

Virtual Learning Among ESL Teachers in Malaysian secondary schools during COVID-19

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Abstract This study aimed at investigating challenges and perceptions of virtual learning among ESL teachers in secondary schools during the pandemic, COVID-19. A quantitative research method was used that used a survey for data collection. The instrument involved was a questionnaire created using Google Forms and distributed via social media. The sample was selected randomly and comprised 50 secondary school English language teachers in Malaysia. A descriptive analysis was carried out using SPSS software 2.5 to find the overall level of agreement in terms of frequencies and percentages. The findings showed a positive indication of English language teachers' challenges and perceptions of online teaching, whereby they managed to overcome the technical issues and improved time management in teaching virtually. However, there were a few problems that needed to be addressed, especially pertaining to equitable network coverage. The authorities need to provide ample support for technological innovations to assist both teachers and learners in achieving meaningful online teaching and learning. This study inspires future research to explore the challenges of online teaching and learning in the Malaysian education system. This could help schools, teachers, and the community work for improvement to optimise the outcomes of online learning in the future.

Keywords: COVID-19, perceptions, virtual learning

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 has had significant changes in the universe of instruction, particularly with the incorporation of data and correspondence innovation (ICT) to support the educational and learning measures. According to Mohd Razuan (2020), English teachers' readiness for online teaching needs to be addressed, especially with regard to equitable network coverage and facilities, implying the need for the authorities to provide ample support and innovations to assist both teachers and learners in achieving meaningful online learning. A study by Laar, Deursen, Dijk, and Haan (2017) found that advanced electronic correspondence innovation is a vital factor in a 21st-century learning climate and it is important to get educators to utilize innovation in their homerooms, subsequently, a couple of endeavours have been made to fuse the utilization of innovation and execute online teaching including to give learning the board frameworks (LMS) as stages to regulate and keep track on the informative cycle directed on the web.

To understand these objectives, numerous nations have begun to incorporate 21st-century abilities identified with the current financial and social turns of events, which incorporate cooperation, correspondence, computerized proficiency, citizenship, critical thinking, basic reasoning, innovativeness, and usefulness (Voogt, Erstad, Dede and Mishra, 2013) into their educational plan and schooling frameworks, to change the instructing and learning measure into significant and reformist encounters for the students to be autonomous. These progressions require more openings for students to use ICT; innovations with no limit to information and data, subsequently making information and abilities to utilize these advances, even more, a fundamental need instead of extra expertise to obtain. Regardless of the tremendous and different meanings of 21st-century abilities by scientists and teachers, they by and large allude to the abilities as expected to adapt to the current changes particularly in its attention on innovation, advanced work, just as utilizations of information (Anagün, 2018). A precise writing survey by Laar, Deursen, Dijk, and Haan (2017) found that advanced electronic correspondence innovation is a vital factor in a 21st-century learning climate and it is important to get educators to utilize innovation in their homerooms, subsequently, a couple of endeavours have been made to fuse the utilization of innovation and execute online teaching and picking up, including to give learning the board frameworks (LMS) as stages to regulate and keep track on the informative cycle directed on the web.

Previous research on challenges in online teaching and learning has shown that they are critical, and yet, after more than a year, ESL teachers in some parts of Malaysia continue to face difficulties. Therefore, this study aims to find the answer to a research question: What are the perceptions of English language teachers regarding online teaching during the COVID-19 outbreak?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The unexpected COVID pandemic incident, also known as COVID-19, shook the whole world in mid-2020. In December 2019, Wuhan, China, made it famous for the first time, after which it surprisingly expanded over the world. Legislators and authorities in many countries have responded to the widespread flare-up with serious measures like travel restrictions, lockdowns, and the closure of buildings and offices like shopping malls, amusement parks, government buildings, colleges, and universities, as well as schools, as part of the effort to control the infection's long-term spread, which worsens and upends our economy and society.

