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Dealing with the Drawbacks of Digital Learning: A Case Study from a Malaysian Public University

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Abstract

This study aims to determine whether students are prepared for online education amid the Covid-19 pandemic. In particular, the education sector has been significantly impacted by the coronavirus outbreak in 2019, which forced higher education institutions to close to combat the epidemic. Online education was conducted throughout the closure and has continued until today. This study intends to shed light on students' challenges when learning online. The primary focus of this research will be on the difficulties that students face during the teaching and learning process. Using a mixed-method approach, data was gathered from 152 students at a public institution in Malaysia. To have a better grasp of the opinions of the students, interviews were conducted. The results demonstrate that the learners found the facilities, support, and communication difficulties. This study is expected to help instructors choose the most effective online teaching approach and develop greater empathy for students dealing with challenges out of their control. Future recommendations should establish how various higher education institutions contribute to the efficacy of online learning in light of the findings of this study.

Introduction

Education broadens one's perspectives and helps one grow as a person. With the advent of online teaching and learning, one's method of obtaining education has been replaced by flexibility. The rising number of studying and teaching options demonstrates the adaptability of internet technology in higher education (Daniel, 2016). As a result, several educational platforms and institutions have responded to the Covid-19 pandemic by rapidly transforming their digital teaching and learning.

The entire globe was stunned when the World Health Organization proclaimed a pandemic of new SARS-CoV2 on March 11, 2020, and it has since become a significant public health concern worldwide. Anxiety, worry, and stress have become common problems for most individuals. To stop the virus from spreading, educational institutions have been compelled to close, and this decision impacts instructors and students (Mailizar et al., 2020). Schools, colleges, and universities were compelled to engage in virtual learning to maintain their educational advancement.

Instructors and students were unprepared for the significant difference in their daily lives because virtual learning could not happen overnight, as humans naturally take time to adjust to change. However, it cannot be denied that during the pandemic, the shift from face-to-face classes to online learning is accelerating considerably. Therefore, several online learning difficulties must be addressed to understand better students' perceptions of studying with technology during the epidemic. University authorities then re-evaluate the existing scenario to enhance online understanding by setting adequate rules and guidelines that address the requirements and needs of students.

Because of the Covid-19 epidemic, students must learn and engage in online classes. Some students have it difficult since they may face challenges such as not being able to participate in class owing to a lack of internet access, a lack of enthusiasm, and so on. According to Zainuddin & Kamaluddin (2012), some disadvantages of online learning include a lack of motivation and self-initiation, inadequate or unreliable internet access, and tutors who are unavailable when needed. Maintaining motivation when attending an online course is also a difficulty that online students face, according to (Gilbert, 2015). Because students rely on technology for online learning, Daniels & Stupnisky (2012) emphasise the possibility of a computer failure or a bad Internet connection.

This study examines what students at a Malaysian public university encountered in online classes and how they dealt with the situation during the epidemic. This paper answers the following research question:

- What are the problems that learners experience in online learning?

The research objective of this study is:

- To examine the challenges faced by ESL learners in online learning.

Literature Review

Many learners confront hurdles such as a lack of community, difficulty understanding instructional goals, and technical issues in their online learning experiences, according to Song et al. (2004). The classroom community strongly influences students' classroom involvement (Young & Bruce, 2011). Instructors who foster a feeling of community and encourage student participation and engagement have a significant impact on student happiness and the quality of online learning, according to (Rovai et al., 2005; Liu et al., 2007). Isolation, unhappiness, boredom, overburden, and low course completion rates would arise from a lack of community (Hara & Kling, 2000; Northrup, 2002; Rovai et al., 2005). As a result, instructor and student participation are critical in online learning.

Learners face technical difficulties, such as a lack of internet access when attempting to engage in online classes. One of the challenges with adopting online learning systems is slow internet on students' mobile devices or personal laptops (Purwanto et al., 2020). According to Famularsih's research, one student had to go to higher ground to acquire internet connectivity in her village, and another struggled to submit assignments on time owing to a terrible internet connection (Famularsih, 2020). This demonstrates that students have difficulty finding the appropriate internet connection for their educational needs.

