

## Exploring Interactions in Online Distance Learning (ODL): The Case for Islamic Studies

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### Abstract

Since the pandemic outbreak, online has been the new norm for students and lecturers. This teaching and learning method involves adapting virtual delivery and access by optimizing the use of various applications and mediums, including Islamic studies. This study aims to find learners' perceptions in Islamic studies regarding learner-to-instructor, learner-to-learner, and learner-to-content interactions. The methodology used by this study is a quantitative method with a survey and questionnaires are distributed randomly among students enrolling in the Islamic Studies course from public universities, involving 409 respondents. The data were descriptively analysed using percentages and mean scores to identify the perceptions among Islamic learners regarding their online sessions. This study covers three sections regarding significant interactions in online learning: learner-to-instructor, learner-to-learner and learner-to-content. The findings show that the highest mean is learner-to-instructor, followed by learner-to-learner, and the lowest in the learner-to-content section. The most effective interaction among learners of Islamic studies is lecturer-student relation. The perception regarding contents shows that the lessons, specifically in Islamic studies must be provided creatively and interactively to meet the students' needs. The research findings highlighted the role of instructors in delivering knowledge in their best way and approaches to ensure effectiveness throughout their lessons. Learners in Islamic studies must have an active learning attitude to empower their knowledge. In conclusion, the findings of this study should be used as guidelines for learners and instructors to enhance the quality of pedagogy in Islamic Studies. The study suggests future research about online interactions and face-to-face learning in another field.

**Keywords:** Online, Teaching, Learning, Interactions, Islamic Studies.

**Introduction***Background of Study*

Islamic studies have undergone significant changes in terms of teaching and learning due to technological advancements. Nevertheless, modern society still takes the importance of Islamic studies due to their awareness of religion as the supreme element in life. The awareness led to the modernization of the teaching method in Islamic studies (Hamzah et al., 2019). However, because Islamic studies are viewed as conceptualization and memory disciplines, the use of technology as a teaching tool has been disregarded. This perception alone undergrudate the flexibility of Islam itself as there were no limiters imposed on delivery and access to knowledge in Islam (Zedan et al., 2014).

Among the challenges to be faced by the university student during their online session, firstly: the abundance of resources and assignments by the instructor, second: unfamiliar with the technology as the new methods of learning, and third: health issues, instance stress and anxiety (Al-Kumaim et al., 2021). The effectiveness of online sessions in higher education has been studied by Nordin et. al (2020), who found that student satisfaction, usability, and technical competencies are positively related to the session's effectiveness. On the other hand, the acceptance of the students, who were unaccustomed with the new teaching and learning standards, including poor time management and an unfriendly setting, had a detrimental impact on the session's effectiveness.

**Statement of Problem**

National Education Policy, based on the Education Act of 1966, has established Islamic studies as among the core subjects in the educational system of Malaysia (Nawi et al., 2012). Islamic courses have been taught to the students from primary school until their undergraduate program at higher education institutions. Islamic Education Philosophy (FPI) aims to continuously disseminate Islam's knowledge, skills, and appreciation based on al-Quran and al-Sunnah. It also emphasizes producing a balance individual who possesses the attitude, skills, personality, and worldview as a servant of Allah SWT in achieving happiness and prosperity in this worldly life and the hereafter (Mohktar, et al., 2019). Before the Covid-19 pandemic, most Islamic courses were customarily taught and required conceptual understanding and memorization (Zedan et al., 2015). Technology-based teaching methods are rarely practised previously as it is believed that religious knowledge, adab and akhlak can only be transferred through talaqqi or face-to-face sessions. But Covid-19 pandemic has forced this traditional offline learning system to go online (Dahmayati, 2021). Therefore, enhancing teaching and learning methods is necessary to meet students' needs by integrating technology to enable learning sessions to be presented more engaging, creative and interactive (Yusoff et al., 2019).

Hence, this study investigates learners' perception in learning Islamic studies online. Specifically, this study is done to answer the following research questions:

How does learners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-instructor interaction online?

How does leaners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-learner interaction online?

How does learners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-content interaction online?

**Literature Review**

How are Islamic Studies Learned and Taught?

