

ESL students' challenges in Sri Lanka during the transition to remote learning

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has put the world in stand-still and affected many sectors, education sector among them. As a result, students had to stay indoors in their houses and were unable to take classes on campuses. To ensure no break in studies, the university relied on an online learning platform. Sri Lankan universities had a number of challenges in streamlining the online learning process. Both instructors and students had to embrace virtual learning without any preparation or training. According to the literature review, students faced certain challenges that could be addressed only after bigger measures. The present study explores the challenges faced by students who studied English as a Second Language (ESL) in a state-owned Sri Lankan university. Nearly, 500 students took part in the study and valid answers were recorded. The findings reveal that the students faced challenges related to confidence level, physical and social interaction, where they resided. The study also reveals that the sudden switch to online classes shows students unpreparedness.

Keywords: Covid 19, ESL students, online learning, social interaction.

INTRODUCTION

The Covid 19 pandemic has triggered a swift paradigm shift in the teaching-learning process of the higher education system and made a major impact on the level of interaction between students and teachers. Owing to the pandemic, universities were restricted to executing academic activities through online platforms (Barrot et al., 2021). With regard to this unexpected situation, governments across the world had to take adequate steps to limit the viral transmission and ensure education continued by switching to online instruction (Coman et al., 2020). Generally, online education is termed as an alternate to conventional learning (Dhawan, 2020). Yet, during the Covid 19 times it became an integral part of all academic activities that traditionally take place in schools and colleges. This change in approach towards teaching and learning create major changes in the perception of students towards learning, and it would be different from their perceptions on traditional classroom learning. The present study makes an attempt to understand the changes that take place in students' perceptions and the challenges they face during the 'emergency remote learning'.

E-learning is primarily a student-centred process, as it offers a range of features such as self-paced learning, personalized and updated content, faster delivery of lessons, control over the content and affordability. In online learning, students learn through asynchronous and synchronous tools, namely videoconferencing platforms such as, Google meet, Discussion board, E-mail, digital library, blogs, and videos. Thus, E-learning platforms design courses to suit the learners' objective of learning and requirements with flexible timing (Almahasees et al. 2021). Despite some challenges involved in E-learning, it leads to better learning and interaction with the students.

Nevertheless, during online learning there arise certain challenges in the learning process, such as lack of interest, absence of prompt feedback from teachers as they are not present when the student has a doubt and a sense of loneliness as there is no physical presence of fellow students (Barrot et al., 2021). However, teachers with their renewed approaches and strategies can address these challenges faced by the students. Teachers don't possess the knowledge and experience

concerning online teaching (McQuiggan, 2012). Thus, these disadvantages and challenges are prominent during the exclusive online learning using an E-learning platforms. This is due to teachers' shortage of exposure in handling the E-learning platform and less time period to get adapted to the new situation. A study published in the New Indian Express (2020) reveals that teachers faced issues related to technology due to lack of knowledge in using the technological tools. It is evident that teachers and students lacked preparedness for the complete online teaching-learning set up.

Considering the above-mentioned aspects, it is implied that adapting to exclusive E-learning can impact the learning process of students and their perspectives about the use of online tools for learning English which forms the premises of our study. It is essential, pertinent and indispensable to understand if students have adjusted to the E-learning atmosphere and whether they are content with the exclusive online learning experience.

The major aim of this study is to find out students' perspectives on learning English through online platforms in the midst of Covid 19 pandemic. In simple terms, our study identifies the methods of learning English was influenced throughout this crisis time and examines students' view on the incorporation of digital learning platforms and how these technologies made an impact on their assimilation and understanding of English language skills.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-Learning in Higher Education

In the present-day scenario, the higher education system is undergoing incessant change, higher education institutes have to progress by meeting the needs of the learners. E-learning systems and information technology are considered as important parameters to execute the academic activities of higher education institutions (Alyoussef, 2021). Nevertheless, in an era filled with innovations and technologies, the main challenge lies in integrating E-learning systems to strengthen the teaching-learning process (Haleem et al., 2022).