Furthermore, according to Vonderwell (2003), online learners lack connection with

their instructors and significant individualised interactions in which students get to know their instructors' personalities better. This could also apply to ESL students in higher education because excellent teacher-student relationships motivate students to participate in the learning process and pursue their interest in learning (Rimm-Kaufman, 2010). As a result, if instructors recognise these issues, they may be able to alter their teaching methods to address them.

In a study by Xu and Jaggars (2013), the consequences of taking a course online rather than in person are examined, as well as the influence of online delivery on student course achievement in a community college context. They conclude that online learning had a considerable negative impact on students' course persistence and grade. On the other hand, Henrie et al (2015) found the opposite. In each case, one of the pieces of proof that online learning is successful was the students' participation. Other research has demonstrated that technology can positively impact student engagement (Chen et al., 2010; Hu and Kuh, 2001). This reflects the importance of this study for students since it may help them better understand the influence of online learning on themselves.

Learners' desire to obtain learning materials is called motivation to learn (Noe, 1986). According to Simmering, Posey, and Piccoli (2009), those who frequently use the Internet and computer have a more substantial interest in learning online because they are more familiar with the online learning environment than those who do not. However, Simmering, Posey, and Piccoli (2009) state that some students lack motivation due to an overabundance of knowledge on the subject being taught. Furthermore, people that excel at using computers are demotivated because they will not have to learn as much and will have less desire to interact with the resources.

External factors, such as the learning environment, learning time, and instrumental aids, had a substantial impact on learners who lacked motivation, impacting their achievement (Cahyani et al., 2020; Rachmat, 2020; Cahyani et al., 2020; Simamora, 2020). In practice, students must use more self-motivation to complete activities online than in class, where the instructor is the incentive (Upton, 2006). A secondary motivation is a widespread notion that students prefer online activities due to their flexibility and ability to learn on their own time (Kemp & Grieve, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because it has the potential to assist instructors in improving their online classes. To successfully integrate ICT into the classroom, we must first understand the aspects that influence students' knowledge of technology in diverse ways (Hashim & Yunus, 2010). Instructors will better understand the issues that their students face when learning online by learning how they react to online learning. Understanding students' preferred learning styles will help them become more engaged and achieve better learning outcomes, such as higher grades and critical thinking skills (Carini et al., 2006).

We have been using the online learning environment for two years now, and it has become the norm. If the number of Covid-19 instances would not go down, it would probably be employed again. The institution would be prepared to conduct any learning linked to

technological breakthroughs, on-campus, or off-campus.

Because of the growing importance of online learning management systems in Higher education, this study could help improve university education quality by studying how students use them for online learning in their studies (Coates, 2006). The university will benefit from this research as well. The data would give the university the necessary knowledge to support information technology (IT) and courses that would prepare instructors to conduct online learning successfully. According to Ataman (2020), school administrators should encourage teachers to use Technology and provide them with the necessary resources and opportunities.

Trends in Online Learning in Education

When it comes to online learning, technological factors will take precedence. It has always been the goal of educators to strive to incorporate technology into their classrooms. Overhead projectors, slide projectors, televisions, and smart boards became the new teaching and learning materials. Salaberry (2001); Eristi et al (2012) evaluated the usefulness of technology in the classroom. With the spread of the Covid-19 epidemic, the teaching and learning process has shifted to employing laptops, computers, and mobile phones as learning tools. On laptops and mobile phones for learning, Kim et al (2013); Mehdipour & Zerehkafi (2013) have found numerous advantages. They further mentioned that mobile phones are utilised for educational and entertaining purposes. In Japan, students will be using their phones everywhere since it allows them to email pals and browses the internet (Thornton & Houser, 2004). Because of the Covid-19 epidemic, instructors and students are suggested to engage in online learning. This could just be the beginning of integrating learning through online means, with more in the future. Not only that, but it would also aid in the comprehension of the impact of online learning on pupils.

