

The Challenges in Online Teaching and Learning During Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL) among the English Language Educators

Akmal Zamani, Maslawati Mohamad

Faculty of Education National University of Malaysia, Malaysia

Email: akmalzamani58@gmail.com

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Abstract

Numerous educational institutions across the world have been forced by the Covid-19 epidemic to fully utilise a number of developing online communication platform technologies, which has encouraged both students and teachers to connect via a range of online communication platforms. In actuality, maintaining a continuous educational process presents a number of difficulties. The purpose of this study is to explore the challenges faced by English educators in online teaching and learning during ERTL. A qualitative study was carried out through a semi-structured interview with 10 English UKM Educators who are currently teaching at varying academic levels. Findings derived from the thematic analysis represent that poor internet connection, lack of self-preparation to work remotely; limitations to effective online teaching and learning during ERTL. The limitations of this study are the small range of population, the scope of this study is limited to conducting online English classes during ERTL in general, and the limited literature review on challenges in online teaching and learning English during ERTL.

Keywords : Covid-19, Online Learning, English Language Learning, Challenges in E-Learning, ERTL.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has spread worldwide, affecting everyone regardless of nationality, education, status, or gender (Andreas, 2020). Students from diverse backgrounds with parental support can reveal other learning opportunities. Poor children are usually expelled from school when the school is closed. This problem has led to many flaws and inequalities in the education system, from a lack of bandwidth and access to computers for online learning to a lack of learning environments. Andreas (2020) added that during this century, the educational community has tried to maintain continuity in learning. However, students and children must rely on their resources to continue studying remotely via the Internet, TV, or radio. Untrained educators have had to adapt to new teaching concepts and methods.

Students from disadvantaged groups who lack access to digital learning resources, sustainability, and motivation for independent learning are at risk (Andreas, 2020).

Emergency remote teaching and learning (ERTL) is a quick transition to an alternative way of teaching following a crisis (Charles et al., 2020). The accelerated digital transformation impacting most students and educators around the world is described as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT), Emergency Remote Learning and Learning (ERTL) (Charles et al., 2020), or Emergency Remote Education (ERE) by (Adriana et al., 2020). ERTL represents an important and stimulating moment for educators worldwide (Seabra et al., 2021). This includes the use of comprehensive distance learning solutions for teaching or education especially in teaching English Language. This can be delivered face-to-face or as a blended or mixed course that reverts to this format once the crisis or emergency has subsided.

Online teaching and learning are one of ERTL's leading media (Shohel et al., 2020). According to Baqia et al (2012), online education, including online teaching and online learning, can refer to " a wide range of applications that take advantage of the Internet to deliver educational content and support social interactions between teachers and students, as well as occasionally between students ". For example, as cited by Juhari (2020), education can be entirely online with all online instruction, or elements can be combined online with face-to-face sessions, also known as blended learning. Teaching the English language online cannot be adequately described without discussing online learning. This is because the two are interdependent. Hoi et al (2021) found that, based on the learning task and the form of the feedback information, online learning can be classified into three main categories: (a) online learning with feedback information completely available at any time; (b) limited feedback; and (c) unsupervised online learning without feedback.

In other words, the shift from online English language teaching to remote learning in emergencies has led to new social and technical challenges and opportunities have led educators to several challenges. Therefore, this study intends to address the following research question: What are the challenges UKM English educators face in teaching and learning during Emergency Remote Teaching and Learning (ERTL)?

Literature Review

The Switch to ERTL

Education, along with tradition, is widely believed to underlie human success, as it transfers information, skills, and techniques with precision between individuals and facilitates the acquisition of accumulated knowledge and normative culture (Fogarti et al., 2011). Without concern for a lack of direct engagement between students and educators, first- and second-generation remote learning delivery techniques prioritise producing and disseminating resources as effectively as feasible (Algahtani, 2011). However, as technology advances and Internet- and web-based courses proliferate, a wealth of evidence indicates that both students and academics benefit from the atmosphere of distant learning. Remote learning has been redefined to incorporate educator-student interactions as a result of the development of enhanced third-generation distance learning systems, including interactive video, email, and World Wide Web technology (Charles et al., 2020). According to Bakia et al (2012), distance learning programmes are made to help students who live far from school and encourage their participation in the classroom. Communication students in remote locations have been found to have a higher level of communication between professors and students than students enrolled in conventional classes (Coman et al., 2020).

