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STUDENTS' ONLINE LEARNING READINESS AMID THE COVID 19 OUTBREAK: MCO PHASE 1

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Abstract:

Teaching on digital platforms has now become the trend, and whether it is language apps, virtual tutoring, or video conferencing tools, there has been a significant rise in usage since the Covid-19 outbreak. In this regard, the study investigated students' readiness towards online learning during the Malaysia Movement Control Order (MCO) Phase 1. 120 students were asked to respond to a questionnaire. However, only 98 students had responded to the questionnaire. In general, the finding shows that the students were not fully ready for online learning mainly due to the limited access to the internet, and because of this limitation, they prefer to have downloadable videos and lecture presentation slides that they can access at any time asynchronously. This study has implications on identifying students' learning needs for the digital language classroom as the base for designing the learning materials.

Keywords:

Students' Online Learning Readiness, e-learning, Covid-19, Malaysia Movement Control Order Phase 1

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Introduction

Covid-19 pandemic first began in Wuhan, China, and within a short three months, the pandemic has affected more than 190 countries and regions, infected more than 700,000 people has killed more than 30,000 people globally, and the number has continuously increased till then. Pandemic Covid-19 has caused learning institutions worldwide to change their teaching and learning delivery mode from the face-to-face platform to the online platform. Due to the pandemic, online learning has become a mainstream education, where universities, faculties' members and students rely entirely on online platform for the teaching and learning approach (Coates, Wen & Shi, 2020). Online learning allows flexible access to content and instruction at any time and at any place. It provides a degree of interactivity, collaboration, and reflection. To ensure classes to continue and studies are completed, teachers and students need to make a considerable effort to adjust to the current Covid-19 crisis.

Malaysia's first local Covid-19 case was first detected on 4 February 2020, and the case started to rise starting on 14 March 2020 (Tang, 2020). As the nation saw a surge in the number of Covid-19 infected cases, the Malaysian government announced the implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) Phase 1 on 18 March until 31 March 2020 (Tang, 2020). Then the MCO Phase was extended to 14 April 2020. The MCO Phase 1 though not unexpected, has caught Malaysians by surprise. This effort was to flatten the curve of the spread of Covid-19 and hopefully to break the chain of the rapid spread of the deadly disease. This is an unprecedented phenomenon in Malaysia. Under the MCO Phase 1, all learning institutions were closed. This sudden closure has changed the traditional learning process (face-to-face) into internet-based learning.

For a few days, all institutions of higher learning were in a state of shock as to how to handle this sudden change. Many students have gone back to their own home states and hometowns all over Malaysia on 17 March 2020 for their mid-semester break before the MCO came into effect. Prior to that announcement made on 16 March 2020, public universities have strongly encouraged lecturers to adopt online teaching and learning method in order to reduce mass gathering of students. Many lecturers had a crash course learning from other colleagues how to use some of the online teaching methods such as Google Classroom, Google Meeting, Zoom, and others. Malaysian Higher Education Ministry has given the approval for all higher education institutions to conduct online teaching or e-learning (Malay Mail, 2020). The Ministry also emphasized that online teaching could only be conducted if all students have access to lecturers and all infrastructure requirements are in place. After that, a new academic calendar was issued, and lecturers were instructed to conduct all teaching online from 14 April 2020 onwards for the rest of the semester.