Challenges of the Online Learning Environment

When you are learning online, you will likely encounter some difficulties. According to Gilbert (2015), students cannot access dependable internet at home. Furthermore, some people may not have sufficient internet connectivity. As a result, they would have to look for internet access somewhere else, such as the public library. As a result, to have a practical learning session, teachers should always check students' internet availability. He also said that pupils feel they do not get enough one-on-one assistance from instructors. For example, many felt bewildered at the start of online learning during the pandemic, not understanding how to receive help from teachers (Gilbert, 2015). As a result, they grew self-sufficient and assisted themselves. Students also learned to overcome numerous difficulties on their own, according to (Gilbert, 2015).

According to Hande (2014), adopting online learning is challenging since it requires institution-wide organisation, collaboration, and reliable connectivity. Furthermore, Hande (2014) found that online assignments could not be finished on time due to slow internet connectivity and speed restrictions. The use of expensive equipment, which may or may not be accessible to all students, particularly those who reside off-campus, is required to provide online assessments, he underlined.

Recommendations for Online Learning

Mukhtar et al. (2020) make a few proposals for online learning: teachers and students should be involved in the institutions' success. Aside from that, they recommend that cognitive load

be reduced during online training and interactivity be increased instead. Likewise, Abel et al. (2009) suggest using a discussion forum because it has unique communication capabilities ideal for an online learning environment. Furthermore, during the Covid-19 epidemic, knowledge exchange can be done using online platforms, which is the most outstanding alternative for asynchronous communication. Moreover, students can quickly locate and search for previous forums at any moment. Besides these, a teacher could also help students succeed by providing timely feedback. The feedback should be tailored to the pupils' individual needs to help them progress. Feedback should also be clear and explicit, with an opportunity for students to ask clarifying questions. In supervision and field education, feedback is crucial for improving student learning (Chur-Hansen & McLean, 2006). To help students get oriented when teaching online, experienced teachers share the structure of online courses and material presentation inside an online system. Students should have easy access to online content. Aside from that, teachers should build a presence to foster a positive learning environment.

When it comes to online learning, students frequently feel alone. They believe they have no one else to turn to for help. As a result, establishing online discussion questions may foster dialogue and sharing between teachers and students and between students and their peers. Teachers should not expect online classes to function in the same way as traditional courses. As a result, new technologies must be found to assist in achieving the lesson's purpose. Because of this, teachers should be willing to experiment with new technologies freely available on the Internet.

Factors Affecting Online Learning in ESL Classrooms

Online learning in ESL classes is influenced by performance expectations, effort expectations, and social impact (Yunus et al., 2021). The term 'effort expectation' can be used to characterise the technology's predicted complexity and the amount of energy required to use it. The instructor's professional development may impact the learners' social influence when using online learning. The university administration ensures that online knowledge is valuable and practical in the educational process.

Another aspect Mahmood et al (2014) cited is that instructors have less technology experience than students. Instructors in particular schools are pushed to use technology without the required training or opportunity to develop a passion for using it in an ESL classroom. Lessons, on the other hand, go well when instructors know how to use the technical tools. These external influences impact how students perceive online learning.

Another factor Mahmood et al (2014) mentioned is that instructors lack expertise in utilising technology compared to the learners. In some schools, instructors are forced to use technology without the proper guidance and time to learn to instil a passion for using it in an ESL classroom. However, lessons do go well if instructors understand how to use the technological tools. In conclusion, these external factors influence students' perception of online learning.

Research Methodology

This research uses the mixed methodology design, which comprises quantitative and qualitative methods of collecting data. The mixed methodology is relevant as it helps

researchers answer any research question. Therefore, a mixed-method approach is made to answer my research questions successfully, and they are: What are the challenges faced by ESL learners in online learning?