Aziz et al (2016) mention that coherent presentation, sequential materials, enough chances for student involvement in integrated training, frequent and periodic measurements, and positive feedback to students are all hallmarks of good teaching. Effective methods and strategies should be used during the teaching-learning activities in Islamic studies. Even though strategy, approach, method, and technique have different purposes and functions, they are all interconnected. According to Lubis et al (2010), systematic teaching and learning are essential to establish successful teaching and learning in-class system. Four factors are considered for its implementation: creativity, reflectivity, cooperation, and responsibility. These four factors should be applied to eight systematic teachings and learning Islamic education (Lubis and Ibrahim, 2009). The eight proper processes in teaching and learning have fulfilled pedagogy aspects, allowing teachers to determine whether the teaching outcome was fully attained or how good the achievement percentage was. Before entering the classroom, the first phase in the teaching and learning process will give the teacher a better-prepared lesson. Students will be happy transmitting the interested set induction in step two and finding the lecture fascinating. Steps three and four encourage the teacher to grasp and master the subject as thoroughly as possible, and the lesson will be given using a question-and-answer method. Steps five and six will encourage students to be more creative, cooperative, and responsible when discussing and presenting issues. Step seven will measure and evaluate the teaching and learning outcome or objectives. Step eight will assist students in comprehending the critical conclusion and preparing for homework. This technique will also be more successful if each student is motivated to creatively, reflect, cooperate, and have responsible educational outcomes (Lubis et al., 2010).

Besides, Ashaari et al (2012) mentioned that the advancement of Islamic studies necessitates using a problem-based teaching style. In which students are allowed to face contemporary problems and develop solutions, as Imam Abu Hanifah (699-767M), Imam Ghazzali (1058–1111M), and Ibnu Rushd (1126-1198M) did. For example, Hadith should be taught intellectually by reading traditional sources and contemporary rational and critical thinking. Furthermore, the motivation is to improve the teaching quality in Islamic academia and facilitate technology in Islamic education. According to Zedan et al (2015), using PowerPoint and educational technology to teach Islamic studies has pedagogical and religious benefits since teaching fosters students' ability of self-learning and innovative thinking through various means or methods of education.

***Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Learning***

Previous researchers have widely debated the Advantages of online learning. According to Hargis, et al. (2013), online learning is an effective and efficient learning process. Tay (2015) states online learning is more open and students' time allocated to study is also more flexible, while Kurniawan et al (2012) emphasizes the advantages of e-learning that can be carried out anywhere and anytime. This shows that deep learning online can train students to be more independent, learn according to their convenience, and make them more confident and productive in their studies.

Hassan et al (2021) conducted a study on the effects of online learning indicates the level of effectiveness of online learning and teaching, where 63.9% think the whole of online learning has a good effect on them. Overall, the study shows several aspects of students' level of learning effectiveness. The highest aspect of effectiveness is the motivational strategy used by the lecturer, which is 70.7%. This is because the role of the lecturer is an essential factor that influences student participation in online learning. Next is the aspect of feedback from lecturers, which is 69.9%. This is because during online learning, especially in discussions, most students are only passively involved, and only a few ask questions. As for the aspect of online interaction, it was 62.3%. So, it can be concluded that studies have found that overall, online learning contributes to learning skills and improves the quality of learning.

A study by Kirin et al (2021) on the impact of online teaching and learning on students also showed a positive effect on students that can help improve students' skills in the use of electronic platforms. Studies show that 68.3% say that online learning can help students' sophistication in using electronic platforms in the future. Among the platforms is google classroom, google meet, zoom, author, MOOC, telegram, etc. This can raise students' skills in using various platforms or applications set by the educational institution. This can indirectly give students an advantage in finding a job and success in the future because the skills and sophistication of a person in using various platforms and applications are highly regarded by the world of industrial revolution today and in the future.

The disadvantage of online learning is the problem of limited internet access. A study by Yahaya and Adnan (2021) shows that limited internet access is a challenge in this online learning, especially for students living in rural areas, such as Sabah and Sarawak. When lecturers give assignments online, not all students can access them. Some rural students have to go to the city to ensure good internet access, even though they are aware of the risk of Covid19. The issue of internet problems is also evidenced by a study conducted by Hamdan and Muhamad (2021) showed no internet access at home and interference to internet access such as disconnected internet lines and instability is a significant challenge in home teaching and learning (PdPR). Apart from that, the study also showed that the inability of parents to provide gadgets such as personal computers and tablets also gave problems to students in continuing online learning and resulted in them dropping out of the learning process.

Another disadvantage of online learning is that the atmosphere is not conducive to learning. According to research by Saifudin and Hamzah (2021) as well as Hamdan and Muhamad (2021), students' inability to concentrate on online teaching and learning is a result of the lack of study space at home, the noisy environment, and the confined space. This, in turn, lowers their motivation to acknowledge that the online learning process is complicated for them because of this environment. This is because students feel there is no comfortable space to study. This unconducive atmosphere makes it difficult for students to focus on the course of online learning. Facilities are also limited as they do not have a desk to study and do not have the tools they need throughout the learning process, for example, printers, desks, chairs and so on. They must sit on beds or in inappropriate places while online classes occur.