Owing to its complex features, various definitions have been proposed for the term 'E-learning'. It is defined in simple terms, as the use of data and technologies and systems to develop and design learning opportunities (Caena & Redecker, 2019).

Likewise, Clark and Mayer define E-learning as instructions provided through digital devices with the intention of supporting learning (Clark & Mayer, 2016). In brief, E-learning indicates transfer of knowledge and education using different electronic devices, the idea is well explained with a contextual integration using technology to meet learners' requirements to learn and evolve.

Concerning the role of E-learning in higher educational institutes, previous research studies reveal that it is useful, effective, and influential in enhancing the performance of learners (33). Most of the teachers feel that E-learning improves education and affirm that it leads to better interaction between students and understanding of concepts. According to Coman et al., teachers' attitude was positive, and it enhances as they understand E-learning is simple and accessible (Coman et al., 2020). A study by Gopal et al. (2021) revealed that, E-learning as a supplementary to conventional classes, enhances students' learning process and increases their involvement in lectures. Another study (Bączek et al., 2021) pointed out that students felt face-to-face classes more informative, simultaneously perceived online learning positively despite difficulties while learning through E-learning platforms.

Though, many researchers highlight that students display positive attitude towards E-learning, studies of the same kind conclude that digital courses lack the same impact as courses imparted in a regular face-to-face classroom (Gherhes et al., 2021). Rather than exclusive online learning, students would prefer blended learning, a mixture of both face-to-face and online classes (Watson 2008).

Effectiveness, Benefits and Downsides of E-Learning in English Teaching

Technological revolution in teaching and learning of EFL has a long history ((Davies& Hewer 2012; Davies,2010). Use of computer-based technologies in language teaching evolved in the 1960s, following the interest displayed by the researchers in education sector to giving instructions after the subsequent growth of commercial mainframe computers in the 1950s (Davies, 2010). Gradually, technology saw an increased popularity in the educational domain, chiefly after the advent of World Wide Web.

Various higher education institutes offer a range of courses for learners to study English. E-Learning is a strategy to teach English and is perceived to be effective as it is student-centric, and meets the requirements of learners, flexible enough to allow learners to learn at their own pace (Quigley, 2013). Also, e-Learning plays a significant part in helping learners to learn a language by providing innovative and motivating language activities in all four language skills. According to Nunan (2003), motivation is the key to learning achievement. Language acquisition through e-Learning is advantageous than the conventional classroom (Farooq, and Zahid, 2012) as it is adaptive (Budi Santoso, 2023).

An E-learning environment is a meaningful outcome of technological development. It has been identified as a transformative potential with regard to learning approach and English language teaching (Hellebrandt & Mathar, 1999). Specifically, students are exposed to E-learning resources to help them acquire language skills (Yang & Chen, 2007).

Shuchi & Islam, 2018). On the other hand, in a conventional face-to-face EFL learning setup, students are not exposed to an authentic English learning environment. Besides, students have only limited opportunities to interact with their teacher on a one-to-one basis owing to the large class size. While, in an E-learning environment, students communicate in the virtual world with other students and enhance their speaking skills (Yang & Chen, 2007). These limitations prevail in most other countries where English is used as a second language.

A study focusing on the enhancement of communication skills reveals that synchronous electronic chat and task-based instructions lead to a lively environment. As a result, learners interact with each other in real-time on topics of their choice (Lee, 2007). Studies by (Warschauer, 1999), and (Yang and Chen 2007) confirm that equal participation benefits E-learning to enhance speaking skills than face-to-face interaction. Further, the communication is extended to the international setting and not restricted to the local level. It also bridges the cultural gap between the students as they acquire cross-cultural knowledge (Al-saggaf, 2004). For instance, teachers in Sri Lanka can create discussion groups for their students in collaboration with teachers from other countries. It helps the learners to broaden and improve the discussion.