The Success of ERTL

Lemay et al (2021) list and explain eight fundamental tenets of successful online education. For instance, they supported communication between students and educators, group learning, prompt feedback, active learning, time allotted for assignments, and enticing students to spend more time on completion. High expectations and duties should be communicated to students by teachers in order to motivate, inspire, and help them utilise technology. Regarding the use of e-learning in higher education specifically in English language teaching, the literature generally shows results that support its usefulness, effectiveness, and positive effect on student achievement. According to Banditvilai (2016), educators, believe in the potential of e-learning to improve the teaching process and collaboration and communication. It gives students flexibility and helps them understand the lesson better. Ndiokubwayo et al. (2020) found that education improved the student's learning experience with the use of videos and colourful images. This is a good comparison to traditional learning in general.

Online teaching and learning typically create the flexibility to learn and teach anywhere, anytime (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). However, to build a successful learning environment, well-planned online learning is a complicated process that needs thoughtful educational design and development (Karen, 2020). Distance learning is a temporary educational solution for urgent issues. The fundamental objective in these situations is to give temporary access to advice and educational assistance in a way that can be swiftly created and dependably provided in an emergency or crisis, not to recreate a strong learning environment (Misirli & Ergulec, 2021). A well-planned distant learning strategy also enables flexible and alternate learning settings, and urgent remote learning in this context increases student engagement (Brynjolfsson et al., 2020). Remote learning in times of need has replaced online learning, creating new social and technological potential, which has implications for children's physical and mental health.

Challenges of ERTL

The unexpected shift to online learning benchmarked organizational flexibility (Wu et al., 2020). Many institutions focus on moving educational content into the digital world rather than online learning and delivery methods. When it comes to teaching English via online specifically during ERTL, one of the main concerns is internet connectivity which resulted in many negative consequences. The uneven internet infrastructure between East and West Malaysia creates gaps in educators' access to and performance in online teaching. In this context, from the perspective of English teaching by educators who teach in rural area, the challenges in conducting online teaching are greater compared to English educators who teach in urban area. However, the lack of access to the Internet and modern technology reminds the lack of resources in the academic environment and the social exclusion of students, which affects their organizational capacity and the ability to participate in digital learning (Davis et al., 2019). Lack of proper communication with the students is another major problem of teaching English during ERTL. Additionally, issues related to online course content take longer to respond to because they are usually discussed via email with their instructors (Davis et al., 2019).

The psychological stress of English Malaysian educators who have to switch to online learning is due to one must learn to use a learning management system before teaching online in a short time with little training and preparation (Bernama, 2020). As a result, the quality of

English language teaching and learning may be reduced. As cited by Joseph and Adamu (2020), some home educators use phone lines to prepare classes, conduct online tutorials, and communicate with students without a subscription to a full Internet service. This undermines the effectiveness and efficiency of online learning especially in English language learning. In the context of assessment, educators need to adapt their assessments to the online learning environment. For example, converting final exams into courses or home exams cited by (Joseph and Adamu, 2020). The online assessment exposes educators to computer vision syndrome (Forster, 2020). Educators have to spend hours teaching English through e-learning and using computers to provide feedback to the students. Also, answering students' endless questions via email has become a daily routine since the pandemic broke out. The above causes educators great fear, anxiety, and stress (Foster, 2020).

Methodology

A research design is defined by Akhtar (2016), as the “establishing circumstances for data collection and analysis with the objective of balancing economy and process with relevance to the research goal”(p.68). This study was conducted to explore the challenges in online teaching and learning during emergency teaching and learning (ERTL) among English language educators. This study employed a qualitative method as the data collection medium used was an online semi-structured interview. The total number of participants involved was 10 English educators from National University of Malaysia (UKM). The educators were from Pusat Pengajian Citra and possess the experience teaching English language range of 4 to 30 years. Therefore, the technique of sampling used was purposive sampling to select the targeted respondents who have experienced online learning. The instruments involved in the semi-structured interviews were constructed and reviewed by a few experts to validate. The interview session was recorded, transcribed, and coded to themes. The themes were justified and used to answer the main objective of this study.

