that use more interactive tools like web conferencing, live chats as part of group sessions, and face-to-face lectures and activities that make the experience more social.

Concretely, the main recommendation is that faculty and administrators engaged with online teaching in general, and especially those serving foreign students, explore the application of blended/hybrid courses to provide their students with greater flexibility than traditional face-to-face instruction but without completely eliminating the physical presence of teachers. Of course, geographical limitations would need to be sorted out for this approach to work. Moreover, students should work on their time management skills and give themselves ample opportunity to work on their assignments. Perhaps the issue may also be addressed by establishing homework submission deadlines on weekdays during office hours.
References


Cundell, A., & Sheepy, E. (2018). Student perceptions of the most effective and engaging online learning activities in a blended graduate seminar. Online Learning, 22(3), 87–102. https://doi.org/10.24059/olj.v22i3.1467