The Ministry of Education has instructed all classes are to be conducted online (Malaysian Ministry of Higher Education, 2020). Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), which had implemented Blended Learning (BL) before the implementation of fully online learning, started online learning on 16 March 2020 (<https://www.ums.edu.my/v5/announcement-link-3/8815-pelaksanaan-kuliah-maya-mulai-16-mac-2020-sehingga-pemakluman-berikutnya>). In BL, classes are conducted with a combination of face-to-face and online classes, which allows both teachers and students to enjoy the advantages of both teaching methods (López-Pérez, Pérez-López & Rodríguez-Ariza, 2011). With the sudden notice of full implementation of online learning by UMS, the teaching instructors and students struggled to cope with the sudden full implementation of online teaching and learning (based on the researcher's own experience). This is because the teaching instructors needed to prepare lessons online for the next day since the announcement notice was made on 15 March 2020 (<https://www.ums.edu.my/v5/announcement-link-3/8815-pelaksanaan-kuliah-maya-mulai-16-mac-2020-sehingga-pemakluman-berikutnya>), and the students needed to make sure they have stable internet access for the online classes (Chung, Subramaniam & Dass, 2020). This drastic change has prompted the researcher to conduct a study on the students' experiences and readiness for the online classes for the English class during the MCO Phase 1. The researcher also wanted to elicit the students' preferred learning method and their readiness to take online English Language classes. In addition, the researcher hopes to offer suggestions to improve the online classes by eliciting the students' preferred learning method and readiness to take online English Language classes. Thus, this paper is aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the online learning challenges faced by the students taking the English Language course during the MCO Phase 1?
2. What are the most preferred and least preferred learning methods among the students taking the English Language course during the MCO Phase 1?
3. What are the suggestions to improve the online English Language classes?

It is hoped that by the end of this study, the English Language instructors can prepare a better online teaching and learning method by understanding the students' online learning readiness in the teaching and learning of English amid the Covid-19 pandemic.

Literature Review

It is reported that more than 400 million students are affected by the school total closures during the Covid-19 pandemic (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). This has resulted in a massive change of teaching and learning methods all over the world---from face-to-face teaching and learning methods to online teaching and learning method. Many scholars have predicted that this "online movement" will become a normalcy in future education (Tam & El-Azar, 2020). Thus, it is important to know students' online learning experience: whether or not they are ready for online learning to apply the online teaching and learning method most suited them.

Students' readiness refers to students' mental and physical preparedness for online learning (Hung, Chou, Chen, & Own, 2010). Studies on students' online learning readiness focus on learners' and teaching intructors' preparedness and the context for successful digital learning.

Engin stated that students need to be ready for online learning to benefit from the online learning setting (2017). Studies have also shown that students' readiness for online learning have positively affected their achievement in study (Engin, 2017; Bernard, Brauer, Abrami, Surkes, 2004; Dray, Lowenthal, Miskiewicz, Ruiz-Primo & Marczyński, 2011; Du, Chaaban, Sabah, Al-Thani & Wang, 2020). When these students are ready for online learning, they are motivated to interact actively in a digital learning context (Du & Chaaban, 2020).

In addition, one of the factors influencing students' readiness for a sudden implementation of online learning is the support from the environment like easy access to the internet (Kaymak & Horzum, 2013; Kerr, Rynearson & Kerr, 2006). Previous studies have emphasized the importance of establishing online learning environments to better support students in online learning (Chou, 2012; Chu & Tsai, 2009; Yang & Tsai, 2008). Warner, Christie, and Choy (1988) were the first to categorize students' readiness for online learning into three facets, namely the students' preferences for the online learning form, their confidence in electronic communication for their learning, and their ability to engage in self-directed learning. All in all, it is essential to determine students' readiness for online teaching and learning because it ensures the success of the online teaching and learning of a subject, which in this study, refers to the teaching and learning of English Language.

Research Methodology

Respondents

The study was conducted in the Centre of the Promotion of Knowledge and Language Learning (PPIB), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). The respondents were selected based on the convenient sampling due to the Covid-19 outbreak that has halted all face-to-face classes during the Malaysia Movement Control Order (MCO) Phase 1. A total of 98 students (2 per cent were males and 98 per cent were females) from Level 4 of the English Language course in PPIB, UMS, participated in the study. More than 50 per cent of the respondents were local Sabahan, namely Kadazan, Bajau, Suluk, Dusun, and Bugis; about 41 per cent of the respondents were Malays, and two per cent of the respondents were Chinese. Only one per cent of the respondent was a Sarawakian (Iban).