The advancement and use of technologies favoured the expansion and facilitation of language learning opportunities. The use of E-learning in language learning and students' perception of the usefulness of this type of learning became subjects of interest for many researchers. Investigating students' attitudes towards the use of Blackboard and Oxford iQ Online tools in the English language learning context, Al-Mubireek, S. [2019] demonstrated that their perspective was favorable. Furthermore, the study showed that both the E-learning platforms helped students to improve their vocabulary and grammar. Another study states that automated speech recognition technology offers a platform for students who are shy to speak with native speakers and practice speaking (Sha, G. 2009). As reported by previous studies, one of the advantages of E-learning is to make use of automatic speech recognition systems to help students participate in speech interactions with a computer. Candle Talk is another online platform that allows students to use speech training programmes and interact with their computers, thereby improving their speaking skills.

E-learning has many value-added features and one of them is that it creates a fruitful learning setting. It encourages students and provides significant and meaningful learning opportunities and outcomes. According to Garrison (2011) the text-based E-learning communication, generated by e-mail messages or discussion threads facilitates critical discourse and reflection. Al-Menei (2008) examined the impact of such text-based tools through computer-assisted English programmes. He emphasized that the writing skills of EFL students improved due to the aforementioned programmes, as the E-learning environment provided enough time for the students to reflect and focus. Farzi (2016) noted that computer programmed with corrective instructions help students to identify and correct their mistakes in writing.

Besides, E-learning offers exceptional prospects to develop learners' reading skills, owing to the unlimited availability of online course materials (Brandl, 2002). Enabling learners to overcome the boundaries of textbook oriented learning is one of the advantages of E-learning, as it promotes access to reading materials from anywhere and at any time. A study conducted by Plana et.al. (2013) emphasized that use of WhatsApp instant messaging in teaching English language to students in Spain increased the motivation and enthusiasm for reading. Ehrlich, Jan, et al (2007) developed an innovative e-learning platform to support the teaching of reading comprehension skills. They have proposed a variety of exercise types embedded in a comprehensive didactical approach to develop reading comprehension skills in an effective way. It motivates students to employ a wide range of reading strategies while working on the exercises. The students are provided guidance through a tutorial element in the form of reading hints, time limits or suitable wording of the exercise themselves. Use of podcast or video presentation or video youtube implies that e-learning plays a vital role in improving the students' ability to listen. Also, listening to authentic language materials are abound online. Indeed, Al-Mardini, T. M. (2019) studied the use of e-learning in teaching activity to enhance the listening skills of students. He reports that use of authentic materials in EFL classrooms would reduce loss of concentration and anxiety faced by students while listening. Further, the study suggests that curriculum incorporates authentic e-learning materials besides regular textbooks to enhance real-life communication. Nattaphon Phanchanikul (2015) investigated the use of e-learning to improve English communication skills of Thai undergraduate students. Students' attitude has been very positive, as they felt studying English through online English courses will offer them adequate practice in listening.

While it's true that E-learning has numerous advantages, also there are drawbacks to consider. E-learning is technologically advanced, including the internet and computers, which some students may have not direct exposure to, and disruptions or other system errors may occur all through classes, increasing the likelihood that online students will become disengaged, lose concentration, or miss due dates. Students' absence of physical interaction and existence of classmates could ascertain how lonely they experience. This is because students' way to mobilize how they research and the amount of time managed to spend learning often can lead to reduced encouragement. There are also health implications with E-learning. Online students and educators who devote long periods of time indoors glued to screens could be

increased risk for myopia, scoliosis, and carpal tunnel syndrome. Yunus, Melor Md, et al (2018) conducted a study using MOOC as a platform for developing writing skills. The study revealed that students faced challenges related to unstable internet connection and time constraints, as a result they were not able to use the learning opportunity given to them.

Teaching English Language during Covid 19 Pandemic

As a result of the never-before-seen circumstances brought on by the Coronavirus pandemic, researchers have become very interested in the effects of the pandemic on learning, higher education institutions, and the teaching faculty and students who attend those institutions. Baber demonstrated that students had a better outlook toward the E-learning, recognising it beneficial and effective in the time of the emergency produced by the global epidemic (2021). This was shown when Baber investigated students' perceptions of online courses during the Coronavirus. The number of universities have stated that they had been forced to accept web - based learning and then had to confront numerous issues, one of most significant of which was accessibility and teachers' able to implement online classes. A study by (Suresh, et.al 2018) disclosed that organisations have been affected by the pandemic in relation to research, symposiums, knowledge transfer, and education delivery.