This unconducive learning environment often happens to students with backgrounds behind a poor or modest family. This is because their parents cannot afford to provide facilities for their learning, such as study desks, fans and rooms for them to study. This causes them to be

unable to focus. This problem can be proven through the statement of Majzub (2003) from the Faculty of Education UKM that how difficult it is for students to cope with learning if the home environment is not conducive, then the concentration of students will be affected. This is supported by studies that say poor or low-income families cannot provide learning equipment and a less comfortable atmosphere at home. Furthermore, they belong to the B40 group, so they cannot provide a conducive environment for their children in online learning. This inappropriate environment makes them unable to focus on learning conducted online. This will affect the quality of learning and student performance.

### **Past Studies**

#### *Past Studies on engagement in learning online*

The COVID-19 pandemic, which began in 2020 and has now spread worldwide, has halted practically all human activity. People in almost every country in the world are forced to sit in their homes to save their lives as a result of the spread of this deadly epidemic (UNESCO, 2020), forcing schools and educational institutions to close and making it impossible for them to carry out learning activities (Akyildiz, 2020). As a result, additional research has been undertaken to determine whether online learning has a beneficial or bad impact on students and the level of student satisfaction from the standpoint of e-learning (Fuchs and Karrila, 2021). Adapting new learning platforms through online learning, on the other hand, is not a new concept and has been hotly disputed even before the Covid-19 outbreak (Stallings, 2002). Email, learning management systems, discussion forums, video conferencing, social networking, and other online services are the digital platforms and technologies used (Dumford and Miller, 2018). Various techniques and methods for delivering online course content are being developed to ensure the stability and viability of higher education institutions. The adoption of e-learning at the tertiary level has been discussed in light of the rapid advancement of technology and the increasing number of students opting for online learning for various reasons. As a result, it is critical to continue developing assessment and evaluation techniques for virtual universities (Stallings, 2002).

There have been many past studies on the KW1 (learning online). For example, the study by Dumford and Miller (2018) examines the impact of students' engagement on online learning in higher education by utilising secondary data from the National Survey of Student Engagement. The research was analysed using a series of ordinary least squares regression models, discovered that students who took more online courses were more likely to use quantitative reasoning rather than collaborative learning, student-faculty exchanges, or group dissection. In addition, these students had less exposure to effective teaching methods and had lower interaction quality. Other than that, Akyildiz's (2020) research, which involved the participation of 12 Turkish university students selected randomly and voluntarily from each grade level, also discovered the same findings. This research was conducted via focus group discussion. Its second research question found that online learning had more disadvantages than advantages, such as a lack of engagement and communication that isolates students, problems with exams, traditional educational habits, the burden of assignments, and time management. In addition, the absence of interaction between students and professors reduced their satisfaction with the online learning method (Shim and Song, 2020).

Despite these negative aspects, Zhu, et al (2020) discovered that participants' attitudes toward online learning were generally favourable and improved once the course was over. They also discovered that four self-regulatory factors and attitudes, which mediate the participants' continuous intention to learn online, were significantly predicted by the participants' continuous intention to learn online. Furthermore, online learning offers time and location flexibility, allowing students to take on more responsibilities in their studies and feel more at ease during exams (Akyildiz, 2020). Based on the preceding discussion and conclusions, future online learning design strategies should focus on improving students' self-regulated learning capacity by modifying instructors' lecturing techniques, perspectives as educators and assessment methods (Zhu, et al., 2020).

#### *Past Studies on learning Islamic studies online*

Many studies were conducted to investigate the learning of Islamic studies online during the pandemic COVID-19. Hamzah et. al (2019) conducted a qualitative study with the interview as an instrument for five selected respondents from Islamic Studies Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). The respondents include lecturers and administrators directly involved with the online learning session. The study identified several problems, including the instructors' lack of familiarity with multilingualism, their inability to deliver sanad (particularly in Quran and Hadith studies), the abundance of sources and information that needs additional authentication, and their inability to pinpoint precise sources. Fifth: Less interaction between students and lecturers due to being left behind in the syllabus. A study reported the success of online learning in Islamic Religious Higher Education regarding various factors, for instance, student characteristics, internal motivation, instructor characteristics, quality of institutions and services, infrastructure and system quality, quality of courses and information, and online learning environment. The study used quantitative methods of three Islamic religious colleges in west Papua. A survey with a Likert scale questionnaire distributed in Google Form to 302 students concluded that all seven factors affected the success of online learning in Islamic higher education in West Papua, Indonesia (Yudiawan et al., 2021).