Instrument

The study employed a questionnaire focused on eliciting respondents' experience on the use of ICT for the teaching and learning English during the MCO Phase 1. The questionnaire was in the google form and sent out to respondents through the WhatsApp application. The questionnaire had a combination of open-ended questions and multiple-choice items. It was divided into two sections: Section A elicited respondents' demographic background, and Section B elicited the respondents' experience in using ICT for the teaching and learning of English during the MCO Phase 1. A general instruction was provided on the questionnaire's cover page, and specific instructions were given for Sections A and B of the questionnaire. Section A has two items (items 1-2) elicited the respondents' gender and ethnicity, whereas Section B has five items (items 3-7) elicited the respondents' experience in the use of ICT in the teaching and learning of English. Section A's questions were open-ended. The type of

question in Section B was multiple-choice and open-ended question type. For the multiple-choice questions, the respondents had to tick a box that best corresponds to their choice.

The respondents also needed to write the responses in the space provided in the open-ended type of questions. Items 3 and 4 of the questionnaires in Section B elicited the respondents' internet access and the internet quality during the MCO Phase 1. The respondents were also asked about their study preference in item 5 of the questionnaire (Section B). For items 6 and 7 of the questionnaires, the respondents had to state the problems they faced during the English Language online classes and suggestions to improve the English Language online classes. Spaces provided for items 6 and 7 were to gather the qualitative data of the study.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data gathered from the questionnaire (items 3 to 5 of Section B) was analysed descriptively: the frequency count was used to score the responses, which then converted into a percentage for each response. Section B elicited the respondents' internet access, internet quality, and their study's preference during the MCO Phase 1. The responses for items 3 to 5 were discussed as follows:

In item 3 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their internet access. Table 1 shows the responses.

Item 3: *Do you have internet access during the MCO Phase 1?*

Table 1: Internet Access

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=98)
Yes, most of the time	22
Yes, sometimes	62
Yes, if I can go out to public spaces , e.g., KFC, McDonalds or cyber café	8
No	6

Table 1 illustrates that more than 60 per cent of the respondents had internet access. However, it was not all the time. Only 22 per cent of the respondents had access to the internet most of the time. The other 8 per cent needed to go to public places such as fast-food restaurants like KFC and McDonald and cybercafé to access the internet. Less than 7 per cent of the respondents had no internet access.

Item 4 of the questionnaire elicited the respondents' internet quality. Table 2 illustrates the responses.

Item 4: *How good is your internet access?*

Table 2: Internet Quality

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=98)
No connection	6
Low bandwidth (3G or lower) and Limited/low data access	30
High bandwidth (3G or lower) and High data access	14
High bandwidth (fixed internet connection or 4G) and limited/low data access OR only in public places	35
High bandwidth (fixed internet connection or 4G) and high data access	13

Table 2 shows that more than 34 per cent of the respondents had high bandwidth and limited or low data access (either at home or public places). About 31 per cent of the respondents had low bandwidth (3G or lower) and limited or low data access during the MCO Phase 1. More than 25 per cent of the respondents had high data access: 14 per cent with low bandwidth (3G or lower) and 13 per cent with a high bandwidth (fixed internet connection or 4G). Only 6 per cent of the respondents had no internet connection.

In item 5 of the questionnaire, the respondents were asked about their study's preference. For item 5, the respondents can choose more than one response. Table 3 shows the responses.

Item 5: *How do you prefer to study?*

Table 3: Study's Preference

Responses	No. of Respondents (N=98)
Downloadable videos in SmartUMS or other online sources	62
Lecture presentation slides in SmartUMS	70
Short-video clips sent via WhatsApp	61
Short-video clips sent via email	26
Online direct class via an online platform (e.g., Google Meet, Microsoft Team, etc.)	21

Table 3 illustrates that most of the respondents prefer lecture presentation slides in Smart3UMS (70 per cent), downloadable videos in SmartUMS/other online sources (62 per cent), and short-video clips sent via WhatsApp (61 per cent). Less than 30 per cent of the respondents prefer short-video clips of the lesson sent via email (26 per cent) and direct online class via an online platform like Google Meet and Microsoft Team (21 per cent).

For the qualitative data, the respondents had to write their responses in the space provided for Items 6 and 7 of the questionnaires. Item 6 elicited the respondents' problems in online

classes during the MCO Phase 1, whereas item 7 elicited the respondents' suggestions on how best the online classes should be conducted. The responses for items 6 and 7 were analysed using the Thematic Analysis (TA). This type of analysis was used widely in qualitative research data (Braun, & Clarke, 2006). Following the TA steps, the general codes for items 6 and 7's responses were first categorized. Table 4 illustrates the code categorization.