Regardless of the positive criticism of online learning, a few educators saw the absence of time as a hindrance to the execution of online learning (Cheok et al., 2017), as they were

needed to shuffle between the customary showing strategy with the new proposed online teaching. Subsequently, the objective of this investigation is to distinguish the difficulties looking by instructors while leading virtual showing whenever they as of now were offered full chance to investigate, ace, and thus direct the exercises on the web, as an option in contrast to educating and learning measure similarly as the thing they have been encountering since the primary day of the imprisonment during the COVID 19 episode.

Internet learning is not, at this point, another wonder in the training framework. Truth be told, the development of innovation in our regular daily existence has encouraged a basic requirement for advanced learning and computerized study hall. A lot of studies, for instance, relating to instructors' preparation to lead online exercises (Kumar et al., 2020; Cheok et al., 2017; Norazlin, 2018; Thi et al., 2017), tracked down a huge outcome showing positive criticism and acknowledgment from the educators. Notwithstanding confronting obstructions like lacking of time, offices, and abilities, educators saw online learning as valuable in making incredible premium among understudies and aiding in making their showing position simpler (Cheok, et al., 2017). With appropriately satisfactory preparation, help, and backing from the school, they are ready to execute internet learning in their study halls.

Mayoob (2020) contends that the COVID-19 epidemic is to blame for the difficulties and barriers faced by English language learners (ELL) at Science and Arts College, Alula, and Taibah University, Saudi Arabia, when they move to online learning in the second semester of 2020. This investigation's aim is to analyse the students' first experiences with online learning and the viability of virtual learning methodologies. It has been shown that the main difficulties that influence and hinder online EFL learning during COVID-19 are related to professional, academic, and communication difficulties. The findings of the study indicate that the majority of EFL students are unsatisfied with continuing with online learning since they were unable to achieve the expected development in language learning execution.

The Ministry of Education has developed a number of online learning platforms at the school level (in both mandatory and optional schools), such as the former Frog VLE (Virtual Learning Environments) and the present learning framework (LMS) known as Google Classroom; both serve as the mechanisms for teachers to digitise their teaching. However, instructors' perception of the extensive time needed has evolved into a significant barrier to internet showing, demotivating them to carry out this development (Cheok, et al., 2017).

The COVID-19 pandemic altered every aspect of online education, particularly ESL (English as a Second Language), which has been moved to e-learning in the majority of universities around the world. Therefore, the study's primary focus is on the difficulties and barriers that were encountered online during the epidemic and what needs to be done to facilitate overcoming them. Other concerns of integrating technology into conventional teaching and learning have already been looked into and covered by a number of research and projects.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions that guide the study are:

- a. What are the challenges faced by ESL teachers in secondary schools while conducting online teaching during COVID 19 outbreak?
- b. What is the perception of English language teachers regarding online teaching during COVID-19 outbreak?

METHODOLOGY

This study used a cross-sectional survey to gather data from a sample of 50 secondary school English language teachers in Malaysia as part of a quantitative research design. A self-administered questionnaire was utilised to collect data about the attitudes of virtual learning among ESL teachers in Malaysian secondary schools during the COVID-19 outbreak in minimising issues such respondents' inability or unwillingness to reply.

RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS

The information was gathered using a questionnaire. To avoid problems such as inability or unwillingness to answer among the respondents, a self-administered questionnaire was used as the survey instrument to elicit information identify the challenges faced by ESL teachers in secondary schools while conducting online teaching during COVID 19 outbreak and their perception towards online teaching. The questionnaire was adapted and modified from survey on online and distance learning from School Education Gateway but modified according to this research study. The questionnaire was divided into 3 sections named alphabetically from A to C. Section A contains items that elicit demographic details about the respondents. Section B and C were prepared as sets of statements to be rated using a five-point Likert scale that allows the respondents to express their level of agreement, which ranges from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). The choice made by the respondents would describe their challenges for different aspects. The final section C was meant for further investigating the ESL teachers' perception towards online teaching to see whether there was any similarity or difference in their perception. Therefore, a simple questionnaire was given.

