

ESL Learners' Perceptions of Online Learning in a Tertiary Institute

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Abstract

The study explores how learners view the benefits and challenges faced in implementing online learning in ESL classrooms. 53 learners from a private university in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia, were selected to be participants. An adapted questionnaire from a previous study was used to collect data via the Google form. This study employs a quantitative methodology, and the SPSS software was used to analyse the data collected. The findings showed that most learners acknowledged that the introduction of online learning caused obstacles for them. The results reflected learners' unbiased views on the benefits of integrating online learning into ESL institutions. The learners also have difficulty in learning online, and lecturers need to adapt their teaching methods and techniques to address this issue. The study recommends that online learning requires improved resources and technological support from the institution's management.

Keywords: online learning, ESL learners' perceptions, Covid-19

1. Introduction

In many nations around the world, there has been a surge in the usage of online classes and learning. Education is more convenient and available to everyone thanks to the internet. Malaysia's education sector is one that is constantly expanding. Learning activities that were previously carried out in the classroom using the face-to-face technique were transferred to the online learning system. Malaysian educational institutions shifted to an online teaching environment shortly after the Union Government announced a nationwide lockdown in March 2020 (Landau,2020).

Since schools and colleges have been shuttered indefinitely, educational institutions and students are experimenting with alternative methods of completing their allocated curricula within the time frame given by the academic calendar. Most colleges have moved to an online mode during this time, employing Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, Zoom, or other online platforms. The critical concern of the implication is the quality of learning, which is closely tied to how well the content is developed and implemented. The success of learning also depends on how content is curated for the online context and on identifying and addressing students' limits. These procedures have undoubtedly caused some discomfort. However, they have also inspired fresh examples of educational innovation utilising digital interventions (Muthuprasad Aiswarya, Aditya, & Jha,2020).

This is a silver lining given the slow pace of academic reforms, which maintain lecture-based instruction, institutional prejudices, and outmoded classrooms. Nonetheless, COVID-19 has prompted educational institutions worldwide to try novel techniques at short notice. In such a situation, online learning is the only way and initiative to carry out learning without a physical meeting between teacher and student (Mohd Salleh et al., 2020). In fact, online learning is implemented almost everywhere in the world during the Covid-19 pandemic (Dong et al., 2020).

The findings of some previous studies have shown the positive side of online learning. The stigma of the quality of online learning is still low compared to face-to-face learning and cannot be eliminated (Charles Hodges et al., 2020). In a study conducted by Dong et al. (2020) found that perception and the readiness of parents and teachers for online learning are still at a low-level low. Many teachers are still not ready to equip themselves with the skills to implement online learning and many learners do not have the opportunity to learn online. Thus, they likely face constraints and challenges in implementing online learning (Yahaya et al., 2020).

Lately, there have been many studies and discussions about online learning conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is still no specific study to get the learners perception of deep learning lines run in Malaysia. Therefore, the researcher feels that a study about this should be carried out for other researchers to gain more comprehensive knowledge for improving online learning quality. This study's primary goal is to learn more about how learners perceive the benefits and challenges of using online learning in ESL classes. The following questions were answered to fulfil this study's objectives:

1. What are the benefits of Online Learning during Covid 19 in an ESL classroom?
2. What challenges do learners face during online learning implementation during Covid 19?

2. Literature Review

A learning experience is considered to be online learning if it is carried out in person either synchronously or asynchronously utilising devices or gadgets that have a connection to the internet (Bani, 2020). Aside from that, the term "online learning" can also be described as a teaching strategy that makes use of various forms of electronic media to convey information (Norliza A. Rahim, 2013).

According to studies, online education serves as a catalyst for capable self-learning and produces students who are independent, innovative, and more flexible (Vespanathan, 2015). Under these conditions, students are free to choose what they want to learn, to be located wherever, and to be prepared to participate in online activities to communicate with their teachers and friends (Baharuddin et al., 2020).

This is similar to the online learning theory, which asserts that because electronic media provide a learning environment based on the principle of "just-in-time" with the competence of "anywhere, anytime, anyone," students have a better ability to control their own learning through collaborative learning opportunities, interactive learning, and private learning (Talesra et al. 2003; Karoulis et al. 2004). This theory says that collaborative learning opportunities and interactive learning allow students to better control their own learning.