Another quantitative study aims to identify students' readiness and needs in The North Zone of Malaysia Polytechnics. A survey involved 228 students registered for Islamic courses from five Malaysian polytechnics in the North Zone. A set of questionnaires was distributed randomly, and the data were analyzed based on frequency, percentage, and mean score. The survey illustrated the students' attitudes, opinions, behavior, and characteristics. The study found that students' readiness level is high in accepting the online session. All the respondents (100%) owned mobile devices and were familiar with the devices, whereas 93.5% of respondents had experience using the mobile devices for more than three years. The respondents' familiarity with using devices was also good and reached a high level. It shows that the students enrolled in Islamic courses at The North Zone of Malaysia Polytechnics showed a high readiness to develop learning and teaching online. From the study, the researcher suggests lecturers utilize students' readiness and build an exciting learning environment by integrating technology into the teaching and learning process to enhance interest, motivation, achievement, and critical thinking by students in Islamic Studies courses (Yusoff et al., 2020).

Several studies focus on discussing Islamic studies' content, materials, and source related to online teaching and learning. Hoque et al (2019) found that adapting Islamic studies online is important and beneficial to students and institutions. However, there are challenges in online learning compared to traditional education methods. Among the challenges is total freedom of learning, leading to unethical attitudes and students' deviation due to a lack of proper monitoring of instructors. The research focuses on Hadith studies from its various subject such as "Ulumul al-hadith" (sciences of hadith) "Takhri" (a method and authentic way of searching the source of Hadith), "Ilmu Al-Rijal" (study biography of narrators), "Derasah Al-Isnad" (identify the reliability of narrators) and "Hukum Al-Hadith" (determine the validity of Hadith). From these, the researcher found certain subjects in Hadith studies that are not suitable for online learning, for instance, Ilmu Jarh Wa Al-Tadil, which requires students an extensive hadith science laboratory experiment. Therefore, the researcher suggests that instructors enhance their skills in conducting online teaching and need consistent training to become familiar with technologies because converting traditional methods using a new teaching medium is challenging. It requires additional courses, encouragement, support, and motivation for both learners and instructors to protect the value of Islamic knowledge itself.

### Conceptual Framework of the Study

This study replicated the study by (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). Figure 1 presents the conceptual framework. Online classes need to consider three main aspects of interactions for learning effectiveness. The first is learner-to-learner interaction, which refers to the opportunity learners get when they communicate with their peers online. Next, the instructor needs to communicate well with the learners online and plan activities to encourage interaction among learners. Finally, there should be learner-to-content interaction where learners are allowed to respond to the materials used in the online classes.

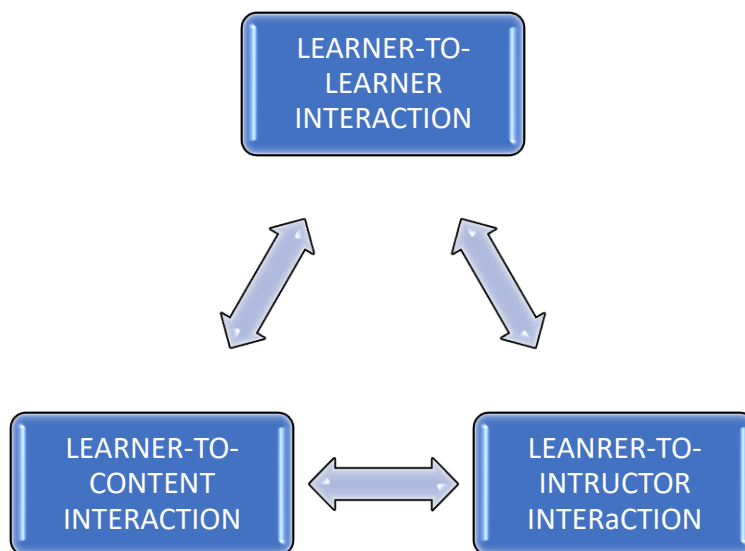


Figure 1- Conceptual Framework of the Study- Online Interactions in Islamic Studies

### Methodology

This quantitative research investigates how learners use cognitive and metacognitive strategies when they learn French as a foreign language. The instrument used is a survey adapted from (Martin and Bolliger, 2018). The 409 respondents from a public university were purposively chosen to answer the survey. The survey has three main sections. Concerning

Table 1, section A has items on the demographic profile. Section B has six items on learner-to-learner engagement, section C has eight items on learner-to-instructor engagement, and section D has eight items on learner-to-content engagement.