DATA ANALYSIS

A descriptive analysis was carried out to find the overall level of agreement in terms of frequency and percentage for each construct to analyse and interpret challenges perception. These data were then further analysed to identify the respondents' challenges for online teaching. Other than that, a comparison was made between the number and percentage of the respondents' perception towards the online teaching too.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

i) The challenges faced by ESL teachers in secondary schools while conducting online teaching during COVID 19 outbreak.

ii) The perception of English language teachers regarding online teaching during COVID 19 outbreak.

Due to pandemic COVID-19, it was mandatory for teachers to conduct virtual teaching and learning for the students. It was the first attempt, and they faced challenges in order to have effective virtual teaching. According to teachers, they were not given a proper assistant for this virtual teaching. Teachers were only based on their knowledge started their online teaching and learning. Secondary school ESL teachers also mentioned that they faced some issues, such as internet connection, materials, and students' attendance. Every teacher has their own perception of online learning based on their teaching environment.

The demographic information about the respondents is described in Table 1. It reflects general observation of ESL teachers involved in this research, concerning aspects like gender, age group, and teaching experience and no further investigation was made pertaining to this information. Since this study aims to identify ESL teachers’ challenges for online teaching in general, no specifications were made in terms of levels or schools they taught, their school geographical location, and language skills taught during the online teaching.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Respondents

		Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Male	12	24.0
	Female	38	76.0
Age	20 – 29	38	76.0
	30 – 39	9	18.0
	40 – 49	3	6.0
	1 – 5	7	14.0
	6 – 10	20	40.0
Teaching Experience	11 – 15	9	18.0
	16 – 20	9	18.0
	21 – 25	1	2.0
	26 – 30	3	6.0
	More than 30	1	2.0
Total		50	100

A total of 50 English teachers responded to the survey, of whom 8 (76%) were female and 12 (24%) were male. The age of most of the respondents was 20 to 29 years which is 76% and the teaching experience of them was 6 to 10 years. These figures show that the average respondents were experienced teachers and with about 9 years of teaching experience, they were teachers of DG41 and DG42 grade who are supposed to be able to direct and positively manipulate the instructional process on their own. They can be very active and creative in online teaching and play an important role to guide younger and newer teachers in the profession.

Challenges faced by ESL teachers

Teachers’ challenges conducting online lessons is represented by statements teachers’ challenges in Media and ICT, Communication, Teaching Pedagogical, motivation and assessment and time management and organisation level. ESL teachers are facing some challenges and obstacles in the online teaching and learning. There are few aspects that involves in this issue. In the survey some of it were mentioned for the respondents to respond. An online teaching and learning also requires a more critical and careful process as it involves few different parts to be consider.

Table 2: Teachers' Challenges in Media and ICT

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral / Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Teachers' access to technology (computers, software, stable Internet connection)	3	2.0	1	4.0	25	36.0	14	38	16	20
Pupils' access to technology	3	6.0	1	2.0	25	50.0	14	28.0	6	12.0
Average		2.5		3		43		33		16

Teachers' access to technology (computers, software, stable Internet connection) showing that 38% of respondents agreed to teachers' access to technology for example computers, software, stable internet, and connection. Very few respondents disagree with the item. It shows that, teachers are quite comfortable and less challenged in accessing the platform to do online teaching. Pupils' access to technology showing that 50% of respondents neutral to pupils' access to technology. About 28% agreed to the item. It shows that, teachers are facing challenges upon students' technology knowledge to learn through the online lesson.

Table 3: Teachers' Challenges in Communication

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral / Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Communicating with pupils	1	2.0	8	16.0	21	42.0	15	30	5	10
Communicating with parents/caregivers	9	18.0	23	46.0	13.0	26.0	5	10.0	0	0
Average		10		31		34		20		0

Based on the communication among teachers and pupils it is showing neutral which is 42% and 30% agreed to the statement. It could be seen that the respondents were well equipped and prepared for effective communication. Only a small percentage of the respondents showed there are not facing many challenges in communication which is 16 % disagree and 2% strongly disagree.