Table 4: Codes Categorization

Item	Codes/Responses
Item 6: What problems do you encounter during the online classes?	Low connection Line trouble/blackout Do not have suitable clothing for the online assessments Poor internet access Laptop problem Disturbances at home
Item 7: How can we improve the online classes?	Lessons should be recorded and uploaded to SmartUMS, YouTube, and WhatsApp/Telegram Presentation slides should be shared in
SmartUMS	or WhatsApp/Telegram Use online application/platform that can be assessed by every student Do online classes at midnight for better internet access Do WhatsApp discussion for the lessons Give lessons in PDF form

The responses were then organized into several potential themes. Tables 5a and 5b show the emergent themes of items 6 and 7, respectively.

Table 5a: Emergent Themes from the Responses of Item 6

Themes	Subthemes	Example
Internet Connection	Poor internet connection	"Low internet connection at home." "My internet access sometimes slow, sometimes fast." "My internet line is weak." "Sometimes we have line trouble, and sometimes blackout happens."
Tool Used for the Online Classes	Broken laptop	"My laptop problem right now." "...laptop problem."
Home Environment	Noisy learning environment	"My baby brother always cries." "My younger siblings love to run around the house laughing, and sometimes they fight."

Attire for the Online Class Assessments	No proper attire for the online assessments	<p>"My parents watch TV with loud volume."</p> <p>"My house is in front of the main road, so I can hear cars, lorries, motorcycles' sound almost 24 hours a day."</p> <p>"I stay at my sister's house, so I only have my regular clothes."</p> <p>"I'm at my village now. I didn't bring back any cloth when I went back home."</p>
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Table 5a illustrates the problems encountered by the respondents during the online class. The problems were mainly on the low internet connection, broken laptop, noisy learning environment, and no proper attire for the online class assessments.

Table 5b shows the respondents' suggestions to improve the online class. The respondents suggested that the platform used for online classes should be accessible to everyone. In addition, they suggested that the online class should be conducted at a suitable time, which is midnight, as the internet line is clear at midnight, and the lessons' notes should be shared in PDF form. Table 5b illustrates the themes for Item 7 of the questionnaire.

Table 5b: Emergent Themes from the Responses of Item 7

Themes	Subthemes	Examples
Suggestions to Improve the Online Classes	Accessible platform for everyone	<p>"We can discuss the lessons in the class WhatsApp group."</p> <p>"Can record the lessons and post it at SmartUMS or WhatsApp/Telegram."</p> <p>"We can use Google Meet, Schoology, or Telegram if you want."</p>
	Suitable time to conduct the online class	<p>"We should do an online class at midnight because the internet line is clear at midnight."</p>
	Notes sharing	<p>"Lesson notes can be in PDF form."</p>

Findings & Discussions

For this section, the researcher discusses the findings based on the study's research questions (RQ).

RQ1: What are the online learning challenges faced by the students taking the English Language course during the MCO Phase 1?

It is vital to make sure students are ready for online learning to benefit from it. Support from the environment (Chou, 2012; Chu & Tsai, 2009; Yang & Tsai, 2008) like the robust internet connection is one of the factors influencing students' readiness for online learning (Kaymak & Horzum, 2013; Kerr, Ryneearson & Kerr, 2006). However, in this study, most respondents stated that poor internet connection was the main problem faced during the English Language online classes (see Table 4). This could be due to the no internet access, low bandwidth with high data access, or high bandwidth with low data access (see Table 2) in their areas.

Sometimes, they also experienced power breakdown in their areas, causing them to be absent from their online classes (see Table 4) as they cannot access the online classes.

Other supports such as the availability of the learning tools such as laptops and a supportive learning environment like a peaceful home environment were among the problems these students faced. As the only primary learning tool for them to attend online classes, a broken laptop was a problem that these students had to face. Perhaps this is because the laptop was used for the English Language classes and other online classes of other subjects. The laptop's continuous use during the MCO Phase 1 has contributed to this problem, i.e., a broken laptop. These respondents also mentioned the noisy learning environment as one of the problems they faced during the online classes. These respondents stayed at home during the MCO Phase 1. Therefore, the noisy learning environment caused by their family members was unavoidable (see Table 5a).