Table 1  
*Distribution of Items in Survey*

SECTION	CONSTRUCTS	NO. OF ITEMS
B	Learner-to-Learner Interaction	6
C	Learner-to-Instructor Interaction	8
D	Learner-to-Content Interaction	8
	Total Number of Items	22

Table 2  
*Result of Reliability Statistics*

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.937	22

Source: Author's calculation

Table 2 presents the reliability statistics for the instrument. SPSS analysis revealed a Cronbach alpha of .937, thus showing high internal reliability of the instrument used. Data is collected from 409 respondents online via the google form. Data is then analysed using SPSS version 26. Finally, the analysed data is presented in percentages and mean scores to answer the 2 research questions.

**Findings**

Findings for Demographic profile

Figure 2 shows the percentage of gender among respondents.

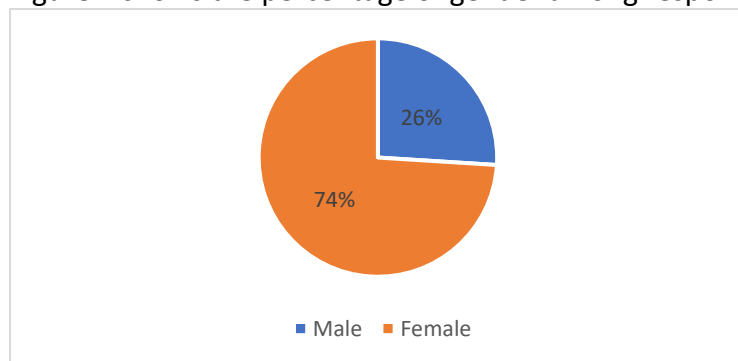


Figure 2- Percentage of Gender

Out of 409 individuals who had responded to the questionnaire, the majority were female with 74%, while male respondents were slightly lower at 26%.



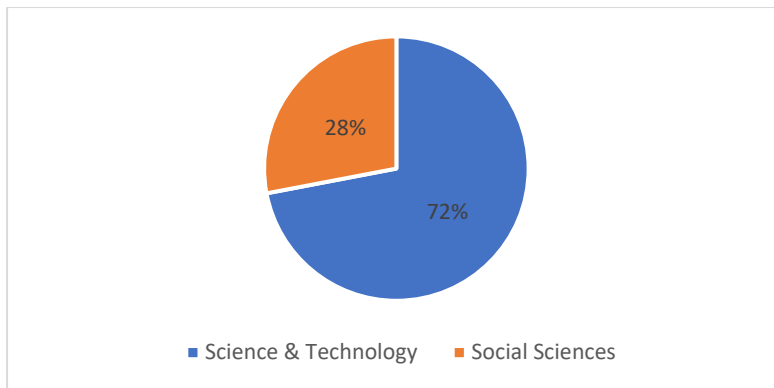


Figure 3- Percentage of Discipline

The above figure represents the percentage of respondents according to their academic discipline. Most of the respondents are from science and technology backgrounds, with 72% significantly higher than those from social sciences with only 28%.

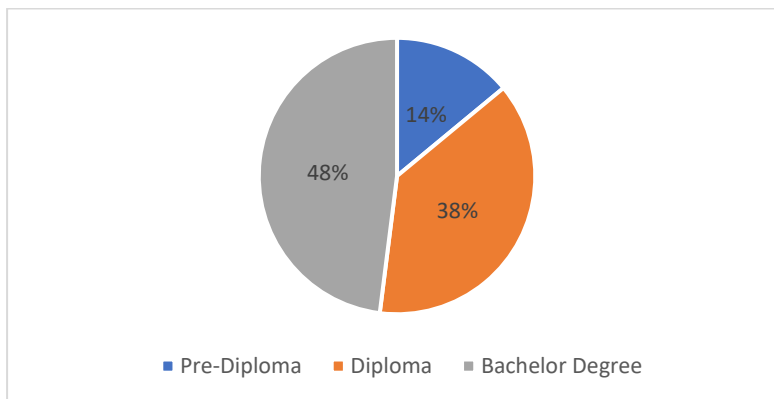


Figure 4- Percentage of Level of Study

Figure 4 explains the percentage of respondents from their level of study, namely pre-diploma, diploma and bachelor's degree. The highest respondents are those with a bachelor's degree, with 48%. While 38% of the respondents possessed a diploma, followed by a pre-diploma holder with 14%.

