

# ASSESSING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON THE INFLUENCE OF INSTRUCTIONAL IMMEDIACY BEHAVIOUR IN ENGENDERING PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

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**Abstract:** The instructional immediacy behaviour of instructors has been found to play a salient role in facilitating learning among students. This is particularly the case in traditional learning environments. The advent of COVID-19 has accelerated the transition to virtual, online environments, especially in Higher Education Institutions globally, but with considerable impact on the developing country, where tuition was mostly predicated on traditional approaches. Although several techniques and platforms have been suggested for extending the utility and impact of an instructor's instructional immediacy within the emergent online learning environments, studies seeking to elicit the perspectives of students concerning the influence of instructional immediacy behaviour of their lecturers, operating within Online Learning Environments on tuition remain scant. This study seeks to contribute towards developing this field to assist effective teaching and learning practices. A phenomenological research design is adopted. Data was collected from a purposively selected sample of interviewees using semi-structured interviews. The data was subsequently analysed using thematic analysis. The findings indicate that the instructional immediacy behaviour of lecturers within a Teaching and Learning Environment exuded more influence on the learning abilities of most of the interviewees when compared their Online Learning Experience. This finding is indicative of the need to properly train instructors on how to engage with students effectively in Online Learning Environments.

*Keywords: instructional immediacy, online learning, student experiences, student participation, teaching and learning strategies*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education has been confronted with challenges resulting from the transition to online teaching and learning platforms since the pandemic. Online education has become popular over the years with the advent of new technologies which provide the desired levels of flexibility for a diversity of students who are intent on engaging with course material and classes in an asynchronous manner (Xie, Siau, & Nah, 2020). Online learning has now become a preferred mode of teaching and learning (T&L), especially since the COVID-19 pandemic struck. This mode of T&L has been deployed for a variety of reasons including adaptability and convenience. The prevalence of online learning environments has progressed to a point where there is no need to meet face to face to continue with educational activities. Nawi, Yusoff, Ajmain, and Abbas (2014),

highlighted the versatility of online T&L option that it comes with appealing benefits and complications. Instructors had to focus on the new relationships which they had to create with their students on an online platform, unlike with the traditional T&L platform where immediate form of engagement with students was physical. (Yeap, Suhaimi, & Nasir, 2021), also mention that instructors have to take advantage of the benefits of teaching online, like increased flexibility of time and location and the use of online resources.

In their study, (Xie et al., 2020) present a list of different instruction methods like webinars, blended education, individual online courses and massive open online courses that instructors can use to meet the expectations of the 'digital smart' students and must be able to combine the teaching and multimedia techniques so that every subjects will becomes more interesting and competitive. A student's presence in a traditional class still remains a key factor to successful learning experience as it brings about a critical connection to learning (Kauffman, 2015). Social presence presents a level of connectedness between the student and the instructor and among the students themselves. It also provides the platform for the instructor to be fully involved in learning. Dixon, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, and Lauer (2017) note that, another challenge about online classes is that instructors can take time to respond to the discussion posts or to other media platforms thereby creating impressions that the instructor is distant from a student, or the student cannot approach the instructor immediately as they would in a traditional class. Cultivating different levels of immediacy in class can be beneficial in nurturing engagement, participation and cognitive learning (Kauffman, 2015).

Dixon et al. (2017), posits that by choosing appropriate media in an online class, instructors can use video and audio to enhance instructional immediacy and student engagement, active learning, and participation. But little attention has been given therein to online learning scenarios concerning how instructors can transpose the verbal and non-verbal cues to the students and, how to keep students engaged and participating in class in those circumstances. Using some of the traditional strategies on online platforms has not been helping much in student engagement and encouraging participation. For this study, instructional immediacy behaviours that positively impact student retention, motivation, and cognitive learning will be identified, explained, and assessed how to use these behaviours in an online class. Those identified will be the ones that support participation, engagement, and motivation to be in an online class. It is therefore imperative, that instructors, educators , instructional designers, and faculty understand and employ strategies that aid in creating effective online courses that engage, motivate, and increase student retention and cognitive learning (Stone, Downing, & Dymont, 2021).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Immediacy behaviours was first described by (Mehrabian & Williams, 1969) as the extent to which verbal and nonverbal (physical proximity, formality of dress, and facial expression) cues are exchanged to enhance closeness and reduce physical distance between people who are communicating. These scholars classified these immediacy behaviours as verbal and non-verbal behaviours (Mehrabian & Williams, 1969). The non-verbal immediacy definition was further extended by Andersen (1979) to include eye contact, gesture, relaxed body position, directing body position toward students, smiling, vocal expressiveness, movement, and proximity. Whereas, (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976) described verbal immediacy as the use of humour, praise of

student work, actions, or comments; and frequency of initiating and/or willingness to become engaged in conversation before, after, or outside of class.