Technology has advanced and made online learning simple and straightforward (Irawan et al., 2020). Online education includes open, distance, e-learning, computer-based, and blended education (Muhamad Azhar Stapa et al., 2017). A device linked to the internet is required for all these learning methods, allowing students to learn at any time and from any location (Cojacariu et al., 2014).

Abroad, many studies have been carried out concerning online learning. For example, Kim's (2020) study, which is a descriptive study, examines how teachers use online learning to conduct teaching courses during the COVID-19 season. Lee (2020) in Korea and Giri & Dutta (2020) in India conducted a research on teaching Chemistry courses at universities and concluded that teaching experience is still limited in terms of integrating teaching and learning on an online platform.

Means, Bakia, and Murphy (2014) conducted a study on the efficacy of online learning. They concluded that the efficiency of online learning is impacted by the environment in which it is implemented and the capabilities of students who engage with technology. According to the research conducted by Dabbagh (2007), specific requirements must be met before an online student can successfully follow the learning method. These requirements include an established academic self-concept, an appreciation for opportunities to learn that are dependent on technology, independent learning skills, and the ability to communicate and collaborate online.

According to Ehwan Ngadi (2020), who is based in Malaysia, the three primary implications of COVID-19 that are seen as a significant challenge for educators to manage online learning are emotional management and holistic assessment, Internet accessibility and the stability of the teaching platform. These are all seen as significant challenges. According to the research by Muhammad Faizal and colleagues (2020), intrinsic and extrinsic factors should be given more consideration, particularly in the context of technology usage.

Rapanta et al. (2020) found that the design of learning activities demanded changes to meet the requirements of the new assessment norms of post-Covid-19 learning. A study by Verma et al. (2020) found that the learners assumed their lecturers were not friendly with technology, had not mastered interactive teaching, and faced technical distractions in managing their teaching activities. Moralista and Oducado (2020) also found that although the lecturers in their study have technological competence, they insist they do not have the training to handle online teaching. Internet services and access are also said to be unstable.

Herliandry's study (2020), on the other hand, concludes that online learning methods are a practical solution during the COVID-19 outbreak. A study in India conducted by Muthuprasad et al. (2020) on Indian agriculture students' perceptions of online education and the many aspects that could make online learning more effective and successful. Sudrajat's study (2020) also looked at the competence of teaching staff in online learning management during COVID-19 and found that teachers successfully perform tasks. However, a lack demands the need to empower energy competence instructors. Che Azizan & Mohamad's (2020) study examined 351 teachers' views on using the Home Based learning approach during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study shows that most teachers have a favourable view of online learning but acknowledge that they face various challenges in implementing learning online

Learners' interest, motivation, critical and creative thinking, and knowledge and interactivity among learners can be improved through online learning (Shafinah Mamat, 2020). However, in a time of crisis like the current pandemic, teachers have no choice but to overhaul the country's educational system to emphasise more profound learning. Teachers and learners should be aware of some of the drawbacks of online education, so their enthusiasm for it does not wane even further.

It is essential to prioritise online learning quality while building online courses. The syllabus does not necessitate the use of learning methods. Even so, it is the responsibility of teachers during the outbreak to provide their learners with an effective alternative that is in line with 21st-century educational practices. For this reason, teachers need to think outside the box when promoting discussion and exchanging ideas among their learners (Syed Lamsah Syed Chear & Melor Md Yunus, 2019).

3. Method

This section provides a concise overview of the research methodology and the participants who participated in this study. In addition, the specifics of the instrument as well as the processes that were followed in order to gather the data and analyse it are supplied below.

3.1 Research Design

A quantitative method was applied for this investigation, namely the descriptive survey method. According to Cresswell & Cresswell (2018), it is the study of a population sample using questionnaires or structured interviews as data collection devices to explain trends, attitudes, or opinions numerically or quantitatively. This strategy also makes it possible to extrapolate findings from a small sample to the entire population (Fowler, 2008). As a result,

this study used a questionnaire, one of the most commonly used instruments in this design, to collect data based on a group of private college learners' viewpoints.