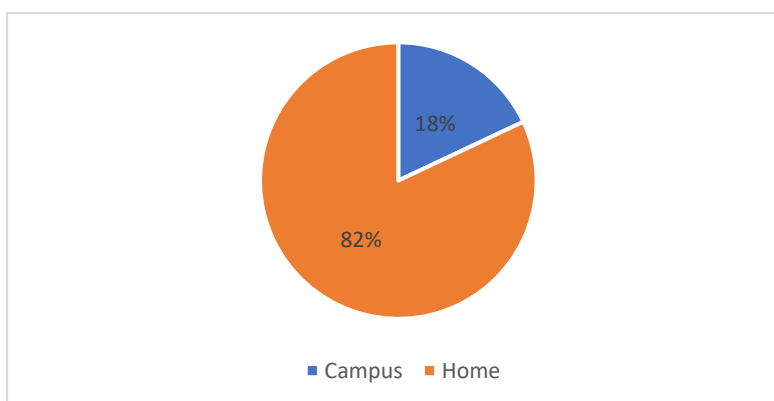


Figure 5- Percentage of Location during ODL

Figure 5 shows the results for location during ODL. Most students, 82% of 409 students, stay at home during their ODL classes. There are only 18% of them stay on campus during ODL.

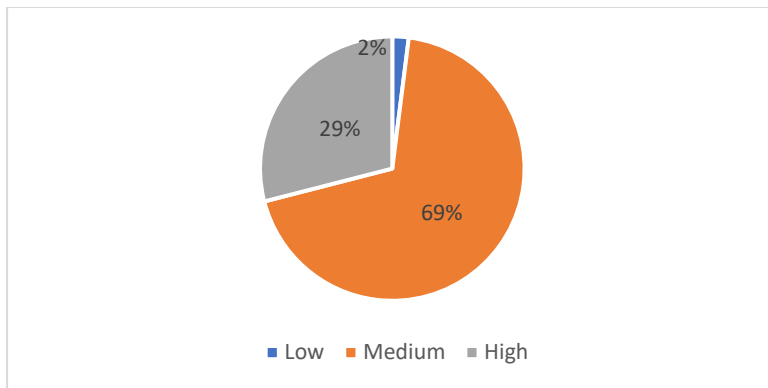


Figure 6- Percentage of Internet Access

Figure 6 reports the percentage of internet access among 409 students. 69% recorded a medium level of internet access, followed by 29% high level of internet access, and only 2% reported a low level of internet access. Thus, most students have a medium level of internet access during their ODL classes.

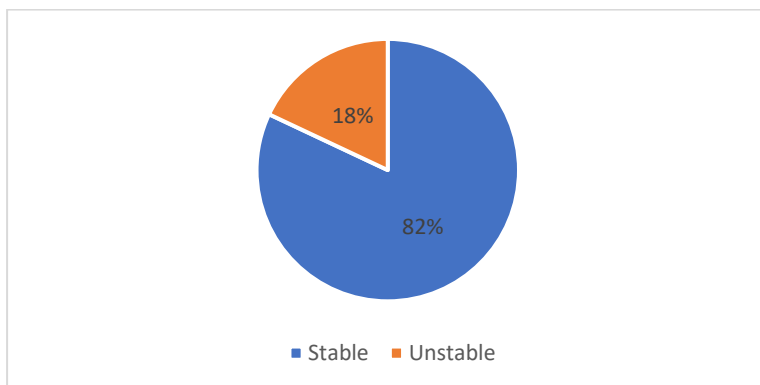


Figure 7- Percentage of Family Financial Situation

Figure 7 indicates the family financial situation among these 409 students. Most of the students, 82%, show they are from a stable family financial situation. Besides, 18% of these students report unstable family financial situations.

#### *Findings for learner-to-Instructor Interaction*

This section presents data to answer research question 1: How do learners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-instructor interaction online?