Despite the fact that educational institutions had already been utilising E-learning as an alternative way prior to the pandemic, the majority of them had not prepared to fully participate in digital activities. Therefore, improving the efficiency of the e-learning method is critical if we are to keep offering education in an effective manner. This improvement must also take into consideration the interaction between students and teachers, and the language that is used in the communication between students and teachers ought to be definite, but it should also contain specific terms for the students' field of study.

In addition, Sun et al (2013) research on students' perceptions of their experiences in online classes revealed that students assume instructors ought to be aware of how they can make adjustments their presentations to the digital context, rather than merely transferring online the data that was traditionally presented in a more conventional manner, and that instructors should provide students with a sufficient number of initiatives and worksheets.

In addition, Chen et al. (2020) outlined seven major factors that serve as the foundation of online education and that play a crucial piece in maximising learning potential under unique conditions such as those brought about by the Covid 19 pandemic. These facets include: trying to manage and establishing digital infrastructure in to prevent disruptions, notably throughout video-conferences; utilising student-friendly tools, which allow teachers integrate and interpret concepts; delivering dependable, immersive, and varied e - resources; utilising social networks to create online communities for students in to minimize sense of loneliness; utilising a variety of effective methods, including such discussions, or objectives are clearly on discovering; including using varied suitable strategies, such as teaching based on multiple breakthroughs.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

Most of the aforementioned research emphasizes several points about the setting in which online learning and, impliedly, E-learning platforms were employed to supplement the conventional student learning, such as the experiences of both students and teachers. Even though universities were compelled to use and implement E-learning platforms as a main tool in the educational process during the pandemic, few studies have focused on this phenomenon. The purpose of this research is to shed light on how students in one of the regions of the world who had little expertise with this process prior to the pandemic view educational opportunities that are available solely online through E-learning systems.

Before the disease outbreak, few professors in Sri Lanka's higher education system made use of E-learning platforms; those who did tended to stick to the platform's most fundamental features, like upload new teaching materials. Most students and educators were caught off guard by the sudden shift to digital learning, and many were not aware of online learning platforms before the pandemic. Therefore, a survey was administered to students to gauge their opinion of and confidence in universities' ability to offer education in a fully online setting.

The following questions guided this investigation:

1. What are students' perceptions with regard to their academic institution's performance in terms of knowledge provision only through online education?
2. What are student's views concerning their own knowledge acquisition potential in the context of online education?

PARTICIPANTS AND DATA COLLECTION METHOD

A total of 500 first-year students took part in this study. Of the whole participants, around 300 female and 200 male students within the age limit of 19 years hailed from rural and urban background. All the students belonged to various UG programs during the academic year 2018-2019. Data was collected through online mode. The questionnaire link was sent to the students' WhatsApp groups. The student participants were briefed about the survey and its purpose before the questionnaire was sent to them. Students took nearly 10 to 15 mins to complete the survey.

DATA ANALYSIS

SPSS Statistics (version 23) was used to analyze the data from students. Descriptive statistics such as mean, Standard Deviation, percentages were also used. The Spearman coefficient was employed to correlate students' perceptions of teachers' use of online environment in the classroom and their contentment towards online learning. The open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively to understand perception of students with regard to technical aspects, students' and teachers' skills, using online environment, student-teacher interaction, etc.

RESULTS

What are students' perceptions with regard to their academic institution's performance in terms of knowledge provision only through online education?

Despite the unpreparedness of teachers, students, and the university due to Covid 19, which led to a major shift in teaching and learning methods, all the stakeholders managed to sail over the challenging situation by adapting to new realities. 52% of students viewed that they faced technical issues such as signal loss, connectivity issues, poor sound and delayed messages while using the platform provided by the university. The teachers were prone to use other related platforms to ensure the learning takes place but some students did face some challenges concerning the communication gap. The technical issues did surface even after shifting to other platforms to ensure teaching took place without any break.