Findings and Discussion

Poor Internet Connection

Internet connection is crucial during the pandemic as it connects educators to students. A poor connection leads to undesirable outcomes, as the online teaching and learning process is nearly impossible. This challenge affected both parties, which were the students and educators. Preparation of synchronous and asynchronous remote classes requires not only the presence of the educators and the students but the need to have devices and a stable Internet connection to communicate. This highlighted that the internet connection is essential in ensuring its success. Without a stable or strong internet connection, it is nearly impossible to carry out an online class. One factor that influences the quality of the internet connection is the setting. This was highlighted by the participants who encountered problems regarding this issue.

The biggest challenge is the internet connection. So, they've gone back to their hometown... had to come out from the village to get some internet connection. (Educator 8)

..I had students from Sabah and Sarawak who had to go up the hill and wait until nighttime to get an internet connection... (Educator 7)

The availability of access to the internet, either personal data connection or WIFI, could not sketch the whole picture in the context of teaching and learning opportunities. Adding to the fact that the quality and stability of the Internet connection appeared to be problematic. This obstacle is not only endured by the respective English educators but was also a struggle for the students to attend classes. This however could be supported by Davis, Gough, & Taylor (2019), who stated that the lack of access to the Internet and modern technology reminds the lack of resources in the academic environment and the social exclusion of students, which affects their organizational capacity and the ability to participate in digital learning. The teaching and learning English language process requires active participation from both parties. Hence, it is pretty struggling for English educators to consider their internet connection and students' internet connection.

Lack of self-preparation to work remotely

It has become a norm for educators, especially those who teach the English language to be prepared in pre, while, and post-classes. The strike of the Covid-19 pandemic has left educators hanging without standardised guidelines. The sudden call to work online and remotely changed the style, approach, and pedagogical standard to teach English. The chalkboard teaching was switched entirely to integrating gadgets and technology in teaching and learning. Most importantly, the majority of participants indicated that despite having at least basic skills in using ICT during English classes, e.g., playing videos from YouTube, they were not technologically prepared for the transition from in-class technology-rooted instruction to distance online teaching.

... most of us were not prepared... I didn't have my laptop, my working device. I was in my wife's hometown at the moment... without a laptop, and yet I had to conduct a class with just a handphone, a tablet, and a connection. We only had data, no Wi-Fi. So, I only managed to conduct the class via Telegram. (Educator 9)

This is supported by Paudel (2021) and mentioned by Bernama (2020) one must learn to use a learning management system before teaching online in a short time with little training and preparation. Pros and cons balance, no strategy - educators switch to online education. As a result, the quality of English language teaching and learning may be reduced.

Throughout the time when English educators have had many aids for the regular lessons, such as worksheets, preparing new aids and using tools that they were not always familiar with required a lot of time and effort. The preparation includes not only the types of gadgets used but also the teaching aids, which affects the English educators' pedagogical approach as they were used to realia or hardcopy materials. Some English educators had terrible times preparing soft copies and online teaching aids to teach their students.

...Another thing is that most of my material is in hard copy rather than a soft copy. I have many students and lots of classes. When everything has to be online, I have to prepare materials using slides and for asynchronous learning... (Educator 3)

When describing the introduction of remote English language teaching in educational institutions, it is vital to highlight the differences in the approaches to language teaching and

the use of ICT in different settings. The emphasis is on the delivery of learning content, and the primary issue is the delivery of a different range of materials. As a matter of fact, this was supported and highlighted in a study by Rizvi et al. (2020), there are pretty several educators struggling in the process of online class preparation due to time restraints and support. Therefore, lack of experience in this regard is one of the reasons for the initial fear.