Manarte, Lopes, and Pereira (2014) explain that immediacy definition will change overtime based on people's perceptions emotions physical and psychological relations. Immediacy goes hand in hand with the communication behaviours between those that are communicating, and it emulates the characteristics of the communicative activities. The educational context of instructional immediacy constitutes of practices by an instructor which provide an effective learning environment and facilitates optimal levels of student engagement, student participation and strong interpersonal connection. Therefore, immediacy in education context affects students' learning outcomes (Al Ghamdi, 2017). In a normal traditional learning environment, the instructor's immediacy behaviours can influence the learning environment of the student, it is observed that both verbal and nonverbal immediacy practices have an impact on the learning environment. Body language, rather than vocal expression, is used in non-verbal immediacy to send messages in unconscious ways. (Chakraborty & Nafukho, 2015) also be pointed out that by using these behaviours, maintaining eye contact, smiling, or use of gestures, creates a meaningful learning environment to enhance the student's educational experience. Velez and Cano (2012) further explain that expressions are often communicated as gestures whilst verbal communication communicates feelings as words. These can be used as instructor immediacy cues or practices during online learning to facilitate participation for cognitive learning, engagement during the online class and social interaction.

Chakraborty (2015) also confirms that instructor immediacy actions might assist students feel more connected, which influences students' cognitive learning. Al Ghamdi (2017) Student interaction with the instructor is a contributor to the student's learning process. It is therefore evident that the relationship between instructor immediacy and students influences how students feel about their study responsibilities, relationship with other peers, the instructor, and overall attitude towards the course. Online learning was first used in 1995 as a web-based system (WebCT) which was later developed as a Learning Management System (LMS), which is now called Blackboard (Ismail & Salih, 2018). The LMS is used as a platform for blended learning. Curtin (2002) explains online learning as a learning method that uses internet to enhance the interaction between the teacher and students.

In a traditional platform, students tend to naturally connect with each other and with their instructors. Lack of connectedness and social interaction in an online environment can create a perception of physical distance between a lecturer and the student thereby creating lack of motivation, a sense of isolation and an interest to be in an online class (Gregory & Salmon, 2013). It is believed that connectedness amongst students help them create sense of communities that can bring about a level of satisfaction, encourage participation, as well as engagement in class both in an online and traditional environments (Hew, 2015). It is at these platforms where they can express their social nature of learning. It is imperative to create learning environments where there is ease of transition from traditional to online teaching and learning, making sure that quality education is still offered. Online learning environments can include learning, materials such as graphics audio-visual materials and enhanced form of communication. Instructors will have to be technologically inclined and aid in creating effective online lessons that are motivating engaging and that is also increase the student attendance and cognitive learning (Baker, 2010).

The role of the instructor then becomes the facilitation of the learning process and knowledge sharing with students daily, enhancing student knowledge and learning. (Fahara & Castro, 2015) highlights the use of learning designs, collaborative learning, and project-oriented learning technique, that favours interaction and communication between the student and the instructor. These are some of the immediacy practices that the instructor may use to facilitate learning in an online environment. It lessens the perceived physical distance between the student and the instructor and creates a relationship between the two and between the students themselves (Fahara & Castro, 2015).

### 3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study aimed to contribute towards developing this field to assist effective teaching and learning practices. The researcher adopted a phenomenological research design and conducted semi-structured interviews to explore student's perceptions on instructor's immediacy behaviours (Wilson, 2015). Semi-structured interviews, or focused interviews should be more flexible and allow the researcher to better understand the perspective of the interviewees (Daymon & Holloway, 2010). Norlyk and Harder (2010) opines that the choice of the research design is to be able to deepen the lived experiences of those interviewed and understanding the perceptions of the students on what immediacy behaviours are, and what effect do they have on student learning experience. Matua and Van Der Wal (2015) explain that phenomenological research design is a qualitative research design that seek to investigate a certain phenomenon, to explore and understand the everyday activities around the phenomenon to be able to interpret the lived experiences of the participants. Purposive sampling was used to select students from 1st year to 3rd year level to establish the student's perceptions of the difference between the instructional immediacy behaviours experienced in traditional vs online classrooms. Tongco (2007) posits that purposive sampling is the deliberate choice of the sample in a group to be used, due to the type of information it has the sample was used to be able to interpret the experiences lived (Whitehead & Whitehead, 2016).

The data collection went through ethical clearance by the faculty research committee and all the interviewees were informed about the study. Data was collected from students enrolled from year 1 to year 3 registered for bachelor programmes in Quantity Surveying and Construction Management. All the courses are currently offered online, except the practical components and as flipped classes. The researcher wanted to examine what students' perceptions are with what keeps them engaged in class and what motivates them to be present and active in an online environment. Workshops were conducted with the different academic year levels using a Learning Management System which they all have access to. The students were grouped in two groups per year level whilst conducting the interviews over a month to provide a deeper understanding. The interview questions were based on the themes. The focus groups allowed the researcher to ask more open-ended questions to gather more insight for the interviews.