Almost 65% of students felt they spent the majority of their time using their mobile devices to listen to lectures and complete homework. In addition, they felt that they did not have as much free time as they once did in their offline classes due to the deadline-driven assignments. Teachers were gradually modifying the nature and quantity of assignments, which presented a challenge for students. To maximise the efficacy of online education, it is essential to strike a balance between the student's workload and their individual time commitments. Some students also mentioned that they had trouble concentrating in an online setting and communicating with their teachers.

What are student's views concerning their own knowledge retention and language acquisition potential in the context of online education?

English language learning took place in different forms during the covid. It is the view of the students of ESL that to achieve the goals of ESL, they do need a mentor in the third world context. In Sri Lanka, students come from different background with varied level of English proficiency. Many of them do not have any English background from their domestic context or in the neighbourhood. Most of their interactions do happen in monolingual practices. They do not have adequate exposure to English. Therefore, the first advantage the students get from the physical classes is that they do copy the expressing models, styles, and intonation patterns from the ESL teachers which they missed in the online classes during the Covid. In the actual classroom, teachers can conduct several activities based on tasks as the physical classrooms have such facilities whereas in the online classes, learners do miss those facilities. As far as the interactions between teachers and ESL learners are concerned, they were lacking in the online classes. Most of the students considered themselves as individuals in the online classes in the online mode because there was no cohesiveness in the online classes which seemed to be an isolated setting that kept the learners detached from various interpersonal and communicative competencies.

DISCUSSION

Interactions

Interactions with peers do promote ESL learning in several ways and this helps ESL learners enhance their skills in ESL in a big way. This diverse classroom atmosphere was very much missing in the online classes that were conducted online. In online classes, students felt more individualistic than a collaborative learning group. There was not enough interaction in the online classes and this diminished the chance of getting language input from the teachers and peers in the physical classroom. The students are of the view that interaction is the most important characteristic of the modern language learning approach. The Task-based approach, Communicative language teaching, and content-based language teaching do pay attention to the enhancement of interaction skills of the ESL learners. Interactions among learners do promote cooperative learning and increase the opportunities of getting a lot of language input.

The online classes did not provide enough chances for learners to interact and copy the expressive models in the learning process. It was noted by the ESL learners that they could not change their learning styles abruptly in the online classes. ESL Learners did feel that they learned quite a lot from the ESL classes conducted online. It cannot be continued for a long time and it cannot replace face-to-face classes which, in many ways, assist learners to progress in their second language acquisition. However, the performance of the learners shows that their performance in the face-to-face classes was much better than in the online classes. The evaluations show that ESL learners did access the important components of the ESL curriculum fully. The components such as grammar and writing skills were not taught as they were intended to be imparted. Some of the ESL learners said that they did not feel any differences between face-to-face classes and online classes when talking about interaction between teacher and learners because the reason they gave was it was up to the level of curiosity of the learners whether to interact or not. This emphasises a reality that those who remained active in

the face-to-face classes performed well in the online classes. This was a view from a section of ESL learners. Teachers were asking the learners questions constantly in the online classes. It was also expressed that in the face-to-face classes ESL teachers were able to point a particular learner and tried to elicit the answer from that particular learner and this was infeasible in the online classes as learners were silent even if the teachers called them by their name or a number.