A set of questionnaires was used to collect the quantitative research method. According to Mathers et al (1998), questionnaires will be a good option as it is a quick method for data collection if the sample size is large and widely spread. Therefore, questionnaires were explicitly constructed for data collection regarding students' perspectives on online learning during the Covid-19 pandemic. The qualitative research method also used an interview session to collect data. Interviews require active listening, note-taking, careful planning, and preparation to avoid wasted opportunities and disappointing results (Hannabuss, 1996). The targeted research respondents were 152 undergraduate students from a public university in Malaysia that are currently doing online learning due to the pandemic. From the 152 students, 10 participants were interviewed to understand their perspectives further.

Research Instruments

For acquiring and collecting data for the project study, various tools are accessible. Two research instruments were used in this study: a questionnaire and an interview. The qualitative data was gathered through an interview session with undergraduate students. Ten of the 152 respondents were chosen randomly from the survey using a random sample procedure. A random sampling method involves the selection of respondents at random. It enables researchers to draw solid statistical conclusions about a whole group of people (McCombes, 2021).

Questionnaire

A set of questionnaires consisting of 26 questions was distributed to 152 students taking proficiency courses at the university. The questions are a mix of Yes/No, Likert Scale, and open-ended questions. The questionnaires seek information on the participants' satisfactory level of online learning, their issues with online learning, and their challenges. A workflow is recommended during the data collection to ensure these research aims are met. Planning a flow for data collection would also help have a seamless process. Firstly, the set of questionnaires was distributed to the targeted respondents. Then, the quantitative method was carried out through an online medium: Google Form. The Google Form was sent out to the ESL learners in UTM. In today's networked world, online or web-based survey tools have become commonly used instruments for data collection (Raju & Harinarayana, 2016). It gives an advantage for researchers to collect data in a fast and more uncomplicated way. Then, interview sessions with ten respondents were conducted through online platforms such as Webex, Google Meet or Zoom, depending on the respondents' preference. The final procedure was to analyse and interpret the data received.

Data Analysis

Data were collected via a Google Form and transferred to Microsoft Excel in the data analysis stage. The raw data were then analysed and organised into their respective aspects. Finally, the analysed data were tabulated and shown in suitable graphs. On the other hand, the interviews were recorded and transcribed. During the analysis of data, the data were categorised into three major themes: the learners' attitudes toward online learning, the

challenges faced and the impact of online learning on them. To ensure the questionnaire's validity, ten undergraduate students taking English proficiency courses were given a pilot questionnaire as respondents. The results from the pilot questionnaire were analysed and amended to prove further that the objectives of this research could be met.

Study Findings and Discussion

Demographic Information of Respondents

This section clarifies the respondents' demographic information in the study. The demographics collected are gender, faculty, and the location of their online learning to better understand online learning perceptions during the Covid-19 pandemic. The total number of respondents who participated in this survey was 152 who took English courses at the higher learning institute. Males accounted for 81 respondents, while females accounted for 71. 124 undergraduate students were based in Malaysia, while 28 were from other countries.

The Challenges Faced by ESL Learners in Online Learning

The following data depicts the challenges faced by ESL learners in online learning.

Facilities

Proper Internet Access

Table 1

Learners' internet access

Yes	65.1 %
No	29.6 %
Sometimes	5.3 %

Learners' internet connectivity for online learning is depicted in Table 1. It can be shown that nearly half of the students (65.1 per cent) have sufficient internet access for online learning. 5.3 per cent of respondents, on the other hand, do not have a good internet connection. According to Ina's interview, she mentioned the following.

"One online learning challenge would probably be the internet connection because we only use Streamyx in my house. We don't have Unifi. So, it is tough to connect to my Internet when I do presentations. So, I cannot have a smooth presentation".

Streamyx, according to Ina, is a broadband service for light usages, such as reading emails or surfing the web. As a result, it is unsuitable for people who wish to participate in video conferences. Furthermore, 29.6 per cent of respondents stated that they do not have proper internet access. One of Izzah's interviews also found this statement when she said that her hometown did not have enough internet connectivity. Like many others in rural areas, the area where she lives lacks adequate internet access. As a result, she is unable to attend her online classes. Likewise, her home internet connection was not sufficient for online learning.