Communicating with parents online apparently better than physical classes. It's because the parents are always available to communicate regarding their students' progress rather than meeting them physically. Teachers are responded challenge on this issue as neutral which is 46%, agree 26%, and disagree is 18%.

Table 4: Teachers' Challenges in teaching

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral / Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Low levels of teachers' pedagogical digital competence	3	6.0	4	8.0	30	60.0	12	24.0	1	2.0
Low levels of pupils' digital competence	7	14.0	28	56.0	12	24.0	3	6.0	0	0
Converting activities and content into online/distance learning	1	2.0	2	4.0	18	36.0	22	44.0	7	14.0
Preparing content for online and distance learning	2	4.0	2	4.0	18	36.0	22	44.0	6	12.0
Average		6.5		18		39		29.5		7

Even though our teachers portrayed the true quality of a teacher as they were able to adopt and adapt materials searched on the internet, as well as seeking online help and assistance on their own. In other words, the respondents were able to adapt themselves to the use of technology to facilitate the teaching and learning process conducted but their low levels of pedagogical digital competence showing more neutral. The result found the highest percentage of teachers were in the middle of learning a proper digital pedagogical which is 60%. It means teachers are still facing challenges in digital teaching. Therefore, it is important for schools and authorities to address this issue and provide relevant support to the teachers.

Pupils' low levels of pedagogical digital competence showing also showing neutral. The result found the highest percentage of pupils were in the middle of using digital learning which is 56%. Besides, 24% of respondents agreed to the statement.

Converting activities and content into online or distance learning is also considering a challenge for teachers as they are not really able to observe the student's involvement. So, 44% and teachers are agreed and 36% are neutral about it. The others are going for strongly agree which is 14% and about 6% only strongly disagree and disagree.

Preparing a lesson is known to be crucial for an effective and organized teaching and learning process, yet planning an online lesson requires a more critical and careful process as it involves another important variable to consider which is the use of media and ICT. So here most responded agree which is 44% and 36% neutral and others accordingly. It can be said that teachers are find preparing content for online learning is slightly challenges for them.

Table 5: Teachers' Challenges in time management and organisation level

Statement	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral / Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Increased workload and stress working from home	0	0	0	0	19	38.0	15	30.0	16	32.0
Time management and organisation	0	0	0	0	19	38.0	26	52.0	4	8.0
The school has not switched to online/ distance learning	19	38.0	8	16.0	18	36.0	3	6.0	1	2.0
Average		12.3		5.3		37.3		29.3		14

Teachers are basically agreed with the statement that workload and stress working from home with the percentage of (neutral 38% + strongly agree 32% + agree 30%). It is showing that teachers finding that working from is a stress for them as well as increased their workload. They need to prepare materials and lessons for the classes and present them digitally compared to physical classes. At the same time, they are feeling stress working from home because they need to handle too many things at home together with doing online classes for example their kids, housework, and so on.

Planning and designing a lesson could be time-consuming, especially for online learning which is not a norm in Malaysian classrooms. Martin et al. (2019) pointed out that online learning could be time-consuming in terms of designing and planning for the lessons. It also takes a long time for a first timer as all the lesson objectives, learning outcomes, content, activities, assessment, and reflection need to be redesigned to suit the online format.

The result found the highest percentage of teachers were agree with the challenges in managing time preparing and conducting online lessons which are 52%. In short, the majority of the teachers were trying their best to manage the timing wisely despite the newness of the learning platform, illuminating their positivity and proficiency in their teaching profession.

This is followed by 38% of them who had a neutral feeling and very few of them (8%) strongly agree that they are facing challenges as they would not be able to properly schedule their time to design the lesson, facilitate the lesson, mark their pupils' homework and exercises, allocate time to learn new tools and strategies related to online learning, as well as complete the lesson within the time allocated.