Technological Challenges

Many of the ESL learners are of the view that they underwent some technological challenges while learning online. Some of the students did not have proper devices to follow the online lectures and in some cases they had devices but they did not have sufficient data to join and stay on the online lectures. In fact, teachers used videos with various contents and they were self-explanatory to some extent. The presentations were made by both teachers and learners using various platforms such as, Google Meet, Teams, Google Classroom, and so on. Through these, learners were able to gather considerable content. Sometimes, teachers were able to use more than one platform simultaneously to conduct a lesson. These facilities were available in the face-to-face classes. Many of the ESL learners told that they did not consider the online tools were the proper to learn English and they did feel the necessity of the presence of people and teachers in the classroom and they wanted to have a chat with their friends and teachers in the classroom. This would boost their learning of ESL. It was noted during the conversation with ESL learners that they had been used to face to face classes for a long time and all of a sudden, they switched over to online and this did not fit very well into their comfort zone. It was also a fact that if these online platforms had been introduced from their childhood, they might have adapted them very well. The teachers who were in the final years of their service had a lot of difficulties in adapting the online tools but all of them learnt by and by and eventually all ESL teachers were familiar with the application of these new tools and apps. So, the generation gap was also felt by ESL learners as some learners are very conversant with these new platforms and applications. It was also true that at the beginning of COVID-19, all ESL learners did have smartphones and they used their parents' phones and friends' phones. Before the pandemic, teachers never allowed ESL learners to use the mobile phones in the classroom and students started to use them in the physical classroom frequently as a lot of learning materials are posted on Viber, WhatsApp, and so on. Teachers' big issue is to check if students are using it for the right purpose in the classroom. The same issues were noticed during the pandemic because some learners were on Facebook and some were on YouTube while teachers were conducting a lesson via Zoom. One serious concern with which they were obsessed was anxiety and stress during the pandemic, online education was quite new and they were anxious to learn these online tools which made them quite stressful.

Monitoring System

It was agreed by many ESL learners that there was no eye contact in the online classes and they felt that eye contact was very important for certain aspects to be understood. The other notable drawback in the online classes was that there was no proper monitoring system for teachers to ensure that learners were fully engaged in the class. Teachers believed that all ESL learners were attentive and they did know the problems the ESL learners were encountering. The learners responded to the questions raised by teachers but the teacher did not identify who responded to his/her questions. The teacher was able to correct the mistakes of the learners sometimes. In the case of learning materials, the learners were not given the material on time and as a result of this, they could not get ready for the classes. It was agreed by the ESL learners that teachers played their role fairly well in the online platforms and they employed different techniques and strategies to teach a particular topic but, how the ESL learners received them was a big question. Teachers could not engage the ESL learners in online education fully and they could not ensure the learners' active engagement throughout the classes

Speaking of Online Learning

There were some instances where students did learn something. It was true that ESL learners did perform in speaking well in online education because they did not sense any inhibition in the online platform. The fact that those who are conscious about themselves are able to perform well when they don't have people around them. This was one advantage of the online platform. There were mistakes and breakdowns, but the learners got some urge to speak on an online platform like Zoom, Google Meet, Google Classroom, and so on. ESL learners' speaking ability was elevated to some extent in the online mode during COVID-19. So far as the speaking ability is concerned, the bright students did well and they are not bothered about online or offline, and intermediate-level learners too were able to manage to speak in a comprehensive manner. Learners' responses show that the students from low socioeconomic backgrounds were able to speak better than in the face-to-face mode as they did not feel shy or scared of making mistakes in front of teachers and peers. The low economic conditions sometimes create unhappy learning situations in the face-to-face classes. Those situations were very minimal in the online classes. The teachers of course sat in front of the Zoom or other online platforms, but they could not ensure if learners were doing the given tasks.

Listening Skill Writing Skill

It was agreed by most of the ESL learners that they could do the listening activated through online in an effective manner. Teachers shared the video clips and audio clips and learners were able to follow instructions clearly and completed the tasks successfully. In the case of writing, it was a herculean task for teachers as well as learners as there was no correcting mechanism in the online classes. Typing and sending them to the teachers were far more tiresome job and it was not that easy.

Reading Skill

When a question was asked about reading comprehension skill during online classes the learners were of the opinion that the schema should be activated before doing the reading comprehension exercises. It could be in the form of pictures or some background idea about a topic and so on. This was possible via online platform in case there is strong internet connectivity. Internet could be used to access some videos and audios in relation to a particular topic and this helps the learners to get some ideas about what to read. This kind of reading activity was done in some online classes. However, the monitoring issue was also found when dealing with reading comprehension tasks in online and the teacher gave the answers at the end and learners corrected their answers.