3.2 Research Participants

The participants in the study were 53 learners who took English classes at a private institution in Petaling Jaya, Malaysia. It includes 32 female (60.3%) and 21 male (39.6%). The majority of the samples were degree students (33.96%), followed by diploma students (30.19%), while the remainder were PhD students (28.30%) and Masters's students (5.66%). The learners were from different modes of study and in different years of study at the institution. They were studying through online classes for a semester

The purposive sampling method is a sampling strategy in which participants are purposefully chosen because of the characteristics they possess that satisfy the study's entrance requirements. The learners were selected to meet the study's purpose of determining how learners perceive online learning in ESL courses. As a result, selecting study participants from within the current crop of learners is an appropriate strategy.

There are many ways to sample for a research project; the most common is "purposive sampling," which is also known as "selected or subjective sampling." This sampling approach relies on participants who can and will provide needed information based on their knowledge or experience, which is decided by researchers (Etikan et al., 2016).

3.3 Research Instrument

In order to address the study questions, a modified questionnaire was employed to gather data. The questionnaire was created based on Khaliah Ramli et al. (2020). The adapted questionnaire was verified by two experts where the researchers is attached to. The items were altered to suit the study's goals better. To begin with, the questions in the questionnaire were geared toward undergraduate and postgraduate learners at a private institution.

There were three sections to the questions on the survey. The samples' descriptive data are presented in the first section, which includes two components. The second is the benefits of Online Learning which has eight elements, while the final is the challenges of Online Learning, which has eight items. A five-point Likert scale, with one representing 'strongly disagree' to five representing 'strongly agree', was used in the questionnaire.

3.4 Data Collection

Procedures for collecting quantitative data were utilised throughout the course of this research (Creswell, 2012). Both the participants in the study and the platform used to gather data were chosen. After that, a questionnaire that had been used in a previous study was adapted in order to answer the research questions. Afterwards, the questionnaire was distributed electronically using Google Form because doing so is practical, risk-free, and easy to do (Torrentira, 2020). The researchers ensured that the participant questionnaire had information on consent. As a result, every individual who filled out the questionnaire gave their informed consent to participate in the research. Statistical software was used to do a quantitative analysis of the data that was collected.

3.5 Data Analysis

The responses the respondents gave in the Google form were examined descriptively to gather the required data and understand how the learners feel about online learning. The questionnaire inquired about and measured a variety of factors, including the perceptions of Esl learners towards integrating online learning into the structure of ESL classrooms. The IBM Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) v.23 was used to analyse the gathered data. For this study, a descriptive analysis was performed to address the first and second research question. In descriptive analysis, statistics as frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation are used. The mean and standard deviation of responses represented learners' perceptions of the benefits and challenges of online learning.

4. Findings

4.1 Benefits of Online Learning Implementation

Table 1 represent learners' review of the benefits of online learning implementation in the ESL classroom using mean and standard deviation. The benefits were ranked from most to least based on the estimated mean and standard deviation.

Table 1 shows that the majority of learners had neutral opinions of the benefits of incorporating online learning in ESL classrooms, meaning that they neither agreed nor disagreed with all of the assertions. The most frequently acknowledged benefit of using online learning in ESL courses is its convenience. The least commonly claimed benefit, on the other hand, is that online learning fosters more understanding than physical classroom learning.

Table 1. Learners' Perception of The Benefits of Online Learning Implementation in ESL Classrooms

No	Item	N	Mean	SD
1.	Online Learning is very convenient	53	3.70	1.29
2.	Online Learning enables me to accomplish tasks more easily	53	3.60	1.03
3.	Online learning promotes greater student participation	53	2.62	1.11
4.	Online Learning promotes better understanding compared to classroom	53	2.53	1.14
5.	Online Learning improves my performance academically	53	2.92	1.03
6.	Online Learning caters to individual needs	53	3.21	1.13
7.	Online Learning improves learning process	53	3.04	1.11
8.	Online Learning promotes engagement between classmates	53	2.49	1.28
	Average Mean		3.14	1.14

(Level: Very low= 1.00- 1.80, Low= 1.81- 2.60, Moderate= 2.61- 3.40, High= 3.41- 4.20, Very high= 4.21- 5.00)

Table 1, shows the distribution of mean values and standard deviations by items in the variables for learners' perception on the implementation of online learning. Findings show that the overall average of the items has a mean value, and the standard deviation above the scale is average, that is, between the mean value of 2.61-3.40. The mean average of all items in Table 1 was 3.14 (s.p = 1.14). This indicates that the level of learners' perception of the implementation of online learning is at an average level.