The interviews conducted were structured in themes as follows:

- The effect of Instructional Immediacy behaviours of lecturer on students' learning experiences

- The impact of the nature of the learning environment on the utility of instructional immediacy behaviour

The respondents from year 1 to year 3 were as follows:

Year level 1: 55 students, Year level 2: 40 students and Year level 3: 30 students

#### 4. RESULTS/ FINDINGS

The data was prepared and analysed from the interviews that were performed using a thematic analysis. The data was well coded putting all the necessary information under themes.

##### *a. Effect of Instructional Immediacy Behaviour of Lecturer on Students' learning experience*

During the interviews, students expressed their views on how the lectures are offered either traditional or on online platforms. More than 50% of the students interviewed from the 3<sup>rd</sup> year level, mentioned that there isn't much of a difference. The only difference that they observed was that they felt that they were in a different kind of environment during online classes. The data collected had more responses in relation to the absence of the instructor's handwriting on the board. They further related that without the use of updated software, the instructors struggle to use the onboard "white board" and they struggle to follow and engage in class. Baker (2010) suggested that the instructors should be technologically inclined to use the software in place, to enhance the online learning experience.

*"The online lectures make more sense to us if we see a lecturer using body language and writing on a whiteboard" Y1, Y2 and Y3*

When asked about what influences lack of participation during online classes, they mentioned that during the instructors would sometimes record the sessions and let the students listen to the recordings in their own time and place. It will be more pleasurable if we were to engage in an online class like we do in a traditional class (Yeap et al., 2021). They further highlighted that in a traditional class that isn't that type of a barrier that they feel. This group reported the technical challenges they are facing when they must listen to the recordings of the online classes. The student ends up being bored listening to a recording and can easily disconnect from the content which does not resonate with the best practices of immediacy (Kauffman, 2015). When they were asked about putting on their names and videos on during online classes this is how they responded:

*"Sometimes we are afraid of being called out with our names because we are not confident enough to answer in an online class like we are in a traditional class" Y1*

*"Because we can attend classes from anywhere, our locations and backgrounds are not class appropriate" Y2*

##### *b. The impact of the nature of the learning environment on the utility of Instructional Immediacy behaviour*

The students reported that they learned more effectively on an online platform than on a traditional platform, they mentioned that they become fully engaged at their own time and at their own pace, and that they are able to look at their online material effectively using their electronic devices at the comfort of their homes or any location. The responses from Y 2 reported the following:

*"Some of us have difficulties linking the concepts on the audio clips with the actual presentation" Y1s (10)*

*“Other lecturers use their picture as a background whilst presenting and there is no connection with the students during the class and it’s more like listening to an audio/pre-recorded class whilst in an actual class.” Y2(12)*

The minority of year level 1’s mentioned that they wished they had the experience of attending on campus as they were experiencing difficulties with their internet connectivity and access to their electronic devices. It therefore makes it difficult for them to be able to connect and engage with the content effectively. The learning environment is disrupted and therefore no affective learning of the student taking place (Hew, 2015). The third-year group are mostly fascinated and tech savvy about the use of online learning. This was the feedback from their group,

*“Because we are already using technology, why not make it fun and use all the icons available on zoom or teams” Y3*

*“We are always on our phones and can interact with the emojis and other icons, it will be fun to use those during online group discussions.*

The feedback is clear about some of the icons in use on the LMS, Zoom and Microsoft Teams, that can be used as non-verbal cues to enhance the communication between the students and the instructor. The icons can also be used to keep the students engaged during online class. Some students reported that there is more flexibility with access to materials, listening to the lecturer’s podcast at any time (Xie et al., 2020)

*“We are able to listen or watch lecture videos at our own time e.g at gym, but it is more interesting to hear on the emphasis of the voice on certain concepts and the varied tone used throughout the class/session” Y2, Y3*

Others felt that the use of the instructor’s body language has an effect in the way they are motivated and connected in class. How the non-verbal communication is relayed in class has a huge impact on the perception of how the student will interpret the content delivered in class (Xie et al., 2020).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The goal of the paper was to present the perceptions of the students about the immediacy practices, how they understand them and what they expect from the instructors. The research studies have shown that immediacy practices are beneficial for enhancing online environment. Instructors need to be well skilled to use the available platforms as well as software that can be used for facilitating online learning. The immediacy practices are explored to be used by instructors to enhance participation and student engagement amongst the students as well as instructors. It is also revealed that the practices used in traditional learning environment can also be used in an online learning platform using the emerging technologies. The data revealed more about the student’s perspectives regarding the instructor immediacy. Instructional Immediacy behaviours can enhance student engagement, interaction, motivation, and participation, whether used in traditional or online classes. The findings have also revealed that verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviours applied by instructors whether in traditional or online, can be as effective as possible if instructors are trained to use them effectively for the purpose of the student’s learning experience. The right use of these behaviours can reduce the physical distance between the student and the instructor, can motivate the student to learn and understand the content more. Online learning environment can be enhanced to suite and accommodate the learner’s experience. One of the instructor objectives

should be to integrate instruments that can be used during a lesson to engage the learner to the content and to help the learner be motivated and interact during class.

## 5. REFERENCES

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