Categories of Learners

ESL learners could be divided into categories such as advanced learners, intermediate learners, and basic learners. In the case of advanced and intermediate learners, they were able to perform satisfactorily in online education but the limited proficiency level learners found it very difficult to cope with online education. In the case of advanced learners, they do have a good knowledge of English, and their acquiring capabilities are superior to the low achievers of language. Responses from the ESL learners show that intermediate and basic learners want to study in face-to-face classes where they feel can acquire English by way of interaction with teachers, and peers and copying the expressive styles and patterns from their teachers. Further, the weak students expected the teacher should explain the thing again and over again when they felt something difficult to understand. This facility was not found in the online mode. Limited proficiency level ESL learners wanted to ask the teacher their doubts and they wanted clarity on certain areas of language. They were in anticipation of practicing the language skill in the classroom, but more practices were not possible in online education.

Use of Online Platforms

The online platforms have diverse features and sophisticated technological operating systems and these were the ways available during the pandemic. Therefore, everybody had to be familiar with the application of that platform, and ESL learners had to adapt themselves to the new innovations that were happening during the pandemic. Students of ESL accepted the fact that this online education was an alternative to face-to-face classes as they were in a need to continue their education during the pandemic, and these platforms cannot be used continuously for a long time. These online platforms such as Goole Meet, Zoom, LMS, Teams, and so on were useful to continue their learning without a major breakdown and they felt this was a temporary solution. They wanted to go back to the physical classes once normalcy is restored in the country. These platforms were considered a good channel for sustaining learning during the pandemic. However, physical classes are the best for ESL learning according to the responses from the interviews with ESL learners. However much they underwent to get along the online classes they were of the same view that they learned fairly well and that online platforms can be a good alternative to sustain learning in the utmost crisis like a pandemic. It was observed from the interactions with ESL learners that some online platforms were very new to them and they did not hear about those platforms earlier. However, they managed to get used to it within a short span of time. It was found out during the interview with ESL learners that all of them did not have desktops or laptops but did have a smartphone which was okay for Zoom but it was not suitable for other platforms like Google Meet, Google Classroom, Teams, and so on. They encountered so much of setbacks in coping with class by means of a smartphone that they did not get clarity of the lessons taught and the activities that were expected to be completed with the help of a smartphone were very difficult and cumbersome.

One positive that happened as a result of online education was that all learners are familiar with online platforms and they explore and update innovation taking place in the one platform. Nevertheless, continuing ESL learning through online platforms will be an insane effort since learners will not achieve the desired goals from in Sri Lankan universities. ESL learners in Sri Lankan universities revealed their experience that they could not turn on their cameras due to the coverage issues so the chance of seeing the teacher and peers was deprived of and this was a real hindrance in the online classes. Flexibility and accessibility were the areas where learners found online education comfortable because they could select a convenient time for their learning. It was easy for them to access the content and resources from various sources. In the case of Sri Lankan universities, they paid subscriptions to ESL websites, and ESL learners can access them and use them for their learning and reference. ESL learners stressed one point that physical classes are paramount for freshers as most of the ESL learners come from the vernacular medium of instruction. Therefore, they need to have a teacher and a pleasant

learning environment. Advanced ESL learners and intermediate learners were able to capture the lesson well in the online platforms and they succeeded in achieving their goals to a larger extent but limited proficiency level learners were unable to grasp the knowledge through the online tools. These limited proficiency level learners need to learn English in the physical classes and the participants in the research reiterated this point.