Item 1, which states that online learning is very convenient, had the highest degree of agreement with regard to the benefits of online learning (M= 3.70, SD= 1.29). This was followed by Item 2, online learning enables them to accomplish tasks more easily than classroom learning, with a mean and standard deviation of (M= 3.60, SD = 1.03). The next item for high agreement level was Item 6 on the statement that online learning improves their academic performance (M= 3.60, SD = 1.03). According to the findings, Item 7 reported with (M= 3.04, SD = 1.13). It was revealed that learners do agree with the statement that online learning benefits their learning process.

Item 8, online learning promotes engagement between classmates, was the least scored benefit of implementing online learning (M=2.49, SD=1.11). This is followed by Item 4, online learning promotes better understanding compared to classroom learning. It scored a Mean of 2.53 and an SD of 1.14. The above items scored the least compared to the other items.

By and large, the vast majority of the learners held neutral opinions related to the benefits of incorporating online learning into ESL classrooms, indicating that they were neither in agreement nor disagreement with all of the claims. The benefit of online learning being implemented in ESL classrooms that were mentioned the most frequently was that it is very convenient. In contrast, the benefit mentioned the least frequently was that online learning promotes better understanding compared to learning in a physical classroom.

4.2 Challenges of Online Learning Implementation

Table Part 2 shows the distribution of mean values and standard deviations by items in the variables for learners' perception of the challenges of implementing online learning. Findings show that the overall average of the items has a mean value, and the standard deviation above the scale is high, between the mean value of 3.41-4.20. The mean average of all items in Table 1 was 3.53 (s.p = 1.06). This indicates the learners' perception of the challenges of implementing online learning is at a high level.

Table 2. Learners' Perception of The Challenges of The Implementation on Online Learning

No	Item	N	Mean	SD
1.	Online learning is not too favourable among learners as	53	3.70	1.14

	learners prefer classroom learning situations.			
2.	Online learning is difficult for learners as lecturers' instructions are unclear.	53	3.45	1.01
3.	Online learning could demotivate learners as learners do not know what criteria they will be assessed.	53	3.49	1.01
4.	Online learning is difficult for those who need assistance in learning from the lecturer.	53	4.00	1.16
5.	Online learning decreases learners' motivation to learn because of the lack of formality in the teaching process.	53	3.43	0.97
6.	Online learning makes it difficult for learners to retain information.	53	2.98	1.08
7.	Online learning is difficult because learners tend not to participate in the learning process.	53	3.79	1.04
8.	Online learning is difficult as there tends to be a single-student- domination.	53	3.38	1.04
	Average Mean		3.53	1.04

(Level: Very low= 1.00- 1.80, Low= 1.81- 2.60, Moderate= 2.61- 3.40, High= 3.41- 4.20, Very high= 4.21- 5.00)

The majority of learners said that they agreed with item 4, which stated that they found it challenging to learn online because they needed assistance in learning from the lecturer. This item scored a mean value of 4.00 and a standard deviation of 1.16. The assertion that online learning is difficult because learners tend not to participate in the learning process scored the second highest ($M=3.79$, $SD= 1.04$), followed by item 1, with the score of $M= 3.70$, $SD= 1.14$. Online learning is not too favourable among learners since they prefer classroom learning situations.

The least performing item was item 5; online learning makes it difficult for learners to retain information. This item scored a mean value of 2.98 and a standard deviation value of 1.08. The second least reported challenge is item 8 ($M= 3.38$, $SD= 1.04$). Learners found online learning difficult since there is a tendency for a single student to dominate the conversation.

Based on the statements, the majority of the learners agreed on the challenges of using online learning in ESL classes. The most frequently mentioned challenge with online learning is that it is tough for learners who require aid learning from the lecturers. Meanwhile, the least discussed challenge is that online learning makes it difficult for learners to remember the material taught.