Apart from that, some respondents also stated that not having suitable clothing for the English Language class's online assessments was also a problem. The respondents were doing English for Occupational Purposes (EOP) at the time of the study. The course prepares them with job-seeking and working skills such as interview and meeting skills, etcetera. Interview and meeting are among the assessments that these respondents had to do for the EOP. Wearing presentable, formal, and neat clothing is one of the requirements of these assessments. Since the notice of full implementation of online learning by UMS was made unexpectedly, and the students were sent back to their hometown, many of the students chose to stay at their relative's or friend's house that has easy internet access. These students only brought back their daily clothing, for they believed that online classes did not require them to wear something formal. This had become a problem when they needed to dress up for the interview and meeting assessments.

RQ2: What are the most preferred and least preferred learning methods among the students taking the English Language course during the MCO Phase 1?

Warner, Christie, and Choy (1988) have introduced three factors of students' readiness for online learning, namely the students' preferences for the online learning form, their confidence in electronic communication for their learning, and their ability to engage in self-directed learning. In this study, the respondents were asked about the most preferred and least preferred online learning form when they needed to respond to item 5 of the questionnaire. For this question, they were allowed to choose more than one answer. It is found that these respondents preferred to have lecture presentation slides in SmartUMS the most, and this was followed by downloadable videos in SmartUMS or other online sources and short-video clips sent via WhatsApp (see Table 3). The least preferred online learning forms for these respondents would be the direct online class via an online platform such as Google Meet, Microsoft Team, etcetera, and short-video clips sent via email (see Table 3). These findings correspond to item 4 of the questionnaire, where the respondents stated the quality of their internet access (see Table 2). Most of the respondents have low bandwidth with limited/low data access or high bandwidth with limited/low data access. Since they have poor internet access, and sometimes, power breakdown (see Table 4), the respondents prefer to have their online learning form asynchronously: they can download or access the lesson at any time in

SmartUMS (UMS official e-learning platform). Based on this finding, it can be assumed that these respondents were confident and could engage in self-directed learning where they refer to the downloadable lesson presentation slides or watch the downloadable lesson videos and short clips sent via WhatsApp without the teacher's presence. Perhaps, direct online classes via online platforms like Google Meet was the least preferred online learning form because of their poor internet connection and high confidence in learning the lesson themselves without the teacher's presence.

RQ3: What are the suggestions to improve the online English Language classes?

There were three leading suggestions to improve online English Language classes. First, the respondents suggested that teachers should use accessible online learning platform for everyone like the WhatsApp group chat, SmartUMS, Telegram group chat, and surprisingly, they even suggested Google Meet, Zoom, Google Classroom, Schoology for the direct online classes. However, these platforms were the least preferred online learning forms. The respondents also suggested having direct online classes at midnight because the internet line in their areas is clear at midnight. Lastly, the respondents suggested that lessons' notes should be shared in PDF forms. These suggestions seem to show that these students are partially ready for online learning despite all the problems they faced during the online classes.

Conclusions

So, were the students ready for the English Language online classes during the MCO Phase 1? The findings and discussion show that the students' experience during the initial Covid-19 outbreak was unfavourable to their online learning readiness. The lack of support from the learning environment (i.e., poor internet access, broken learning tool and noisy learning environment) shows that the respondents of the study were not fully ready for online learning at that time. Perhaps that was why they prefer asynchronous learning more than synchronous learning due to the learning environment's lack of support. Nevertheless, the response for RQ3 indicates that these students were not against the idea of online learning. They were just not ready at that time as everything was decided quickly for them. Although the MCO Phase 1 had ended on 31 March 2020, classes in UMS are still conducted online due to the 3rd wave of the Covid-19 pandemic (Bernama, 2020). Thus, it is recommended for English Language teachers to find out students' readiness for online learning through their experiences to offer a beneficial situation for both teachers and students.

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