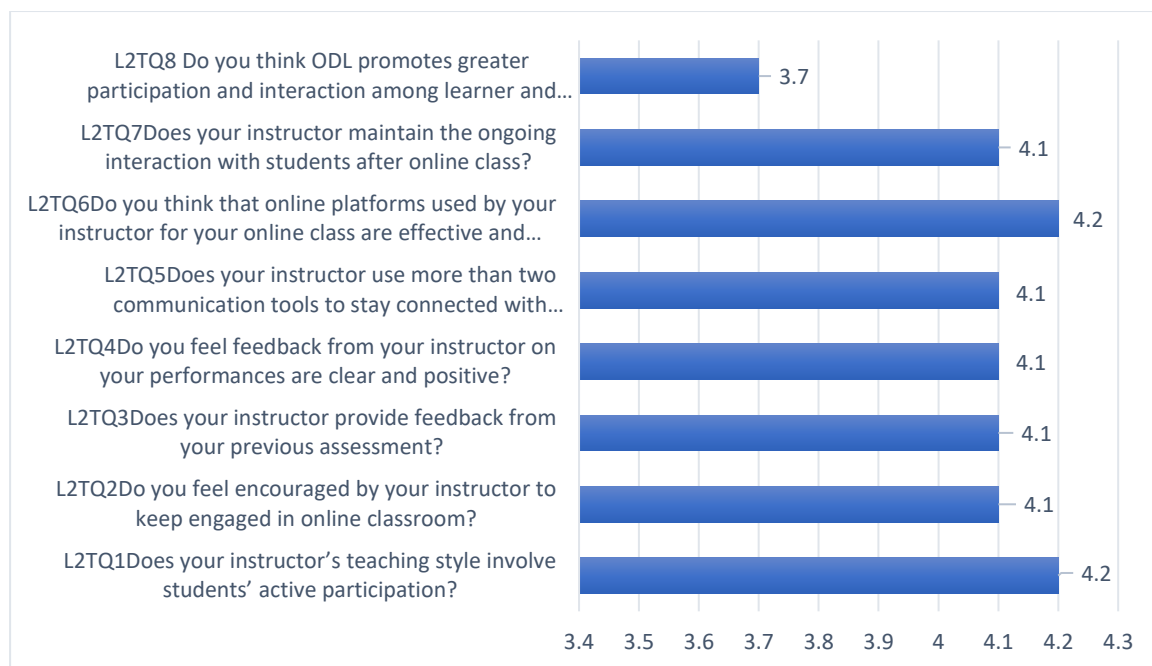


Figure 8- Mean for Learner-to-Instructor

This study utilizes the quantitative method to examine the undergraduates' Learner-To-Instructor Interaction. Quantitative research, as a rule, underscores measurement in the collection and analysis of data. A structured design of online questions based on recent literature is used for this study. Information analysis shows that most respondents (4.2) stated that instructors' teaching styles do involve students' active participation. Students feel encouraged by their instructors to keep engaged in their online classroom (4.1). The students express satisfaction with their prior evaluations at ODL. As their teachers use more than two communication methods to stay in touch with students, the results also demonstrate that students' experiences with the online platforms utilised by their instructor for their online class are practical and convenient. The mean score for ongoing interaction with students after online class is 4.1 and slightly increased to 4.2 for online platforms used by their instructors, which are practical and convenient. Respondents opted from average to agree to all the experiences ODL which promotes greater participation and interaction among learners and instructors.

#### *Findings for learner-to-learner Interaction*

This section presents data to answer research question 2: How do learners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-learner interaction online?



Figure 9- Mean for Learner-to-learner Interaction

The output in the table above presented the findings of SPSS analysis on the variable related to learner-to-learner interaction. Six statements of learner-to-learner interaction were given to the 409 respondents, 26 per cent male and 74 per cent female. The mean score of each six statements shows a value range between 3.8 to 4.2, indicating that the interaction among learners through online learning is moderate. Students rated each statement (on a 5-point scale), indicating their agreement with this statement. There is a positive interaction among the students through online learning, which support Zhu et al (2020) discovery that the participants' online learning attitudes are positive and improved after the course was completed. According to the students' responses, both synchronous and asynchronous instruction can incorporate student engagement with peers and the instructor if online learning design strategies are focused on enhancing students' capacity for self-regulated learning through adjustments to instructors' lecturing techniques, perspectives as educators, and assessment methods (Wilcox and Vignal, 2020).

*Findings for learner-to-content interaction*

This section presents data to answer research question 3: How do learners of Islamic studies perceive Learner-to-content interaction online?