5. Discussion

5.1 Benefits of Online Learning

According to this research, one of the benefits of online education is that it can be tailored to the learner's needs. Learners have varying requirements for what they need from a learning environment, much like a conventional classroom. Learners who pursue their education through online means are not required to be physically present at a school to participate in class. According to (Alchamdani et al., 2020) the deployment of online learning is a new experience that presents flexibility and ease of learning without coming to campus. This is in line with their opinion. As long as they have access to a reliable internet connection, learners are free to participate in class whenever and wherever they choose. Learners are not required to regularly visit the campus which also complies with the suggestions made by the government to avoid congregating in large groups to break the spread of coronavirus.

Next, learners agreed on item 5, in which they are able to accomplish tasks more easily through online learning. Online classes also allow learners to work at their own pace. Throughout their time spent learning online, this facilitated the learners' ability to complete the assignments and participate in the activities more effectively. This means that some learners might require additional time depending on how quickly they learn. These needs could be met with online learning, and this idea is supported by a study by Bailey and Lee (2020), which found that learners in online classes can get more time to prepare for answers than they would in a traditional classroom setting.

The learners appeared to agree that online educational activities enhanced their overall learning experience. The content sharing of learning materials and assessments was made available throughout the deployment of online learning at the institution using the university software, which was beneficial for the learner's learning process. A study by Allo (2020) confirms this belief, which indicated that learners thought online learning systems could satisfy all of their needs.

5.2 Challenges of Online Learning

The lack of face-to-face interaction between learners and lecturers in an online classroom might be a turnoff for some learners. Some of the learners think that online classes are boring since they can't talk to their classmates and professors like they can in person. In online classes, the assignments from lecturers are more difficult to complete. Learners are required to conduct additional work, such as creating and submitting photographs and videos, downloading materials, and uploading finished projects.

Not only that, learners get eye fatigue staring at the screen of their smartphone or laptop for a number of hours every day. A low level of participation from learners also occurred because it can be difficult for them to concentrate on the screen of the zoom meeting when the lecture is giving the explanation, especially when they are not in an atmosphere that is conducive to learning and there are a lot of distractions around them.

When considered from the perspective of its flaws, it is discovered that it lessens the amount of interaction between lecturers and learners and is solely reliant on technological instruments,

which is in line with item 4. According to Brown (2017), the fact that lecturers and learners receive their assignments and feedback via the internet has significantly reduced face-to-face interaction in traditional classroom settings. This has evolved into a vulnerability that the respondents have highlighted.

Therefore, excessive reliance on technology becomes the primary shortcoming of the distance learning approach. If there is a problem with either the software or the hardware, the following class session will be terminated, which may interfere with the learning process. In addition, because of the nature of the complex technology utilised in distance learning, online education can only be made available to learners who are competent in computers and technology.

6. Conclusion

This research was carried out in Malaysia at a higher institution with the purpose of determining how learners there feel about the use of online learning. This study also aims to investigate the benefits and challenges that come with utilising online education for teaching ESL learners. The findings of the study have shown that it is important for teachers to be selective about the types, materials, platforms, and methods of online learning that are used for student learning sessions because it has a great potential to determine whether or not online learning is successful.

The implementation of online learning is not limited to completing the syllabus only. It can model and improve various skills necessary for learners. Online learning may be the new norm during the pandemic as is currently the case. However, the benefits and importance that can be obtained from online learning is deep and should be used to the maximum.

In this pandemic era, the findings from this research can serve as a reference for educators, lecturers, schools, and other institutions in their efforts to enhance the model, strategies, and overall quality of online learning, as well as for other researchers in their pursuit of additional knowledge concerning online learning

Limitations

According to the experiences that the researchers had during the research process, there are a few issues that should concern future researchers to refine and improve their future research. One of these issues is that there were only 53 people who participated in the survey and the findings therefore could not be generalized to a larger population. It goes without saying that this does not adequately represent the current circumstances because learners are still unfamiliar with some online learning models, lecturers must pay particular attention to managing learners while learning. This is a new experience for learners in implementing complete online learning. In addition, during the process of retrieving the data, the information that respondents offer about themselves through surveys may not always reflect the respondents' accurate opinions. This occurs because each respondent may have their own unique set of thoughts, assumptions, and understandings, in addition to other considerations such as whether or not they were honest when filling out the questionnaire with their responses to their opinions.

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