Teachers are strongly disagreed with the statement that the school has not switched to online or distance learning which 38%. It's clearly showing that the schools are almost using online learning as the pandemic continues until now. About 36% are neutral because some schools from rural areas are still finding it difficult to conduct online classes as poor facilities and management of the school.

Table 6: Teachers' Challenges motivation and assessment

	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Neutral / Not Sure		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Involving disaffected pupils	2	4.0	4	8.0	26	52.0	14	28.0	4	8.0
Involving pupils from socially disadvantaged homes	2	4.0	7	14.0	21	42.0	10	20.0	8	16.0
Keeping all pupils motivated and engaged	0	0	4	8.0	20	40.0	16	32.0	10	20.0
Supporting pupils with special needs or disabilities	3	6.0	3	6.0	23	46.0	17	34.0	4	8.0
Assessing pupils' progress	2	4.0	1	2.0	17	34.0	22	44.0	8	16.0
Little direction or support given by the school	1	2.0	4	8.0	26	52.0	16	32.0	3	6.0
There have been no challenges	16	32.0	8	16.0	16	32.0	6	12.0	3	6.0
Average		7.4		13.1		42.3		28.9		11.4

Involving disaffected pupils are more on neutral too which is 52% followed by 28% agree with the statement as some students are not involved online lesson which may result from not interested in online learning or unable cope with online learning. So, here teachers are facing challenges to gather all their students for the proper teaching and learning process.

Teachers also facing challenges in teaching students who are socially disadvantaged at home. 42 % neutral, 20% agree, and followed by 16% strongly agree. Teachers are facing challenges in this issue probably the members of the student's family are not socially well advance. So, it is quite difficult for teachers to teach this type of student online.

The above table also showing, keeping all pupils motivated and engaged all the time is absolutely challenging for teachers. So, 40% of teachers responded neutral followed by 32% agree and 20% strongly agree. It is a great challenge for ESL teachers to cope up with online teaching for their students.

Supporting pupils with special needs or disabilities, showing 46% and 34% of teachers facing challenges to support students with special needs or disabilities. It's because this type of student is always unable to sit in one place for long hours to attend the online class. Moreover, they need to be assisted by someone in order to go through the online lesson even though they are at the secondary level. It can be said that ESL teachers are quite struggling to do online teaching for those special students.

Assessing students' progress is a great challenge for teachers as they are unable to assess the student's original job. It means the students were sent a copied assessment or they have been helped by someone else to complete it. So, teachers unable to get a genuine answer from students sometimes. 44% agreed and 34 neutral to the statement given. Another 16% strongly agree and strongly disagree is 4% and disagree is only 2%.

According to the table, teachers are neutral about the direction or support is given by the school which is 52% and agree is about 32%. As the pandemic continuing for another year, the schools are aware of online classes and preparing the facilities for teachers to conduct online teaching as well as for students.

Based on, there have been no challenges 32% being neutral and 32% strongly disagree to showing that there have been no challenges. It considers teachers are facing challenges in different ways in the online learning and teaching process. Only minor numbers of teachers which is 6% strongly agree that there have been no challenges in conducting online classes.

Table 7: ESL Teachers' Perception of Conducting Online Learning

Perception	Strongly disagree %	Disagree %	Neutral / Not Sure %	Agree %	Strongly Agree %
Flexible	2	10	52	36	0
Innovation (freedom to experiment with teaching practice)	2	10	40	42	6
Easy accessibility (platforms, materials, resources)	2	8	42	42	6
An improved relationship with pupils	4	12	58	14	12
Customisation (ability to personalise learning for students)	4	12	50	28	6