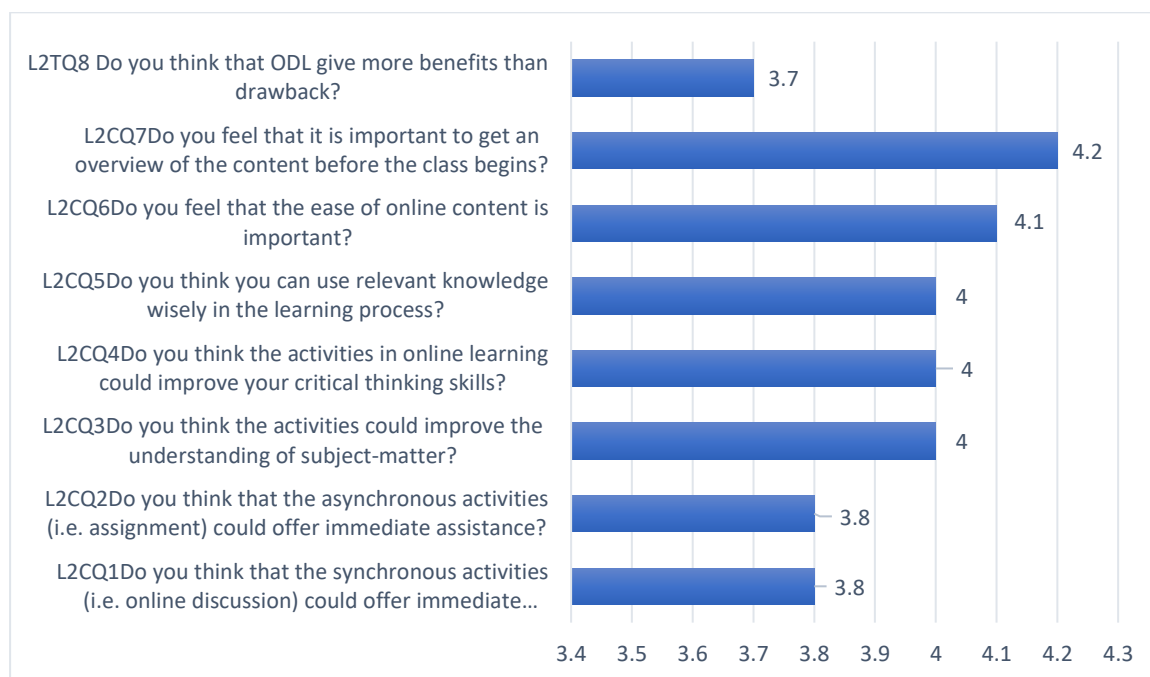


Figure 10- Mean for Learner-to-Content Interaction

Figure 10 presents the mean for a learner to content interaction during ODL. The highest mean is 4.2, and most respondents strongly agree that it is essential to get an overview of the content before the class begins. This is followed by a second higher mean with 4.1, about the importance of the ease of online content. Finally, the lowest mean is 3.7, which indicates that some respondents disagree with the statement that ODL gives more benefits than a drawback.

## Conclusion

### *Summary of Findings and Discussion*

This study conveys various respondent demographic information: male and female, from science and technology field and social sciences, including pre-diploma, diploma and degree level, students on campus and stay at home within online distance learning (ODL) period, with the majority of them have a medium level of internet access and most of them with a stable financial family situation. Based on the findings for learner-to-instructor interaction, this study found that most respondents agreed that the instructor's teaching style involves students' active participation. The online platforms used by your instructor for your online class are effective and convenient. However, the respondents less agreed that ODL promotes greater participation and interaction among learners and instructors.

For learner-to-learner interaction, the findings of this study show that most of the respondents preferred to be in the same group with their peers for online activities, and they agreed that peer support motivates them to finish tasks. Meanwhile, the respondent's feedback shows less agreement with the statement that collaborative learning promotes peer-to-peer understanding. Finally, to conclude the findings for learner-to-content

interaction, most respondents agreed that getting an overview of the content is essential before the class begins. They also less agreed with the thought that ODL gives more benefits than a drawback.

Table 3

*Total mean for all Online Interaction*

Learner-to-instructor	4.08
Learner-to-learner	4.02
Learner-to-content	3.95

From table 3, the highest mean is learner-to-instructor with 4.08, followed by learner-to-learner with 4.2 and the lowest mean is 3.95, which is the learner-to-content section. The results show that the most beneficial interaction among students is with their lecturers in learning and teaching Islamic studies online. It illustrates that students still rely on their instructors even though their learning is based on the online session. This finding follows the findings by Hassan et al (2021), who found that the highest aspect contributing to the effectiveness of online sessions is the motivational strategy used by the lecturer.

*Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Future Research*

In conclusion, the role of instructors throughout online learning sessions is considered the most important aspect that contributes to the session's effectiveness. Thus, the sessions must be conducted by well-prepared strategies planned by the lectures, avoiding the application of total freedom of learning among students. Students must deepen their knowledge more independently without depending on their lecturers to give them everything. Their motivation to seek knowledge will be conducted through a more compelling online learning session. The students should utilize borderless technology to enrich their knowledge.

Meanwhile, there is a need to improvise the content. As a result shows, the lowest mean is learner-to-content interaction. It shows that within online learning sessions, students need several contents, such as materials and activities, which will assist them in understanding lessons more. It will be challenging for lecturers to provide them with suitable online content creatively. Therefore, this study suggests continuous skills enhancement in delivering online sessions among lecturers. Due to the online learning methodology being widely used lately and both students and lecturers becoming more convenient with the learning method, there is a need for further studies about online interactions. It is important to know whether their frequent uses and familiarity with that method will contribute to different findings regarding learner-to-instructor, learner-to-learner and learner-to-content interactions.

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