Inernet Signal

Table 2

Learners' internet signal during online classes

Extremely Strong	30 %
Quite Strong	53 %
Sometimes Strong	13 %
Fair	13 %
Weak	5 %

The internet signals these students use in an online lesson are shown in the table above. For their online classes, 30 per cent of students have extremely strong internet connections, while 53 per cent of respondents occasionally have a strong internet signal. On the other hand, 5 per cent of respondents had weak internet signals due to their location. For instance, Pavitira claimed she used the internet data on her cell phone. However, there was poor internet access in her place of residence. Fathnin also said the following during the interview.

"If you have low bandwidth, you cannot hear what the lecturers are teaching or saying. They are also breaking up. Some of the points will leave you behind, so you must catch up with what they teach. Sometimes, you must catch up with your friends instead".

Devices Used for Online Learning

Table 3

Devices used during online learning

Type of Devices	Percentage (per cent)
Laptop/computer	47.4
Mobile phone	2.6
Tab	0.7
All three	5.3
Laptop/computer & Mobile phone	41.4
Laptop/computer & Tab	2.6
Mobile phone & Tab	0

The gadgets utilised by the respondents in online classes are depicted in Table 3 above. The most popular device is a laptop or computer, which accounts for 47.4 per cent of all usage, followed by a laptop and a mobile computer. The students used both devices since they are the best at supporting video conferencing apps like WebEx, Google Meet, and Zoom. Laptops, mobile phones, and tablets are all used by 5.3 per cent of the respondents. Amir, who used all three devices, stated that it is easier to attend online classes using phones and handheld tablets than laptops because those two are easier to connect to Wi-Fi. The devices used by the students determine the strength of internet connectivity for online learning. Online learning

becomes a problem for people who do not have access to superior technology for learning.

Support System

Lack of guidance from the instructor is another problem that students run into when taking online classes. In the study, 55.9 per cent of participants stated that lecturers frequently delivered lectures during online sessions without engaging in a two-way conversation with the students. It is unclear whether these results apply to specific language courses or the broader online learning environment. While their teachers interacted with them, just 20.4 per cent of respondents claimed to have never run into this issue, and 23.7 per cent were unsure whether any two-way interaction had occurred.

Additionally, 61.2 per cent of respondents said that their instructors showed a genuine interest in their students during an online session. Anita, for instance, remarked that her lecturer was sympathetic and intrigued by her connectivity issues. On the other hand, 19.1 per cent of respondents refuted the claim, pointing out that some of their instructors had neglected to inquire about their worries or general well-being.

Students experienced problems with both their instructors and their other students. When you are learning online, group discussions might be difficult. Some instructors assigned group projects to alleviate students' burden of completing their assignments separately. However, the students' workload did not lessen as a result, and their stress levels increased due to their inability to meet with their group members physically. The excerpts from the interview with a few students are provided below.

"Waiting, waiting, and waiting group members to start their work, but they start on the day of submission, and the outcome was copy-and-paste, although I keep reminding them to manage their time for the assignments".

"I will try my best to complete it early because it is difficult to contact other group mates. Sometimes, they do their work last minute, and it causes me to need to wait for them to complete their parts before I continue and proceed with it. Hence, I think it is essential to get good and responsible team members doing group assignments".

"We discuss only via WhatsApp. We can only divide the parts of the assignment to each of the group members. We can't even have a proper conversation about the assignment".

Due to peer pressure inside their groups, students appeared stressed out. Siti claimed that one very outstanding group member goes above and beyond, finishing her contribution several days before the deadline. Siti said, "I became stressed out." They consequently had to find another Internet connection method, like the local library. Slow internet on students' laptops or mobile devices was named as one of the challenges to implementing online learning methods by (Purwanto et al., 2020).