Learners’ Interest

As far as students’ motivation to engage in online education, they had varied viewpoints. Some of them said that they had participated in the online classes with much enthusiasm and eagerness whereas some ESL learners revealed that they wanted to be taught in the face-to-face classes. Teachers were able to bring some global scenarios into the classroom by navigating various browsers. This was possible in the online platform and learners of all levels loved this kind of teaching approach via several online platforms. It was noticed during the interview with the students that they loved to have a variety of examples that precipitate their comprehension without any hurdles. Even if the teacher continues with the same kind of activities ESL learners become frustrated so what matters is that the teacher should use appropriate methods and techniques to conduct a lesson effectively. Students felt that many lessons taught by teachers lacked variety during the pandemic as a result students lost interest in the lesson. Freshers did have a dream to meet their friends and lecturers in person but they missed them in online education during the pandemic.

Demerits of Online Education

It was observed during the interview with ESL learners that they felt lethargic to attend the online classes and they became less active in the classes. Consistent participation of learners was missing and it indicates that their learning was inconsistent. For example, when teachers asked some questions from the learners, they were not available to answer and this was the evidence that some learners did not take these online classes into consideration. This had an impact on the subsequent classes as they forgot everything taught in the previous class. On the contrary, in the physical classes, they were vigilant due to the fact they knew that they were being observed by teachers and peers. Particularly, the low achievers were very alert in the face-to-face classes. According to the statistics in Sri Lanka, the vast majority of ESL learners belong to limited proficiency level learners.

Need of an ESL Teacher

ESL learners are of the view that they wanted a teacher at all times of learning English as a second language because English cannot be mastered through memorization and doing examinations and it is very important for ESL learners to have a teacher in the classroom for direct interaction. This was badly missing in the online classes. It is a fact that during the school days too, they missed the teachers’ presence in the classroom because in the schools too there has been an acute shortage of ESL teachers in Sri Lanka for decades. The major issue with online mode was during the pandemic teachers used to give activities to be completed but it was highly impossible for teachers to supervise and check whether ESL learners on the online platforms were doing the tasks or not. This was why ESL learners felt that they had had an ESL teacher throughout the session by their side in the classroom. The students were on Zoom and other online platforms and teachers did not know what learners were doing. In the other disciplines, online platforms were ok for the students as they based on the notes given by the lecturers and professors. The books relevant to the discipline would also help to improve the knowledge. The majority of the ESL learners confessed that they found it difficult to carry on without the presence of a teacher in the classroom. Correcting the answers will be very important in ESL classes now and then and this gives proper guidance and feedback immediately and it will be a strong support for achieving the goals of ESL learning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the present study highlights the difficulties faced by ESL students in a state-owned Sri Lankan University during COVID-19 pandemic. The main challenge pertained to the abrupt transition of students from traditional learning to online learning. Some of the noteworthy problems faced by them are lack of confidence, physical and social interactions at a limited level and above all the living environments with poor network connection. The present study’s findings revealed an immediate need-based approach to overcome these challenges. Addressing these issues can provide the ESL students an effective online learning set-up and other student communities in the same context.

Sl. No	Questions	5	4	3	2	1
1	There were connectivity issues while using the online platform					
2	There were signal problems at the time video lectures					
3	Audio was not clear during the lecture					
4	The messages shared were not promptly delivered					

5	Presentations are distorted when sharing a window				
6	Audio conference was used				
7	Discussions were held through forums				
8	WhatsApp chats were also used for classroom discussions				
9	Video conferencing was used				
10	Exercises were shared to the whole class during the same time for the class to workout				
11	Language tasks were both shared in pdf and word format				
12	Website links for reading activities were provided				
13	More language tasks were offered by the teachers				
14	More practical activities were provided than theory				
15	I have more time to study and prepare for exams after the advent of online sessions				
16	I have less time to study and prepare for exams after the advent of online sessions				
17	Online classes are very much appropriate for teaching and learning at college level				
18	I prefer interacting with teacher during the question and answer session				
19	I prefer posting the responses through chat box				
20	I find it challenging to present my ideas during online session				
21	I don't find any difficulty while doing my presentation via online				
22	I prefer attending the online class through audio and video				
23	I prefer attending the online class only through audio				
24	I have used e-learning platform before the interruption of offline classes				
25	I prefer skype for online learning				
26	I prefer google meet for online learning				
27	I prefer Zoom for online learning				

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