... the biggest challenge ... to quickly come up with something. I think we got around two weeks before or a month before we could conduct our class online... doesn't give us any like certainty or anything that could comfort us. (Educator 5)

Undoubtedly, information and communication technologies are essential tools in the work of educators, irrespective of the type of institution in which they are employed or which course or field they were in. In this study, the focus is dragged to the context of English educators. However, acquiring technical literacy in ICT tools is another exciting issue. This is supported by Foster (2020) who states that educators have to spend hours teaching English through e-learning and using computers to provide feedback to the students which requires technological literacy to ensure the success of the lesson. The above causes educators great fear, anxiety, and stress. The lack of adequate skills for English educators to engage in online teaching is consistent with a poor internet connection, lack of laptops or computers, and mobile connectivity that allows educators partial access to the resources offered by the platform. It mainly took place with the use of ICT tools. English educators had to confront a redefinition of the role of an educator who usually met students in the classroom. Senior English educators may possess less ICT literacy than junior educators. The issue was raised by a few interviewees who are senior educators and was confirmed by a few others.

I'm representing the elderly group ...The most challenging part is that we are not tech-savvy. (Educator 8)

... I have this technophobia thing. Anxiety is not okay, and then sometimes, we have plan A and suddenly something happens. Oh my god. I felt like I was dying. (Educator 7)

..we were not prepared with all this online meeting technology, Google Meet, Ms. Teams, we are not familiar with all these online teaching methods...(Educator 3)

This obstacle has driven the senior English educators to carry such burdens as their workload will directly incline due to taking much time in lesson preparation.

we have to learn to videotape ourselves and to do the recording in a concise time, and we have like five or six different classes. So that was a challenge for us. (Educator 2)

In view of implementing effective educational measures in the pandemic era, it seems extremely important to create optimal conditions for English educators to adapt effectively to new ways of teaching. Indeed, the transition to distance learning is a situation that requires preparation, whether technological, pedagogical, or psychological.

Limitation to effective online teaching and learning process

A further challenge English educators faced was using the tools in a way that could facilitate the English teaching and learning process, carrying out activities in accordance with the methodology of teaching students so that they would be able to perform the tasks given. This is supported by Fernando, Grifoni, and Guzzo (2020) pointed that it is more convenient to observe students' learning pace in a standard classroom setting. On the other hand, educators can sustain the quality and momentum of the teaching and learning process. It is nearly the total opposite of effective English online teaching and learning, as educators cannot justify whether the methods and pedagogical approaches used are suitable or flopping. On more than one occasion, this presented a difficulty that educators could not overcome. One of the participants highlighted the obstacle faced in during and post online English teaching :

...students couldn't understand what I was talking about. Even after talking for two hours and then even writing it down in an email, putting it in an announcement, UKM folio, and putting it in the Telegram, and WhatsApp groups, they still couldn't understand... (Educator 6)

..they don't want to ask, that's the thing...(Educator 8)

Another issue was the constraints resulting from the specificities of working with students. Until present, English educators have relied on ICT tools to support classroom activities. However, it has been a challenge for them to use real-time teaching platforms or to prepare materials that are attractive and simple enough for the students to cope. Many of them emphasized the difficulty of not engaging students understanding and confusing them even more, which, according to the pedagogy of teaching, is characteristic of teaching students.

...We have to re-explain, re-word, re-word, and re-word. I think they had such a cultural shock to this thing called online learning that they couldn't digest whatever we were saying. I asked them what the problem? And they said that those things, lectures or whatever, couldn't go into their heads immediately. (Educator 1)

Lack of proper communication with the students is another major problem of teaching English during ERTL. Additionally, issues related to online course content take longer to respond to because they are usually discussed via email with their educators (Davis et al., 2019).

New, attractive forms of communication between the English educator and the class were also sometimes a field of experimentation for students who, having such a technical possibility, hindered the teaching in various ways. Educators also reported technical difficulties in preparing the teaching materials and instructions needed for asynchronous teaching.

Conducting Reliable Online Assessments

Assessment is the key to educators' apprehend of their students' understanding throughout the teaching and learning process. The assessment helps English educators to evaluate the range of success of their pedagogical standard that is being reinforced throughout their teaching, along with assessing their students' comprehension. However, it is easier if the assessment was carried out in the physical setting as the educator could evaluate their students as a whole. As the classes were carried out online, so does the assessment, the

participants voiced out the difficulties as their primary concern was the reliability of the results, as mentioned by one of the participants... *about all these challenges...we also question the validity, or I will say, the reliability of our assessment. (Educator 7)*

Assessment could vary depending on the educators' requirements or needs. The main goal of carrying out an assessment is to measure the student's level of understanding. An assessment should be transparent and driven to the objectives and the elements that would be assessed. However, since the pandemic and all assessments were conducted online, educators started to question to what extent the reliability of the assessments could be measured. The participants highlighted speaking and writing assessments.