The following challenge is the ESL students' system of support. The evidence indicates that ESL students feel alienated from their colleagues and the instructor. As a result, they do

not have a strong online learning support system. Face-to-face classrooms give students a sense of belonging and connection with their professors and peers, making it their preferred method of instruction.

When online learning first started during the pandemic, many people were puzzled and unsure of how to contact instructors for assistance (Gilbert, 2015). They consequently learned to support themselves and one another. Gilbert asserts once more that students learnt how to handle different obstacles independently. The data acquired showed that instructors only lecture without two-way communication and have no interest in their students' well-being, which is consistent with Gilbert (2015)'s claim that students perceive instructors do not provide adequate one-on-one assistance.

Communication

Finally, students have trouble interacting with their peers. The replies indicate that it is challenging to complete group assignments when there is little communication among group members. However, this is not because of a shortage of discussion material but because the students are not very enthusiastic. The study's respondents' problem is similar to Davies' (2009) study. He found that some group members may be reluctant to participate in formative evaluations and may not fully commit to the group's goals due to motivational issues.

Regarding group work, specific individuals 'freeload' and 'free ride' provide an excellent challenge for the rest of the group. Students must be self-motivated, as a lack of motivation can lead to various issues, including failure. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), self-satisfaction requires intrinsic motivation, defined as accomplishing specified tasks. On the other hand, learners lack intrinsic motivation due to extrinsic considerations such as grades.

Issues with facilities, support systems, and communication were the three main categories. Students' facility issues are mostly caused by a lack of internet connectivity. Lack of bandwidth and poor internet access are the key issues. The absence of support from the instructor is the second issue. Third, as they strive to adjust to the new norm of online learning, students experience a sense of isolation. Finally, students find it difficult to interact with their peers, particularly when working in groups. Finally, other students struggle with a lack of desire and enthusiasm for finishing their coursework.

To sum up, according to the study's findings, many students did not feel that their particular instructors made them feel welcome in the online learning environment. On the contrary, they were dissatisfied and unmotivated in online courses because of a lack of comprehension, sympathy, and knowledge regarding delivery modes.

For instructors and learners to successfully incorporate online learning, higher education support is crucial. Examples of management incentives could include a Learning Management System refresher course and more internet bandwidth to address connectivity issues. This might be assisted by the real-time sharing of virtual teaching and learning concepts on WhatsApp groups for university lecturers, which helped establish a favourable climate for virtual learning activities to grow. Again, this highlights how essential interactions are between higher education institutions and their staff.

Recommendations for Future Research

According to this study, future research could look into how learners perceive online learning during the pandemic and their learning adjustments. Only undergraduate students at the university are eligible for this project. Conversely, university closures have a major effect on all higher education institutions. As a result, regardless of location, students encounter the same challenges. According to future studies, the efficiency of online learning may be improved by other higher education institutions in other nations.

Teacher educators might be better able to address issues related to online learning by using the study's findings to comprehend students' viewpoints and attitudes toward it. Instructors must be creative and make use of a variety of resources for teaching and learning. It is essential to keep in mind that certain students might not have enough access to the internet for online learning. Therefore, instructors should consider continuing the learning process for students who encounter these challenges.

Students must participate in online learning as well. They are essential to the accomplishment of online education. The students must fully understand the instructor's role as a facilitator or guide. According to Vonderwell and Savery, learners may believe that the instructor is not instructing while facilitating, directing, and structuring learning because they have preconceived beliefs about what "instruction" entails (2004). Students must be prepared to accept change in a crisis like the Covid-19 epidemic.

Conclusion

Although the immediate transition to online training may have been difficult for students, they quickly adjusted to the new environment. Because some students could not access the platforms due to technological challenges, online learning was initially tough, but it has improved in recent months. Furthermore, many students had inadequate bandwidth, which prohibited them from turning on their cameras and resulted in poor sound quality, but this was a rare occurrence. Although the issues raised by students in this survey may only reflect the period following the university's closure, the report provides a student perspective on higher education.

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