According to table, the items from questions one to ten five based on the teachers' perception of conducting online learning. The ease with which teachers are Flexible is neutral for 52% of teachers, while 36% of respondents agree. Simultaneously, 42% of teachers are agree about Innovation which is freedom to experiment with teaching practice, while 40% neutral. It is showing that teachers are prefer to be innovative by experiment freedom in teaching methods. This followed item number 3, where teachers reported agreement (42%) on the statement Easy accessibility (platforms, materials, resources) and at the same time (42%) are neutral about this item. Item 4 recorded that teachers are neutral (58%) with the statement an improved relationship with pupils. Item 10, with the statement Customisation (ability to personalise learning for students), recorded the majority of the teachers' neutral, which is 50%. According to the above statement and reports, teachers neutral about online learning.

According to the report, teachers are more flexible to conduct online teaching than physical classes. In this case, respondents felt that both physical and online classes have their own advantages and disadvantages. It will be challenging for them when it comes to activities for which teachers need to observe the students' capabilities. Teachers are preferred to be innovators, which means they have the freedom to experiment with teaching practises and try to be creative enough to create their own way of teaching to conduct the online classes. The respondents also felt that they could modify the lesson according to the students' abilities in online teaching. Respondents felt that it was easy for them to access the online platform to conduct lessons online. Meanwhile, they also find it easy to get materials and gather resources for online teaching and learning. The respondents felt that they are still lacking in relationships

with students when it comes to online teaching. Physical classes can assure a better relationship between teacher and student.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

English language instructors felt that there were several difficulties with teaching online. The ability of teachers to conduct online classes is one of the five different characteristics of teachers' opinions that were examined, though some of them confront difficulties because of their interactions with students. The most crucial aspect of teachers' and students' life for effective learning is their relationships. Since the results revealed that the problems were caused by weaknesses in the relationships between the students and teachers, more effort could be put forth to ensure that these problems have been addressed since quite some time has passed. As indicated by teachers in this study, we could also utilise this information to carry out the same problems investigation for students to determine whether they are experiencing difficulties with online learning.

Other than that, the results of this study could not be used to describe the difficulties faced by Malaysia's entire English teacher population, hence a bigger sample size is advised to accurately reflect the makeup of the population. This study is intended to stimulate further investigation into the difficulties associated with online teaching and learning in Malaysian schools. This would support efforts by the community, instructors, and schools to enhance the results of online learning in the future.

Effective education and learning measures require careful planning and arrangement of the lessons. Online learning demands entirely different materials and coaching methods than traditional study halls. Teachers must adapt to a new environment, and this method of presenting approach acknowledges their challenges with online learning. Prozesky (2000) stated that learning can be either superficial or profound depending on how it is guided. Information that is simply recalled is considered shallow learning and has little to no impact on a pupil. However, effective learning that prepares the learner to use the material successfully will result in a profound and substantial learning, and this is the thing that online learning does best.

In addition to providing the exercise content, make sure that students actually want to self-learn and search for basic information on their own, as required in 21st-century education. This will legitimise the need for instructors to be prepared to handle the challenges of leading an exercise online.

As a conclusion, the use of online learning could be advantageous to students in a variety of ways, but teachers must also be prepared for the difficulties that may arise. In the opinion of teachers, the greatest benefit of online learning was the ease with which the most recent knowledge could be accessed. The fact that online learning produced better understanding than traditional classroom instruction was the benefit of online learning that was least appreciated. On the other hand, the lack of clarity in lecturers' instructions was the biggest obstacle to online learning, and students' lack of concern for it can be seen in their off-topic contributions in online conversations.

However, the limitations of this study should be acknowledged. Future research should incorporate qualitative analysis to better understand the motivations underlying the students' opinions. In addition, external elements like the pedagogical aspect and the students' experience with online learning must be considered. Additionally, the current study only explores teachers' perceptions of online instruction in ESL classrooms. However, a lot of research must be done for classes in various subjects. Only quantitative data were obtained for this study; therefore, future researchers should use the qualitative technique for in-depth analyses and debates in future studies.

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