Online assessment is a challenge because some students would result in copying... don't really have a way to identify them...we do know that they are copying, but we can't really accuse them of doing so. (Educator 4)

The participants highlighted speaking and writing assessments where plagiarism and direct copy-paste work will be observed. This would be the main issue as educators needed to measure the student's proficiency level accurately. This will lead to difficulties in monitoring students understanding levels.

... when it comes to writing ...for example, a writing assignment... I was aware that there were chances of copying and plagiarism (Educator 8)

...a public speaking course... and the greatest challenge, I feel, is that in assessing the students, we are not able to assess their true ability... these students... have their teleprompter right in front of them (Educator 10)

However, this matter is supported and strongly highlighted by Stephen and Christoph (2020) who stated the issue of plagiarism and the trustworthiness of the assessment result expands to a more prominent focus as educators have a hard time providing feedback based on students' performance. This issue indirectly reduces the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process as the English educator could not assist the students through their mistakes. One of the participants highlighted this by saying that *...the biggest challenge was giving feedback, not only during the assessment but also during practices...which I find very difficult to give feedback on online learning. (Educator 7)*

There are varieties of aspects in carrying out online assessments which include the preparation. A few studies supported and highlighted the preparation which pointed out that educators need to adapt their assessments to the online learning environment. For example, converting final exams into courses or home exams was cited by Joseph and Adamu (2020). The online assessment instilled fear among educators as the reliability and validity were questioned. To a certain extent, the platform used to conduct online assessments is vital to be taken into consideration. However, due to the fact that ICT literacy among English educators needs to be improved, this could be another challenge to the educators to receive feedback and response from the students.

Conclusion

The pandemic of Covid-19 had led to many disastrous incidents which affected the educational system as a whole. Switching from a standard classroom setting to remote teaching and learning raised significant challenges for educators, especially in teaching the English Language. The present study has set the bar for studying online teaching and learning challenges during emergency remote teaching and learning among English Language educators. The study has shown that the distinguished challenges that educators were facing while carrying out online teaching and learning during ERTL are poor internet connection, which affects the timeline of the teaching and learning process. The second challenge is the lack of self-preparation to work remotely, which highlights ICT literacy among educators, lack of experience in teaching online, and time restraint to online teaching aids preparation. The findings of this study provide insight for English teachers about the possible challenges they might encounter while conducting online classes during ERTL. Adding to the point, the findings make several contributions to the current literature. Firstly, the findings could aid further research in conducting a more significant study on online teaching and learning challenges during ERTL with a larger population. Secondly, the literature review could be extended to a broader focus, such as strategies to overcome online teaching and learning challenges during ERTL. The significant contributions and implications of this study are adapting to the virtual learning environment necessitates reimagining teaching methods and encourages educators to explore innovative approaches. However, technophobia among some senior educators highlights the need for addressing digital literacy gaps. The challenges in technology access and internet connectivity underscore equity issues in education. Comprehensive professional development is crucial to equip educators with the necessary skills. Overcoming challenges in student engagement and interaction can lead to the development of interactive teaching practices. Effective assessment and feedback methods must be explored. The experience of ERTL fosters resilience and adaptability among educators, preparing them for future disruptions.

The limitations of this study are this study focuses on a small population: English educators from a faculty in UKM. In addition, the scope of this study is limited to conducting online English classes during ERTL in general without specifying the four skills in teaching English. Adding to that, the limited sources of the literature review on challenges in online teaching and learning English during ERTL. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study suggests future studies could expand the population of the participants, which could extend the findings of this study and could focus on the challenges in online teaching and learning English based on the four skills, which are speaking skills, reading skills, writing skills, and listening skills. The findings of this study have the most significant practical implications, which are that English educators could take charge of being ready in terms of self-preparation to conduct online lessons, such as attending courses emphasizing the integration of technology which could boost the effectiveness of online teaching and learning process. This could aid educators in opening the doorways to interactive and engaging learning opportunities among their students.

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